Harry Potter Fan Fiction

Resonance, Revolution & Resolution

written by

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version

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Author's Notes:

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

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

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

A sequel is in the works, title: Revolution and Resolution, but this story is complete in and of itself.

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

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

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Part I

Resonance

Chapter 1.

Year Six, Easter

"Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry."
– Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

"Here you go, Harry," Hermione said as she handed back his Potions essay. "Just two things that could be fixed. I don't think boar's teeth is correct in the second part, nor honeydew correct in the last part."

Harry scowled at the parchment. "Thanks," he said and pulled out his textbooks. He really wanted to be done with it. The temptation to decide it didn't matter enough warred with the notion of giving Snape the pleasure of marking him wrong more times than he would get to if Harry fixed his essay. He sighed and flipped to the relevant chapter. Sixth year Potions was more interesting than previous years, but much harder.

"More tea?" Ron asked him.

Without looking up Harry held out his cup. "Thanks."

"You shoulda done like I did and not taken anything hard this year," he pointed out, not for the first time.

Chapter 1

"Second term exams will be over soon enough and it will get a little easier then, for a little while." Hermione said this as she packed her books away. She stretched, sat back in her chair and stared at the fire while Ron and Harry finished up assignments.

"Hand your essays forward," Snape said as he strode into the dungeon classroom the next morning. He glared at the students as they obeyed in silence. "Today and the rest of the term we are going to cover lichen-based potions. These are unique because the lichen will assist us in synthesizing key ingredients of the potion. It is also time-consuming as lichen are sensitive to eutrophication. So the process is very difficult to speed up."

He paced once in front of the classroom. "Who can tell me the three main species used in potion making?" Hermione raised her hand along with one of the Ravenclaws. "Mr. Potter?" the teacher asked airily even though Harry's hands were firmly clenched together on the tabletop.

Harry cleared his throat to stall, delved into his memories of the readings, and said, "Usnea, Lungwort, and Parmeliacia . . aceae."

"Hm, close Mr. Potter, but not correct," the teacher sneered.

Harry rubbed his neck as Dean leaned over and whispered, "It would have been good enough for a Slytherin answer."

"Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Thomas, for speaking out of turn," Snape commented and waved his wand at the blackboard, making the day's potion instructions appear. He glared at Harry and Dean a long moment, daring them to complain. Harry put his head down and copied the potion into his notes with a frown.

"Hmf," Snape murmured, as though he believed their giving in was pathetic.

"Four more terms," Harry chanted under his breath. "Or maybe Voldemort will discover he's a spy before then."

"Harry!" Hermione whispered sharply, chastising him.

Year Six, Easter

"You are coming to our place for Easter holiday, right Harry?" Ron asked him as they walked to the Gryffindor tower at the end of the day. "I'm really looking forward to getting a break."

"I don't think Dumbledore is going to let me," Harry said disgustedly, watching his worn trainers at the edge of his robes as he walked. "I think my choices are here or the Dursleys. That isn't a difficult choice, believe me."

"Do you want me to stay?" Ron suggested as they reached the staircases.

"You should go visit your mum and dad. I'm sure they want to see you," Harry said, plodding up a bit tiredly.

"They want to see you too," Ron pointed out.

"Tell them to convince Dumbledore it's safe then," Harry said with little hope.

"What if I stayed for two extra days and then went home? There is another train from Hogsmeade on Sunday."

"I'd like that, Ron. We spend all day together everyday, but it is just working, it seems." Harry said.

"I'll owl my folks and tell 'em," Ron said excitedly.

"I'd love to stay with you guys," Hermione interjected, "but my parents are expecting me for dinner on Sunday with my grandparents; I wouldn't make it home in time."

"I appreciate the thought, Hermione," Harry said. "But we'll be all right. We are just going to sit around and do nothing . . . and enjoy every minute of it."

"Every minute, wizard chess," Ron said deviously. "We haven't played all term."

"One game, maybe, Ron. My ego can't take more than that."

"Oh, your ego, Mr. Hero, would be just fine after losing ten in a row," Ron grouched.

Easter break at the castle started essentially as expected. "Shall we go out on the pitch and toss a Quaffle around?" Ron asked.

Harry sat back in the empty common room with his feet up on one of the low tables. "I wouldn't qualify that as 'nothing'."

Chapter 1

Ron tugged on his arm. "Come on, you. You need some sun–you are almost as pale as I am."

Brooms in hand, they stepped out onto the lawn. Cloud shadows moved over the green grass which danced in the cool breeze. Down at the pitch they took the Quidditch locker off of the shelf and removed the Quaffle before stowing it again. As they kicked off, the cold wind bit Harry's hands, and he wished he had worn gloves.

"Pass it!" Harry shouted, flying out ahead. Ron obliged and soon they were dodging in and out of each other's flight path, passing the Quaffle back and forth.

"Bad pass!" Ron complained as he was forced to scoop the Quaffle off the lawn and kick off again. He passed it behind his back more accurately than Harry had done.

"Show off!" Harry shouted. He did a sloth roll and tossed it back.

"Look who's talking!" Ron laughed. He made an extra effort to catch that pass, then tossed the Quaffle up and hit it with the tail of his broom over to Harry.

"Not reg!" Harry chided him, ducking low and wide to fetch the Quaffle before it could plummet to the ground. "Let me try that." With a look of deep concentration, Harry tossed the Quaffle straight up and turned the broom one way, then fast the other. His just grazed it on the back swing, sending it into the trees. "Ugh, I'll get it," he said.

Ron laughed as Harry zipped away and landed just at the edge of the forest. He dropped his broom and stepped into the darkness. Ron flew a few loops and barrel rolls before heading over there. "Need help finding it? It could be up in the branches, it isn't very heavy," he shouted. He flew low over the tree tops and looked around at them. "Harry?" he asked a minute later, having received no response.

Immediately, Ron dropped to the ground beside Harry's broom. "Harry!" he shouted loudly. He started to charge into the trees before he realized that because of the bright day, he couldn't see in past the brush at all. "Harry!" Ron yelled again. "So help me, if you are funning me, I'm going to kill you."

A breeze rustling the leaves was all that answered him. Ron took up his broom, kicked off hard, and flew around the side of the castle to Hagrid's cabin.

"Hagrid!" Ron pounded on the door.

"Whacha wan'?" Hagrid asked, stepping around from the pumpkin patch beside the cabin.

"Harry went into the forest after the Quaffle and he isn't answering me," Ron said worriedly and felt a little silly for it.

"Wha' the hell'd he do tha' fer?" Hagrid said and opened the door. "Fang!"

"It wasn't far in, really, just past the first trees or so," Ron insisted as he jogged to keep up with Hagrid. "I'm going to kill him if he is joking around."

As they approached the edge of the forest, Ron said, "There, where his broom is." Ron felt relieved that at least it was still there.

They stepped into the forest at that spot, Fang leading the way. As their eyes adapted they began circling. "Harry!" Hagrid called out with his deep bellow. The boar hound snuffled around a few trees then dug in one spot before he began mewling piteously.

"What is it?" Ron asked, stepping closer to Hagrid.

"Fang?" Hagrid asked. The hound dug more fiercely and sniffed again before releasing another howl. "Didjer see anyone, Ron?"

"No," Ron answered despairingly. "Harry landed and went in. I flew around a couple of loops and came over to ask if he needed help in case it was stuck in the tree. He didn't answer."

"Fang?" Hagrid repeated. The hound stepped over with the quaffle in his great teeth. "This wha' yeh looking fer?" he asked Ron as he took it from Fang.

"Yes," Ron said, his voice breaking.

"Best ge' up ter the castle. Come on."

"Where is he?"

"Jus' as well you took your time coming ov'r, I think."

"Hagrid?" Ron insisted, pained.

"What happened?" Dumbledore asked sharply when Hagrid told him Harry had gone missing. Ron recounted the tale again as accurately as he could, even his stalling.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think . . ." He frowned miserably.

"Hagrid, take Mr. Weasley up to the Gryffindor Tower and meet me back here." More thoughtfully, he said, "I will need to send you to negotiate with the Centaurs, I think."

"No! I want to help!" Ron cried.

"I am afraid not this time, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said with finality.

Face scrunched up, Ron stomped after Hagrid.

Chapter 2.

A Long Bitter Night

Light footfalls crossed the carpet of moss and needles in the deepest part of the Forbidden Forest. The trees were so old here that the weight of the needles and leaves on the ground kept the underbrush from growing. Daylight filtered through in a welcoming green and brown light that dappled the ground playfully.

Severus Snape took in none of this beauty as he walked quietly, wand out and ready. Dumbledore followed behind him, their long strides almost perfectly matched. They had walked quite a distance looking for the boy. Snape was beginning to believe that if they were looking in the right place, it would be dumb luck. A tingle passed over him, familiar but very out of place. Instinctively he issued the counter-curse. Dumbledore came aside and looked at him questioningly. "A Death Eater protective spell," Snape informed him and shook his head once. "I did not know there was a safe-area spelled here."

"There is an small abandoned manor ahead," Dumbledore said. "It would make a fine safehouse."

Quietly, Snape stated, "It does make it more likely we are in the right place."

"The wrens are very precise in their own way," Dumbledore said as they continued on. "'It is just very hard to translate their directions into human terms." A breeze lifted his long beard and hair as he stopped and listened to a fierce string of twittering above them. "They believe we are on the right track as well, although very slow about it."

"No magic, Albus, at all. It will be detected immediately and we will have far too much company." Dumbledore tucked his wand away as they stepped down along a game trail that led into a ravine.

"I do hope Mr. Potter is worth this trouble," Snape breathed in annoyance.

"He is, Severus," Dumbledore chastised in a serious tone.

The going was slow on the muddy track and the late afternoon light didn't penetrate into the deep, and the air grew damp and chilled. Unnamed things chittered from a hollow stump. Snape broke off a thick dead sapling to use as a staff for walking or as a weapon, if needed. Something large with leathery wings flapped through the upper branches of the trees as they made the bottom of the ravine and skirted the creek to a narrow point where large stones made a footpath. By the time they reached the other ledge of the ravine, the sun had faded and a bitter wind pressed their cloaks against them.

"We really must find him before dark," Dumbledore said. "The oldest part of the forest harbors more than its share of night creatures; most of them quite hungry."

Snape frowned and didn't comment. He had already shared his opinions regarding irresponsible students earlier in the search.

Another fifteen minutes on, Dumbledore stopped. "There," he breathed and pointed at the edge of a black robe lying in the leaves, visible around the side of a large tilted tree.

Harry rested his head against the rough rotting wood on the side of the porch to what appeared to be an empty half-collapsed house. The fragile skin of whitewash peeled off and stuck to his cheek. His muddy cloak chilled him, but he didn't have the strength to adjust it to not press against him so tightly. He closed his eyes. A bird twittered loudly on a nearby branch, startling him.

Harry had felt worse, but not for quite so long. His whole body tingled and ached abominably and his right arm twitched every so often of its own accord. His brain seemed to be trying to find a way to separate him from the pain, but it wasn't successful for long, and the pain spiraled in and out, taxing him. Maybe if he got cold enough he would go numb, but right now the cold only brought on more agony. He carefully settled lower to get farther out of the wind and tried to dwell on something other than the blur of desperation, screaming and pain that constituted the last few hours.

Chapter 2

"Dead," Snape observed as he crouched beside the puffy, blue-faced Crabbe senior. His hands were frozen in a position as though he had been reaching for something.

"Not a mark on Mr. Goyle," Dumbledore commented as he looked over the other figure. He appeared to have simply collapsed limply in that spot. When he saw Snape going through Crabbe's pockets, Dumbledore did the same to Goyle. "Hmf," he grunted. As Snape turned to him, Dumbledore held up Harry's wand.

Snape gazed at in dismay and then looked around them more acutely . "That is a good sign, I suppose," he commented dryly.

"Unless there were more than two of them."

"Unlikely. These two rarely spent time around anyone but Malfoy. Which way is it to the manor house?"

Tucking Harry's wand away with his own, Dumbledore said, "This way," and strode off in that direction.

Every time Harry started to drift off, a bird would fuss nearby. It was starting to make him feel persecuted. A tiny bird with black stripes on its wings landed on the wood rail near him and tilted its head this way and that. Harry heard it then, footfalls in the underbrush. Stupidly, he felt in his pockets for his wand and grimaced at his empty robes. One of his tormentors probably had it on them. He should have looked, but he couldn't bear it at the time he had escaped and now it was a very long crawl back and too late anyway.

The footfalls stopped. Harry held his breath. The bird chattered again and this time Harry realized with a jolt that it was giving him away.

"Harry?" a familiar voice queried over the wind.

Stunned and relieved beyond his numbness, Harry leaned around the wood post and replied, "Professor Dumbledore?"

They charged over to him. Dumbledore crouched beside him and said, "I am every so pleased to see you, my boy." He brushed the paint flecks from Harry's cheek with his age-rough hands. Many sets of leathery wings flapped overhead, breaking branches

in their path. "Severus, see if you can get into this place. It is too late to head back tonight."

"I could go back for the Thestrals," Snape suggested as he braved the weak timbers of the porch.

Dumbledore considered that, glancing up to the treetops. "I do not think you have time even for that. And we cannot signal, because at the moment, there is no one to signal to. Harry, do you think you can make it 'til morning?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said and moved to stand up. Dumbledore assisted him and walked him up the single wood step. "I couldn't get that open," Harry commented dully as Snape pushed the door aside. It creaked loudly on its rusty hinges.

"That is because you do not know the password, Mr. Potter," he stated snidely.

Harry shot him a look of confusion at that. They stepped around the collapsed staircase and into a long parlor room. Harry stumbled over his own feet as they stepped over to a half-rotted chaise that someone before them had pulled up before the hearth. Dumbledore strained to catch him.

"Severus, give me a hand with him."

Snape turned from investigating the grate to help lower Harry to the floor. Harry drew in a ragged, painful breath as he leaned back against the torn stuffing of the rotted furniture. "Potter?" Snape asked.

"Hurts to move," Harry explained with a wince.

Snape stood and after studying Harry a moment, stalked past Dumbledore. "I will return shortly," he said briskly.

Dumbledore crouched on the hearth stone and checked the flue before reaching for the scrap wood piled beside the hearth.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said tiredly.

Dumbledore continued with his task, "It is all right, Harry. One would not have expected it to be unsafe a mere two hundred yards from the castle. Had I thought as much, I would not have allowed you outside." He stood and looked into the old mugs lining the mantle. "Here we are," he said as he found flint and a metal plate. He plucked a tuft of the lining of the chaise and boxed it in with scrap wood on the hearth stone. With just a few tries, he had it lit. When the kindling was also burning, he turned to Harry. "Sometimes it pays to be old."

Chapter 2

Harry grinned lightly at his headmaster through his many aches.

Snape strode back in. Harry looked up at him approaching and realized how dark it had become outside after he had been staring into the flames.

"Most impressive, Albus," Snape said.

"Are we going home?" Harry asked. The persistent throb in his body frightened him now; it felt like a dire warning.

"Harry," Dumbledore chastised him.

Harry turned his head away, remembering with a twinge that he wasn't supposed to think of the castle as home at the risk of breaking the protective spell on his aunt's house.

Snape looked between them curiously before he said, "I will fetch more to burn. If you can find some fresh water to brew these in." He placed some pieces of bark and a few leaves on the mantle and left again.

Harry's eyes fell closed and this time no bird interrupted him. He drifted, vaguely aware of shadows moving before the fire, of the fire roaring higher and then banking down again as it consumed its ready fuel, the clanking of a pewter mug on the grate. Someone was leaning over him, touching him. "No," Harry muttered. In that instant he believed the figure was Goyle incanting yet another Crucio. His right arm twitched as he tried to escape.

"Potter?" Snape prompted sharply. He crouched beside the boy and shook his arm lightly, trying to rouse him. Harry pushed weakly against him and said, "No," again. Snape grabbed his hand to fend him off and felt the iciness of it. He growled faintly.

"What is it?" Dumbledore asked as he knelt beside the hearthstone.

Snape felt Harry's forehead and said, "He has slipped into shock, I think." Moving rapidly now, Snape unhooked Harry's cloak and pulled it free of him. "No wonder; it is damp through." He shook his head and tossed the cloak over the chaise to dry. Harry's torn shirt pulled open, revealing a mottled bruise on his chest. Snape fingered the formally white collar and pulled the shirt aside a little farther. "He needs a Healer, Albus," Snape commented in an annoyed tone before tugging Harry's shirt back into place. He turned to Dumbledore expectantly.

"How much time would we have from spell to having anyone Apparating in to investigate?" the old wizard asked.

"Seconds," Snape replied. "A safehouse this close to Hogwarts would be closely monitored."

Dumbledore shook his bearded head faintly. "We need a significant diversion then in order to depart safely. Minerva could arrange one but she is due back at Hogwarts in three hours at the soonest. Until then, something will have to be done for Mr. Potter."

"No warming spell. No warming potion," Snape muttered to himself. Glancing back at the low fire burning behind him, he held up his hand to gauge the heat and frowned. After a moment of thought, he growled faintly again. "I know you do not like me, Potter . . . " he said as lowered himself against the bolster and spread out his rabbit lined cloak before pulling Harry over onto it. With an exasperated sigh, he pulled Harry close to his own body and covered him with the furred surface. Fortunately, Harry seemed beyond caring at this point.

Dumbledore crouched beside them, adjusting the cloak better over Harry. "I've always admired this cloak of yours, Severus," he said vaguely, as he looked over Harry's unconscious features.

"No magic," Snape reminded him bluntly. "We are in no position for a fight."

Dumbledore released the edge of the cloak and stood suddenly. "It is hard to resist," he said in frustration. He strode over to the dark windows and looked out, hands clasped behind him.

Snape looked down at the unruly hair of the head resting on his chest. Harry's right shoulder spasmed for what Snape counted as the fourth time. It indicated more injury, damage to the sympathetic system. He could think of three potions that might help, considered idly whether he had all of the ingredients in his office. He wondered what curse had caused it.

"Potter?" Snape said. He sat upright a little more, causing Harry to gasp. "Can you hear me?" he asked. Dumbledore stepped back over. "I am wondering what spells were used on him," Snape explained.

Harry opened his eyes. His breathing sounded too loud to his own ears. Someone wanted something.

"Potter? What spells were used on you?"

Dazed and pained, Harry thought back and tried to remember the incantations Crabbe and Goyle had uttered.

"Crucio?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded. "Cryckenblat," he said dully. "Flamenstraif." Remembering made him cringe at the memory of his helplessness, so he stopped. The throbbing radiated across his back now; he shifted to try to escape it and found himself held fast, enveloped in Snape's cloak. He made a noise of distress.

Chapter 2

"Perhaps some of the potion?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Potion it is not. More of a tea," Snape stated harshly. "And it needs a few more minutes to steep the acid out of the bark." As Harry's arm jerked again, he said, "Potter, you are safe at the moment. Do try to remain calm." Snape sounded as though he were trying for a sneer and failing to reach it.

Harry floated in and out of awareness over the next few minutes. Chills alternated with waves of feeling drastically overheated and suffocated. He imagined he was feverish and lying in his cupboard under the stairs with his Aunt Petunia complaining about the difficulty he was causing. He dreamed he was lying on the cricket pitch after falling from his broom, icy rain drenching him, his friends shouting from the stands to warn him of the dark figures hovering threateningly at the perimeter.

Snape shifted Harry to one side, sending a stab of agony through him. His voice cut through the disorientation momentarily. "Do you have the broken cup?" Harry cracked his eyes open and squinted in confusion as Dumbledore used the wide sleeve of his robe to wipe out a piece of porcelain. Orange flickered around the old wizard, a pool of light in the oppressive darkness. Reaching into the fire with his hand protected by his sleeve, he pulled out a blackened tankard and poured something from it into the cup half. Snape took this from him and brought it close to Harry.

"Here," he murmured, pulling Harry upright with an arm around his back. Snape paused to blow across the hot liquid he held gingerly by the broken edges. Harry drew in a sharp breath as this scene resonated with a deep memory and drew forth an agonizing longing for a lost parent who had once done the same thing. Bone-cold despair twisted his heart as the cup was pressed against his lips and hot bitter liquid, tasting of the forest, trickled into his mouth. "A little more," Snape murmured, sounding very un-Snapelike. Harry swallowed convulsively and more followed. The warmth of it spread though his chest and stomach. The chill gripping him dissipated in its wake, leaving a hollow behind like a warm Dementor attack.

Harry, too exhausted to hold his head up any longer let it fall against the figure beside him. His chest felt as though someone had put a binding curse around it. The twisting in his heart made his other aches pale in comparison. He drew in a sharp breath against the constriction, releasing it reluctantly. Cautiously, he drew in another.

"Severus . . . " Dumbledore said in concern. "That tea . . . "

"It should not be affecting his breathing," Snape muttered. He tilted Harry's neck back and ran his thumb beside his windpipe. Harry fought his grip and twisted to

bury his face in Snape's robe as another sob wracked him. Snape's arm went lax as realization struck.

"Albus," Snape said unevenly, "perhaps you should . . . "

Dumbledore ran his hand over his beard. "I would have great difficulty resisting using a spell on him." He shifted to a crouch, just a little closer. "Harry, everything is all right," he intoned soothingly.

Nothing seemed all right to Harry. He felt as though the room were full of Dementors, that he would feel alone and unhappy forever. The warmth in his stomach became an uncomfortable burn. He focused on that and swallowed hard against the next sob. The robe against his cheek was wet now. He raised one oddly clumsy arm to dry his eyes. His arm felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds. He let it fall.

A palm rested a moment on his forehead. The gesture eased some of the painful tangle inside. As grief released him, so did wakefulness. Harry's head fell lax as sleep took him.

The persistent twitch of Harry's arm woke him. His body was warm, his ankles cold and the bottoms of his feet much too hot. A fire burned low nearby. His head rested on something that rose and fell rhythmically with the relentless heartbeat resonating bizarre and dreamily within. Stiff, aching, and strangely half-numb, Harry shifted to free his hand, which was trapped beneath him. Arms tightened around him. Waking up much faster now, Harry sorted frantically through jumbled memories. Goyle and Crabbe came back first, making his arm spasm in renewed panic. Then he remembered his teachers. He lifted his head and squinted into the red-hued dimness.

"He is awake, Albus," Snape said from a spot much too close. Harry stiffened at that and tried to sit up, but couldn't find even a fraction of the strength necessary. "How do you feel?" Snape asked him as he raised them both to a sitting position. The sharp pain this caused brought the rest of the memories crashing back. Harry trembled at them. "How much longer, Albus?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore knelt beside the hearthstone and stirred the fire with a forked tree branch. He shook his head. "Too many things are happening at once. It is not possible to organize something significant on such short notice. I myself should already be elsewhere."

Chapter 2

"Perhaps he will drink a little more tea," Snape suggested.

Dumbledore reached for the tankard, now sitting out of the fire. Harry was very grateful to see that it had been allowed to cool, he didn't want to repeat the earlier scene. The thought of it made him panicky and breathless.

Snape took the cup and, since Harry had his hands out, started to rest it in his palm. Harry's hands shook too badly, however. "Let me hold it," Snape ordered. After Harry finished the cool liquid, Snape set the cup down and took his hand. "Squeeze," he said sternly. Harry obeyed, realizing the pressure was weak. "Other one," Snape said as he gripped Harry's other hand. He sighed. "What spell did they use that caused so much damage to your nerves?"

Harry shook his head. His hours with Crabbe and Goyle had merged into a confused mass. "Pulsata? Repostuna?" Snape guessed. Harry shook his head again. "What happened to Crabbe?" Snape then asked, sounding intensely curious.

Harry frowned and dropped his gaze. Hoarsely, he replied, "I only know how to do two spells without a wand." He hesitated at the memory.

"And a binding curse is one of them," Snape stated. Harry nodded. "Around the neck?" Snape asked evenly.

"He was using a burning spell on me, on my legs," Harry explained, pained by the memory. Crabbe had been working his way up, taunting him with the awful, permanent damage the spell was going to do. "I just wanted him to stop."

"I was not asking you for justification, by any means," Snape scolded. "What about Goyle?"

Harry's glazed eyes stared beyond the hearth. "He saw what happened to Crabbe and he . . . he started to incant an Avada Kedavra," Harry explained in an empty voice, then stopped.

"Are you completely immune, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked in disbelief.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know," he breathed. "I didn't let him finish it." He swallowed and drew out the reluctant memory. "I saw it forming," he said slowly.

"The curse?" Snape asked in surprise.

"At his feet. It was a disk of green glowing on the forest floor. I didn't know what to do." Harry closed his eyes as the sheer desperation of that moment washed through him, as though it was happening this instant. "I slapped my hands down on the ground at his feet and shouted. He exploded in that awful green light. And fell."

"What did you shout?" Snape asked carefully.

Harry shrugged. "'No,' I guess. That's all I can remember shouting."

Snape shook his head and turned to Dumbledore, who raised his eyebrow in surprise.

"It is the closest thing to a counter I have heard," Dumbledore said.

"Leave it to Potter," Snape said in annoyance.

"He does have an excessive amount of experience with it. Unfortunately."

Harry looked between them and leaned back against the chaise. His cover had started to slip off, so he wrapped his arms around himself for warmth and shivered.

Snape unhooked his cloak and shifted off of it before wrapping it around Harry alone. "Thanks," Harry murmured. Snape leaned over and covered Harry's legs completely before sitting back with his arms crossed.

"So we wait until morning?" Snape inquired. "That is five hours away." Dumbledore didn't respond.

Harry, happy to be away from Snape, now found a downside to it–he had no place to rest his head. As it grew too heavy to hold up, he had to let his chin fall to his chest, which wasn't very comfortable.

Rubbing his arms for warmth, Snape said, "I think you are underestimating the boy's injuries. The longer the delay, the more likely they are to become permanent."

Harry lifted his head when he heard that and looked from one teacher to the other. They didn't notice him.

"What do you suggest, Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"I suggest that I go for the Thestrals. They are native to the forest and would not set off the spell alarm like a broom would."

"That is a very long walk back. I doubt you would make it by daybreak, or at all."

Snape stood and lifted Harry's cloak off the chaise. It had almost dried, though it was stiff with mud. Snape draped it over his shoulders anyway and sat back down and huddled toward the hearth. "I was considering the other direction. We are near the edge of the Apparation limit–that is why this safehouse is so located."

"But you do not know where the border is?" Dumbledore pointed out.

"Not precisely," Snape admitted.

Chapter 2

"It was a new moon yesterday; there is sparse light."

Frustration in his voice, Snape said, "If the boy is so important to you, we must do something."

"He is important to all of us, Severus," Dumbledore said levelly.

Snape ran his fingers through his hair angrily. "I am aware of that–that is why I am willing to go."

Harry frowned at them and wondered if they talked about him like this often when he wasn't around. He was used to this from the Dursleys, but that just made it sting more. Dumbledore stood up and moved to crouch beside Harry, who had been forced to let his head lay back on the moldy stuffing of the chaise. "How critical is he?"

"I do not know," Snape muttered darkly. "I am not a Healer."

Dumbledore finally turned his attention to Harry. "How are you feeling?" Dumbledore asked him gently.

Harry shrugged. He couldn't stand to let Dumbledore down again and say how truly awful he felt.

Snape answered for him. With sharp tones, he said, "So well, he cannot hold his head up, and he has the strength in his hands of an infant."

Harry couldn't bring himself to argue.

"Take him up then," Dumbledore said decisively. He picked up the tankard and tossed the tea over the hot coals. Steam billowed out and the room darkened to pitch black.

"What are we doing, Albus?" Snape asked.

Harry felt a hand grab his arm. With hurried, clumsy movements he managed to hook the borrowed cloak at his neck.

"Take this," Dumbledore said. Harry couldn't see what it was, but from the sound, Snape apparently put it in his pocket.

"Albus?" Snape questioned dangerously. He'd been arguing for action but not this, it would seem.

"Get Harry to his feet and get your wand out," Dumbledore instructed with a calm that seemed inappropriate to the circumstances.

Fearful now, Harry tried desperately to see either of their faces. Only colored explosions swam in his vision as Snape slipped an arm behind him and pulled him upright.

"Try to stand," he ordered, as he pulled Harry's arm around his shoulder and held him up fast with his left. Harry grabbed a handful of his own cloak against Snape's back and tried to stop shaking.

"Take hold of the mug," Dumbledore said. "I will hold the portal open until you are completely through and then I will destroy it so you cannot be followed."

Snape's wand hand grasped Harry's fingers and wrapped them around the handle of the mug. The wooden handle of his wand pressed into the back of Harry's hand painfully. Dizzy, he leaned heavily against his teacher. The new fear had left him already, burned out from long exposure to it. He waited with numb patience for whatever was going to happen.

"I will join you when I can," Dumbledore said, then tapped the pewter with his wand several times as he incanted something under his breath. It rang out loudly, like a bell and Harry's nerves complained at the sharp noise breaking the stillness. The hook on his navel grabbed hold at the same moment his scar seared, as though he had fallen into the grate and rested it on the coals. Harry cried out and thrashed to free himself. Snape was far stronger and, in the next instant, their feet hit the pavement of an alleyway surrounded by red brick walls.

Chapter 3.

St. Mungos

Harry put his hand to his scar, gasped and tried to double over. "Voldemort!" he breathed. Snape pocketed his wand and used both hands to keep Harry from collapsing. "You have to go back and help him!" Harry insisted. He pounded on Snape's chest once. The burning in his scar had eased but it still pulsed ominously. He rubbed it furiously and clenched his eyes shut against the tears forming in them.

"The headmaster can take care of himself," Snape stated.

"No he can't. He doesn't try hard enough," Harry insisted angrily.

Snape didn't have an argument for that. Instead he pulled Harry against the grimy brick wall beside them and shushed him. Sounds came from down the alley.

"Thought I heard sumptin,"' a rough voice said. Another low voice grumbled but didn't argue. A bottle skidded over the pavement and cracked against the brick as footsteps approached.

Snape pulled out his wand and transfigured the other bottles at their feet into long grey rats. The rats skittered down the pavement. Moments later, cries of disgust went up and the footsteps quickly receded. Snape let out a breath. Harry rubbed his scar one last time and let his hand fall.

"Does your scar always hurt that much when you are near the Dark Lord?" Snape asked.

Harry scoffed. "He just has to think about me and it hurts that much," he replied sarcastically.

Snape's brow furrowed at that. He leaned Harry against the wall and used his wand to tap the bricks in a pattern. An archway opened and Snape pushed Harry through it. It closed behind them, leaving them in a dark metal cage with only one small flickering globe lamp in the corner. "I have a casualty," Snape stated.

The lift began to move downward, unsettling Harry who tangled his fingers in the metal mesh behind him to keep from falling. His legs quivered as he tried to get his feet back under himself. Snape bent and took his arm over his shoulder again and hoisted him up to hang limp at his side. After a moment's deliberation, he simply bent and lifted Harry at the knees as well. The lift stopped. Snape carried him down a short dim corridor and out into the brighter, familiar waiting area.

The welcomewitch saw them approach and urged the others queued up to move aside. "What happened?" she asked. Harry had his head turned against Snape's arm, so his lightening scar wasn't visible.

"He has suffered several hours of torture at the hands of two Death Eaters," Snape stated.

The welcomewitch pointed to the lifts. "Fourth floor, Healer Shankwell," she said. "I'll tell him you're coming up." As she turned to the announcing tube behind her, Snape moved to the lifts. On the fourth floor, a middle-aged hospital wizard in lime robes, gestured from a doorway halfway down.

As Snape approached, the wizard took a quick look at the cloak-wrapped bundle in his arms. "Put him down in here." Snape did as instructed, lowering Harry onto a hard, high bed in a small room down a side hallway. The globed candles near the ceiling floated over them from the center of the room. He stepped back out of the way as the Healer and another witch, stripped Harry and pulled a light coverlet over him, revealing for a few moments the bruising on his chest and a series of blistered narrow burns on his legs.

"I'll get a burn plaster," the witch said.

"What was used on him?" Shankwell asked.

Snape related the spells he knew then added, "And he was in the wash of a Killing Curse."

The Healer shook his head and took out his wand. He held it over Harry's chest and pulled his chin over toward him. "Great Merlin, it's Harry Potter," he said in

surprise. Harry gave the man a vaguely disgusted look. At that, the wizard suppressed his surprise and tapped Harry's chest. Tingles ran over Harry, racing to his fingertips and back to the wand. His arm twitched yet again, making him frown in frustration. The Healer put his hand behind Harry's neck and touched each of his fingertips with his wand.

"Call Versa in," the Shankwell said to the witch. She set down the cauldron of burn plaster she was stirring and stepped out. Snape eyed it before putting his hands behind his back and stepping farther out of the way.

A few minutes later, two witches returned. The new one was lithe with brown hair down to her knees. She pulled her hair behind her and bent over Harry a long minute. Their eyes met as she studied him closely, her hands skimming just above his skin. "What did you give him for the pain?" she asked.

"A tea of murdock, arrowroot and new bark," Snape replied.

"That needs to clear before I can work," she said. "Get me a Grandine potion," Versa said.

The wizard, who had been holding the cauldron while the other witch dabbed plaster on his burns, conjured a tray for it and left. He returned a moment later with a clear liquid that fizzed. "You need to drink this," he said as he stepped beside the bed. With a flick of his wand, the bed lifted Harry's head and shoulders. Harry grimaced at the bubbles bursting in his face but he drank it all down, then swallowed hard as it bubbled up in his stomach.

Versa pushed him over onto his side. Harry didn't fight her; pain pulsed through his limbs so strongly now, he couldn't consider doing anything beyond clenching his eyes shut and breathing. Fingers ran along his spine, making his arm jump yet again. Versa was talking to him in a low voice, meaningless words of encouragement and pleas for patience. A hand gripped Harry's left just as the pain surged to the worst yet. He gripped it in return, trying to squeeze the pain out of himself.

A moment later waves of cold and warm rippled through him and what felt like numbness, but was really only normal sensation, settled into him. He sighed in relief. "It was almost too long," Versa said. "It will be a few days before he recovers fully."

Harry thought he could manage if he felt like this. He opened his eyes and discovered with a start that he was clutching Snape's hand. What he could see of Snape's expression through his hair looked dark and fierce. Harry pulled his hand free and rolled onto his back. The other witch was dabbing plaster on the last burn on his

ankle. They felt much better as well, although the dried mixture pulled when he moved his feet. Another potion was pressed into his hands. As Harry, relieved to have full control of his hands, pulled it toward him, Snape leaned close and looked into the wooden cup.

"Draught of Palidyn," Shankwell supplied. Snape stood straight and didn't comment. "He's been very interested in the potions," the wizard mentioned to Harry.

"He is the Potions master at Hogwarts," Harry said between sips of sharp lemony liquid.

"Oh," Shankwell said. When Harry had finished, the Healer took the cup back and after eyeing Snape thoughtfully, left them alone.

Harry leaned back. He thought he'd felt completely better before, but another tingle of relief passed over him from the second potion. Harry moved his feet under the coverlet, feeling the way the plaster pulled at the skin along his shins. "Heard from Dumbledore?" he asked suddenly. He felt very uncomfortable around Snape now. Extremely embarrassed.

Snape shook his head.

"Can I leave?" Harry then asked.

Snape tossed his hair back and raised a brow of surprise at him. "I do not think they can keep you here if you are able to leave under your own power."

"I'm leaving then," he said and swung his legs to the side, out into the cold air. "Um, do you know where my clothes are?"

Minutes later, after Harry used a crude expulsion charm to get the worst soiling out of his clothes and put them on, they walked down the corridor. He felt like someone had used a feather-light charm on him since he was still accustomed to the draining pain of before. Snape steered him into the room behind the floorwitch, who was dealing with a screaming young child with real rabbit ears that she clutched in her fists.

"Patient of?" the man behind the desk asked. He was pasty-faced with a large mole on his check. He held parchments very close to his eyes to read them.

"Shankwell," Harry replied.

"Do you have his release form?"

"I'm releasing myself," Harry said evenly.

The man looked up with a doubtful, derisive expression that turned to shock as he recognized him. "I suppose," he mumbled, pulled out a parchment and began writing quickly and neatly upon it.

Chapter 3

They walked out to the lifts. Shankwell hurried down the corridor toward them as they waited. "You are leaving?" he asked in concern.

"I'm going ho-. . . back to Hogwarts."

Shankwell huffed. "You Order wizards are impossible." He stomped off.

Harry slouched. "Yeah," he muttered, "we Order wizards."

Snape watched the dial above the lift turn slowly. "You want more of this, Potter?" he sneered.

The lift arrived. A pair of Healers stepped out, deep in conversation. Harry and Snape stepped in. "I want to know what is going on," Harry snapped in frustration.

"I fully expect you will be allowed to join when you are of age."

"Should I live so long," Harry commented darkly. The doors to the lift hadn't closed. He looked over the controls in annoyance.

"Why did the headmaster chastise you for referring to the school as 'home?"' Snape asked.

Feeling trapped by the damning requirement the protective spell Dumbledore put on his Aunt's house, Harry tugged angrily on the lever for the door. He huffed in frustration and said, "Figure it out for yourself–I always have to." The doors finally closed reluctantly. Harry gazed though the dual gates as one slid past the other as the lift began to move. Frowning deeply, he murmured to himself, "It means I have no home."

They took the floo network into Hogsmeade. The Three Broomsticks where they landed was dark and empty although morning light spread through the windows. The path up to the castle had never seemed longer. As they walked in silence, Harry refused to show any weakness at all which was extra difficult as Snape watched him very closely.

By the time they reached the entrance hall, Harry's vision was trying to tunnel in. He rested against the post at the bottom of the stairs. Snape came back down the steps and started to ask something. "Just give me a moment," Harry insisted. The walk should not have left him so drained, he thought. He took a deep breath and pushed away and put a foot up on the first riser mostly to keep from falling. Snape

put a hand out to catch him, should he fall farther. Harry stalked by him, annoyed with himself.

The hospital wing was empty when they opened the door. Madame Pomfrey must have been elsewhere as she didn't step out of her office as she usually did. "Do you have a favorite bed?" Snape asked snidely.

"That one," Harry answered seriously, pointing to the third one on the right. It had a thicker mattress, he was certain. Beside the bed, he slipped off his shoes and crawled under the covers fully clothed.

"I will locate Madame Pomfrey," Snape said and turned to leave.

"No hurry," Harry said, thinking only of a nice long sleep.

"Mr. Potter?" Pomfrey's voice roused him, seemingly in the next instant. She sounded very concerned.

Annoyed at being woken, Harry just murmured a greeting and curled up farther. The covers came down–the cool air made his arm spasm. He lay half dozing as she stripped, spelled, and bathed him, muttering about dark wizards and his unfortunate luck as she did so. With growing impatience, Harry ignored her–he wanted nothing more than to return to undisturbed sleep.

Pomfrey touched her wand to Harry's shoulderblade, causing another spasm. She said, "The central nerve renewal spell didn't cure the sympathetic damage."

"Apparently not," Snape said.

Harry forced himself not to react; he didn't realize his teacher was still there. "Sedition potion?" Pomfrey suggested Harry pretended that he'd fallen back to sleep.

"Frenwaer elixir. It will require about an hour to brew," Snape said. Harry heard his footsteps recede across the floor.

He must have drifted off then because apparently moments later, Pomfrey was urging him to sit up and drink something from a stone cup. Harry groggily obeyed. Pomfrey was the only one there now, for which he was glad.

He finished the cup she held for him. "Not bad," Harry commented. Not only was it not noxious, the potion tasted vaguely like strawberries. Still tired beyond belief, Harry fell back on the bed and curled up on his other side, instantly asleep.

He woke up to his stomach complaining. Stiff from his muscles to his bones, he sat up and stretched with a groan. Pomfrey came out of her office. "How are you feeling?"

"Famished." He glanced at the clock above the doors which showed six-ten. "May I go down to dinner?"

She smiled faintly at him as though relieved by his question. "If you feel up to it."

Harry peered under the bedstand, the usual place for personal things to be stored. A clean set of robes were there.

"Mr. Weasley brought those down for you," she said as she folded the duvet back neatly into thirds at the end of the bed.

"Where is Ron?"

"He was here for a little while this morning, dear, while you were asleep."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed to have missed him.

"He did not leave willingly. His father had to come and fetch him."

Dressed, Harry made a good show of walking normally out of the wing. Out in the corridor, he leaned against the wall for a minute until a bout of dizziness passed. He took it slower the rest of the way.

As he stepped inside the Great Hall, Dumbledore looked up and smiled at him from the end of the Hufflepuff table. "My dear boy. Good to see you about."

Harry returned the smile and took the last seat on the near end, hesitating just an instant as it meant sitting across from Snape. It was, however, beside Hagrid, which almost balanced out. An empty plate and utensils appeared before him as he stepped over the bench. Fiercely hungry, he pulled the platter of roast mutton close and served himself a healthy pile of that and cabbage. As he ate, he noticed Snape studying him closely. Harry looked up sharply at him and stared back. Snape completely ignored this and continued watching him frequently between bites. With a frown, Harry completely ignored his teacher instead.

Dumbledore called Harry over as they all stood up when the meal was over. The old wizard put a hand on his shoulder and leaned down to say, "Madame Pomfrey wants to be certain you return to the hospital wing for the night."

"Yes, sir."

"And how are you doing?"

Harry shrugged and realized then that his spasm had completely disappeared. "Well enough, sir."

"I don't think I need to tell you to stay inside? There is always the bailey if you wish to get some sun." At Harry's nod, Dumbledore patted him on the back and said, in a voice that was half admonishment and half tease, "Do try to stay out of trouble."

Chapter 4.

Restless and Sleepless

The rest of the holiday break was quiet. Harry read ahead in all of his subjects, even doing as Hermione did, outlining the chapters on parchments to use for note-taking. He wrote back and forth to Ron twice before his friend returned. Ron seemed to think that, because Goyle and Crabbe were dead, everything was okay again. Harry could not find the words to explain otherwise and kind of wish Ron just understood.

The first Monday back, Harry seriously dreaded Potions. Considering how prepared he was for class, having reread the chapter again the night before, the trepidation felt very strange.

As Snape strode into the classroom, Harry kept his head down over his notes. He stayed that way until the lecture was almost over, when Snape finally called on him to answer a question Dean had failed to. Fortunately, Harry had just been staring at his notes from the reading, the next day's reading, and knew the answer.

"Correct, Mr. Potter," Snape said slowly with a hint of surprise.

Malfoy caught Harry's eye. His look was darker than Harry had ever seen it, utterly malevolent. Harry held the other boy's gaze for a long time, steady in his own anger. Unexpectedly, Snape stepped down the aisle, blocking Harry's view of the Slytherin table. Harry raised his gaze to the teacher and Snape gave him a warning look before returning to the front. Harry, insides squirming under that black gaze, returned to bending over his notes full-time.

Chapter 4

Students gathered early for D.A. in the Room of Requirement and exchanged rumors about He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named. Susan Bones stood in a cluster with Cho and a few fifth years. Harry wandered over to them while he waited for Hermione and Neville to arrive so that they could work out dividing up the demonstrations. Susan, in surreptitious tones, said, "The D.E. have been quiet lately, according to my aunt. The Ministry is taking credit for scaring them into hiding." Susan noticed Harry had joined them. "What do you think?" she asked him.

"I usually assume the Ministry has it wrong, which would mean there is another reason for them lying low," Harry replied.

The other students shuffled nervously. Susan's news had been the first good news in a long time.

Cho cleared her throat. "Rumor has it something happened here at school over break."

Ron and Dean came in at that moment, sparing Harry from making an excuse for not answering. He stepped over to them and said hello.

"What happened?" Susan asked Cho behind him. "The Order had a big scheme going over break, I do know that."

Ron and Dean gravitated toward the other group, forcing Harry to do the same or walk off on his own. "But something went wrong, I heard," Cho went on. "Not going to enlighten us, Harry? You were here all break." When Harry shook his head, she added, "You've become as bad as the teachers for keeping things to yourself."

"Leave him alone," Ron said stiffly.

"I was only kidding him," Cho said.

"Don't kid him about that," Ron berated her in a hard tone.

"It's all right, Ron." Harry touched his friend's arm to calm him down.

"What are we doing today?" Susan asked, cleanly changing the subject.

"Defensive Transfiguration," Harry said. "Which is hard stuff and we'll probably spend the rest of the term on it, unless people really don't like doing it."

"Like what kinds of transfigurations?" Dean asked.

"Like turning a stone floor into a sheet of ice, for example." The students made noises of approval at that. Harry went on from the list in his head, "Turning chairs into attack dogs. Ants into tarantulas."

"Ugh, why would you do that?" Ron exclaimed, grimacing.

"Imagine, Ron," Harry said, "If you were being chased by a dark wizard with the same phobia as you. Ant hills are everywhere. You could send thousands of tarantulas behind you to slow your pursuer." Ron shuddered as Harry added, "I admit, that one is a bit of a stretch. We have to look up or work out some that are more useful."

"Do we also have a charm to turn our shoes into ice boots? That would make the ice one much more useful," Dean suggested.

"You can work on that," Harry said.

Neville and Hermione came in with a large group of students. Harry went over to them to discuss the session, grateful to get on with something that felt useful.

Malfoy stalked down the corridor, trailing behind Nott and Parkinson, who formed a kind of honor guard for him. At the top of the grand staircase, the blonde boy spun around on Harry and his friends, his jaw clenched in fury.

"If you have something to say, Malfoy, get it over with," Harry challenged, when Malfoy's mouth worked silently.

Before Malfoy could respond, someone grabbed Harry from behind by the back of his robe. "If you are on your way to lunch, Potter, keep moving," Snape ordered harshly, releasing Harry immediately with a shove away from Malfoy.

Harry couldn't stop the wounded look from reaching his eyes as he glanced up at his teacher. Snape raised his chin and turned to his student. "What did I tell you, Mr. Malfoy?"

With hurt pride Malfoy retorted, "I didn't say anything to him."

"No invitation to a confrontation," Snape said, as though repeating himself.

"What?" Malfoy asked him sarcastically. "Don't want him killing anyone else?"

Every student in the crowded hallway stopped and turned to them. Ron and Hermione shifted in front of Harry. Dean, Ginny and Cho moved in closer as well from the other side of the corridor. Harry stepped sideways to stand behind Hermione so he could see. From Snape's flat expression, Harry could tell that Malfoy had crossed the line.

Chapter 4

"They got what they deserved," Ron muttered quietly. Harry poked him hard under his ribs to make him shut up. No one but Harry and Hermione seemed to have heard him.

"My office, Mr. Malfoy," Snape stated in a totally level voice. Harry never imagined such a normal tone could sound so menacing. Snape's eyes narrowed at his student, then he spun on his heel and stalked off with a glance at Harry as he passed. Harry's heart raced a little, wondering if he were in trouble as well. As soon as the Slytherins had followed Malfoy away, Harry chastised himself for his concern–he shouldn't care if he were in trouble with the Head of Slytherin House.

The other students in the corridor still mingled as Dean and Ginny offered Harry a few words of support.

"Who'd he kill?" Justin Finch-Fletchley asked suddenly, loud enough to carry up and down the corridor. The other general murmuring stopped.

Ron stepped over to the other boy. They were almost the same taller-than-average height. "Two Death Eaters who had abducted him over holiday."

"What's the problem with that?" Justin asked.

"Crabbe's and Goyle's fathers," Hermione explained softly.

"That's why they're gone, I suppose," Justin said. "Good riddance to them, really." He looked at Harry, who wished he felt more defiant–Harry felt raw only, exposed. "Be careful, Harry," Justin said grimly and stepped away. The other students took this cue and moved along as well.

The new term rolled on. Harry studied quietly during most of his free time. With Quidditch cancelled for security reasons, there wasn't much else to do. Ron and especially Hermione didn't interrupt him with games or much conversation–they simply joined him when they found him in either the library or the house common room. Even a month into the new term, Harry found himself obsessing over Potions. He completed his assignments with much more care than previously. He also found he couldn't bear the thought of not being able to answer any question that might come his way during class.

"Can you quiz me on Potions?" Harry asked Hermione as they sat studying in the commons room on a Sunday night. Ron played Wizard chess with Dean as he and Hermione sat before the fire.

"Sure, Harry." She took out her notes and flipped through them. Quietly, she said, "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry chewed his lip a moment. "Don't I seem all right?" He really had been working hard to act normally.

She lifted a shoulder in lieu of a shrug. "You are much quieter, and you act differently around Professor Snape."

Harry hadn't told them precisely what had happened, just an overview–an almost misleading one, in fact. "He makes me nervous."

"He's always done that. You've been downright obedient lately. It's really odd." Now that the topic was open, Hermione looked to be going for the truth.

Harry re-stacked his textbooks more neatly beside him. "I don't want to talk about it," he stated evenly. He didn't want to think about how undone he felt. How vulnerable. How if Snape wanted to destroy him, as he had seemed to try to do before, how easy it would be now.

Hermione watched him as he fell silent. Very quietly, she asked, "Did he hurt you, Harry?"

"Who?" When she huffed like a laugh and rolled her eyes, Harry added, "No." He felt his face heating up and that bothered him too.

"You just seem frightened of him, is all. Cowed," she commented as she went back to her notes. "And you are working really hard in his class," she added as though that were the strangest part of it.

Harry fidgeted with his empty hands before taking up a quill to make it stop. He didn't reply. She waited a long time, as though to give him a chance to speak, before she started quizzing him on the next few Potions readings.

Sleep became more elusive for Harry. Sometimes shadowy dreams where he was being chased woke him. Other nights his parents called to him as he searched the Forbidden Forest for them. Some nights he didn't remember dreaming, just found himself awake and far too alert and wired to sleep, despite his exhaustion. Eventually, Harry would simply get up, collect his books and head down to the common room.

Chapter 4

One such evening after turning up the lamps, Harry settled into the chair in the corner and pulled out his Transfiguration essay, which was due the following afternoon. He read it over, then read over the chapters and his notes. Then read over the essay again, fixing a few minor things that he now noticed. He considered copying it out again, just to have something to do, even though it didn't have that many cross-outs.

"Still working on something?" Ron's voice came from the stairway to the boy's dormitory.

"Not really," Harry replied. "I can't sleep."

Ron pulled his dressing gown around himself tighter and tied it as he came down the steps. "Having nightmares?"

Harry put his essay and books away and sat back in the worn, overstuffed chair. "Sometimes. Sometimes, I just wake up in the middle of the night and there isn't a chance of going back to sleep."

With a groan Ron sat in the chair beside Harry's. "You never told me what really happened over break," Ron said. "That have anything to do with it?"

"I don't think so."

"You looked a mess when they finally let me see you. Couldn't believe that you'd been to St. Mungo's already."

"They tortured me for hours," Harry said.

"I wanted to stay," Ron said in an frustrated tone. "I didn't talk to Dad all break I was so angry with him for making me leave." Ron fidgeted with his fingers. "Is that why you've been so cowed since then."

"You think so, too? Hermione said that the other day."

"You killed them in the end, doesn't that make it all right again?"

"No."

Ron leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "Then nothing will." Harry frowned at that and pulled out his Herbology textbook. "You've turned into Hermione, you know," Ron commented.

Harry scoffed at that.

"No, it's true. She said yesterday you are getting almost the same grades as she is now. You haven't done anything against the rules. Not one thing. You aren't as much fun, anymore, you know," Ron ended lightly, teasing.

Harry frowned. "I'm not here to have fun anymore. I'm here to survive."

"Merlin, Harry," Ron breathed. He leaned forward in his chair. "Come on, let's go wander around the castle, see what we can stir up." At Harry's dubious look, he amended, "We'll just go down to the library then. Anything, Harry. You aren't going to sleep anyway."

"Don't you need to sleep?" Harry pointed out.

"I sleep every night. I'll make up for it tomorrow."

"I envy you, Ron. I really do," Harry murmured.

"I didn't say that to rub it in," Ron said quickly. He stood up and put Harry's book away in his bag and flipped it closed. "Come on." He tugged at Harry's arm. "Just a walk around the fourth floor. I'm a prefect, we'll just say I felt like taking a look around and brought you along."

"Then we won't be breaking any rules," Harry pointed out.

Ron sighed. "You're worrying me, Harry. Come on. Late night snack then. Dobby will be thrilled to see you."

That got Harry moving. In their pyjamas and robes, they stepped through the portrait hole and into the silent corridor. "I really love it when it is quiet like this," Ron said, "like we have the whole, huge place to ourselves."

They didn't encounter anyone on the way down to the kitchens. Only a few portraits paid them any heed and none of them tried to talk to them. In the kitchen, the house-elf sitting before the fire went and fetched Dobby for them.

"Harry Potter is visiting Dobby!" the elf said in greeting a moment later.

"How are you doing, Dobby?" Harry asked.

"Dobby is very well, Master Harry. Would Master like a seat?" he asked, gesturing at the very low bench and table. Food began arriving as they settled in. Ron gave Harry a look of victory as a plate of cold chicken wings was set before them.

"Have some mashed potatoes," Ron said, serving Harry a huge pile. "Mum swears they make you sleep better."

Harry watched Ron eat, trying to suppress his tired jealousy at the notion of a caring mum and the luxury of ignoring one's father for an entire week. Dobby distracted him as he slid onto the bench beside Harry and leaned close. Conspiratorially, the house-elf said, "Bad things is happening, Master Harry."

Chapter 4

"I know, Dobby," Harry said as he pushed his potatoes around with his fork.

"Worse things," Dobby insisted in his squeaky whisper. "There is talking that He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named means to kill Master Harry. Soon."

Harry frowned. Ron breathed out loudly. "Guess this wasn't the best idea I've ever had," he said darkly, glaring at Dobby accusingly.

Dobby tugged frantically on Harry's sleeve. "They says He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named has found out a secret."

Harry froze. "How?" he asked sharply. He turned to the house-elf and grabbed the front of his tea-towel, just around the Hogwarts seal. "How did he learn it?"

"He is capturing a wizard who knows."

"Does Dumbledore know this?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, Master."

Harry tossed down his fork with loud clang against his plate. The other elves who were hovering nearby, in case anything else was needed, backed up a few steps. "Wouldn't bother telling me, would he?" Harry spat bitterly.

"What are you on about?" Ron asked, sounding wary of the answer.

Harry stared into the fire for a long time. He felt betrayed all over again. With a loud scrap of the bench on the floor, Harry stood up. "Let's go."

"You do keep as many secrets as they do, you know," Ron pointed out. "You never told them you were hearing the Basilisk. You never tell them when you are having visions or dreams. You haven't told me what happened over break or about this thing Dobby is on about."

"You want to hear all of it?" Harry shouted. "You want to be as sleepless as I am?"

Ron dejectedly dropped the wing he was gnawing on back onto his plate and stood up. "I want to help," he said firmly. "So does Hermione, but neither of us have any idea where to start."

After a long moment Harry turned to the elf. "Dobby, can you leave us alone, please? Take the others with you?"

"Yes, Master. Dobby is sorry, Master."

"Don't be, Dobby. I needed to know what you told me, even if no one else thinks I do."

When they were alone, Harry sat again and drank down his pumpkin juice. His stomach felt like it had filled with acid and the juice helped a lot. "The prophecy is the secret Dobby is referring to," Harry said.

"It was lost. Neville broke it," Ron said.

"No. The person who recorded it still remembered it. That was Dumbledore. Other wizards were there when it was first spoken, but Dumbledore didn't tell me who they were."

Harry related the whole thing for him.

"Blimey. The Dark Lord-"

"You sound like Snape when you use that name."

"It just sounds better than-"

"His name is Voldemort," Harry said harshly.

Ron breathed in deeply a few times. "Voldemort," he whispered, then shuddered. ". . . is going to kill you the first chance he gets."

"He's tried several times already," Harry pointed out tiredly.

"It is more critical now," Ron said slowly. "The most important thing he has to do."

"Thanks, Ron," Harry retorted sarcastically.

"Sorry," Ron said. "Let's get out of here. I'm full."

Harry, who hadn't really eaten anything, stood up willingly. They walked out and down the corridor, then up the steps to the Entrance Hall. In continued silence, they climbed the seven staircases up. One moved after they had started up it, forcing them to walk around the fourth floor corridor to get back to the next one up. They were both so deep in their own thoughts that, when a throat cleared loudly behind them, they both jumped.

Sharp footsteps and a billowing cloak caught up to them where they stood. Snape, arms crossed, said snidely, "Is it even worth asking what you are doing out of your dormitory at this hour?"

"Taking a walk," Ron replied, annoyed. "I'm a prefect; if I feel like looking around, I can," he added, sounding less certain now than when he had said it to Harry earlier.

"Potter, go up to your tower. I want a word with Mr. Weasley." Snape said this slowly, making Harry hesitate. "Potter," Snape said more sharply. Harry frowned and stalked off. He glanced back to see Ron and his teacher facing off.

Chapter 4

After Harry had gone, Snape circled Ron once with a predatory gleam in his eyes. "Mr. Weasley, the prefects were issued very specific instructions regarding Mr. Potter."

"We didn't leave the castle," Ron insisted. "We went down for a snack."

"He is not to be out of the tower after ten. We were very clear on that point," Snape said angrily.

Ron sighed. "I thought a walk and some food would help him sleep," he said in a bit of a whine. "He hasn't had a full night's sleep in a week," he added, half to himself. Ron waited to be berated more, finally raising his eyes when nothing was forthcoming. Snape's expression surprised him–he almost looked . . . concerned. The look vanished as Snape's eyes narrowed.

"Weasley, if you violate any of the rules surrounding Mr. Potter again, you will deeply regret it."

"I won't, sir," Ron said honestly. "I'm sorry, sir," he added in a pained voice. Harry's explanation of the prophecy had already made him regret his suggesting this foray.

"Go," Snape ordered him.

Ron ran off to catch up to his friend.

Harry was learning to like Herbology for a very unlikely reason–there were no chairs, which made it very hard to fall asleep during class. On the other hand, the gloves made it hard to rub his aching eyes.

With a gentle touch born of a need to focus on something outside himself, he finished repotting a weeping wrenfern. It looked good in its new pot, almost as good as Neville's. Even Hermione's looked like it had suffered in its move. Ron's looked half-dead.

"Good job, Harry," Neville said.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," Professor Sprout said as she circled the table. "Five points for Gryffindor for each of you and Mr. Longbottom for the two happiest newly transplanted wrenferns."

Neville looked joyous at that. He rarely got points for the house. Malfoy across the table glared at them and spat into his plant, which drooped farther.

Restless and Sleepless

Harry was dreaming. He was crossing a swamp, leaping from one tuft of tall reeds to another. This path died out as well as the others had, the next clump of vegetation too far to reach. He was tired of backtracking in a futile effort at finding a way over the inky, oily water. But he had been warned repeatedly not to wade in it, that he would surely sink and be drawn fatally into its murky depths. He measured the distance between his feet and the distant clump surrounding a leaning old dead tree. How deep could it be, anyway?

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry jumped awake. Snape glared at him from across the Potions bench. "If you cannot stay awake, perhaps you should not be in class," Snape suggested with a sneer.

A week ago, that would have angered Harry; now it sounded very reasonable. With clumsy motions he bent to pick up his bookbag and put his things away.

"Harry?" Hermione asked in surprise.

With a flick of his cloak, Snape spun back around and stalked off.

From deep in the fog of his exhaustion, Harry whispered, "I do need to sleep."

"Do you want me to take you up?" she asked in concern.

Snape stalked back over and set a corked bottle on the bench. "A sip of that before you try to sleep, Mr. Potter."

Harry picked it up and looked at the dark red liquid a moment before putting it in his bag on top of his books. "You'll tell me the assignment?" Harry confirmed with Hermione after Snape had stalked back to the front again.

"Of course."

With the potion Harry slept soundly until dinner. Until Ron woke him, worried.

"Pomfrey is about to come up and check on you," his friend explained. "I thought I'd head her off."

"Thanks," Harry said. He swung his legs off the bed and pressed his hair down.

"Hermione said Snape gave you a potion."

Harry pointed at the bottle on the night stand. "It works, apparently. Next time I should take it at night, clearly."

It took until three in the morning for Harry to copy Hermione's notes and finish his assignments. Uncertain if it was all right to take the potion twice in one day, Harry dozed lightly without it until morning, the dream about the swamp dogging him still.

Chapter 4

It was finally Saturday. Harry, relieved that he didn't have to struggle through classes, dragged himself down to breakfast with his friends after a short night's sleep. He had taken a small sip of potion the night before, alarmed at how much of it he had been using over the last week. The tiny dose had given him a few hours of slumber, which would have to do–he didn't fancy asking Snape for more of it.

Most of the staff were missing at breakfast, which happened more often lately on the weekends. Snape, Sprout, Hagrid, and Trelawney were clumped in the middle of the long head table. Harry tried to gauge what was going on by reading their mannerisms. When he made it down the line that far, he got a very challenging look from Snape, so Harry ducked quickly back to his breakfast.

The school grounds, not to mention Hogsmeade, were off-limits, so the students clustered in the bailey off the ground floor in the warm spring weather. The sunlight felt wonderful as he and his friends sat on a stone bench beside the fountain, but the warmth made Harry sleepy. He scrubbed his face hard to rouse himself.

"Didn't you take that potion last night?" Hermione asked.

"Not enough. I'm almost out," Harry admitted.

"I'll ask for more, if you don't want to," she offered.

Harry huffed in frustration. "I guess I should have you do that. I can't get by without it." With a yawn, he said, "Maybe I should take a nap, since I can do that today without missing class." As he stood up, Ron and Hermione did as well. Had Harry not been too foggy-brained, he would have noticed the meaningful look that passed between his friends. He also would have noticed the other students that followed right behind them, all D.A. members. He would have noticed that non-Gryffindors like Cho were suddenly deciding to hang out in the Gryffindor common room on a sunny Saturday.

Harry, blissfully unaware of anything other than the prospect of his pillow, bid goodbye at the bottom of the boy's dormitory stairs and headed up. He eyed the remaining potion on the side table before deciding that he was tired enough to sleep without it. Fully clothed, minus his shoes, Harry fell back onto his bed and drifted off.

Restless and Sleepless

An hour later, with a horrified gasp, Harry jerked awake. He had starkly dreamed that Voldemort was standing beside his bed, waiting with patient malevolence for him to wake up. Breathing heavily, Harry sat up and grabbed his wand off the side table. He hadn't bothered to close the bed drapes, and sunlight poured through the room and across his bed. Out the window he could see that the mountains around the school were verdant with new leaves. Rubbing his tingling scar, Harry stood up and went to the window. The lawn was deserted, and the wind blew pleasing waves across the undisturbed expanse of green.

Harry gasped as the tingle in his scar heated to a burn. The stark contrast between the beautiful day and the pain in his scar confused his tired brain. He stumbled backward to sit on the bed, his palm pressed hard against his forehead. With his eyes clenched shut, Harry tried to Occlude his mind, hoping that would cut off the agony. It gave him a vision instead, a vision of Voldemort standing in the castle Entrance Hall, beckoning him.

Chapter 5.

Meeting Destiny

Harry gasped again and, shaking badly, worked his way hand over hand to the end of his bed. On rubbery legs, he made the door to the dormitory and negotiated the stairs, still clutching his wand. It occurred to him, as he reached the bottom, that far more students were in the common room than he would have expected. They all turned to him in concern.

"Harry?" Hermione and Ron queried together. They and Ginny came over to him quickly. "Are you all right? Should we get Madam Pomfrey?"

Harry shook his head mechanically. "Get your wands out. McGonagall is gone, isn't she? And Dumbledore?"

"Yes," Randel, the Seventh Year prefect confirmed.

"No surprise," Harry muttered. "Get everyone together. The D.A. that is." He tried to still the shaking of his wand hand with no luck.

"Harry, what is going on?" Hermione demanded. The other students were moving to obey. Some leapt out the portrait hole without waiting for Harry's response.

"Voldemort is downstairs."

"Shit!" Someone exclaimed as everyone gasped.

"Harry, you were dreaming," Hermione insisted.

"Maybe, but it didn't seem like it. I think he is standing in the frigging Entrance Hall. Get everyone together." Harry stalked past her without really looking at her

and pushed open the Fat Lady. He couldn't remember being this frightened before. Even in the graveyard, he had only to worry about himself. Every last thing was on the line now–the entire wizarding world.

Putting one foot before the other, Harry let his legs carry him to the staircases, his friends following close. Students ran forward from the group as they went, bringing other D.A. back with them. At the first floor, Harry stopped.

"Should someone scout ahead?" Dean asked, sounding like he wanted to believe but actually didn't.

"No," Harry replied, imagining that someone getting picked off. He looked around him. "You, you, and you," he indicated the First and Second Years. "Stay to the back. Way to the back." At their disappointed and angry faces, he said, "Act as spotters then, if you have to help, but stay the hell back."

Harry started off again abruptly. Halfway down the corridor to the grand staircase, Ron organized himself and the other core members in front of Harry. "You aren't leading the way, mate," Ron explained.

They stepped quietly, the shuffle of their robes the only sound until Ron breathed, "Great Merlin," when they made the top of the grand staircase which led down to the Entrance Hall. All of the students raised their wands, some shaking more than others. Harry stepped forward enough to see down into the ground floor. A ring of hooded Death Eaters surrounded a tall central figure looking oddly as Harry had expected them. This confirmation made him feel strangely calm. Voldemort stood with his hooded head turned up to them, red eyes glowing even in the bright light from the open doors to the outside.

With faint whispers Ron and the others packed themselves in tightly. Neville and Ginny changed positions. The students formed a ring around Harry and the leaders took a step down the staircase, almost in unison.

Harry, wand held at his side, followed them mechanically, his eyes locked on Voldemort's. Hermione whispered something and Neville responded. Harry glanced down at their shoulders before him. They had packed in sideways, back to front, wands held out before them. They didn't appear to be shaking anymore. Harry swallowed hard at the surge of emotion he felt at his friends doing this for him, stepping into a battle against the most evil wizards and witches alive.

Harry looked up again, bolstering himself with a determination to not let them down. He blinked and hesitated on the next riser when he saw Voldemort take a very small

step backward. The ring around Harry paused with him. Heart racing, Harry remembered the battle at the Ministry. He narrowed his eyes at Voldemort's red ones and relived that ache of wanting to see Sirius again. This time it was unmistakable. Voldemort turned with a shift of his shoulders.

The fact that you can feel pain like this, is your greatest strength , Dumbledore's voice came back to him along with the angry pain of that conversation. The students paused around Harry, since he had stopped advancing. Harry thought of the picture of his parents in the album Hagrid had given him. He thought of the ache of friendship he had for Hagrid. Voldemort twisted away, breaking his own ranks. Confused, the Death Eaters started casting spells at them.

Hermione and Neville put up a joined block, protecting nearly all of them. Ron and Ginny and the others incanted spells back at the ring of hooded figures. Harry gripped and began lifting his wand. Snake-like, Voldemort turned and stepped forward again, freezing Harry in place. Ignoring the shouted spells and the cries of pain, Harry thought of his parents. He brought the dark ache of loneliness up from the depths where he kept it secured and, with damp eyes, felt it all, dwelling especially on the memory of his mother's protection of him when this very wizard had come for him the first time.

Voldemort ducked his head to break eye contact and shouted something at his followers. Harry, suddenly released, glanced around him as well. A few of the students had fallen; one used the handrail to stand up again, wand still spelling. The circle of Death Eaters was breaking down with a few of them lying prone now. Look at me, damn you, Harry snarled in his mind at the dark, central figure.

Movement across the hall caught Harry's attention. Snape, wand at ready, stepped stealthily up the stairwell that led to the Ravenclaw dungeon, alarmed eyes evaluating the situation. Harry wavered in that instant, worried what side he was really on. Paranoia flared in Harry's mind that maybe Snape had set this all up somehow, that he had tricked everyone. His old hatred of him flared.

Voldemort spun back, drawing Harry's eyes without volition. He struck through Harry's mind, riding on that hatred and distrust. Harry stepped back, almost falling. "No," Harry murmured. His scar felt like a laser burning all the way through his skull. He couldn't move, simply hung suspended on Voldemort's will. So easy , he heard mockingly in his mind. Tendrils snaked around Harry's hatred, feeding on it.

Harry tried to close his eyes, but they snapped open again. Hermione called his name in concern. He didn't have much room to think in his own mind; memories of

Snape's cruel treatment seemed to be tangling up his own force of will. Voldemort took a confident step forward raising his wand at Harry and began to speak something most certainly fatal. With a whimper of utter reluctance, Harry remembered. He remembered that night in the abandoned manor house–the first and only time in his life he had woken up in someone's arms.

Voldemort's entire body jerked at that and Harry could suddenly breathe. He remembered the ache at hearing Snape's concerned voice. That terrible moment when his teacher blew across the tea to cool it for him. Voldemort's wand slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. Harry barely heard it over the shouting. He raised his wand then. The emotion in him had reached some kind of breaking point, and he imagined himself as a shaken butterbeer bottle. Fleetingly, wondered if he could hate Voldemort enough to kill him. Forbidden curses required force of will; Bellatrix had told him that, and he expected she would know. But he couldn't risk any hate or Voldemort would have him then for certain. The evil being before him was straightening his angular self, raising his bare, white, boney hand.

" Avada Kedavra! " Harry shouted, with no hate, just an overwhelming, aching desire to free himself and everyone else.

The green flare was bright, even competing with the sunlight. Voldemort flickered with it, writhing as he fell. Roaring silence descended as everyone froze like a Muggle snapshot. Rolling chaos followed. The Death Eaters broke in every direction. Dean dashed from beside Harry and followed three of them down the stairs to the left. Other students followed him. Some followers ran for the main doors and some for the Great Hall. With whoops like war cries, students piled after them.

Hysterical screaming drew Harry's attention back to the center of the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, her mask pulled off, shook Voldemort's still form and shouted, "Master! Master!" Another hooded figure hovered a moment before running off. With a snarl she lifted her wand and fired at Harry. Neville, the only remaining student in front of him, spelled a block. The force of the blasting curse threw him back into Harry, and they fell together up the steps. Screaming like a banshee, Bellatrix fired again. This time, another figure had jumped in and two blocks went up. Neville staggered to his feet and screamed a binding curse at her, which she shook off easily. Harry, desperate to help, tried to aim his wand and stand up, only to find a hand on him, pressing him against the stairs.

"Stay down, Mr. Potter," Snape said.

Bellatrix threw another blasting curse, easily blocked this time. She seemed too despairing to think more strategically. With a sob she ran for the nearest door to the Great Hall. Neville leapt down the stairs after her.

Snape looked around them for any other danger before turning back to Harry, who found something in his gaze he had never seen before, a respectful amazement. Snape offered him a hand up. "All right, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape shook his head, apparently in disbelief. After a glance over Harry, he stepped down to the floor, where he placed double bindings on the fallen Death Eaters On unsteady legs Harry followed him down. Voldemort lay apart from the others, half on his side, his hood obscuring his face. Harry stepped over to the fallen wizard and considered pushing him over onto his back to see his face. The thought of touching him made Harry queasy, so he leaned down instead to look inside his hood. Voldemort's eyes were slitted open, the glow gone from them. His lipless mouth hung open and slack. Harry straightened and considered that the boney form under the robe didn't look like much, really.

Shouts came from outside, followed by the sizzle of spells. Professor Snape rushed to the open doorway, his wand drawn. He lowered it to his side as he looked out into the light. Professor McGonagall stepped up into view and into the hall. She stopped dead at the top and stared wide-eyed at Harry and the scene. Harry blinked at her, silhouetted in the bright sunlight and green lawn behind her. Part of him calculated what this must look like, him standing, wand at his side, over Voldemort's dead body. Most of him was too numb to care.

Dumbledore followed. Out of breath, he said to Snape, "Thank goodness, Severus," as he touched Snape on the arm in relief. "You were correct it was-" Dumbledore dropped his arm and gaped in surprise. "Harry!" he breathed in shock.

Harry couldn't remember surprising the old wizard quite that way before. He supposed that was some kind of compliment. "It's over," Harry tried to say, although it came out raspy and quiet.

Dumbledore stepped up to him. He had no compunction about pushing Voldemort over to look at him. Harry took an unconscious half step back as the limp form flopped over. "My dear boy. When I realized how badly we had been tricked . . ." He took a deep breath and looked Harry over. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Harry quipped, recovering himself.

Clattering footsteps sounded on the stairs from the dungeon. Dean Thomas, leaning heavily on the wall, his shoes transfigured to ice boots, blood running from a long streak on his scalp, said, "That bastard dead?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Thank Merlin," he breathed and collapsed onto the floor.

Harry moved toward him but was restrained by Dumbledore. "You relax, Harry. You have done your part for certain." He stepped across to the teachers, standing in the doorway to the Great Hall. "Minerva, get the hearths in here put on the Floo Network so we can get the injured to hospital faster."

McGonagall moved to comply. Snape said, "There are other D.E. about."

"The Ministry is right behind us. In fact, they are here now." Dumbledore gestured at the door as Tonks and four other Aurors rushed into the hall along with other Ministry wizards. Tonks hesitated as she took in the scene and came over to Harry. The other Aurors spread out to sweep the castle at Dumbledore's request.

"Did you do this?" Tonks asked Harry.

Harry hesitated; her tone made it sound as though he could be in trouble for it. "Yes."

Tonks hugged him hard. "Harry," she murmured. "Will you marry me?"

"What?" Harry blurted, stunned.

She pushed him to arm's length. "I don't think I could love anyone more than I do you right now. You are amazing, Harry." Harry, still alarmed, didn't manage a reply. "I'm only joking," she said and hit him lightly on the arm with her fist. As she stepped past him to help in the Great Hall, she said quietly, "Unless you change your mind."

Harry turned to Dumbledore for help with that one and found only an amused smile. Expressions of surprise from the top of the grand staircase made Harry realize that many, many students had gathered there. "No closer," Dumbledore said to them, holding up his hand. Harry wondered if he had cast a spell as well to block the staircase.

"Harry did that?" one small voice asked. "Yeah," another replied in an awed tone. Murmuring followed. "Way to go, Harry!" the first shouted. Harry gave them all a wane smile. As good as he felt, he also felt completely unseated.

McGonagall stepped over. "The Minister is on his way," she said with a touch of distaste.

"Try to prepare yourself, Harry," Dumbledore said. "There will be many questions."

Chapter 5

"I'm ready, sir," Harry said, even though he didn't believe he was, but had a feeling his dislike of Fudge could carry him though.

When Fudge and his entourage, including Percy, blustered into the Entrance Hall, the teachers moved closer to Harry as though to form ranks.

"Well, I wouldn't have believed it without seeing it. Thank Merlin we have a body this time," Fudge breathed as he crouched beside Voldemort's dead figure. "Potter, I'm told we have you to thank for this."

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged quietly.

Brusquely, Fudge stood up. "Well, we'll have to have the full story." He put his hands on his hips and looked Harry over appraisingly, in a way Harry didn't like. With effort Harry held his expression level until the man turned to Dumbledore.

"Perhaps the lounge off the Great Hall," Dumbledore said graciously. He raised his arm to urge the Minister along.

In the Great Hall injured students and bound Death Eaters were waiting to be transported out. Dean lay on the Gryffindor table, still bleeding. Harry veered over to him. It looked like Dean had been wiping the blood from his eyes repeatedly, as his face was darkened with red of various shades. His eyes were intense. "Ice transfiguration worked like a charm," he said, as though discussing a Quidditch maneuver. "Sir," he said as Dumbledore came up beside Harry.

"Not as bad as he looks," Professor Grubbly-Plank said as she walked up to them. "Too much adrenaline to feel anything anyway," she said darkly before turning to help another student into the Floo. Harry noticed this student was bound even though he could barely stand. Nott turned angry eyes their way before ducking inside.

Harry looked around the Hall frantically and then at Dumbledore. "How many . . uh, hurt . . . dead?" he asked.

McGonagall, close behind him, said, "There are at least two dead Death Eaters and twelve injured students. We didn't lose any students, and don't expect to," Dumbledore put his hand upon Harry's head and stroked his hair once.

"I didn't kill him," Dean interrupted, trying valiantly to sit up. "He killed himself when we cornered him. Nott senior, that is. Would have had to go through Theodore to get to him anyway, tried to defend his dad."

Fudge stepped over. "Reems, White, take statements here and at Mungo's while we interview Mr. Potter and the staff," he said to two of his people. "Wilson, with me," he said to Percy.

Harry had to cover his mouth to keep from cracking up. All of his emotions were stark and sudden. He hoped that wore off soon.

"So, were any of your teachers present?" Fudge asked when the door to the lounge closed.

Dumbledore lit the lamps and invited everyone to sit. "Only Professor Snape was present, I believe, during the battle. He was the only one present when we arrived, in any event."

Harry sat down on the couch across from Percy. The Minister chose to stand. "Tell us what happened, Potter," Fudge said in a tone as though they were old school chums.

"From what point?"

"From wherever seems relevant, Harry," Dumbledore said gently.

Harry looked around the room. McGonagall stood beside the couch to the right. Dumbledore took the seat beside him. Snape hung in the corner where Krum had stood brooding the last time Harry had been in this room. Percy sat with his quill poised over a long, long blank parchment. Fudge still looked Harry over as though considering his market value.

Harry sighed. "I went up for a nap after breakfast-"

"A nap?" Percy asked in disbelief.

"I haven't been sleeping well the last two weeks," Harry said defensively. "I went up for a nap, as I was saying. I woke up all of a sudden thinking Voldemort was standing by my bed. Which he wasn't," Harry pointed out at Percy's blanched expression. "But my scar started burning and I had a vision of him waiting in the Entrance Hall for me." Harry stopped to rub his neck. "I went down to the common room, where a lot of students were hanging out." Harry trailed off as he paused to reconsider that.

"What?" Fudge said, impatient apparently with Harry's pace.

"I was just thinking now that they weren't all Gryffindors, which is odd." He shook his head. He had a clear memory of Cho sitting in the best chair by the fire, looking up at him in concern. "I told Ron and Hermione to get the D.A. together."

"Ah, yes," Fudge said grimly. "Dumbledore's Army as I recall."

"Defense Association," Harry corrected him with a sharp look. Fudge was really grating on him, and the Minister's confusion at this revelation didn't endear him more. "We pulled the group together–"

"Wait, everyone just believed you?" Percy asked with derision.

"Not everyone. But everyone went along anyway. Only Hermione voiced any doubt." Harry paused to see whether Percy would say anything else. "Voldemort and some twenty odd Death Eaters were in the Entrance Hall, standing in a circle around Voldemort. Hermione, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Dean packed themselves tight together in front of me. Hermione and Neville arranged to concentrate on blocking. None of the D.E. moved as we started down the stairs. We had a huge advantage with the height and those two blocking everything coming up at us."

Harry stopped to try to figure out how to explain what he had done. The teachers sat patiently while Fudge fidgeted. "What spell did you use to fell He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Fudge demanded with a huff.

"In the end, a Killing Curse," Harry said.

"He just stood there and let you do that?" Fudge asked in disbelief.

"He'd dropped his wand," Harry said levelly. "I had to get him to put his wand down–mine and his cancel out." The teachers around him sat in a kind of deeper stillness as Harry spoke. He tread back from that line of topic, thinking maybe it was too mired.

"And he dropped his wand because–?" Fudge prompted, waving his hand to pull Harry along.

"Because I'd attacked his mind," Harry supplied.

"Good grief, boy! What made you think that would work?" Fudge said.

"Someone told me once it was my only weapon." Beside him, Dumbledore shifted, pulling his robes straight. Harry went on, thinking only to get through this and get back to his bed. "I made him feel everything he was unable too. It was too much for him." And me as well, Harry thought with a spike of pain. He wanted to scream at Fudge that it wouldn't have come down to this if he hadn't been so slow. But that wasn't true, really; the prophecy didn't include Fudge.

Harry sat back, exhausted. Dumbledore pulled out his wand and a steaming teapot and cups appeared. He poured a cup for Harry and one for the Minister, in that order. "Severus, would you like tea?" the headmaster asked amiably.

Snape turned away from the mantelpiece and stepped over. He gave Harry a strange, intense look before he leaned over and accepted a cup.

Harry went on. "After Voldemort fell, Bellatrix was the only one to stay put. She went crazy, started spelling me with blasting curses, but Neville and Professor Snape

stepped in the way. The other students chased after the escaping D.E. so those two were the only ones left. After that, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore came in the front door." Harry shrugged to indicate he was finished. He sipped his tea and waited, hoping there weren't any questions.

"Professor," Fudge cranked his head around to look at Snape. "Tell us what you saw."

Percy put down the cup he was about to pour tea into and returned to his transcription. Harry closed his eyes and listened as Snape described investigating an alarm spell that was triggered in the corridor near the delivery entrance to the kitchens. When he came back up to the Entrance Hall, it was clear from the noise that a fight was going on. "The students were on the grand staircase, as stated. Potter didn't have his wand out, that I could see; he just stared down at the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord kept stepping back, flinching back. He eventually backed into his own ranks and they began casting at the students in their confusion over what was happening."

Snape set his empty teacup down. "I doubt that was the plan. The Dark Lord intended to take out Potter himself." Harry opened his eyes at that and looked up at his teacher. In his tired state, this all could be a dream. Snape eyed him with that piercing look again.

His professor continued, "The battle of wills, if you'll allow, went back and forth until Mr. Potter got the upper hand and Voldemort dropped his wand. That was when Potter raised his wand for the first time and used a Killing Curse." As he finished, Snape stepped back away from the group and crossed his arms. Harry wondered what was up with him; he seemed unsettled in a different way than normal.

Fudge glanced over Percy's shoulder before clapping his hands together and rubbing them. "I guess that covers it for now. You will make yourself available, Mr. Potter, correct, if we have more questions?"

Harry nodded, hiding his relief with great effort.

Out in the Great Hall, only Ministry wizards mingled now. "Harry!" Mr. Weasley shouted and ran over to him. "My boy," he said when he reached him. He clasped Harry's arms fiercely. "So good to see you unharmed. Look at you, not a nick on you!"

Harry smiled at him and dropped his gaze. Dumbledore came beside and put a hand under his arm. "Harry, just one more thing I need from you and then you can rest. The press are outside. . . ."

Harry made a pained noise in the back of his throat. "I'd really rather not, sir."

"The rumors are flying fast and furious, Harry," Mr. Weasley pointed out helpfully. "Best nip them all now."

"Arthur is correct, Harry," Dumbledore said. "It will be short, I promise, and I'll be right beside you."

"Suddenly unwilling to bask in your fame, Potter?" Snape asked from behind them.

Harry shot him a look of disbelief. "What do you mean, 'suddenly unwilling?"'

"Come, Harry," Dumbledore said easily as he pulled Harry away. When they were halfway across the Hall, the old wizard leaned close. "No infighting in front of the Ministry, my boy."

"Tell that to Professor Snape," Harry said.

"Believe me, I will," Dumbledore assured him.

Mollified, Harry followed him out, thinking ahead to dealing with the likes of Rita Skeeter. Dumbledore led him past Voldemort's body, being guarded by two Aurors, to the front doors, which were now closed. Dumbledore opened one just wide enough and stepped out, pulling Harry behind him. The first thing Harry thought was, goodness, the press moves fast. There were no fewer than thirty people standing at the base of the castle steps, from all different nationalities. They all jerked and jumped to their feet when he and the headmaster appeared.

Dumbledore immediately held up his hand, as they all had started talking at once. Silence fell. "One at a time, now," he said kindly. "And this is going to be short, as Harry is very tired."

"Were you injured?" a redheaded man in the front asked with a heavy brogue.

"No," Harry replied.

"Not at all? Not a scratch?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, that is very different from dead," the man said, taking notes.

"Very different," Harry acknowledged amiably. If the questions continued like this, he could handle it.

A dark, Hungarian-sounding man in the back asked, "Vat spells did you use on thee Dark Lord?"

"An Avada Kedavra," Harry said. All of them wrote that down. A camera flashed.

"Haf you used it before?"

"No."

"Vat was it like, using such a curse on thee Dark Lord? Easy to come up vit so much hatred?"

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't hatred." All of them paused, quills poised, as he thought about his answer. "It was love of everything else." He took a deep breath, suddenly short on air. Dumbledore's hand touched his back fleetingly and he forced himself past it.

Rita Skeeter raised her hand and said, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Harry lowered his brow at her. "Does anyone care about that?" he asked. Several heads nodded. "No," he said, annoyed.

"Not the pretty, although decidedly too clever for her own good, girl with the long curly–"

"No." Harry considered pointing out that she was with someone else, but decided that discretion really was the better part.

"Are you going to accept the Scots invitation to play Seeker?"

"What?" Harry blurted, certain he had misheard. "I hadn't heard that," he said, startled not just at that notion but at the other bizarre offers that were undoubtedly going to follow.

"One more question," Dumbledore said, putting an arm around Harry's shoulder. Cameras flashed. Harry really was tired, far more than physically.

"Your little club, the D.A.?" This was from Rita. "Were they helpful?"

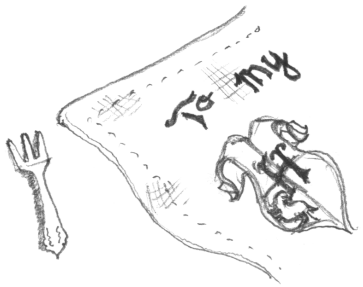
"Very. They protected me, rounded up the Death Eaters when they ran away after Voldemort fell."

Dumbledore bowed to them. Some of them raised their hands. "I'll come back in a few minutes after I've seen Harry inside. The Minister will also undoubtedly answer a few questions."

Harry suddenly realized how important it was to be out here before Fudge. The Entrance Hall felt dark now in contrast to the sunny steps. Voldemort's body was gone. Tonks stepped over when she saw them come in.

"Bad news," she said. "We didn't get all the D.E." She sighed and pocketed her wand. "Seems Pettigrew was sent to Azkaban to release the servants we had already. He succeeded but not in time for them to get here, or they decided not to come."
"That means Mr. Malfoy is loose too?" Harry asked, resisting looking behind him even here in the hall of the castle filled with Ministry wizards.
"Everyone we caught at the Ministry is loose now. It's a fair trade, really. We'll take it in an eye-blink, but it's unfortunate." She and Dumbledore shared a look that Harry was too tired to study closely.
"I'm going up to my dormitory," Harry said, as he stepped away from Dumbledore's supporting arm toward the stairs. He hesitated–he was out of potion. Maybe he didn't need it now. His tired brain couldn't decide. The top of the staircase was packed with wide-eyed students. Deciding he would sleep no matter what, Harry went up. A path parted through the students as he approached. Hands reached out and brushed his robe as he passed.
"Good going, Harry." "Thank you, Harry," quiet voices said as he made his way through the crowd. He glanced around himself. He knew most of the faces there, if not the names, but a wide gulf had opened between them that staggered him in his current state. Smiling faintly to cover, he kept walking. Some followed one or two corridors, then decided to return to watch the Ministry at work.
"Harry!" Hermione rocketed out of her chair and hugged him as he stepped into the common room.
"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked.
"Avoiding Percy," Ron said. "That and Tonks walked us here from the Dispensary with a sharp comment about not seeing us in the way."
"He's your brother," Ginny pointed out.
"So why are you here as well?" Ron asked his sister.
"You didn't get hurt at all?" Harry asked them.
Ron held up a bandaged arm and then a bandaged ankle. "Treated and released," he said. "Hermione had tentacles for hair but that was easy to fix. Ginny, well, she can tell you if she wants. She'll kill me if I do."
Ginny had turned bright red and stared at the ceiling.
Harry swayed slightly. "My nap got interrupted," he said, then giggled. "I need to go back to sleep," he added in full seriousness.
"We'll wake you for the party," Ginny said.
At the base of the stairs, Harry turned. "What party?"
"There has to be one," she insisted.
"Sure," Harry murmured. "As long as it is at least three hours from now."

Chapter 6.



Aftermath

Harry was awakened in less than an hour by Pomfrey. She fussed over him until he convinced her that he really didn't need anything but sleep. When the door closed again, Harry tugged the gap in the heavy drapes closed completely and hoped that was the last interruption.

"Mr. Potter?" a familiar voice woke him. Harry leaned over and pulled the drapes aside. The sun was low in the sky now. Professor McGonagall stood between his bed and Ron's, her head cocked to the side.

"Professor," Harry said a little sleepily.

In a teasing voice she said, "We cannot start the party without you."

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

Shocked at how long he had slept, Harry swung his legs off the bed and stood up. He looked himself over and shook the worst of the wrinkles out of his robe.

"Uh ah. Dress robes, my dear," McGonagall said kindly.

Harry's foggy brain sharpened up at that. "Why?"

"There may be one or two photographers," she said casually.

Harry scratched his head and went to his trunk. He pulled out his black dress robe with the satin collar and cuffs and his toiletry kit. His body was moving on automatic.

At the door to the dormitory, he turned suddenly. Rubbing his eyes, he asked, "Voldemort is gone, right? I didn't just dream that?" He readjusted his glasses as he peered up at her.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," she replied. Harry could hear a smile in her voice.

Harry cleared his throat. "Good." He opened the door and headed down.

McGonagall waited in the corridor outside the boy's toilet while Harry freshened up and changed. Dampening his hair, he tried to comb it into something presentable. Finally with a shrug, he gave up, put the comb back in his kit, and stared at himself in the mirror. He didn't look like someone who had defeated Voldemort. He sighed as he met his own green eyes. They looked less than victorious, more burned out. He wished with an acute stab that his parents could see him now. They would be proud, he was certain, or at least very relieved. He sighed again and swallowed hard. All of that emotion from the battle was still very much at the surface.

McGonagall was waiting. If she hadn't been, he might have spent the rest of the evening alone in the boy's toilet rather than face everyone.

"All right, my boy?" his professor asked kindly when he stepped out.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied quietly.

She stopped and put a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, are you up for this? You certainly don't have to do anything you don't want to," she added in a light tone. "I think you could ask just about anything from us, in fact. Frankly, we've been feeling bad, having the party without you. You missed the last one as well and that was your doing as well," she added easily.

Harry gave her a small smile. "I wouldn't want to miss it, Professor."

She hooked an arm around him, ostensibly to lead him down the corridor. She gave him a half-hug first, however, and pushed his hair back. Harry looked up at her in surprise. McGonagall was usually much more restrained than that.

"Ma'am?"

"We're so proud of you, Harry," she said and pulled him against her side again.

Harry dropped his gaze. "Thank you, ma'am."

They started down the corridor. "You aren't insufferable at all," she said, half to herself. "Why does Severus keep insisting that you are?"

Harry gave her a worried look then got distracted by having to keep up with her much longer pace.

In the Entrance Hall, Harry could hear the murmur and clink of a party going on beyond the doors. His professor steered him away from the first door, which he usually used since it was closest to the Gryffindor table. At the center doors, she gave him an affectionate smile, pulled open the large carved door, and gestured for him to lead.

Harry glanced into the hall as he followed her gesture and hesitated on the threshold. The Great Hall had been arranged similarly to the way it had for the Tri-Wizard Tournament Ball, with large round tables, each with their own cluster of floating candles. Four tables sat on the raised platform at the end, with chairs only facing forward or sideways. Double the number of people were there than the normal students.

Conversation died away as Harry took in the room. Heads turned to him. Chairs shifted. One of the head tables captured Harry's attention as Dumbledore stood up, his flowing baby-blue robe sparkling in the candlelight. Fudge moved to stand as well. They started clapping. The rest of the room picked it up immediately.

Stunned, Harry required a nudge from behind to get moving again. He walked dazedly along a narrow aisle up the middle, through the sea of now standing and clapping witches and wizards, up to the platform. Dumbledore met him at the edge and shook his hand.

"Come on up here, Harry," the old wizard invited.

Working hard to take in what was happening around him, Harry took a seat beside Fudge, facing the rest of the hall. The clapping faded and a commotion from a table to the left caught his attention. Harry stiffened a little when he saw Fred and George leading the rest of the Weasleys in holding up their cups. "To Harry!" the twins roared. The rest of their table and a scattering of others around the room joined in, echoing it as well as the following hip-hip-hooray! Harry smiled lightly at their antics. The state of the Weasleys and the cups made Harry suspicious about whether that explained McGonagall's more outgoing behavior as well.

Dumbledore, still standing beside his chair, put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Thank you all for coming. Especially on such short notice," he added congenially. "I thought it only fair that we make up two rounds of parties to Harry, who wasn't exactly cognizant of the last festivities the wizarding world held to celebrate Voldemort's demise."

Harry was glad to see no one hissed this time. Someone shouted, "Here, here." It sounded like Hagrid. Harry looked around to try to find him, figuring that should be easy. A sea of ecstatically happy faces met Harry's own as he scanned the crowd. At

a table on the right, Hagrid sat talking with Mundungus. He winked at Harry when their eyes met.

"Harry?" Dumbledore was saying to him. Harry's head snapped up at that. "Would you care to give us a few words on this historic occasion?" Harry blanched, but the old wizard had his arm out to invite him to stand. Dumbledore leaned close as he guided Harry out from behind the table. "This could end up in a future History of Magic textbook, my boy," he winked.

Harry cleared his throat; his eyes took in the rest of their table as he stalled. Professors Sprout and Snape were there as well as someone who appeared to be the Bulgarian Minister of Magic. "Well," Harry began slowly, "the first thing that comes to mind is: good riddance." The room laughed lightly and murmured conversation broke out for a moment.

He took a deep breath and assembled his scattered thoughts. "We all have lives to go back to," he said, thinking, I have a life that starts right now, forget going back. Bolstered by that, he thought about the frantic lives of the teachers who were also Order members, and went on. "Everyone needs to try to remember what was important to them before this all started, because those things are what really matter. Not the things you do because you have to." A few sounds of agreement came from the tables.

Harry wanted to say something about those who didn't make it to see this day, but just considering it made the frail foundation he stood on tilt crazily. Far too many eyes were upon him to risk anything like that. He had been silent too long–the shifting feet around the room told him so. Mentally backing frantically away from unsettling thoughts, Harry said lightly, "Myself, I am looking forward to a lifting of the ban on Quidditch." The room laughed more this time.

"That will be arranged, Harry, I assure you," Dumbledore said.

Ron's shout of joy made Harry grin as he looked over at the Weasley table. Harry scanned the full set of redheads. Even Percy was there although, as usual, he looked like he disapproved of something. "It is good to see so many here," he said without thinking.

"Yes, Harry, it is," Dumbledore said, patting Harry on the shoulder. "And we have you to thank for that." As though he realized the unstable ground Harry had tread onto unthinkingly, Dumbledore went on, "Please, everyone, enjoy your dinner. Dedalus Diggle has promised us a fireworks show from Hogsmeade at ten o'clock." With cheerful conversations roaring back to life around them, Dumbledore led Harry back to his seat and took his own beside him.

"Well spoken," McGonagall leaned over to say from beside the headmaster.

"No one warned me," Harry said with a hint of accusation.

"Impromptu speeches are always better," she said as though it were perfectly obvious. She toasted him with her cup and drank a large gulp, confirming Harry's suspicions. Harry suspected he would find butterbeer in his own chalice. It had mulled mead instead, to his amazement. It burned his throat even with just a sip; he took another gulp anyway.

Plates of roast mutton and goose appeared on the table, dressed with vegetables. Suddenly incredibly famished, Harry served himself from the closest plate and waited impatiently for others to serve themselves so he could start. The Bulgarian Minister smiled broadly at him when Harry looked his way.

"I do not know if you remember me," the wizard said.

"I think so," Harry said. "From the World Cup."

The wizard smiled more. "Yes. I am most flattered. But we were not properly introduced," he said in his slavic accent as he stood and held his hand out across the table. "Gorazd Obolensky."

Harry leaned forward for a quick handshake. "Good to you again, sir."

As Obolensky sat back down, straightening his stiff dress robes as he did so, he said, "I think I was wery lucky on the drawing of tables tonight." He grinned at Dumbledore and stabbed his fork into his meat.

Harry took this cue and started devouring his plate.

"Do they not feed you here?" Obolensky asked, seeing this.

After swallowing, Harry said, "Yes, sir. It's just that I slept through lunch."

"Ah, yes, the appetite of a–what are you, sixteen?"

"Yes, sir."

" Ehem ," Fudge cleared his throat making Harry wonder whether maybe he shouldn't be talking around his own Minister. "Have any future plans, Harry?"

Harry almost rose to the question, but held back on instinct. "Still considering things, sir." In his peripheral vision, he saw all four teachers at the table pause a moment as he said this. He glanced at McGonagall, who gave him a disapproving look, then rolled her eyes as though she were giving up on him.

Chapter 6

"Well, young man, be sure and let us know what you decide, hm?" Fudge said, sounding the doting uncle.

Harry silently congratulated himself for keeping mum. He didn't want to get into the very competitive Aurors program that way.

"Things are going to get much easier," Fudge went on. "We'll have to relearn what it is like to worry about something as trivial as cauldron bottoms." He chuckled to himself.

Harry made it through the meal, although it seemed to stretch on a little long. Fudge pushed his chair back and said, "Have to make the rounds." He tossed his bundled serviette onto his bone-strewn plate and bowed to the table before moving off. The plates soon cleared themselves and the next course appeared. Harry took a rice pudding from the serving tray that circled slowly above the center of the table before vanishing again a minute later.

Obolensky shifted down a seat, bringing his own slice of chocolate cake with him. "Do you mind?" he asked. Harry shook his head between bites. Obolensky made a noise of pleasure at his first bite. "Very good. My compliments to the chefs," he said to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded acceptance of the compliment as he poured tea for himself and McGonagall beside him. "Things in Bulgaria will settle down quickly, I assume?" the headmaster asked.

"I expect. We have lost all of our Dementors and wampires but presumably some will try to return. How we will handle them then . . . we shall see." He smiled at Harry as he took another large bite of cake. "Such minor problems," he said a little dreamily. He shook his dark head. "I heard rumors last year about you, Mr. Potter, how you were expected somehow to do what you did before. And I remembered the boy from the top box at the World Cup and I thought, he has not a chance."

Harry laughed. "Did you put money on that?"

Obolensky started to answer then looked taken aback. "Of course not."

"Well, that's all right, then," Harry said amiably.

The Bulgarian Minister pulled himself together. He seemed to find Harry's attitude a little worrisome. "I hope to be as flippant as you are about this someday, Mr. Potter. Or perhaps it is the mead that is the explanation?"

Harry shrugged. The other extreme was less sustainable, but he wasn't going to try to explain that.

Obolensky picked up his serviette and shook it out with a spell that flattened it neatly. He arranged it with the Hogwarts seal on the top left and leaned in close while he fished in his pocket. "Would you mind, terribly?" he asked as he pulled out a never-out quill. He shook the quill and incanted something that made the nib into a little hard sponge that filled with black ink from the never-out charm of the quill.

"What was that charm?" Harry asked, distracted from what he should have seen coming.

Obolensky smiled widely. "I can teach a spell to the famous Harry Potter," he murmured with a hint of reverence. He shook the quill back to normal with a canceling spell. "The spell is Znakpisatel. Here," he repeated it, canceled it and handed the quill to Harry.

It took three corrections of his pronunciation, but finally, Harry made what was essentially a Muggle marker pen out of the quill. Harry had been missing marker pens in his wizard life and thought this a clever spell. "Cool," Harry said happily.

"Would you mind?" Obolensky repeated, shifting the serviette over a little closer. "I promised Wictor I would return with your autograph for him."

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Victor?"

McGonagall cleared her throat. Harry glanced at his teachers, who gave him looks of mixed amusement. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Victor Krum?" Harry asked the minister in disbelief.

"Yes. I know you have met, correct?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. He looked down at the cloth before him, a bit dazed. "What would you like it to say?" Harry asked slowly, thinking of how fun it was going to be to tell Ron about this.

Obolensky murmured something in Bulgarian as if trying it out for sound.

"You'll have to spell that out," Harry said, amused.

"To my dear friend, Wictor," Obolensky suggested.

Harry took a deep breath and in his best hand, wrote that out and signed below it. There was a lot of blank space at the bottom. He thought a moment and then added, Voldemort Demise Party, May 1997, along the bottom edge.

"Ah, very nice," Obolensky said, admiring it. He folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. Harry gave him the quill back as well.

Chapter 6

"Tea, Harry?" Dumbledore asked when Harry sat back with a tired sigh.

"Please, sir."

"Then I think we shall allow a few of the reporters in when you have perked up a little."

Harry made a small noise of disgust. He took the offered cup and saucer and held them while Dumbledore poured. "You said something about fireworks?"

"Yes. In order to avoid Mr. Diggle getting in trouble with the Ministry again, he was invited to set off his spells here in Hogsmeade. Quite a party is going on there as well tonight."

"What did he get in trouble for?" Harry asked as he sipped his tea.

McGonagall crossed her arms. "Last time, he filled the sky over Kent with magical fireworks. Fortunately, the Muggles thought they were shooting stars. The hordes of owls flying by day they remembered much longer."

At Harry's alarmed expression, Dumbledore leaned close and said, "That is why we have all of the troublemakers here tonight." Then he winked.

Harry looked around the loud room and commented, "People do seem pretty happy."

"Everyone but you, Potter," Snape commented snidely.

Harry gave him sharp look but didn't reply. He couldn't deny that he felt as though someone had taken him apart and put him back together wrong.

"Come now, fame and fortune await," Snape went on.

"Severus," Dumbledore said with mild chastisement. "Harry has had a very long day."

Harry has had a very long six years, Harry thought.

"The minister is not here," Snape said as he crossed his arms.

" A minister is," Dumbledore pointed out mildly.

Obolensky leaned close to Harry. "You have an arch-nemesis, here?" he asked with a glance at Snape. He sounded genuinely amused.

"Yes," Harry replied dryly.

"Another pudding, Harry?" Dumbledore asked kindly. "Or anything else?"

Harry, feeling testy, looked up at the headmaster. "Do I get to join the Order now?" He had meant it as a joke, but found himself far more raw about it than expected. Dumbledore's blue eyes studied him closely. The instinct to back down tugged at him, but Harry overcame it very easily for the first time ever and held that bright gaze levelly.

McGonagall interjected airily, "You still aren't of age, you know."

Harry's emotions seesawed into annoyance with them all. He looked away from them out over the room. Many tart replies came to mind; he suppressed them all on the assumption that he would regret them later.

Obolensky pushed his chair back. He patted Harry's hand and said, "It will look better in the morning, I think." He stood up. "I should really be doing as your Fudge is. If you will excuse?"

Harry nodded as the others made noises of ascent. When the Bulgarian had stepped to the next table, Dumbledore said, "I will not apologize for protecting you, Harry."

Harry held his gaze out over the room as fury flashed through him. That protection had cost him Sirius. If he had been anywhere else, he would have gone into a rage. He would have screamed that if Snape were such a useful Order member, he would have killed Voldemort himself. He would have pointed out that their protection had not really been all that good anyway. He swallowed and blinked hard, struggling desperately to bury it all.

The noise of the room faded out and a rush sounding as wind filled his head. Queer, muffled voices cried out from a distance. A grey-green haze overlaid the Great Hall filled with bright flickering green strands like a massive dilapidated spider web. An odd thing came at him. He squinted to try to see it better. It looked like a black star with amorphous, straining limbs. The stretched voices got louder. Other dark patches circled slowly, hungrily, feeling their way through the haze. Harry jerked back to escape it.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said in a very concerned voice. Harry's chair had been turned to face Dumbledore's and he had Harry's arms in his hands. McGonagall was on her feet leaning over the headmaster's shoulder. "What happened?"

Harry caught his breath. "I don't know," he replied. Though fear had tempered his anger he still didn't feel generous enough to work out how to explain what he had just seen.

Dumbledore frowned at him. "We cannot help you, my boy, if you do not let us," he said quietly. When Harry refused to look at him, he said gently, "Perhaps the party is not the best place for you right now."

Chapter 6

"I want to stay," Harry insisted. He didn't relish the thought of lying alone on his dormitory bed imagining everyone down here having fun, waiting for that green world to just suck him in for good the next time.

Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Severus," he said and tossed his head. Snape stood immediately and departed. Harry watched him go in confusion. McGonagall sat back down, pushed her chalice away and poured herself some tea. She kept her eyes on Harry as she sipped it down.

Presently, Snape returned and slipped something surreptitiously to Dumbledore before returning to his seat and taking on an expression identical to McGonagall's, one of careful scrutiny.

Dumbledore took Harry's chalice of mead and, behind the table, poured the contents of the vial into it. As he set it back on the table, Harry asked, "What is that?"

"It is a mood altering potion," Dumbledore said. "I would normally resist giving you such a thing, but I insist you drink it if you are to remain this evening."

Harry gave him an accusing look and his anger built again, although fear of the vision cut it off short.

"I'm doing this for your own good. You are of course free to rant at me another time, but a scene here tonight would mark you forever in everyone's minds. I will not allow that to happen."

Harry glanced at the cup, then stared at Dumbledore's hand on the table, at the glittering silver rings on his fingers. He felt utterly drained and oddly defeated. He lifted the chalice and downed the contents in a fiery set of gulps.

"Thank you, Harry. We'll let that settle in and then we'll give the reporters their chance while the potion is at its peak. Have another pudding," Dumbledore suggested, pulling a dish of chocolate bonbons off the tray that had appeared as he said it.

Grudgingly, Harry bit one in half. They were frozen solid. His breath turned the chocolate white on the remaining half. Harry stared unseeing out across the Hall as he thought about what had happened. The vision didn't make any sense. He replayed it in his mind and wondered if he had fallen asleep for an instant. He started to care less about it. His shoulders felt disconnected from his body, too lax somehow. A group of wizards discussing something with grand arm motions caught his gaze; they were jesting and laughing. A witch sat slightly away from that table with a toddler in her lap eating cake with its fingers. Chocolate was smeared over its face and hands, the mess completely disregarded by everyone. With a painful twinge, Harry wished

away everything in front of him and longed to rewind his life backward to let it play out again another way.

"He is fighting the potion," Snape observed, drawing Harry's thoughts back to the immediate table.

Dumbledore stood up and peered down at Harry. "I don't mean to," Harry tried to explain.

"Come, let's visit some friends. You are in need of a distraction."

Harry followed him off the platform and over to the Weasley table. "Harry!" several of them shouted when they saw him step over. "We thought you'd got too good for us," Fred commented. At Harry's look of hurt disbelief, he slugged him lightly in the stomach. "Just kidding, Harry," he insisted quickly.

"Great party," Ginny said, stepping over from a nearby table full of students. She gave him a light hug. "I don't know what we'd do without you," she said playfully.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said emotionally from two seats away. She reached across the table toward him in vain, as it was too far. Harry wondered how many chalices she had consumed as he humored her and walked around to her seat. Without standing up, she hugged him around the middle, pressing her cheek into his belly. "I can stop worrying about you so much now, I guess. I can't believe you did it." She sniffled.

"Mum," Ron said uncomfortably. "Sorry, mate, too much mead," he said to Harry. Harry just shrugged that it didn't matter. She finally let him go. He went around the table in a floating haze, shaking hands . . . even Percy's.

As they stepped away from that table, Dumbledore whispered in his ear, "I much prefer the real you, but this will have to do."

At the allotted hour, they all went out on the lawn to watch the fireworks. Diggle outdid himself by everyone's estimation. The extravagant display went on and on. Harry sat on the grass between Hermione and Ron to watch it. The other guests of honor sat in overstuffed chairs near the steps. Harry was certain he could have joined them but had no desire to.

An hour into Dedalus' show, Harry could feel the potion wearing off. As the fireworks continued, he felt more and more like a boat left aground during low tide.

Hermione touched his hand. "You all right, Harry?" she asked quietly enough that Ron didn't hear over the sounds of the crowd and the fireworks.

"No," Harry answered. "I feel really strange."

She gave him a pain-filled frown and grasped his hand hard. "Even though you should feel better not having Voldemort rattling around in your head, it will probably take some getting used to," she said hopefully. "Do you feel relieved at least?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Everything is ahead now." She smiled earnestly at him. It was infectious, easing the ache in his chest at least as well as the potion had. He took a deep breath as a giant flower in blue and red burst into the sky, its petals segmenting and drifting on the wind.

As the display went on and the crowd quieted, Harry leaned back in the cold grass and closed his eyes. The colored lights flickered through his eyelids. Eventually, he fell into a calm sleep.

Hermione noted Harry had drifted off, despite the whistle and sizzle of the spells over Hogsmeade. She nudged Ron, who rolled his eyes and shook his head. "He'd fall asleep during a World Cup Quidditch match too, I think, even if he were playing in it." Hermione giggled. Ron took her hand and held it across Harry's supine form.

A time later, someone bent close from behind. Hermione turned and found the headmaster crouching near Harry's shoulder. "How is he doing?" Dumbledore asked her. At Hermione's shrug, the old wizard frowned. "Perhaps it is time to take him to his dormitory."

"He is sleeping all right," Hermione pointed out.

"I doubt if the cold ground is doing him any good," Dumbledore commented quietly.

"I've been using a warming spell on it for him," Hermione said.

Dumbledore gave her a soft smile. "We shall leave him here then."

A booming firework woke Harry a half hour later. The memories of the day flowed through him as he watched a thousand spinning wheels throw sparks throughout the night sky. He sat up and looked around the lawn. It had thinned down to half the number as before. Harry looked up as Fred and George came by with steins, full to the brim.

"More mead, Harry?" one of them asked.

Harry accepted a heavy mug; it was pleasantly warm, so he wrapped his hands around it gratefully. Ron took one too. Hermione insisted that she would share Ron's.

Halfway through his mug of mead, feeling sleeping and overwarm, the fireworks finally finished. Everyone clapped for a long time. Harry wondered if the many distant

figures moving around the side of the lake could hear them. The figures flashing in and out of the firelight made him catch his breath. It reminded him of the things moving around in his green-hazed vision.

"Harry?" Dumbledore queried from nearby, closer to the castle steps. They all stood up and stretched at this cue. The headmaster clearly wanted to ask something, but the crowd pressed in, touching Harry and expressing their gratitude. Harry drew his eyes from Dumbledore's and addressed each person as much as possible.

The next morning, breakfast was served an hour late to accommodate the party ending after two in the morning. As everyone settled into their seats, Dumbledore stood up. "Welcome, everyone, to your first full day of freedom. We are going to make this a Hogsmeade day for the third to seventh years." Cheering interrupted him at this point. "Wait, wait," Dumbledore said in amusement. "I'd also like to announce that we have decided, after much deliberation, to cancel end-of-year examinations."

Ron jumped out of his seat at this. "Yes! I love you, Harry," he said, shaking his friend's shoulders roughly in celebration.

Dumbledore went on, "As well, we shall have an exhibition Quidditch match on the afternoon immediately following the last day of O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. testing. Yes, yes, you cannot skip those, I'm afraid. This match will be composed of teams combining two houses. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor will form one team. Slytherin and Ravenclaw another. Two practices will be scheduled for the weekend before for each team. Equal numbers from each house must be on each team, including the backup. I will let the captains work out how positions will be assigned."

Much conversation followed this announcement.

"That is all," Dumbledore said. As he sat down, plates of food appeared in the center of the tables.

"Did you see this?" Hermione asked Harry with a nudge of her elbow. She held out the Daily Prophet for him.

Harry took it and gaped at the photo below the two-inch-tall headline of "Voldemort Defeated!" It was a black and white image of himself standing over Voldemort's body, taken from the level of the outside steps, so it looked slightly up at him. At first he

thought the image wasn't moving, then he realized that the hem of his robe shifted as though in the breeze. "I didn't see a photographer," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Apparently the Ministry leaked the picture, one of their recording staff took it when they came in with the Aurors."

Harry glanced through the article, glad to see there was no mention of his lack of a girlfriend. There were lots of quotes from various officials and diplomats, even Muggle ones, praising Harry's success. He finished the lead article and looked back at the picture. His eyes looked haunting, even to him, like he was seeing something far off that no one else could. When he tried to give it back to Hermione, she told him to keep it. She had another copy.

"We'll have to find Zacharias after breakfast," Ron said. "Work out the teams right away." He had a deeply committed tone to his voice.

"You can be captain, you know," Harry said as he bit into an oily strip of bacon.

"You are," Ron said in surprise.

"No one is, Ron. There weren't any teams until two minutes ago."

Ron looked at him closely. "You really don't mind."

"I'd rather you do it. Really. You can co-captain with Zac for this match. You sound like you care more about winning than I do."

"You still want to be on the team though, right? Seeker?"

"Yes, I would. But we'll work that out with Zac later."

Zacharias Smith found them before they finished. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked. He had three other players in tow. He sat beside Ron and leaned over him to talk to Harry.

"Ron is Gryffindor captain," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, okay." He turned to Ron. "I figure it like this: Me, Bell and Weasley as Chasers. Sloper and Riggs as Beaters. You as Seeker," he pointed at Harry. "And since Eleanor is really bumming about not playing, you and she have a face-off for Keeper." He said this last to Ron.

Ron thought a moment. "Okay, I'm all right with that, except, who are we going to swap out if I win the position? Not you," he said to Harry.

"I didn't say anything," Harry insisted. "I know Katie really wants to play as it's her last year. Jack might be willing to play as extra."

"I'll talk to him," Ron said. "What kind of formations do you like to use?" he asked Zac.

As breakfast wound down and the co-captains debated, many students came over to congratulate and thank Harry on their way out. Harry chatted with them, thinking that it would be good to get over this so things could return to normal. Dennis Creevey asked him to sign his copy of the Prophet. Harry grinned and used his marker pen charm before putting his signature in the bottom corner of the photograph.

"Where'd you learn that?" Hermione asked.

"Minister Obolensky," Harry explained after the Creevey brothers had left. "He had me sign a Hogwarts serviette for Victor Krum at the party last night." At Ron and Zac's expressions, Harry added with a quirky smile, "Said Victor'd made him promise to bring something back."

Ron shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry, but Voldemort is just not as important as Quidditch."

"Tell everyone else that."

At lunchtime, McGonagall stopped by their table and put three letters in front of Harry. The top one was from Mrs. Weasley. He gave his teacher a questioning look. She paused in departing to say, "See me after classes and I will explain, Mr. Potter. And, no, I am not doubling as a school owl, if that is your question."

After Care of Magical Creatures, which had gone about as chaotically as every other class that day, even considering how chaotic it normally went, Harry headed up to his Head of House's office. He hoped his fellow students settled down soon, their grateful outpourings were starting to wear thin even over his own relief.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," she said in a friendly voice when he stepped in after knocking. She bent over behind her desk and lifted up a wooden box which she placed on top. "These are yours, I believe."

Harry froze and blinked at the box, which was almost three quarters full of letters.

McGonagall went on. "We have put a diversion spell on the castle for the owls delivering post to you. Here is today's." As Harry peered tentatively into the crate, she went on, "They have all been checked for curses, so have at it."

Harry put a hand on the lip of the box and said, "I have assignments due tomorrow, Professor," he pointed out, trying to imagine opening and at least perusing all of these.

McGonagall's lips curled slightly as she gave him a much softer look than normal.

"Professor?" Harry prompted, when she didn't speak.

She came around the desk and said, "I think I can probably assist for a little while." She flicked her wand and three more smaller crates appeared on the floor. "Let's see what we have here," she muttered as she reached into the large box. With a letter opener from her desk, she slit the first one, unfolded it, and glanced over it. "General appreciation," she stated and dropped it into one of the boxes. The second and third were also so classed. The fourth, on much finer paper, she looked at a little longer before handing it to Harry.

Harry unfolded the creamy smooth paper and read the first line of flourished script. He glanced at the envelope and the fancy seal in white wax on the flap. Freelander, it read, with a crest of a sheep and a flying pheasant. Harry had to reread the first two sentences to understand them. "Is this guy a nutter?" Harry asked his teacher.

"Lord Freelander is a very nice man, Harry. I've had the honor of meeting him on at least two occasions. His great grandfather was a wizard and so is he. Some families have magic only every few generations and his is one."

"But he doesn't know anything about me. Why in the world would he want to adopt me?" Harry asked as he glanced at the rest of the letter.

"Succession, Harry. He has no children of his own, I believe." She dropped two more letters into the first box. "If I were you, I would not dismiss it out of hand. You could do worse than an estate with a wing of your own, horses to ride hither and thither, and all the personal tutors you could wish for to continue in whatever career you fancied."

Harry gazed at her as though she too had lost her grip on reality. He accepted the file folder she handed him to store the letter. The last sentence caught his eye as he started to fold it. It offered, independent of the other things, to pay for his apprenticeship, should he require it. Harry, feeling a little numb, slipped the letter back into its envelope and stowed it. McGonagall handed him two others.

"I hope those aren't the same," Harry said, seeing one on almost equally nice paper.

"One is . . . similar," she said. "The other just exceptionally well written."

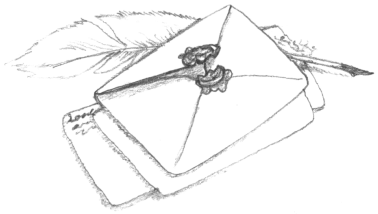
Harry opened the top one, written on scented pink parchment. It was an offer of a daughter's hand in marriage, the accompanying photo wasn't too bad; he was very glad she wasn't anyone he knew from school. He folded it away and dropped it into one of the unused crates. McGonagall, seeing this, dropped the one she had just opened on top of it with a wink. Harry shook his head in dismay as he unfolded the second one.

"Have a seat," McGonagall said, pulling a chair over from the wall for him.

Harry accepted it as he read the letter in his hand. The handwriting was simple but the words were startlingly eloquent, forcing him to imagine they were intended for someone else in order to get through them. He wished he had had such words last night when he had been asked to speak. When he had finished, he folded it carefully. Gratitude conveyed in that manner felt very different from everyone else's.

McGonagall continued opening and sorting as Harry stared at the cages on the far wall. When he finally returned to himself, he was surprised at her patience. He dropped the letter into the fullest crate and accepted the next handful.

Chapter 7.



Unexpected Offers

Classes finally returned to something resembling normal, by the end of the week. Harry moved through them in a daze, raw and quick tempered. Everyone gave him leeway, though, so he didn't get into trouble for it. He didn't sense any diminishing of everyone's tolerance of him, either, which only added to his feelings of separation.

His spare time was spent answering letters. He had started with the easy ones: the handful of exceptionally moving letters of thanks. He spent many recopied parchments on composing a heartfelt response that he then rewrote, with slight tailoring, to each of them. That left three letters that he couldn't ignore, mostly because McGonagall had strongly urged him not to. These letters included the one from Lord Freelander and were similar in that they made offers of financial assistance for his ongoing training. Even after taking them out of his knapsack many times over, they still brought a flush of something akin to pain. He knew he shouldn't be annoyed at the two men and one woman of social standing who had penned the letters he now held, but he couldn't completely help himself.

McGonagall's firm insistence that he reply played through his mind yet again as he sat alone in the quiet library late one night. He pulled out Lord Freelander's letter and a blank parchment. He just had to write what he truly thought, he told himself. Writing extra neatly, he wrote out the salutation. He thanked the man for his kind offer. He was flattered, among other less clear emotions. Harry put that down, the first part anyway. In awkward phrasing he explained that he couldn't see himself being adopted; at least not right now, ten years ago, certainly, even three or four, maybe.

Harry reread what he had written so far, discovering that he couldn't write an honest letter to someone else until he had written one to himself first. No wonder he had left these in his bookbag all this time while he stumbled through his regular routine.

He put the quill down and rubbed his eyes. What was the real problem, anyway? he asked himself. He imagined himself with a house to go to, a nice one. That sounded very appealing in and of itself. But when the nightmares started, what would his new guardian think? What if he slipped into that vision? He would have to explain that he wasn't what they thought he was, and the thought of having to do that made him feel sickened.

He reread Freelander's letter and, feeling that this stranger had gone out on a limb, Harry felt he should reply with as much honesty as he could manage. He picked up the quill again, and explained, in what felt like clumsy prose, that he needed to find his own way from here because, until now, the prophecy had left him no path of his own. He reiterated his gratitude for the offer and his hope that assistance remain available, should he need it.

With a frown, he rewrote it out three times and closed them all in envelopes.

In Potions, Harry frowned at the instructions and added two drops of essence of silver leaf. He stirred once and waited for the cauldron to cool down. Snape stepped past, pausing to eye Hermione's cauldron and then Harry's. Hermione gave their teacher a warning look.

"What was that for, Ms. Granger?" Snape asked.

Very quietly, she said, "It was a Don't be cruel to Harry look, sir."

"Hermione," Harry said, chastising her.

Equally quiet, Snape retorted, "Have I been cruel to our resident hero even once this week? Granger, Potter is the one being cruel to himself." At her look of confusion, he went on just above a whisper. "His wallowing in self-pity is doing him far more damage than I ever could."

Harry's silver stirring stick hit the table with a twang as he put his hand down suddenly. Then his eyes glazed over.

"Profes-" Hermione started to protest. Snape jerked his hand up in front of her to halt her response as he watched Harry intently. Hermione turned to Harry and reached for his arm, only to be restrained by Snape.

Chapter 7

The web pulsed and glittered around Harry. He thought this time that he could feel the torn strands like open wounds. He was surrounded in the vision, tied into it, but he could escape, he simply had to suppress his anger. As he gathered himself together to back off, a dark shape slithered up just before him, sliding through the spaces of the web effortlessly to loom above him.

With a gasp Harry returned to himself and looked up at his teacher. Startled to find him standing so close, he jumped back off his stool and had to catch himself on the bench behind to remain standing. The whole class froze and stared.

Snape's brow went up. "Ms. Granger, monitor the class for five minutes while I speak with Mr. Potter." Snape went to the door. "Potter?" he said in a voice not to be disobeyed. Embarrassed and breathing fast, Harry rubbed his temple and followed quickly. In the empty corridor, Snape pushed Harry gently but firmly against the stone wall. "What did you see?" When Harry shook his head, Snape said, "Look at me."

Harry shook his head fiercely and stared at the bottom edge of Snape's robe, determined not to be Legilimensed. "Don't you dare," Harry whispered. It came out shaky rather than insistent like he had tried for.

"All right, Potter, I won't, but you must tell me what you saw."

"I don't know what it is," Harry complained. "A web. Glowing. It is all torn up. And there is this thing like a giant sea urchin–it moves around on it." With a frustrated frown he looked up at his teacher, who looked nonplussed. "Any ideas?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Snape rubbed his forehead with his fingertips as he thought. "No, I don't. Except that it seems to happen only when you are very angry, correct?"

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "Yes."

"Perhaps then, you should endeavor not to be," Snape drolled. Harry glared at the door to the classroom, ignoring him. "Cheer up, Potter. You have everything you could have wanted–the world wrapped around your little finger."

"I don't want it," Harry said. "What good is it?"

After studying the boy a few moments, Snape opined, "It must be worth something. Everyone seems intent on obtaining it." At Harry's lack of response, he said, "Stay after class. Perhaps we can determine what this web thing is in your vision. I would do it now but I have visions of my own–of Mr. Malfoy shrinking Mr. Longbottom down into a potion bottle and then shelving it."

Harry laughed despite himself. "You don't really think that's possible, do you, sir?"

"When teaching Slytherins, I have found it does not pay to underestimate their creativity or their dogged pursuit of trouble."

Harry shrugged. "Your house, sir."

Snape put his hand on the door. "As I am frequently reminded," he said as he pushed it open.

"What was that?" Hermione asked when Harry returned to his seat.

In a faint whisper, because everyone around them was trying to listen, he replied, "I don't know. It happened during the party too. When I get really angry, I get this weird vision."

"That doesn't sound good. Don't get angry anymore," Hermione urged him.

"Thanks for the advice," Harry breathed flatly as he tried to figure out where he was in his brewing.

After class, Harry followed his teacher to his office. "Sit down," Snape said as he closed the door. Harry obeyed, slouching in the visitor's chair. Snape leaned against the front of his desk and crossed his arms. "I am curious who you are punishing," he commented evenly.

Harry's brow furrowed at that, but he didn't have a reply.

"I will assume you are not so foolish as to think you can punish me with your difficult behavior." He paused. "Your friends . . . seem to be accustomed to it, quite frankly." He waited for Harry to meet his gaze. "If you are trying to punish the headmaster–I will tell you in strict confidence that you are succeeding."

Harry looked hurt at that, then turned away to gaze at the shelf to the right of him. Glass bottles with frosted glass stoppers sat in neat rows upon it. Was Snape right; was that what he was trying to do? Part of him didn't understand why he wasn't just ecstatic to have reached this point: free to do whatever he pleased. He rubbed his scar, which made him realize that it hadn't so much as tingled in the last week. He should be thrilled just for that, but hurt and anger kept wiping it out.

Snape huffed and said, "If the other teachers haven't convinced you, presumably I won't be able to."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked him quietly.

"No one else has spoken to you? Not even Professor McGonagall?" When Harry shook his head, Snape hissed in frustration. "You are sacrosanct, Potter–that is the problem," he stated, as though it were Harry's fault.

Chapter 7

"You were going to help me with this vision . . ." Harry reminded him, regretting giving in and telling him anything about it.

"Yes, I was, wasn't I?" Snape said as though he regretted it as well.

"I can just go. That would be fine too," Harry said, then added, "Sir."

Snape stood silently, tapping his fingers on his crossed arm, before he spoke. "A web, you said . . ."

Harry shrugged his right shoulder. "Sorta. It's not clean like a spider's web. It is more like something made of slime or taffy. It glows green."

Snape's head came up at that. "It was the same both times?"

"Mostly. This time it . . . " he frowned and stopped.

"Potter," Snape threatened to make him continue.

Harry struggled for words. "Uh, it was as if where it was torn was an injury." He shook his head, frustrated. "And the urchin thing was almost more like an amoeba, reaching out in all directions. I didn't hear voices this time."

His teacher stiffened at that. "What did they say last time?"

"I couldn't understand them. They were muffled and distorted, but they were getting louder." Harry didn't add that they had sounded a bit like people in torment from a long way away.

"My fear, Potter, is that you are tapping into something the Dark Lord left behind."

"That is kinda what I'm assuming," Harry admitted quietly. He sat back and looked at the ceiling. "I have to keep reminding myself he's gone."

"We all do," Snape said. He gave Harry space to consider this before adding, "I do not intend to come across as completely unappreciative for what you did, but old habits die hard."

"Are you saying that you have actually been trying to be nicer to me?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"It seemed . . . reasonable to do so," Snape grudgingly admitted.

Harry laughed. "I hadn't noticed."

Snape uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on the desk behind him. "Regarding this vision. It appears very organic, correct?" At Harry's nod, he continued. "I do not know what it is, but I suspect it will dissipate if left alone. It is worrisome

that you felt it more the second time. That implies to me that you are capable of sustaining it, even if you don't know what it is."

"It just fades in when I get angry," Harry explained.

"That was the Dark Lord's primary emotion."

Harry sighed. "I'll try."

"Try very hard. It has only happened twice?"

"Yes."

"If it happens again, Professor McGonagall wants you banned from the Quidditch match."

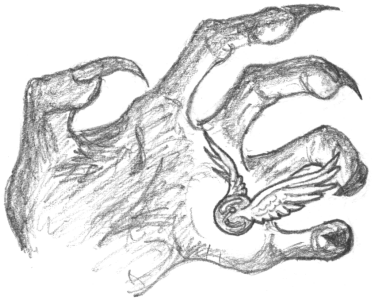
"No." Harry grimaced. "You'd like that though–wouldn't you, sir?" he accused grimly.

"Hm. A combined Ravenclaw-Slytherin win is not worth much, really," Snape replied airily.

Harry lowered his brow at his teacher. The dark edge was gone from Snape's voice–he just hadn't' noticed.

"It is time for class," Snape pointed out dismissively.

Chapter 8.



The Big Match

The last weeks of the term sped past even without examinations looming. Harry kept himself under control and avoided the strange vision. Nevertheless, McGonagall would not let him play in the exhibition match without adding a sticking spell to his broom so that he could not fall off. That would limit his maneuvering but, despite arguing with her for half an hour, she would not relent. She insisted on it for practices as well. Harry did not want news of it to spread too far so he told Ron only under the condition that he tell no one else.

The night before the match, Harry had dreams of dark, slippery shadows tracking him in a hazy green landscape. Sticky strands of glowing taffy held him back from running away. He struggled frantically, tangling himself more and more as his pursuers drew closer. He woke with a start just as they came upon him.

"Harry?" Ron said from the next bed in a tone that said, this better not be what I think it is .

"Yeah."

"Nightmare?"

"Yep."

"Have any more potion?" Ron suggested.

"No," Harry said.

"Too late to get more?"

Harry glanced at the clock; it read a few minutes after one. "Probably."

He heard the sound of Ron's bedcovers shifting and then. "No it's not. It's just after one."

"You want me to go knock on Snape's door at one in the morning?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Whassa?" Dean said from between the edges of his bed drapes.

"Ron wants me to go down and get a sleeping potion from Snape at one in the morning," Harry complained.

"He needs it; he's having nightmares. Harry, we have one Quidditch match. You need to be at your best. Maybe Dean will go get it for you . . . "

Dean shut his drapes quickly. "G'night," he muttered.

"I'll get it for you," Neville said as he slid out of bed and began to slip on his shoes.

Harry tossed his drapes aside. "Neville, don't do that. You hate Professor Snape."

"So do you," Neville retorted. "It is the least we can do for you. We owe you a lot, Harry."

"No you don't," Harry said in a pained voice.

"I'll go down with you, then," Neville said factually, pulling his robe on.

"Maybe McGonagall would go get it," Ron suggested.

"That's an idea," Harry said. He put on his robe and slippers, and padded out. Neville followed.

They knocked on McGonagall's door. A long minute ticked by before she opened it. She looked like she had been sleeping heavily. "What is it?" she asked drowsily.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I wouldn't do this if it weren't the night before the only Quidditch match, but I'm having nightmares and I can't go back to sleep without more potion."

"And?" she asked.

"I was hoping you'd get some for me . . ." Harry said with a plead in his voice.

"Potter," she said a little harshly. "You are more than capable of finding the dungeon, even in the dark."

Chapter 8

"You're going to make me get it?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Potter, despite your hero status the world, or at least this school, does not revolve around you. Professor Snape doesn't bite; get it yourself."

"I don't think I'll bother then, Professor. You don't care if we lose the match?"

She had started to close the door, but held it halfway. "It is a combined Hufflepuff match. It does not matter."

"Boy, Dumbledore really knows how to ruin a Quidditch match," Harry griped. "Professor Snape doesn't care who wins either."

"Then I truly do not care who wins, Harry. Annoying Professor Snape would have been the only remaining consolation. Was there something you wanted, Mr. Longbottom?"

"No, Professor, I was just here for moral support."

"Hm. Well, goodnight," she said with some finality and closed the door softly, although the latch clicked loudly anyway.

Harry stepped back, more than a little hurt. He took a few deep breaths and Occluded his mind to keep real anger at bay.

"So we can tell Ron that was a bad idea," Neville commented.

They stepped slowly back down the corridor. "Sounded like a good one. Usually she goes out of her way to help the team."

"I really am willing to go down and get some for you, Harry," Neville insisted. "Snape can't hate me any more than he does already."

Harry scoffed. "Don't bet on that." He exhaled hard, still smarting from McGonagall's dismissal. "Let's go. If we could face Voldemort, we ought to be able to handle Snape."

As it turned out, light was shining from underneath Snape's office door. Harry, relieved to see that, knocked on it. Footsteps came across the floor and even with this warning, when the door opened abruptly, both of them jumped.

Snape looked between them with his sharp gaze. "A bit late to be wandering about, isn't it?" he sneered lightly at them as he leaned a bit menacingly out toward them.

"I need more sleeping potion, if you would, sir," Harry explained.

Snape's entire demeanor changed. He straightened and gave Harry a long look before gliding back into his office. Harry and Neville stepped just inside the door to wait.

Snape closed a low cabinet and examined a small bottle in his fingers. Harry could see a large grimoire open on Snape's desk. Two lamps were lit to read by. Snape stepped back over with the bottle held out, then retracted it at the last moment as if reconsidering.

"Mr. Longbottom, leave us alone for a minute," Snape said, putting his hand on the door.

Neville glanced at Harry to verify that this was all right, then stepped out. Snape shut the door and kept his hand on it. "What is in your nightmare?" he asked.

Rambling in a tired way, Harry replied, "I'm being chased through a world a lot like the vision, which I haven't had again, by the way. But it isn't the same, really. I think I am just dreaming something like the vision. But I won't fall back to sleep, and I sorta want to be awake for the only Quidditch match of the year." He waited as Snape studied him with his dark eyes. Harry wondered idly why McGonagall hadn't asked what his nightmare was about or worried what his strange vision meant.

Snape held out the bottle.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said honestly as he pocketed it. "It isn't going to be much fun anyway–McGonagall insisted on adding a sticking spell to my broom." Harry immediately thought better of that. "Please don't tell any of the students in your house, sir. I'd never hear the end of it," he added tiredly.

Snape shook his head once. "No one has probably told you this, Potter. But there are those who are certain the remaining Death Eaters are determined to take revenge upon you."

"That wouldn't be too surprising. What else do they have?" Harry thought for a moment. "But we are still having the match. Why?"

Snape raised a brow at him. "Because Dumbledore is determined to cheer you up. That and forty Ministry wizards will be there on guard. I think they are actually hoping the event will draw out the remaining seven, although personally I would consider it a very unwise way of going about it."

Harry tried to imagine Pettigrew showing up at the match, his metal arm glinting in the sunlight. It didn't seem very likely.

Snape went on. "The insistence on the sticking charm probably has less to do with your propensity to phase out than the inherent risk of getting hit with a spell at a great height."

Harry thought that over. "You are being nicer to me," he commented. At Snape's doubtful look, he added sadly, "All I've ever wanted was to know what was going on."

Snape crossed his arms and straightened his shoulders. "I am not one to bury truths simply because they are unsavory or negative."

Harry started to reply then thought better of it. Instead, he reached for the door handle to leave.

"Yes, Potter?" Snape challenged him, quickly putting his hand on the door to hold it closed.

"I was going to say that you look for the unsavory and negative, but I wasn't sure if that was a fair thing to say, so I wasn't going to say it," Harry explained. "Sir."

Snape removed his hand and re-crossed his arms. "You would best go if you are going to get much sleep."

As Harry opened the door, he said, "Thank you, sir."

Neville stood, leaning against the far dungeon wall. He pushed away from it as the door opened. "Professor," he said quietly.

Snape gave him a curt nod and closed the door. At the end of the corridor, Neville asked, "What did he want?"

"He wanted to know what my nightmare was about," Harry explained, feeling hurt again by McGonagall's reaction to his asking her for help.

"Did he know what it meant?"

"Not that he said. I don't think it means anything except that I'm keyed up for the match." Harry fingered the bottle in his pocket as they walked, reassured by the distinctive shape of the warm glass.

The crowd cheered as they flew out onto the pitch. They especially cheered when Harry's name was announced, making him think that more visitors were in the stands than normal. The seats did look rather full. Harry paced Malfoy around in a wide circle as Madam Hooch gave them all the usual warnings. For once, Malfoy remained silent as he looked over the players on both teams, his mouth grim.

The whistle blew and the players flew into position. Huffindor, as they had called it during practice, went on offense first. Ginny and Zac looked like they would reach the goal posts easily until a Bludger, hit by Parkinson, struck the front of Ginny's broom, spinning her around several times. Zac's pass to her, just before, flew wide to be picked up by a Ravenclaw chaser.

Harry took his eyes off the game to check Malfoy's location. The other boy circled lazily, eyes alert. Harry took up the same stance, a half turn around the pitch. The crowd rose to their feet as the opposition scored. Minutes later, Zac put one through as well, tying the score. Harry glanced up at the lake as a breeze ruffled his hair. He really hoped the game went on a good long time. If he saw the Snitch and Malfoy didn't, maybe he would just pretend he hadn't.

Harry passed behind the goal posts as Ron made a save on the center, which unfortunately went right back into the hands of a Slytherin, who tossed it behind his back and through the left hoop. Harry returned to looking for the Snitch.

Malfoy made a dive. Harry changed course but not severely, refusing to be fooled. Apparently it was nothing or a dodge, because the blonde boy returned to his earlier altitude. Harry watched Malfoy as he climbed; he was too big to be a seeker, really. He probably wouldn't be next year. Maybe he wouldn't be on the Slytherin team at all. That thought cheered Harry quite a lot.

The game went on. It was sixty to thirty against. The crowd had quieted, chants gathering steam only occasionally. Malfoy seemed to be getting anxious: he circled faster, looking around him with more turns of his head. Harry, though he wasn't impatient yet, could not just let Malfoy win. He cut Malfoy off and took up a position just ahead of him. Malfoy zipped past him with a nasty look, brushing Harry's shoulder with the tail of his broom. The bristles were sharp and tore at his sleeve and rasped his skin. Annoyed, Harry considered ducking under Malfoy to pass again. He didn't get the chance; a green haze filled his eyes, making it hard to see. Harry curved away sharply, making the opposing Seeker turn to see why.

Harry circled in the opposite direction, occluding his mind to shake the vision, grateful now that he didn't have to worry about falling from his broom if he lost himself to it completely. A cold wind lifted his scarlet cloak, making him shiver. It felt like a breeze from deep in the forest. He turned again at random, crossing the pitch the short way to pace beside Malfoy as he circled. Dimly, he heard the crowd cheer another goal. Another breeze chilled him, and this time it didn't feel so much from the forest as from a crypt.

Heart pounding fiercely, Harry looked out across the lawn toward the forest, green haze coming and going from his vision. Malfoy cut him off. Harry dodged instinctively

to avoid him. In his mind, the black spiked ball was very close, reaching hungrily with its limbs as though to enclose him. With great effort, Harry drew in a breath and shook his head.

The crowd was shouting. Harry saw Malfoy turn suddenly to cut him off again. The Snitch hovered just on Harry's right, its gold fluttering wings penetrating the veil over his vision. He started toward it, his limbs felt numb and cold as he stretched out his hand. The Snitch dodged farther right, increasing Harry's advantage. Malfoy ducked down to get around Harry, betting the Snitch, already high, would dart lower.

Fear gripped Harry in that moment as he realized his green vision corresponded to the real world and that the spiked shadow was behind him, for real. He turned his broom sharply the other way and stared out over the lawn leading to the forest. It was closer yet, approaching from that side.

"Oh, no," McGonagall said, putting her hand over her forehead. "We shouldn't have let him play."

Dumbledore murmured a spell and stared intently at Harry.

The crowd roared and groaned. In the back of his mind, Harry assumed that Malfoy had captured the Snitch. It felt to Harry like the world was ending, but not because of the match. Shaking now, Harry raced to the top box. "Something is coming," Harry shouted and pointed toward the forest.

Dumbledore moved to the front of the box. "Harry, what is it?"

"I don't know. Get everyone inside, sir. Hurry." His hands visibly trembled as they clutched the broom handle.

Dumbledore didn't hesitate. With a Sonorus charm, he announced that everyone was to evacuate to the castle immediately. The ministry wizards gathered below the box. Tonks yelled up to Harry, "What is it?"

Harry gasped and glanced fearfully over his shoulder again.

"Harry, get inside, now," Dumbledore ordered him.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, Harry recognized the grip on his heart. The teachers were at the edge of the box now, cajoling him to move. "I feel it," Harry said. "Do you?"

The teachers shook their heads. "Harry!" Dumbledore shouted at him, angry now.

In his vision the ball now appeared as hundreds of separate things, each moving forward, forming a streaming pack. Glowing points of light appeared here and there.

He wondered what they were. Ron and Ginny came alongside him then, hovering easily. Harry pulled out his wand. "Dementors," Harry said.

Everyone looked to the empty lawn where Harry pointed. "How many?" Ron asked.

"All of them," he replied darkly.

The stands were half empty. Harry watched the line of people moving toward the castle doors. The black figures separated, spreading that way. "They aren't going to make it," Harry said. He felt freed up now, less numb. "They are supposed to be after me, but they are getting distracted."

Ron and Ginny zipped off, collecting a D.A. member each off the stands and flying to the line now running to the castle. Tonks and the ministry wizards saw this as well and instructions went out to protect the path to safety.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a stern tone as he leaned over the edge of the nearby railing.

Harry looked Dumbledore in the eye and shook his head. He flew the other way, trying to draw the Dementors off. He could see them in his mind, and apparently now others could feel them because some were starting to panic. Ron, Ginny, and ten other D.A. members had lined up over near the steps. Patroni circled them. Harry could see dark figures shifted to avoid them, but there were far too many Dementors, more than Harry imagined existed. Ministry wizards joined the students. They appeared to be arguing.

Some of the Dementors had fallen for his ruse, but most hadn't. Harry swooped down and landed near the lake, as far from the castle doors as he could get. The black swarm in the green world shifted toward him nearly as a whole. Harry's limbs went numb again immediately. He readied the Patronus charm in his mind, but held off; he wanted to attract them, not repel them.

The teachers were coming across the lawn after him. Snape caught up with him first. He started to chastise Harry, then paused and looked around himself in concern.

"Feel them?" Harry asked. "There are hundreds of them."

"Your vision?"

"Guess so," Harry answered. "You should be helping with the crowd. I can get away on my broom," Harry said as McGonagall, Sprout, and Dumbledore joined them. He may have been lying; he couldn't feel his fingers holding the broom handle. "Now we're all surrounded," he argued anyway.

The teachers had their wands out; they turned slowly, checking for any targets.

"They're waiting for something," Harry said. The crowd was almost all inside the castle now. "Do you have a really good Dementor spell, sir?" he asked the headmaster. Dumbledore didn't reply, just moved his head as though listening for something.

Deciding it was almost too late, since he could no longer feel his hand clutching his wand, Harry cast a Patronus. The stag immediately faltered, kicking up on its hind legs. McGonagall followed suit–a tiger joined the stag, stalking hunch-shouldered in a tight circle around them. Snape held his wand before him, but did not cast anything. Harry wondered if maybe he was not capable of it.

"Harry, I need to see them," Dumbledore said. He lifted Harry's chin with his finger and stared into his eyes. After a breath, he said, "My dear boy, I cannot believe you placed yourself here, given what you see."

"I was trying to draw them off," Harry explained, pointing at the crowd now trickling in the door, some being carried.

"Yes, but Harry, you should have some desire for self-preservation." Cold swept through them all at that moment. "My friends," Dumbledore said to the teachers, "we are in serious trouble here."

The teachers looked very alarmed at that.

"They want me. Just go," Harry said, stepping back away from them. His back prickled with cold as he did this; hope drained from him. Sprout and Snape grabbed hold of him and pulled him back into the middle of their small circle. They did not let go. Harry had thought his arms were numb, but pain shot through his wrists from their tight grip.

The Ministry wizards were splitting up now. Some stayed to guard the doors and many started in their direction, but hesitated. "I don't want anyone to get hurt," Harry muttered, watching Tonks in the group fighting in their direction as though invisibly repelled.

"What are they waiting for?" Snape snarled. "If there are so many of them . . . "

The air wavered in grey wisps as though the Dementors considered becoming corporal. Harry froze. "They're confused," he whispered. He closed his eyes, trying to find the figures in his mind.

"Harry, be careful," Dumbledore warned him.

The wind in his mind sounded this time like harsh breathing. The teachers around him gasped and he felt them shuffling in closer. Harry did not dare open his eyes–he

had a hold of something in his mind, something very hungry. He felt betrayal as well from the mass presence. "They were promised a feeding," Harry said. "They don't understand their instructions anymore."

Hands fell on Harry's shoulders and held them. "Keep your eyes closed, Harry," Dumbledore ordered. Harry heard shouting in the distance and spells being cast. The press of bodies around him grew tighter, which blocked the cryptic breeze from reaching him, although he could smell it. "Can you make them leave?" Dumbledore asked. Harry could hear in his voice a straining to make that question sound reasonable.

Harry grinned painfully, "How would I go about that, sir?" The combined sound of hundreds of Dementors all pressing in close, lungs rattling, bones clunking, made Harry squeeze his eyes shut harder. He didn't need to see it, he could imagine it well enough.

"Renegotiate," Snape stated.

"I already offered them me in exchange for you, but you wouldn't leave," Harry quipped. His fear had grown old and no longer gripped him so tightly, leaving him reckless.

"Not acceptable, Harry," Dumbledore said in a hard tone. The sound of the ministry wizards battling toward them grew louder.

"I've had to say we aren't with them," Harry pointed out.

"Good plan," Sprout offered shakily. Harry had never heard her frightened before.

Harry delved into the vision again, using his anger growing up with the Dursleys to enter it. He sensed an offer to consume these Muggles in revenge and denied it, reflexively afraid to even dwell on the possibility, even fancifully. The web, active and surging during the offer, fell quiescent, waiting. Harry realized they had more patience in them then he would have imagined. Not today, Harry thought at them, trying to seem authoritative. He had a feeling they had stopped to negotiate because they sensed Dumbledore may have the power to give them something more, or that he did.

Harry relaxed a little more and tried to feel his way through the vision. The Dementors found his access to their web interesting. Only the Dark One had spoken to them thusly in a very long time.

"What are Dementors?" Harry asked.

Chapter 8

"What do you mean?" McGonagall asked.

"Are they real, I mean natural?"

"They are a very old wizard creation, Harry. Magical guards spawned to protect treasure in ancient times." Dumbledore provided this. Harry could hear fatigue in his voice. The ministry wizards sounded farther away.

"I'm going to try something, in that case," Harry said.

"Be very careful, my boy." Dumbledore's hands tightened on his shoulders.

Harry reached out in his mind and reconnected one of the broken strands before him. The web shuddered and glitter flashed around it. Something shifted in the real air around him as well.

"What did you do, Harry?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

"I'm negotiating," Harry said slowly. "Can you call off the Ministry?"

"Harry?" Hermione's voice roused him and he opened his eyes to the darkness of the hospital wing.

"You are insane, Harry," Ron said earnestly. "Completely effing insane."

Harry laughed at him as memory flooded through him. "I couldn't think of anything else to do," he said in a hoarse voice.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked. "The Dementors just left. Poof! And the teachers had to carry you up here."

Pomfrey stepped over, glanced over him, and walked out. She stepped down the corridor, down the stairs and into the staff lounge. "He's awake," she stated to those assembled.

"Lucid?" Dumbledore asked.

"Rather," she replied.

Dumbledore shook his head in amazement and rose to his feet. The staff followed him out and up to the dispensary.

Harry looked up as they entered and came over. Most of them hesitated too get close, or seemed to. Dumbledore stepped up beside the bed next to Hermione. He sighed when he saw Harry's bright eyes. "So, Harry . . . what happened?"

"I gave them something so they would leave," he replied factually, then cleared his rough throat.

"What did you give them?" Dumbledore asked in his usual calm curiosity.

Harry glanced around at the other faces; they looked more perplexed by him now then they had after he had killed Voldemort. "Um, I'm not sure how to explain it. And . . . I'm not sure it was a good idea . . . "

Dumbledore shot him a very intense look, then calmed. "We were afraid, Harry, that you had still given them yourself."

"I didn't need to. And I've cut myself off from them, so I can't see them anymore. That's the last thing I remember." He wrapped his arms around his middle as he remembered the moment they sensed his intent. Their icy minds had tried to grab hold of him; he had severed the web attaching him just in the nick of time.

Dumbledore studied him. "Everyone," he said, "please leave Harry and me alone."

With a few backward head turns, the staff departed. Dumbledore gestured at Hermione and Ron to follow. "He already told us," Ron protested.

Gently, the headmaster said, "Out with you anyway." When the room was clear, he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "We continue to underestimate you, my dear boy." He shook his head slowly. "I never imagined so many Dementors in one place, especially never imagined surviving being surrounded by them. They truly wished to leave nothing to chance when they sent them after you during the Quidditch match."

"It was some kind of bonus deal for them–all of those victims," Harry said. "The deal was, me first, then they could take what they wanted." He waited for Dumbledore's response and went on when none was forthcoming. "Voldemort had become one of them in a way by tapping into their joined minds. That is what I was seeing. He punished them until they did what he wanted. Tore the web of their minds apart, which made them crazier I think, or at least more desperate." He paused again. Dumbledore sat patiently without comment.

"I fixed the web that I could reach. That was the deal," Harry said quietly.

Dumbledore raised his chin in surprise. "You were screaming at the end, Harry. Did you know that? Right before you passed out and the Dementors disappeared."

Harry flushed and cleared his throat again. "No, I didn't know. I barely got away from them. They grabbed me as I cut the strands connecting me. It was horrible, like having my soul turned to ice crystals."

Chapter 8

"You seem all right, now."

"I feel the same as I did." He shrugged. "At least those visions will stop."

Dumbledore straightened his robes and sat back. He patted Harry's arm and sighed. "We should discuss the summer, Harry. Despite your continued cleverness, we are concerned about your safety. We want you to stay here at Hogwarts until the Ministry has apprehended the remaining Death Eaters."

"I don't have to go to the Dursleys?" Harry asked excitedly.

"In the past, we have not been here to keep watch. But with Voldemort gone, we can be more flexible. As well, the spell's effectiveness is in question with regard to your aunt's house since it was a binding upon Voldemort himself and, by proxy, his followers."

Harry felt very relieved. With a sly look, he asked, "Can I write them the letter that says I'm not coming back?"

The headmaster pulled his robes together and stood. "If you can behave yourself while doing so . . . of course."

Chapter 9.

The End of Year Six

Harry was released from Pomfrey's clutches at breakfast time, and before heading down, he had to rush back to his dormitory for a clean set of robes. By the time he had changed, the corridors were nearly empty. He came up behind Dennis, hoisting open the door to the Great Hall with some effort. Harry helped from behind and gave the younger Creevey brother a smile. Dennis nearly fell over when he saw who was behind him. He stepped aside with his mouth open and watched Harry pass. "Dennis?" Harry asked the boy. The whole large room quieted and everyone, it seemed, turned to watch him come in. Harry only now realized his mistake; by being late, he had made an entrance.

The expressions of his fellow students had shifted to quiet awe or even fear from the ecstatically impressed they had been before. Shaking his head, Harry stepped along the table to where his friends were and sat down.

"Good to see you, Harry," Ginny said when Harry greeted them all.

Plates of food appeared. The hall was a long time returning to a normal level of conversation.

After breakfast Harry took himself away from his friends to write his letter. He had orginally planned on mailing it, but owl post would make more of an impression and it would arrive in time, since the train left tomorrow morning. He pulled out parchment and quill and began.

Chapter 9

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia ,

I am writing to inform you that I won't be returning for summer holiday. I have destroyed Voldemort so I am no longer required to seek refuge with you for protection.

He grinned at that opening. It was succinct, just the way his uncle liked it.

I don't expect to be needing anything from you in the future. I probably should thank you for the shelter and meals, although I find it hard to do that. Mum would have been disappointed, I'm sure, if she knew how low you managed to keep a bare minimum of care.

He reread the last sentence. It was as tactful as he could be while still saying what he absolutely had to; it would kill him to not say anything. He burned with an undeniable desire to put them in his past and that required getting beyond these statements.

Remember me to everyone, especially Aunt Marge.

Harry grinned maliciously at that and signed it.

The leaving feast was a loud affair. Harry declined sitting at the head table when Dumbledore offered it. He much preferred to sit with his friends before they departed on the morning train without him. His fellow students still seemed annoyingly reverent around him. Harry didn't believe Dementors were worse than Voldemort, but everyone else definitely thought so.

Dumbledore stood up and clinked his glass for attention. "Good evening to everyone. It is time to wrap up another school year. I don't think we've had a more interesting one since our Founders passed on. First off, after much complaining by the students, we have decided to award the cup based on merit points alone, so we are celebrating Ravenclaw's first house cup in over fifteen years." He waved his wand and blue banners bearing an eagle unfurled from the ceiling across the Hall. The Ravenclaw table erupted into cheers and much back beating.

Ron leaned over and said in a cheated voice, "What, he didn't give Gryffindor a thousand points for destroying Voldemort?"

"Everyone helped with that, Ron," Harry said offhandedly.

"We also have . . . " Dumbledore went on as he picked up a looped ribbon with a medal attached and glanced at it briefly. "Not one . . ." He lifted another identical medal and draped both over his gnarled hand. ". . . but two awards for special service to the school for . . ." He pretended to read the name off the medal. ". . . one Harry Potter."

Even louder cheering broke out, startling Harry. Ron and Hermione pushed him out of his seat and gave him a shove toward the front of the hall. Students reached out to slap his arms as he walked up. He mounted the platform beside the headmaster and stared at the edging on the old wizard's bright blue robes as the cheering continued. Out of the side of his eye, he could see the teachers behind the table all standing and clapping as well.

Dumbledore draped each medal over him. They felt heavy as they bumped his breastbone. Harry held one up to look closer. It had his name inscribed in a flourishing script. "Thank you, sir," Harry said as he finally met the headmaster's gaze and accepted the offered handshake.

"You deserve much more, Harry," Dumbledore said. He patted Harry on the shoulder and gave him a nudge in the direction of his seat. "Unless you have something to say?"

"No, sir," he replied quickly. As he walked back to his seat, the Gryffindor table remained standing until Harry sat down. "All right. That will get annoying if it continues," he commented loudly.

"One for the Dementors, I take it," Ron said with his mouth full, as he eyed Harry's medals.

Harry slipped them off. Hands reached out to look at them. He handed them away without care and served himself mashed potatoes. Had he been looking at the staff table at that moment, he might have seen Professor McGonagall elbow Professor Snape.

The next morning, Harry waved the train away from Hogsmeade station. It felt very strange to do so. As the train rounded the bend and disappeared, except for the plume of steam blooming over the trees, Harry headed back up to the castle with Hagrid.

Chapter 9

As they rounded the lake with Hagrid taking extremely slow steps in deference to Harry, the half-giant said, "I have teh go inter Diagon Alley for some things. I asked Dumbledore if'n I can take you along. But he said 'no."'

"Thanks for asking, though," Harry said.

Hagrid put a hand on Harry's shoulder as they walked. "You amazed everyone this time, Harry. You really did."

"Why? Voldemort was much worse. Why is everyone so impressed by the Dementors? I don't get it."

"I think it was a matter o' being tha' on top o' He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named tha' is getting teh people. They don' know what teh expect nex'. Everyone knew you could do in the other bloke–you'd done i' before. No one saw this one coming."

Harry hung around with Hagrid for a while as he resewed his massive boot, watered the pumpkin patch, and mixed meat scraps with chicken blood for the Thestrals then set the buckets of it in the sun to warm.

Hagrid wiped his bloody hands on his thick leather apron before pulling it off. "Well, Harry, gotta run. I's lunchtime anyway–yeh best be getting up to the castle."

Harry studiously avoided glancing at the dark buckets again as he departed. The lawn was teaming with crickets as he walked and the sun was even warmer today than it had been all school year. That seemed promising.

The Great Hall was alight inside from the tall windows. A few owls were just flying back out the upper open panes as Harry made his way to the end of the Hufflepuff table where the staff were seated. A place seemed to have been saved for him at the end, beside Dumbledore and across from McGonagall. With casual hellos all around, Harry slid onto the bench. Everyone was already eating, so he served himself a small chicken pie and ignored the salad and pea soup. The filling of the pie was hot, so he nibbled along the crust before dropping it back onto his plate to cool.

"Are you going to find things to occupy yourself without your friends here?" McGonagall asked.

"I expect so, Professor," Harry replied flatly. He wasn't feeling too congenial about her still. A subtle shifting happened around the table as though everyone sensed his mood. Harry realized that, while the subtle went completely unregarded by his friends, the teachers were acutely aware of it.

McGonagall eyed him, then went back to eating her soup. Snape leaned forward from two seats down and asked airily, "Nightmares all over, Potter?"

Harry paused in cutting into the hard crust of his pie with the edge of his fork. Last night hadn't been dream-free by any means. The same hazy world with a few slithering shadows had woken him twice despite whatever potion Pomfrey had forced on him, but no web and no wind. "Not exactly," he said thoughtfully.

Groans, sighs and one dropped fork accompanied this revelation. "Should I simply have said 'yes'?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Not if isn't true," Dumbledore replied as he gave his staff a disapproving once-over.

"You have something else for us, Potter?" McGonagall asked with more than a hint of chastisement.

"I don't know, ma'am," Harry replied quietly. He took a bite of his pie despite not feeling very hungry anymore. After finishing half, he really wasn't hungry. He stood up. "May I go, sir?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Of course, Harry."

He walked quickly out of the hall even though he had no place to be. His footsteps echoed much more than usual. On automatic, he started up the Grand Staircase and headed for the Gryffindor tower. In the middle of the corridor, he changed his mind. He had an inkling that McGonagall was going to come looking for him, at least part of him hoped she would, even though he didn't feel like talking to her. He ran through the list of likely places she would look next, like the library and courtyard. Turning around, he headed for the staircase to the dungeon.

The dungeon corridors were very quiet and cool, even on such a warm day. Harry wandered all the way to the end, past the classroom and the entrance to the Slytherin common room. He had never come down this far. Around the corner were more doors that had no labels so he assumed they were storage. A tall, dusty, glass trophy case sat at the turn in the corridor. On the top shelf was a large mahogany plaque with small gold fixtures for every year Slytherin had won the house cup. This was a Slytherin-only duplicate of one in the trophy room that Harry himself had been forced to polish during various detentions.

Harry bent over to peer at the other awards on the lower shelves. There was a medal from 1423 to one Mathias Priorton from a town in Hungary for removal of a plague of fire locusts. Harry thought the Slytherins were stretching it a bit if that was the best they could scrounge up. Beside that was a row of trophies for best in show at a biannual 1600s Quidditch festival. Harry wondered if they still held it; that sounded like fun. On the end, partially behind the base of the last trophy, was a medal for

special services to the school. The name, inscribed in staid block lettering, was Tom Riddle.

"Goes to show," Harry muttered to himself. As he crouched to study the very bottom shelf, footsteps sounded in the preceding corridor. Harry held still as he heard a door open and the footsteps fade. The door didn't close. He assumed it was Snape going into his office. If he didn't close his door, Harry might have to sneak past with a Disillusionment spell when he wanted to leave.

The bottom shelf held two short silver staffs with large gems on top. They didn't appear to have any labels. More footsteps approached and stopped.

"Have you seen Potter?" Harry heard McGonagall say. He held his breath to listen better.

"No," was the reply just audible from inside Snape's office.

"If you see him-"

"In the extremely unlikely event of him showing up in my office, I will certainly do so," Snape interrupted blandly. He sounded unhappy at being disturbed. Harry's lips quirked at the thought of showing up right after McGonagall left.

"Apparently, he has a bee in his bonnet about something," McGonagall commented in an annoyed tone.

"That is . . . phenomenally caustic," Snape said, making Harry's brow furrow until he heard the dull thunk of a bottle being put back down. He grinned a bit more at hearing McGonagall getting the same treatment from the Potions master as any student.

"I've looked everywhere likely," McGonagall said, half to herself.

"I doubt he has left the castle. He seems to have learned something akin to obedience in the last few months."

Harry growled at that and tried to think of ways to prove that wrong in the coming days.

"Albus seems to think it critical that I speak with him," she sighed, sounding like she had other things to do. Harry frowned, feeling stung yet again.

"It is unusual for you to have a problem with Mr. Potter," Snape observed.

Her feet paced the length of the room and her voice was harder to hear. "I think he is angry that I turned him away the night before the match. Wanted me to come

down here to get a potion from you." She said this as though it were very difficult to believe.

"He did come down," Snape commented. "He didn't tell you why he needed it?"

"Said he was having a nightmare," she said dismissively.

"Yes," Snape said in an oddly mild tone. "I believe that was the one where he dreamed he was trapped in a web of the Dementors' minds."

In a defensive tone, she said, "How was I to know he was dreaming about that? Goodness . . . he told you?"

"I asked. And I feel compelled to point out that his dreams are usually significant. I was reading Diagenes' Treatise on Visions and Other Disturbances of the Conscious when Potter knocked. I was trying to find a reference to web-like visions." Harry blinked at that, remembering the large grimoire.

McGonagall countered, "What was I supposed to do? Usher him into my office and give him a cup of cocoa? Pat him on the head and insist it will be all right?"

Harry, tired of crouching, stood up and stared unseeing at the house cup plaque. McGonagall ranted on. It sounded as though she was pacing in shorter laps. "Just as well the boy doesn't have parents–the things that happen to him . . . the worry alone would kill anyone. He faced down Voldemort for Merlin's sake. He doesn't need to be coddled. I assumed if I asked him his dream, he wouldn't tell me anyway."

Snape spoke then. "His dream would not have been significant to you, since I am quite certain he didn't tell anyone but myself about his vision. I was rather surprised to find that no one had spoken to him at all, not even his Head of House." There was silence for a long moment before Snape continued in a slightly harder tone. "Minerva, he attacked the Dark Lord, with his mind . I cannot conceive of it. That is akin to bathing in maggot-infested rotting flesh."

Harry straightened in surprise then thought, It wasn't that bad .

Snape was still going. "After this, the boy mopes around the castle, clearly hurting, and when I pull him into my office because he is having a vision in the middle of my class, I find that no one has spoken to him about the battle, let alone his visions." Harry held his breath again, his emotions confused.

With a hint of accusation McGonagall asked, "Did you?"

"It isn't my place. As well, it isn't even slightly inside the realm of my abilities."

McGonagall sighed. "I guess Albus should have done it. He mistakenly believes Harry needs extensive space to work things out on his own, and I don't think that's true. Maybe it was never true. He persists in his belief that, if the boy has a problem, he will come to him."

Yeah, if I knew the password , Harry thought.

McGonagall sighed. "I just thought it ridiculous he couldn't come down and retrieve his own potion." She paused. Footsteps scuffed across the floor. Harry envisioned her confronting Snape. "You are one to talk about how he should be treated. You are the one who has made certain the boy cannot stand the sight of you."

Harry strained to hear Snape's response, but nothing was forthcoming. His shoulders drooped in disappointment.

"Well, if you do see him," McGonagall repeated in frustration as footsteps sounded in the hallway now.

Harry waited what seemed like a long time, but was probably only ten minutes, before he ventured back around the corner and peered in Snape's doorway. His teacher sat at his desk, one finger pressed against his forehead as he sorted through a stack of parchments. He showed no reaction as he glanced up at the doorway. "Potter," he said flatly in a sort of greeting.

"Sir," Harry said, thinking quickly of a topic. "You shouldn't have exams to grade," he said in reference to the parchments.

"No. One advantage of the headmaster's rather generous edict." He picked up the top sheet and squinted at the heading. "I have been sent the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. Potions essays from Durmstrang. Seems they lost the three wizards qualified to grade them in a battle with some of the Dark Lord's supporters."

"Oh," Harry said. He had already started to forget about that for hours or even a day at a time.

"Professor McGonagall is looking for you, by the way."

"Oh?" Harry said again, this time in forced surprise. He glanced around the room. "Guess I should go see her," he said a little reluctantly.

Snape was leaning over the parchments, which made his hair fall over his eyes. He looked up at Harry through it. "Still having nightmares?"

Harry shrugged.

"Meaningful?"

"Don't know, sir."

Snape dipped his quill and made a notation on the top parchment. "Let me know if you need more potion."

"I will, sir," Harry said, his emotions confusing him more. He stepped to the doorway. "I'm dismissed, sir?"

"You came in voluntarily, as I recall," Snape pointed out evenly.

"Right. See you at dinner, Professor."

Harry wandered slowly up to McGonagall's office. Her door was open as well. He wondered if that were always true when the students weren't around. Maybe it was just to get a better breeze from the window. Knocking on the doorframe brought her head up from the filing drawer she had been bent over.

"Mr. Potter, come in."

"I was told you wanted to see me." Harry hoped she had told more teachers than Snape.

"Yes." She put the folder she had pulled on top of the cabinet. "Close the door and have a seat." As Harry obeyed, she sat at her desk and clasped her hands before her. She looked more tired than he had noticed at lunch, making him feel kind of bad. He should have just answered her in an ordinary tone, and none of this would have happened. She said, "I apologize for my comment at lunch. You certainly would prefer, I know, to be free of disturbing dreams. And should you need us, we will most certainly be here for you."

Harry looked down at his hands. He felt a strange tug of war between wanting to not need them at all and wishing they would pay him a little more heed.

She went on. "The other night, had I known you were dreaming of real Dementors, I would have . . . well, I don't know what we would have done for you. But something . . . we always seem to come up with something. I certainly wouldn't have sent you off so harshly." Her shoulders fell as she finished. When he didn't respond, she prompted, "Harry?"

"Ma'am?"

She waited, then said, "And you are still having nightmares?"

"Yes," Harry replied softly.

"Do you want to tell me what is in them?"

Harry deciding that she might as well know, plunged in and said, "I'm wandering through this green haze and these shadows are–I don't know if following me is quite right–hunting me, maybe. They were there before when I was seeing the Dementors' web, but that is gone now and this isn't." She didn't have a response. Harry added, "With Professor Snape's potion, the dreams don't wake me as much, so they don't really matter."

"I suspect they still matter," she said, then added in a strained voice, "But I don't know how they matter."

Harry realized at that moment that much of his teachers' attitude toward him was borne of helplessness. They didn't want to deal with him because they didn't know what to do, not because he was an annoyance they would rather be free of. That made him feel a little better. He leaned forward in his chair and propped his hands on the armrests. "I'll let you know if they change or if they start to make some kind of sense," he said, hoping it would get him away.

"You do that, Harry," she said gently. She looked around herself and then reached for the file on the cabinet and opened it up. "You may go," she said when she realized he was waiting for a dismissal. She too didn't seem to think he needed to stick to protocol.

Now that he didn't need to avoid McGonagall, he headed to the tower. The common room was quiet, the grate dark. It was going to get very boring and lonely here, he realized. At least at the Dursleys he had tormentors for company. He went up to his dormitory. All of the beds but his own had been stripped of bedding and only one trunk sat at the foot of one bed, his bed. The sight was a little daunting. Over holiday break when he was here, his roommates' things still remained.

Deciding to write his friends, he pulled out a quill and a stack of parchments. Writing careful letters to every one of his friends required nearly all of the time until dinner.

He headed to the owlery, where the school owls were settled in large numbers since they were unneeded. Harry gave Hedwig Hermione's letter and coaxed eight other school owls down for the others. As the birds flew off, Harry hoped his friends didn't think it pathetic that he had nothing better to do than write them the same day they had left school. His next thought was, he hoped they all weren't so busy with summer family things that they didn't have time to write back. Harry sighed as he stared at the shafts of evening light coming into the dusty air of the owlery. He wished he had summer family things to be doing. Wished it a lot.

As he walked slowly back to the tower, he regretted not keeping Hedwig for company. He could have put her cage in his dormitory without bothering anyone.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the inside of the canopy until the clock read six for dinner. He didn't really feel like sitting with the teachers again, but he was hungry and there wasn't anything else to do. If he didn't show up, he worried what they would think. Maybe they wouldn't notice since it wasn't subtle enough.

Rubbing grit from his eyes, he stood up. After stopping in the boy's toilet to wash up and comb his hair down, he headed for the Great Hall. The teachers were arranged almost identically as they had been before, except Tonks occupied the seat he had had earlier. He greeted the Auror warmly and received a tight hug in return. "So good to see you, Harry." She returned to her seat and her conversation with Dumbledore. Harry wandered down to the end across from Hagrid and Filch and beside Trelawney.

Harry ate quickly, stopping only to answer Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As he stood to leave, Dumbledore said, "There is pudding, Harry."

Harry took this as a strong request to stay, since there always pudding. He sat back down, flushing under the attention he had attracted with his attempted early departure.

"I hear you are having prophetic dreams, my dear boy," Trelawney said quietly. "You certainly haven't shown much promise in class, but the Sight can manifest at any time."

"They haven't been about the future, Professor, just the present."

"Ah," she said, as though that diminished his dreams considerably.

Harry had to stop himself from tapping his fingers on the table. The problem with staying for pudding was that he had to stay through everyone else finishing dinner.

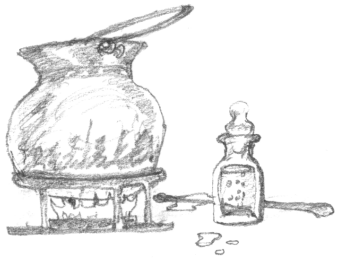
"Hope yer stayin' out o' trouble," Filch said, pointing his knife at Harry–not an ordinary butter one– but a very sharp, folding, bone-handled one he kept in his pocket and was using to cut his meat.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, feeling a little beaten down by being here.

"Ah, you'll settle in all righ', Harry," Hagrid said. Harry, never one to let Hagrid down, nodded that he agreed, even though he didn't. He couldn't get visions of all the other students–home with their parents, planning trips, playing sports, visiting friends–out of his head. His chest felt tight if he let himself dwell on it for long.

"At least I'm allowed to consider it home now," Harry commented to himself. A few eyes shifted over to him at that; Snape's dwelled on him a little longer than the others.

Chapter 19.



The Request

Harry explored the castle over the next few days. He discovered a large wooden box of blue wombats in an attic, thought of telling someone, maybe Hagrid, then decided that, since they looked pretty happy, Hagrid was probably responsible for them being there. He also discovered a secret passage that wasn't on the Marauder's Map. It led from the sixth floor landing via an old staircase and narrow passage to the Defense Classroom. One of the panels on the back wall turned open in the middle with a simple unlock spell. Harry didn't know what use it might have, but it had potential. He locked the panel with a much better locking spell before leaving the room.

This led to him pulling out the Marauder's Map to try to figure out how to edit it. His dad had helped create it while he was at school; certainly Harry could work out the magic given enough time. And time was what he had. He wrote Hermione and then, thinking more, Fred and George, to ask if they had any ideas on where to start.

While he waited, he went to the library and started reading. He read through dinner apparently, because he got to find out what happened when he did not show up for a meal. The door to the library opened suddenly and Professor Sprout put her head in, started to pull it back, then stepped in. "Mr. Potter, there you are."

Harry looked around as if that didn't make any sense.

"Just wondered where you'd got to since you weren't at dinner."

Harry glanced at the clock in surprise. "Lost track of time, ma'am," he explained.

"Very good," she brightened upon hearing that. "Well, carry on. Oh, you do know how to get to the kitchens if you want something later?"

"Yes, thank you."

She smiled at him and departed. Harry went back to reading a very interesting book on paper intelligence spells. It didn't provide anything about the Map, but he was starting to think that this book was probably the one Tom Riddle started with when he created his diary.

Harry lit a lamp and kept reading. He had had to pull over a few lamps from the other tables; it seemed like the bright days outside made it harder for him to read at night.

"Interesting reading, Harry?" Dumbledore's voice came from the darkness. He had not made a sound coming in.

"Yes, it is." Harry glanced around at the rather significant pile surrounding him. It would be hard to pretend he was reading idly.

Dumbledore stepped over and peered over his shoulder, tilting his head up to look through his halfmoon spectacles. "Hm."

"I was curious how Tom Riddle created that diary," Harry said.

"Thinking of creating your own?" Dumbledore asked amiably.

Harry laughed lightly. "No sir. Just curious."

"Well, Harry you are free to keep whatever hours you wish, but given the propensity for boys of your age to keep rather late hours, you might want to at least attempt to sleep at a reasonable hour."

Harry glanced at the clock. It was just after eleven. "Yes, sir."

Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder and departed. Long after the door to the library closed, he could feel the spot on his shoulder where the old wizard had touched him. Feeling unsettled, Harry stacked the books neatly and put a note on them for Madam Pince, even though she hadn't been at meals.

He slept well that night and woke feeling better than he had in a while. He didn't like using the potion every night: that seemed like a cheat. Reading himself into exhaustion made for a good alternative.

Chapter 10

Harry stalled on figuring out the Map; he was too afraid to damage it to try anything really experimental. He needed to figure out a way to make a new one and that would take a lot more reading, from which he needed a break. Bored again, he wandered down to the dungeon without really thinking about where he was going.

Snape was brewing something in his office. It smelled like lemon balm. Harry knocked on the doorframe when it looked like an opportune moment. He didn't think it a good idea to startle Snape, although it occurred to him that he had never seen that happen.

"Potter," Snape said in a kind of greeting.

Despite his teacher's tone being neither inviting nor dissuading, Harry stepped in and went over to peer in the cauldron. Ground pearl dust was added in a steady stream while the liquid boiled. It turned a swirling pink.

"What is that?" Harry asked.

"Amorphous Solution."

"Oh." That was an ingredient they had used for one potion near the end of the last year.

Harry considered asking Snape if he knew anything about parchment intelligence spells but decided against it. Snape had not only seen the Map, but had been insulted by it. He might realize why Harry was asking. "You're making a lot of it," he observed to make small talk.

"There is a lot of brewing I would like to do over the summer since it looks like I will be here."

"Normally you wouldn't?" Harry asked.

"Of course not. You may enjoy considering the school home, but I do not."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I don't enjoy it. I don't have any choice."

"One almost always has a choice," Snape stated as he drew out the stirring stick and wiped it with a rag.

Harry thought about that. He could, he supposed, consider the Burrow as his home instead. The Weasleys had certainly urged him to do so in the past. It didn't seem like two weeks in one place over sixteen years would quite qualify. Grimmauld Place might qualify if it had not been auctioned to some wizard from Edinburgh who may or may not have managed to remove Mrs. Black by now. He refused to go back to thinking of Privet Drive as home. He would consider any place before that.

"Gave you rather a lot to think about, apparently," Snape commented.

Harry looked up from staring into the burner flame below the cauldron. "Yes, sir," he agreed, feeling empty inside. He headed for the door, still thinking.

"Potter," Snape said, halting his departure. When Harry turned, he asked, "Still having nightmares?"

Harry nodded.

"You are not out of potion?"

"I don't use it every night," Harry explained.

"That is of course, your choice," Snape said.

Harry had a realization that night as he sat on his bed, running the Map through its paces. He had stared at the introduction so many times that he had ceased to read it. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs it listed. The thought that Pettigrew had touched the Map at some point made Harry feel unclean. But it had also been his dad's, so that overrode his desire to destroy it in a fit of pique. Padfoot and Prongs could not help him anymore but Moony might be willing to.

Heart beating a little fast, Harry pulled out a parchment and quill and wrote a letter to Lupin. He had not seen his former teacher since the Voldemort Demise Party. He had a lot to tell him, so the letter went on a long time before Harry got around to asking for help with adding a secret passage to the Map. Since he kept Hedwig in his room now, he sent the letter off right away. Hedwig gave him a friendly nip as he held her at the window. He supposed it was because she much preferred deliveries at night.

His response arrived at lunch the next day. Seeing the return address, Harry tucked the letter in his pocket rather than risk someone reading about the Map over his shoulder. He cut his lunch short and headed off with a wave at Hagrid, mostly to make sure no one thought he was testy about something.

In his room he opened the letter. Lupin's first paragraph was filled with a long series of grateful statements about Harry's success against Voldemort. He told Harry that he was working with Gringott's part time, but he couldn't say what his work was exactly. Following this he explained in detail what he knew of the Map, seemed eager

to do so. He attached a list of book references, apologizing that he knew there were others Harry would need and, if he remembered them, he would pass them along.

Harry reread the letter, then quilled another one, asking specifically how easy it would be to damage the Map while he worked on it, or should he start again. Lupin's insistence that his dad and Sirius would be thrilled to know he was keeping it up to date, as amending it was something they had been diligent about, made Harry's heart twist as he wrote out the reply.

With a heavy heart, Harry sent Hedwig back off. He lay back on his bed and stared at the canopy for a lot of the afternoon.

Eventually, the list of references got him curious enough to return to the library. He had found some of the right books but not the right chapters. He settled in to read, facing the clock, so as to not miss dinner again.

"Moving?" Harry asked a few days later as he encountered Professor Snape hovering a trunk down the fourth floor corridor. Harry immediately answered his own question. "Ah, Dumbledore finally let you have the Defense teaching job."

Snape gave him a look that dared him to make further comment. Harry just shrugged. "Hermione will be disappointed, I think." He followed along as Snape took the empty trunk back to the dungeon. "Are you going to last more than a year?" Harry asked with extra innocence.

"I do intend to," Snape commented.

Harry had to walk fast to keep up once they were down the stairs. "Are you good at teaching Defense?" he asked honestly. "I need to get a good score on my N.E.W.T."

"What do you need that grade for? Supreme Ruler of the Wizard Universe does not have a N.E.W.T. requirement," Snape commented levelly.

Harry brushed that off. "No, but the Auror's program does."

They had reached the dungeon. Snape stepped into his office and opened the trunk in front of the next full bookcase. Harry wandered over to the low cabinets along the right-hand wall. An entire row of cauldrons bubbled away on the tops of them. "You have been busy, Professor."

"Those are the long-brew potions needed for the school's stocks. While school is in session, it is very difficult to successfully brew them; something or someone," he sneered, "inevitably happens to them." He had packed the remainder of the books away and started in on other items from the shelves. Breakables were wrapped in rags before being placed atop the books.

"Misthria Potion?" Harry asked as he watched a gold-flecked liquid simmer in a brass cauldron.

"Yes," Snape replied, a little surprised. He watched with hooded eyes as Harry walked down the line, peering into each.

Running feet brought both of their heads up to the doorway. Trelawney, trailing a diaphanous shawl, stopped breathlessly in the hallway outside the door. Upon seeing Harry, she smiled sweetly and composed herself. "Severus," she said in a friendly voice as she leaned lightly on the doorframe, "you are needed upstairs." Snape stepped over to her and, after a brief hesitation, stepped around her and away. "How are you, Harry?" she asked as though they were neighbors talking over a fence.

"Fine, Professor," Harry replied carefully.

She caught her breath and looked around the room casually. "I can't wait to meet the new Potions teacher. Can you? Greer I think her name is."

"Is she as nice as Professor Snape?" Harry asked.

"Uh," she said thoughtfully and then giggled almost girlishly. "That's a good one. One would tend to assume maybe a little nicer."

Harry turned back to the cauldrons, hoping she would go away. He was always a little worried she would start prophesying again at any moment. She only ever did that when they were alone together.

"Well, I'm sure I'll see you at lunch. Bye for now."

Harry sighed and shook his head. Beside the next potion a book lay open. Harry perused the instructions and peered into the cauldron. The next step called for linden bark threads. A small basket of them sat on the shelf below. They were to be added as soon as the potion boiled clear. It sure looked clear to Harry, who felt pretty confident he could spot that. He listened and didn't hear any footsteps. Shrugging at the thought that the potion would be ruined if he did not add the ingredient, Harry started dropping threads in, one at a time, as it said.

"Really, it is nothing," Dumbledore was saying as Snape entered the Great Hall. McGonagall was in the middle of helping the headmaster up. "Just a moment of unbalance."

Snape crossed the room in an instant, taking Dumbledore's other arm. "Hospital wing?" Snape asked his colleague.

"Really, I must insist that is too much," Dumbledore said.

"Yes," McGonagall answered Snape in a hard tone.

On the fifteenth thread a deep emerald bloom spread from the thread throughout the liquid. It was a very nice color. Harry dampened the burner like it said and read the next step. The mixture was supposed to be thickened before it cooled. Harry realized that he recognized it now. It was the insect bite ointment Pomfrey gave out in little tins. Harry looked around on the shelf below and didn't see any gelatin, agar, or anything like that. The other stocks were being rearranged, so if there had been an organization scheme, he was not likely to pick up on it now.

He wandered over to the cabinet that was still left undisturbed. On the top shelf was a dusty jar of tapioca beads. Still hearing no footsteps, he took down a clean mortar and pestle, ground a handful of beads into fine powder, and stirred it slowly into the cooling liquid. He stopped when it was about halfway thickened to what he remembered the ointment to be, figuring that it would set more when it finished cooling.

He moved the cauldron to a worktable, sat on a stool and stared at it with a faint frown. He couldn't very well just leave it like this. Even though he was pretty sure that if it set up in the cauldron it could be reheated and poured out, the incompleteness of it bothered him. He looked around for any empty shallow tins with screw-tops like Pomfrey had. The side door to the supply room stood ajar, which was not normal for Snape. Harry peered inside and saw what he needed between stacks of filter paper and empty one-dose vials.

Using bundled rags to protect his hands from the heat, Harry poured the green glop out evenly into four large tins and set them apart to cool on the work table. He stared at their glistening jewel-like surfaces, and waited.

"What happened?" Pomfrey asked as the trio entered the hospital wing trailed by the Divination teacher.

"My staff is overreacting," Dumbledore stated as he was lowered onto a bed. "A mere moment of disorientation is all."

"He fainted," McGonagall supplied.

Trelawney stepped to the end of the bed, jingling softly as she shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"Well, I think we'll keep you here overnight, Professor," Pomfrey said as she checked his pulse.

Dumbledore graced them all with a chastising look but gave in.

Harry was just deciding that the tins had cooled enough. He wiped out a lid with a clean rag and touched the side of a tin to see how much it jiggled.

"Potter?" Snape said as he stepped in the doorway. His gaze shifted from the empty spot on the side cabinet back to the work table. Brow drawn low, he stepped over and lifted a tin to look across it. "Hm, what did you use to thicken this?"

"Oh," Harry fidgeted once. "I couldn't find anything but the tapioca." He gestured at the tall cabinet. As Snape eyed the ointment again, Harry added quickly, "I thought it was nonreactive in this case."

Snape's dark gaze slid over to him at that. "It is. It seems to set the color better as well." He put the tin down and pushed it over. Harry waited to be yelled at. When nothing but a close look was forthcoming, he put the cleaned lid on that tin and pushed it to the side. As he started to wipe out the next lid, Snape said, "Are you bored, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed in relief. "Yeah, I guess so."

Snape stepped back over to his trunk. "Many of the potions are rather basic, if you truly wish to assist." Harry brightened. "Do try to practice somewhat better technique than you usually manage in class."

"That's easy when you aren't hovering around waiting for me to make a mistake," Harry commented, then held his breath.

Snape looked up from continuing to pack breakables. "Is that how you explain your rather extraordinary O.W.L. performance?"

"Yes."

"Where's Dumbledore?" Harry asked when they sat down to lunch.

"He is on a small holiday," McGonagall supplied.

"He could use one," Harry said stridently as he assembled a roast beef sandwich for himself.

"Yes," McGonagall commented emphatically, sounding a little put-out herself.

Harry stared at his sandwich for a long moment before reaching for the horseradish.

Chapter 19

"Professor, can I speak with you?" Harry asked after he knocked on the doorframe of McGonagall's office.

She was sorting through a large stack of parchments. "Of course, Mr. Potter. Come in."

Harry sat down in one of the visitor's chairs. Mice ran around in the cage above his head. He waited for the burst of noise to stop before he took a deep breath and asked, "No one is usually here right now, are they?"

She sighed, "No. Not usually."

Harry slouched and said, "I feel bad making everyone stay on my regard."

"Harry," she said sharply. "I'm sorry for the implication I made earlier. It is truly not a problem. We would be ten times busier and under a hundred times more stress if you hadn't finished Voldemort off for us. If we forget that for a moment and imply that you are any kind of a burden, whatsoever, then we are sorely in the wrong."

Harry frowned and stared at his feet.

"Has anyone implied that besides my slip at lunch? Has Professor Snape?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, ma'am. He seems happy to be moving his office."

"Yes, I can imagine he would be." She straightened a stack of papers that threatened to slide off the desk. "For myself I am taking care of things that I would be doing just before the year begins anyway. Getting it done now means having less to do later. I expect the Ministry will have managed to round up the remaining D.E. in short order, and we can all do as we wish then. If not, I will personally hunt them down myself."

"Can I help?" he asked eagerly.

"Harry, you have done far more than your part already. Take a rest now."

Harry sighed and felt the walls of the castle closing in again.

Harry spent the rest of the day with this notes from the references. He had prepped a piece of lambskin parchment with the spells he had found in the second book. But he could not decide exactly what he wanted the sheet to do. The little word animation at the beginning of the Map's activation amazed him when he broke it down into its components, unless it was a single more complicated spell that took care of the many small details. He sighed. He had found a book that described how the scoreboard at the Quidditch World Cup worked, but most of the complication with that had been the ability to constantly update it from several locations. Harry wanted something that had some smarts without further intervention.

On a separate piece of paper, he made sketches of Hedwig in several poses. He took a deep breath and used a duplicitous spell to copy one to the smart parchment. He then tried to get it to show when he tapped the parchment and said, "Hedwig". The image seemed to have disappeared completely. With a frustrated sigh, he read through his notes again and wished Hermione were there. Maybe he could get Lupin to visit and show him, he thought, as he pulled out a volume from the stack, pushed up his glasses, and sat back to read some more.

When he reread the text after a few spell attempts, much more of it made sense. He supposed he would just have to keep trying and reading until it worked. It must have been easier for his dad, he had three friends to help him. Or maybe his father just had been better at magic.

Snape stepped into the dispensary carrying a smoking stone cup. He set it on the stand beside Dumbledore's bed, careful to do so quietly.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, not asleep as he first appeared. "Have a seat; I have been thinking and I want to speak with you."

Snape went over to the next bed and picked up a chair. "That is a downside to your incarceration here," he commented.

Dumbledore laughed. "My dear Severus, you can always be counted on to speak the truth–as you see it anyway. I wonder if you'd permit me to do the same?"

Snape sat back with his hands clasped over his abdomen. "If you wish," he replied tediously

"This little setback came upon me unexpectedly. It makes me very concerned that I have somewhat less time than I thought. As well I am even more relieved to have

certain critical things taken care of." He reached over to the night stand for his glasses and perched them on his nose. "After a hundred and sixty years I have to remind myself that I cannot possibly take care of everything personally." He steepled his fingers and sat silently for a long minute. "I want you to consider something for me, Severus."

"Consider, meaning it is not an instruction you are giving me outright?"

"I would never make such a request outright." He looked Snape over. "You have come a long way, Severus," he observed.

Snape hmf ed and exuded vague insult.

"Realize, it is the only reason I am asking this of you."

"It is just for my consideration?" Snape repeated. At Dumbledore's nod, Snape asked tiredly, "What is it?"

Dumbledore's eye twinkled as he said, "I want you to consider adopting Mr. Potter."

Snape's eyes widened in dismayed disbelief. "You must be joking, Albus."

Amiably, Dumbledore replied, "No, Severus, I am not." When Snape shook his head, Dumbledore said kindly, "Think about it longer than that."

"There is nothing to think about!"

"Severus . . . " Dumbledore hesitated. "Here is where you are granting me the right to state things as I see them." He waited for Snape to calm down and sit back again, artificially relaxed. "I saw that boy bring out a side of you I did not imagine existed."

Snape frowned fiercely and looked away down the long side of the wing.

"Yes, I know what you are thinking. But I know you saw him bring down the most powerful wizard in the world with precisely that set of emotions."

Snape scoffed. "What you don't know, and what Mr. Potter skipped telling the Ministry, is that I almost made him fail at it."

"Hm . . . you underestimate Mr. Potter."

"And you underestimate what happened," Snape came back. "Your request is absurd," he said angrily. He did not meet Dumbledore's gaze. "I certainly hope that is the only request you have of me." He stood up and shifted the chair out of the way.

"Yes, Severus, it is," Dumbledore stated kindly.

"You should drink that within the next hour or so," he said, indicating the potion beside the bed.

"Thank you," the headmaster said sincerely.

With a deep frown, Snape stalked out of the wing.

The Request

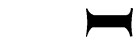
"Do you need any help today?" Harry asked from the doorway. He almost didn't– Snape seemed miffed about something as he sorted through the shelves of potions that surrounded the room. At some point, Harry apparently had learned the subtle difference between everyday Snape orneriness and real anger.

Snape looked up and considered him a long moment with an unreadable expression. "There is not much to be done today." As Harry's face fell, he added, "But the burn plaster will need to be finished tomorrow, if you want to familiarize yourself with the instructions for it at this time."

Harry stepped in and accepted the potion manual. He flipped it open and glanced at the relevant pages before closing it around his finger at that spot. He hesitated, undecided about whether to stay or go. Snape went back to his task, which involved evaluating each bottle of any age at all. He looked intent on it.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said and slipped out the door.

Harry tossed fitfully in his four poster and with a groan, woke up. Grey light filled the tall windows. The dark shadows from his dream faded only slowly, taking with them his panic to escape them. He got up to use the lavatory and didn't feel like sleeping anymore. He turned up the lamps, sat on the floor, and sorted his chocolate frog cards. The one of Dumbledore winked at him and he picked it up and read the back of it for the hundredth time, remembering the first time he had read it on the train on the way to his first year here. That moment seemed ten lifetimes ago. Flamel's name made him wonder suddenly if Dumbledore hadn't also been using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir. The thought chilled him.



Two days later, Dumbledore returned to dinner.

"Did you have a good rest?" Harry asked him.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he replied, "Yes, my dear boy, I did."

Chapter 10

Harry served himself two chicken legs and a jacket potato. McGonagall spooned a serving of peas beside it. Harry frowned at her but didn't say anything. Sprout was back today. She explained to him about the regular care everything needed. Harry felt better that at least she was here by choice. Hagrid beside her also was. That just left McGonagall, Trelawney and presumably Dumbledore there only to protect him. He felt better when he realized this.

After dinner, Harry sat in the Great Hall before the fire, reading the potion manual Snape had given him. It had recipes for all the basic medicinal potions the school used. Harry was fascinated by what went into some of the things he took for granted. The fire lulled him with its heat. After a while, eyes heavy, he set the manual aside and put his head down on his arm.

Shadows that shifted from distinct hooded outlines to smokey, snaking wraiths tracked Harry through a looming forest of dead trees. Tired of running, Harry stopped and faced them with his wand held at ready. They faded out, reappearing in the distance, moving from one trunk to the next, out of range, waiting. He let his wand hand rest at his side in frustration and impatience. Suddenly, the leaves stirred right at his feet and a shadow loomed up in front of him.

"Potter?"

Harry jerked awake and stared at Snape, leaning over the table before him. Breathless from the panic in his dream, he took a moment to recover.

"Nightmare?" Snape asked almost accusingly.

Harry rubbed his hair back and forced his breathing to slow. "Yeah," he admitted, amazed at how much his heart raced. He stretched his stiff neck in a bid for normalcy. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty."

Still unbelievably sleepy as well as jittery, Harry stood up with the aid of the tabletop. "I guess I should go up to the dormitory," he mumbled.

"Do you want this?" Snape held out the potion manual.

"Yep, thanks," Harry said a little more coherently. He took the book and left the Great Hall.

Up in his room, he sat on the bed and tried to shake the fear that gripped him. That was the second time that had happened–that the shadow looming close in his dream was actually Snape in the waking world. He hadn't wanted to believe that the shadows were anything more than the invention of nightmares, not real. He changed and slid into bed and tried to recapture the utter exhaustion he had felt just minutes ago.

The Request

When Harry entered the dungeon the next day, Snape immediately reached into his pocket and held out a small bottle. "Here," he said.

Harry stepped over and accepted it. "Thanks," he murmured and put it in his own pocket.

"I'm surprised that you still need it," Snape commented as he flipped page by page through a thick book on his desk.

"I'd like not to," he admitted, reading upside-down as Snape's finger traced a set of potion ingredients on the page before flipping to the next. He wanted to ask Snape if what he suspected was true, but didn't know how.

"Care to cut up ingredients?" Snape asked. "Not the most interesting task."

"Sure," Harry said. He took the long wild carrot roots and knife to the worktable and set to cutting them so the fibers were as close to a quarter inch long as possible.

Snape came over a little later and scooped up a small pile of them. "Have you determined if there is anything significant in these dreams?" he asked. "I only ask because this is often the case with you."

Harry shrugged. He would feel better if he told, he thought. "I'm being chased, hunted more like, by black shadows."

"Hm," Snape replied. He took the roots to the first cauldron and dropped them in.

Heart pounding a little, Harry said quietly, "I can't count them, I don't know if there are seven of them."

"Or eight, or even twenty-six for that matter," Snape commented levelly. He stirred a second cauldron before stepping back over and looking down at Harry. "More than symbolic, Mr. Potter? These shadows?" he asked.

Harry dropped his gaze and went back to peeling and cutting.

"You apparently have reason to believe they are," Snape went on. When Harry didn't respond, he said, "Have you spoken with the headmaster about this?"

Harry shook his head. "Think I should?"

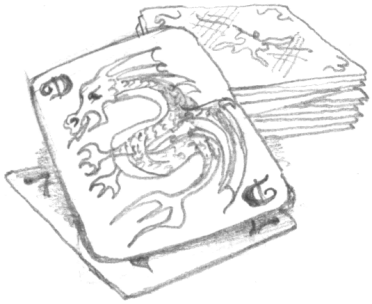
"I think he may have some insight to offer you," Snape said as he sorted through the remaining ingredients, throwing away the dry ones.

Harry didn't feel like bothering Dumbledore with it. He went back to his careful cutting. Moments later, he said, "I wish the Ministry would hurry up and apprehend them, then it wouldn't matter. The way it's going, I'll have to get them myself."

"I even catch you attempting that, Mr. Potter . . ." Snape said harshly as he leaned in close, making Harry lean back. "You will have detention with me every day from now until you complete your N.E.W.T.s."

Harry blinked in shock at the vehemence in his teacher's voice. Snape spun away back to the cauldrons and for a fleeting moment, Harry thought Snape too had surprised himself. "Yes, sir," Harry replied automatically, sounding oddly like he meant it.

Chapter 11.



Fame if not Fortune

The dormitory had started giving Harry that closed-in feeling, so he took one of the parchment spell books down to the Great Hall to read. It was an innocent enough book titled, Witch Writing . It was short on theory, but it had a lot of examples and ideas, mostly for dolling up letters to friends.

It was only an hour before lunch, so Harry took up a spot near the far end of the Hufflepuff table. A basket of chocolate frogs sat in the center of the area where the staff usually ate. Gradually, the staff came in and sat and talked over tea beforehand. Harry, feeling peckish, took one of the yellow, five-sided boxes out of the basket and opened it, coming down with an odd sense that everyone was watching him. Looking up, he found faint smiles from around the table, which was a little strange, although it shouldn't have been worrisome.

The dark brown frog hopped over his book and climbed his hand. Harry raised his arm automatically to make it harder for the magical frog to leap away. It froze in a climbing position, clinging to his pinky. Trying to ignore his sense of unease at the teachers' behavior, Harry broke off a leg and went back to reading as he ate it. He could have sworn the table relaxed a little as he did so.

Dumbledore arrived and so did lunch. Harry put his book aside, set the remainder of the frog on the edge of his plate, and made himself a sandwich. Lunch was unusually quiet, adding to Harry's growing edginess. He was getting a lot of glances too, he was sure, although it wasn't something he usually paid much heed to.

Chapter 11

He finished his sandwich and his frog. His plate disappeared so he reopened his book. He reached over for the yellow package beside the book and felt a ripple run through the table, not unlike the one he had caused in the Dementors. He glanced around at everyone and received the same faint smiles. If they were trying to make him crazy, they seemed to know exactly how to go about it. Suppressing a sigh, Harry idly pulled out the chocolate frog card and crumpled the package as he tried to find where he had left off in the chapter on cartoon spells.

The first thing Harry thought was, he did not have this card, as the picture was not a portrait and all the ones he had were. He gave it his full attention then and froze. On the card was a color version of the picture from the Ministry of him standing over the crumpled body of Voldemort. As he stared at it, the breeze disturbed the hem of his robe in the picture. The look in his eyes was even stranger with the bright green of them piercing through.

He moved his thumb to see his name printed fancifully on the bottom border. Chagrined, he looked around the table. At least he now knew why everyone had been behaving so strangely. "This isn't a joke, is it?" At Dumbledore's shake of his head, Harry looked at the card again. He flipped it over. On the back it read Destroyer of Voldemort at the top, as though it were some kind of honorary title. In the biography was written, As an infant, survived an attack by Voldemort that killed his parents. Defeated the selfsame dark wizard sixteen years later. Famed as well for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds. Won the Tri-Wizard Tournament of 1994.

"Better not do anything else," Harry quipped. At the questioning looks he explained, "No more room on the card." He put the card into his book as a page marker and stood up.

Dumbledore gestured that he should take the whole basket.

"Those are all the same?" Harry asked.

"The company sent them over," the headmaster replied.

With an odd reluctance, Harry reached over for the basket and took it up by the handle before he departed. When Harry was gone, Dumbledore steepled his fingers before him. "If I could do just one thing this summer holiday it would be to remove that boy's melancholy."

Snape sat back and crossed his arms. "It would undoubtedly help if he ceased to have nightmares."

"He is still?" Dumbledore asked in surprise.

"Yes," McGonagall replied. "Though who knows what they mean."

Snape sat straighter. "Potter believes he is seeing the remaining Death Eaters hunting him, which is not impossible given that he inherited another vision of the nonphysical world from the Dark Lord."

"I am afraid there is more to this than poor sleep," Dumbledore said as he stood up.

Harry sat on the floor beside his bed, staring out the window at the castle grounds. He had his entire stack of chocolate frog cards on the floor beside him. The Destroyer of Voldemort one had the highest series number and there was no gap between himself and Marigold the Malevolent, so he assumed they had only issued one new card. It was odd to imagine future Hogwarts students trading it on the train to school; they would get entirely the wrong impression from the text on the back.

He gazed out the window again. Harry had sat in this precise spot six years ago the night after he had arrived on the train the first year. His emotions now couldn't have been farther from what they were then. Back then he had been painfully hopeful and so happy to have been rescued from his relatives. It occurred to him that it was easier to be happy when things were simpler.

Dumbledore sat down on the bare bed beside him where Ron usually slept. As usual, Harry hadn't heard him enter. Dumbledore's eyes looked very pale blue in the sunlight. "You deserve the chocolate frog card, Harry." Harry took a deep breath and stared outside again. Dumbledore went on, "It is unproductive, if not harmful, to continually wish for things that are impossible to obtain."

Harry dropped his eyes and looked at his hands, pulled halfway into his sleeves.

"Come here, my boy," Dumbledore invited. Harry stood up and sat on the bed beside the old wizard. Dumbledore put an arm loosely behind Harry and said, "Our pride is not enough for you, apparently."

It wasn't, Harry thought. It only served to remind him of what he was missing.

Dumbledore went on. "We are very proud of you," he said, patting him on the arm. "You have a whole year of school ahead of you, as a seventh-year, no less. Top of the pack. A whole season of Quidditch. You are looking forward to that, I expect?" He

waited for Harry to nod. "And your grades the last term were most impressive. I expect you can earn your way into any program you wish to enter. We are all very aware that you do not intend to influence your way in."

"I don't want anything from Fudge."

" Minister Fudge, Harry, and you are not obliged to accept anything from him." After a pause, he said, "You have been writing to your friends?" Another nod. "And working on some project of your own with parchment spells. If you need any help, I, or any teacher, would gladly give it."

Harry pulled away and removed the Map from the drawer beside the bed, marveling in part of his mind that he was going to show this to the headmaster of all people. He grinned a bit at what his father would be thinking if he could see him now. "I want to edit this," he explained, "but I'm having a hard time figuring out how." He sat back down, unfolded the Map, pulled out his wand, and activated the parchment.

"My, my," Dumbledore said as he put on his spectacles and peered at it.

"I don't want to damage it, so I've been trying to make something similar first, but it's really hard. I'm thinking that my dad was much better at magic than I am."

Dumbledore handed the Map back. "That is possible, Harry. He managed the grades you have now without seeming to work at it. But I am certain you are much more clever, especially when things are most dire, if that is any consolation." Dumbledore rubbed his hands together. "Do you have a blank parchment?"

Harry sat in the Great Hall in what had become his usual spot. Ron had sent him a deck of wizard cards and a book of games to play on his own. At first he had been a little insulted, but boredom drove him to try it out and he was getting more amusement out of it than expected. Most of the games required careful strategy. Some of the cards aged after they were dealt and changed value. Some cards reacted to the presence of other cards and changed predictably or randomly depending upon the game.

The post owls arrived. One dropped a letter in front of Harry. Another three, flying together, dropped a package on the end of the table in the spot for mail when the recipient wasn't around. Harry read his letter from Hermione. She was really good about writing immediately when she got Harry's letters. Harry took out a quill and

wrote a reply on the back. He told her about his ongoing shadow-filled dreams and his frustration at still being stuck at school.

The school barn owl, used to this routine from him, waited for him to finish. Harry gave the letter back to it and it took flight, scattering the nut shells from the bowl on the table. Snape stepped in and looked at the package before picking it up. He untied it as he came over and looked over Harry's shoulder. "Red seven-flint on the black obsidian," he said.

"That will turn the nine into a dragon and I'll lose," Harry said. He picked up the seven-flint and held it near; the other card flickered threateningly.

"Haven't you already lost, then?" Snape asked.

"No, I have the deck in novice mode."

Snape tossed the brown paper from his package aside; it disappeared before it hit the floor. "Potter, I can't imagine you doing anything in novice mode," he commented as he flipped through the stack of books in his arms.

Harry, spying the title of one, asked, "What are those?"

"Potential texts for Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry half stood by kneeling on the bench seat and looked at the pile more closely. "Can I see one?"

Snape selected one and handed it over. Harry leaned on his elbow and flipped through it. "Which year is this for?" he asked doubtfully.

Snape considered him, "What is wrong?"

Harry frowned lightly. "We've done-" he stopped and flipped to the table of contents. He listed spells under his breath, "Grand flecture, Whistler, Frompten, Polarized blocking. Those four," Harry said, pointing. "We haven't done those."

"Haven't?" Snape took the book back and glanced at it. "Potter, I have Grey's syllabus–you have only covered two of this list."

Harry shrank down a little, half expecting an outburst as he said, "Not in class. In D.A."

Snape raised his chin before he turned on his heel. "Come with me, Potter."

Harry stood up and followed, figuring it was all right to leave his game as it was, although by the time he came back the cards would be different anyway. Snape led the way up the stairs and down the corridor to the Defense classroom.

Chapter 11

"In here," Snape pointed.

"Am I in trouble, sir?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Not if you are telling the truth," Snape replied. He went to the front of the classroom and stepped up onto the platform.

Harry stepped up onto the other end. "Can't you just tell by looking at someone if they are?"

Snape froze at that. He raised a brow and replied softly, "Usually." He pulled out his wand. "First spell is a Titan Block. Let's see it."

Harry took out his wand and thought a moment. "Are you going to spell me with an attack to bring it up against?" he asked, thinking that would make sense. He was used to that from D.A.

"What if I told you you have a persecution complex?" Snape said sharply.

"If I insisted I didn't, wouldn't you think I was overly optimistic?" Harry retorted.

"Point taken."

Harry cleared his throat and tried not to grin. Finally he put up his wand, mostly because Snape looked impatient with him.

"Ready?" At Harry's nod, Snape said, " Figuresempre! "

Harry put out both hands, palms outward, his wand hooked under his right thumb. A shimmering orange dome flared, absorbing the incoming curse.

Snape pulled the book out of his pocket. "Next is Grand Flecture; you said you didn't know that one . . ."

"Can you show me?" Harry interrupted.

"Why not, Potter." Snape said in resignation and stepped over to him. He held out the book. "It is a spell to repel anything physical around you. Timed correctly, you can avoid being struck by something, or many things, thrown at you. Or, you can use it to force a path through something moveable, like brush, or even people, should you be in that much of a hurry."

Harry grinned at that and wondered if Snape were really trying to make a joke. He took the book and read through the description quickly. "Can you do it once?"

Snape moved two heavy stone pedestals onto the platform and placed a wooden block on each. He stood between them and, holding his wand straight up, said, " Hovequanta. " The blocks flew in opposite directions away from him.

Harry set the book down on the floor, picked up one of the blocks and placed it back on the pedestal. Snape did the other and stepped out of the way. Harry stepped into position and thought a moment. The book said the spell felt like a globe expanding in sections away from the caster. He took a deep breath and holding up his wand, spoke the incantation. The block on his right moved to hang half off its pedestal; the other didn't move.

Harry put the one block back into position and tried again, thinking harder about a globe sectioned longitudinally like in the picture. Both blocks flew off their perches. "Huh," Harry muttered as he moved to pick them up. This was a heck of a lot easier than making parchment write on its own.

Snape shook his head at him.

"That wasn't right?" Harry asked, concerned since he thought he had succeeded that time.

"It was acceptable," Snape said evenly.

Harry jumped over and scooped up the book. "What's next?" he asked eagerly.

An hour later, when they had gone through all of the spells, Harry jumped down from the platform. The stack of other years' texts lay on a desk in the first row. He picked up one and thumbed through it. "Which is the sixth-year?"

"I have a question for you first," Snape said. "How many students know the spells you know? Not counting the four new ones, obviously."

"It varies. Not everyone came to every session of D.A."

"There were nineteen students on the staircase the day of the battle. Safe to say they all do, correct?"

"Yep, that was pretty much the core. Some of the younger ones we made stay behind." Harry picked up another book as he talked. That one looked like first-year, or he hoped it was. He didn't see Snape's thoughtfully surprised expression as he said that. Harry said, "There were probably forty-five who came to most sessions-"

"Forty-five?" Snape echoed in surprise.

"And another fifteen who came depending upon the topic. Easy stuff that is really useful brought in the most students."

"Such as?"

"Basic counter-curses, spell detection, stuff like that. Which one is the sixth-year?"

Out of his pocket, Snape handed over another book and watched Harry as he perused the contents.

"If I am out sick, you can simply teach the class," Snape muttered.

"What?" Harry asked, distracted by the book.

"Nothing, Mr. Potter."

"I don't know this one," Harry said brightly, pointing at one halfway down the contents.

"It is also referred to as a Banana Peel."

"Oh, I do know that one, then." Harry snapped the book closed and handed it back.

"Hm. You are making me realize that I need to rethink this. At least for the upper levels."

"Sorry, sir," Harry said sheepishly.

"Do not apologize, Potter," Snape retorted. "You needed those students. Not a single one lost their life. I would not have imagined that possible–not against some of the wizards I know were there. We shall have a more interesting class than expected, that is all. With Dumbledore's permission, perhaps we can do some advanced offensive spells as well."

Harry's head snapped up with acute interest.

Snape set the books on the desk and straightened the chairs. "Remember what I told you," he threatened.

"Yeah, detention for the rest of my life, or something."

"Precisely," Snape stated as he strode past him to the door. As he opened it, he said, "You still have a few hours before dinner. Perhaps you should wander up to McGonagall's office and finish your last year's lessons with her as well."

Harry scoffed. "Her class is hard. I'm not very good at Transfiguration. Hermione is."

"Disgusting having friends like that, isn't it, Potter?" Snape commented.

One day, as Harry sat in the Great Hall building a card house out of his wizard pack, McGonagall stepped in and said, "Potter, I really do think you need to get out. Come with me."

Harry jumped up and followed her across the Entrance Hall and down the steps to the lawn. "Are you my only escort, Professor? Headmaster said two to leave the castle."

She slipped on her traveling cloak as they walked. "From what Professor Snape tells us, you qualify as your own escort. As well, several Order members are in Hogsmeade today. Come along."

They walked down the lawn. Harry was grateful that only a few figures loitered at the gate. He and McGonagall approached and the figures started to take interest in them. As they drew closer, they started calling out his name excitedly. Harry's steps faltered. McGonagall slipped an arm through his and pulled him along. "There are only four of them," she admonished.

An old wizard shook Harry's hand vigorously as soon as they passed through. A woman with her two small children bent down and said. "Look, dears, it is the famous Harry Potter." The tow-headed children clung to their mother's skirt and stared at him with wide-eyed, unblinking gazes.

McGonagall steered Harry through. "Just out for a butterbeer. Excuse us, please."

On the high street, people turned and gaped at him. Quietly, Harry said, "You are reminding me of all that is good about the castle."

"Relax, Harry. Everyone else is now ." She tugged open the door of the Three Broomsticks and gestured for him to enter.

"Blimey, it's 'arry Potter!" someone exclaimed, and the room broke from quiet murmurs to shouting and chaos. Everyone got up from their seats and came over. Madam Rosmerta came out from behind the bar and seated them at the best table near the bar.

"Two butterbeers, please," McGonagall said, completely unshaken by the goings on around her.

Harry shook everyone's hand and a few people's twice. Eventually, after much back pounding and expressions of worship, the crowd settled back at their own tables, although the conversations were much more raucous than before.

"You survived," McGonagall said as she poured her bottle out into a mug.

Chapter 11

Harry made a noise that indicated it had been a close call.

His teacher leaned forward and asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm doing all right, Professor. A little bored."

"You're spending a lot of time in the dungeon," she observed.

"Sna- Professor Snape gives me things to do."

"It's a little surprising, is all. You two haven't got along well in the past and during meals it seems as if that is still true."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Does it?"

She took a gulp of her mug. "Well, if you aren't noticing maybe it is my imagination."

Halfway through their butterbeers–which Madam Rosmerta insisted were on the house, forever–murmuring behind them started to raise alarms with Harry. He settled back in his seat and tried to listen in. Moments later, in badly tuned voices, an old drinking song started, although the lines had been changed. Harry listened with growing bemusement as the lyrics roared out with much shouting.

I'll sing thee one, ho

green glow the wizard, ho!

what is your one, ho?

one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so

I'll sing thee two, ho

green blow dark wizard, ho!

what is your two ho?

two and twenty wanded boys spelt on his head, oh

one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so.

Harry sank down in his seat with his mug. "At least they made it into a group effort," he offered.

"Well, this must be my lucky day," a familiar voice said from behind them. Rita Skeeter stepped over and started to pull out a chair at their table.

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry said a little less than welcoming.

"Please, have a seat," McGonagall said, getting a sharp look from Harry.

Skeeter took out a pad and a normal quill this time. "Anything to say, Mr. Potter? You have been quite the recluse."

"He is being protected from the remaining Death Eaters," McGonagall pointed out factually. Skeeter made a note of that.

"No more attempts on your life, Mr. Potter, since the Dementor incident?"

"No," Harry replied. "Not that I've been informed of, but I'm not informed of much; you must realize." He sipped his butterbeer and watched her write that down. He didn't look over at his teacher.

"Plans for the future?" Skeeter asked without looking up from her writing.

"Still deciding. I have a whole year to figure that out." Working with Fudge, if he were an Auror, was starting to seem unsavory, even if working with Tonks still sounded like fun.

"Glad to have Voldemort gone?"

"Thank you for using his real name," Harry stated. "And yes, very much so."

"But you aren't free to move about as you please because the seven are still loose, correct? You're still a prisoner?" Skeeter asked this in a tone that sounded mild, but really wasn't. Harry wondered in concern what she was really trying to ask, at the same time as he was glad that someone else recognized his situation.

"No, I can't go out without an escort, but Hogwarts isn't a prison–it's my home, as it has been for six years."

Skeeter glanced at McGonagall before she asked Harry, "What do you think your parents would say if they could see you now?"

Harry was very grateful that Skeeter didn't have her Quickquotes quill because this time his eyes did feel a little warm. "I don't know," he replied flatly. She had cut right to the heart of what was bothering him.

"Mr. Potter, you may make up whatever you like. What would you want them to say?" Skeeter waved to Madam Rosmerta for a pot of tea.

"I didn't know them," he insisted, staring into his butterbeer as he grappled with himself.

"Move on to the next question, Ms. Skeeter," McGonagall interjected.

"You knew them," Skeeter pointed out to her. "What do you think they would say?"

Harry looked up at his teacher as she sat back and thought that over. He tended to forget that many of them had known James and Lily Potter at least as students if not from the Order. McGonagall had, as well as Dumbledore, Flitwick, Hagrid, Lupin, and even Snape. It gave him a flash of anger to think that he was the only one who didn't know them.

McGonagall sighed. "It is a long way to think back." She glanced at Harry with a sympathetic expression. "They were very intent on defeating Voldemort and didn't hesitate to get into fierce, dangerous battles with him and his followers whenever they tried to extend their power. It was not the best of circumstances in which to try to raise a child. But like the Longbottoms, I think they felt that they needed something to pin their hopes on. We are all very grateful now that they did." As she said the last, she stared evenly into Harry's eyes.

"Do you still miss them?" Skeeter asked Harry.

"I miss not having parents," Harry replied flatly. He finished his butterbeer and set the mug down. He easily imagined all the other students practicing Quidditch in their yards, taking holiday, waking up late to breakfast with their families.

"Must be difficult," Skeeter commented as she looked over her notes. "No particular future to look forward to and a dark past to keep you company."

Harry hoped the article didn't read like that. "I have plans, I just don't feel like sharing them."

"How about off the record?"

"Is there such a thing with you?" Harry asked.

She put her quill down. "There is now."

"What's with you, anyway?" Harry asked, curious about her good behavior.

Skeeter hedged by topping up her tea cup. "I'm on a very short leash. Finding you here is my big chance to move up again. Plus, I'm still under a cloud of blackmail, am I not?"

"I suppose you are," Harry said. "The deal didn't include Voldemort."

"What is this?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"It wasn't me," Harry insisted.

"It wasn't him," Skeeter confirmed. "Another of your students is presently blackmailing me to not write anything unfavorable about dear Mr. Potter, although that

isn't hard to follow as he is all the rage at the moment and anything negative would get the Prophet flooded with angry howlers. It is blasted hard to work when that is going on," she complained as an aside. "Well, I do appreciate your time." She stood and put away her pad and quill. "Nice to see you again, Ms. McGonagall."

When the door closed after her. McGonagall leaned in and said, "Am I to understand that one of your friends is blackmailing a Prophet reporter? To your benefit?"

"Don't you remember all of those awful things she wrote about me during the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Harry asked.

"No," she said firmly. "Who is this student?"

"You have to ask? Who is smart enough to pull that off?" Harry said.

"Hm," McGonagall growled.

"Skeeter wouldn't have got into trouble if she hadn't been breaking serious wizard law. That is what we have her on, and that's why she's behaving."

"What law is she breaking?"

"As long as she's holding up her end, I can't tell you," Harry pointed out and felt a bit of justice in it.

"Are you in deep anywhere else that we should know about?" She asked a little smartly. "We are only charged with your continued safety, young man."

"Are you finished with your butterbeer, Professor?" Harry asked, very ready to leave.

Chapter 12.

The Offer

Days past. Harry ignored the Prophet –he had no desire to read the other side of the interview with Skeeter. He learned how to charm parchment to do some interesting things, but he didn't know how the Map knew where everyone was. He managed to make a copy of the physical part of the Map with his additions and even gave it modes where it showed just a normal map of the school with the current classrooms labelled or with an additional charm, it showed the secret passages, including the one to the Chamber of Secrets that Harry also realized the old Map lacked.

He made two more copies and sent them off to Ron and Hermione, feeling anxious about their replies after he did so.

His friends didn't reply by the next day, making Harry realize that he needed something else to occupy himself. There weren't any potions to work on. Bored, Harry wandered the castle and the bailey. He wondered if he should start up a new hobby, like sketching, or violin, or anything. The bailey was too small for much flying which was a shame as the weather was beautiful, but then again the sun was shining like this the day Voldemort showed up. If the Ministry would just catch the remaining Death Eaters, he could go flying again around the much larger outer grounds.

Feeling frustrated and caged, Harry sat beside the fountain and rolled up his sleeves to get some sun. He tried to imagine what Voldemort's remaining followers were doing right now. They didn't seem particularly close in his dreams. He hoped that meant they didn't have any good plans after the Dementor one failed so brilliantly.

That night, Harry woke jarringly, shaking with chills. He jerked the drapes aside and turned up the lamp. His own breathing sounded harsh and urgent in his ears. The sight of the curved walls of the dormitory calmed him somewhat. He pulled his legs against his chest and hugged them while he waited for the remainder of his distress to fade.

Remembering Pettigrew's falsetto words of reassurance from the dream, he started shaking again. Wormtail had been leaning over him, stroking his forehead about where his scar was. Harry felt a bit as though vomiting might improve his stomach. He grabbed his robe and shrugged into it as he stumbled down the steps. The Fat Lady slammed closed as he stepped out into the corridor.

By the time he made it to the boy's toilet, his stomach had calmed even though his shivering hadn't. He ran the water hot and held his hands under it a while before washing his face. Feeling better, he walked back to the common room and sat on the couch. The clock read three-thirty. The room was utterly silent. Harry really wished he had someone to talk to, as he wondered tiredly what had brought on this new dream. He toyed with the notion of going to Dumbledore, but the thought of him coming to his office door with an expression like McGonagall's dissuaded him.

When his eyes tried to fall closed, he went back up to his dormitory room, took a large sip of potion, and crawled back into bed.

Harry woke when the light came through the window since his drapes had not been re-closed. He rose, fuzzy-headed, thinking that a bath sounded like a treat, and that he would have to do it before the day heated up, or it wouldn't be as pleasant.

Harry's bath made him late for breakfast. As a result, everyone finished before him. Sprout and Hagrid hovered a bit over coffee before moving on and leaving him alone. The Hall became as quiet as the common room had the night before.

Harry wished in vain for some kind of distraction, but the day oozed by slowly, mind-numbingly.

That night, Harry took the potion before lying down at ten. Early, but then a good long rest was what he wanted most in the world. Exhaustion pulled him easily into sleep as he snuggled down between the covers.

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Harry was cold–so cold he could barely move. He looked around himself groggily. The air was foul and dank. He was looking at the edge of something woven, like a basket or a coarse sack. Eventually, a figure approached and reached out to him. It was Pettigrew again. Harry tried to jerk away and managed to turn his head. It made him dizzy to do so. A hand stroked his forehead as Pettigrew chanted vague phrases of comfort. Harry jerked away from the hand again and caught sight of thick snake coils surrounding him.

With a cry of surprise, Harry tumbled out of bed. He crawled, gasping, to the center of the floor on clumsy limbs that felt alien to him. He huddled there and waited for the panic to ease. His stomach rebelled. He swallowed hard several times since he didn't feel capable of making it down to the toilet.

When he finally came to himself, he looked at the clock which read fifteen minutes before five. Almost morning. In fact, the sky looked to already be brightening. The thought of imminent daylight and company at breakfast soothed his rattled nerves enough to give him strength to get off the floor.

Harry sat through breakfast in near silence, giving one syllable replies to Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As badly as Harry longed for company, he didn't actually want to participate in it. He also wasn't very hungry, although he drank a lot of orange juice and coffee. Harry was still pushing his scramble around on his plate when everyone else got up to leave. He peered into his empty coffee cup, only vaguely aware of the movement around him.

At the door to the Great Hall, Dumbledore paused to look back at Harry, who sat with unusually bad posture on the far end of the long table. The headmaster stepped out and let the door close. "Severus," he said to the retreating backs of his teachers. When Snape looked back, Dumbledore gestured with a tilt of his head that he should return.

Snape came back down the steps and over to the old wizard. Dumbledore said quietly, "Talk to the boy; something is bothering him unusually so." When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Dumbledore added, "I am not unaware where Harry has been spending most of his time."

Snape huffed. "Why do you not speak to him?"

The old wizard sighed as his gaze focused beyond the wall. "Because he will not have me to rely on forever." He tossed his head at the door to the Great Hall to urge Snape back in.

Snape shook his head, pushed his hair back and opened the door. Potter still sat near the far end of the Hufflepuff table, looking more forlorn than usual. He didn't stir as

Snape approached. Frowning at his own discomfort, Snape sat on the bench beside Harry, facing outward.

It required nearly a minute to conjure up words and an appropriate tone of voice. "Did something happen?" he asked factually.

Harry jumped lightly as though, as unlikely as it seemed, he didn't realize Snape was there. Harry cleared his throat and replied, "Potion stopped working."

"It does not completely eliminate dreaming, that is why it is safe to take regularly," Snape explained. "Are the shadows moving in?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

Harry shook his head. "Different dream." He didn't elaborate.

Snape watched the boy's hands rubbing over each other as though to warm them, even though the Hall temperature was quite comfortable. "Does this other dream lead you to believe that you are in danger?" he asked, being as specific as possible.

Harry considered that before he shook his head.

"If it does, you will inform someone immediately?" Snape half asked, half ordered.

"Yes," Harry replied faintly. He hadn't looked up from his barely touched plate of breakfast.

"The dream has removed your appetite?"

Harry nodded and swallowed hard as though to demonstrate his nausea.

Snape stood, having run out of issues to discuss. He watched Harry push his plate back to make room for his elbows on the table. The boy put his head on his hands, looking rather defeated. Snape departed, unwilling to probe further.

Dumbledore visited Snape's office about an hour later. "You spoke with Harry?" he prompted.

Snape put down the crate of marble blocks he was sorting through for student spell practice. Many were cracked or had serious burn marks. "He is suffering from a new nightmare."

"Did he tell you what was in it?"

"No, and I didn't pry. Unless it is critical to, it seems unnecessary," Snape went on, although he felt a bit like he was post-justifying.

Dumbledore stepped over to the desk. "I am concerned the dream represents some real danger to him."

Snape replied, "I asked that specifically. He says it does not."

"Hm," Dumbledore muttered as he picked up one of the cracked blocks of pure white marble and examined it.

Snape commented, "I think if we are willing to trust his retelling, we should be willing to trust his interpretation."

Dumbledore set the block back down. "I want you to keep an eye on him for the next few days."

Snape studied the headmaster a little suspiciously. "Meaning?"

"Speak to him if this continues. Check on him, make certain he is sleeping, because clearly he is not doing so regularly."

Snape blinked in surprise and gave Dumbledore a dismayed look.

"Severus," Dumbledore said congenially, "it is very little to ask, especially compared to what has been asked of you in the past. I have worked hard to keep him unattached to me. Now, when my immediate future is even less certain, I do not wish to tether him to me more than he has managed on his own."

With a frown Snape turned away to pick up another crate of blocks to sort. Dumbledore hovered a moment before he departed, as though to verify Snape wasn't going to protest further.

The dream woke Harry just after midnight, which wasn't surprising considering he had crawled into bed at nine. He stumbled from the room again, unable to resist the need to satisfy his urge to flee if only from one room to another. The common room was its usual silent self as he dropped onto the couch. He stared at the bookshelves and wondered what he was going to do.

It was two when Professor Snape headed up to the Gryffindor Tower. As he approached the end of the dark corridor where the portrait guarded the entrance, he huffed his annoyance at this task. The house passwords were all set identically for the summer and the Fat Lady opened to Periwinkle . As he stepped into the common room and eyed the staircases to the dormitories, it occurred to him that he didn't even know which floor the boy slept on. There were only seven floors to search, he thought in further annoyance.

It wasn't until he stepped across the room that he noticed the figure in striped pyjamas curled on the couch before the empty hearth. He turned one of the lamps up slightly and considered the still form. At least Potter was asleep–that simplified his task, but

it was a tense sleep, not normal and probably not restful. The boy even appeared to be shivering although the room felt pleasantly warm from the sun-baked stones of the tower. As well, the crocheted throw pillow his head rested on would have only seemed comfortable to a monk from an exceptionally strict order.

Snape surveyed the room. The houses all had spare bedding accessible somewhere. He tried one of the wardrobes–it contained games and sundries random. The next one had games as well but the top shelves had pillows and blankets. He pulled down one of each.

Using a transpose spell to avoid disturbing Potter's sleep, he swapped the pillows before covering him. Potter still shivered. Snape was beginning to be somewhat curious what this dream was. He went to the hearth and opened the flue before lighting the logs that were stacked decoratively on the grate. The room didn't need the heat, but the fire would provide more than one kind of warmth.

Harry woke up early the next morning. His first thought was that his memory of leaving his bed again must be mistaken as his head was on a very soft pillow. That was, until he opened his eyes and saw the common room. He fingered the blanket and noticed the black remains of a pile of logs glowing in the hearth. Sitting up and scratching his head, he wondered at that. If Dumbledore or McGonagall had come in, though they would simply have woken him and sent him back to his bed, he was certain. Maybe Dobby had done it, he considered, or one of the other house-elves. He stretched and, feeling better than he had the morning before, went down to wash up.

At breakfast no one paid him any more attention than usual, leading him to assume the house-elves had bedded him down. He relaxed at that notion and forced himself to eat enough to cover the burn in his queasy stomach.

Harry wandered the castle most of the day, because if he sat still he felt chilled and sick again. His friends' replies arrived and out in the sunshine, on a bench beside the keep, he read them. They were impressed with the maps. Hermione offered a few possible ways the Marauder's Map knew where everyone was although she had to admit they were unlikely to really work. Ron was visiting his brother in London and his letter had a return address there. He described a little of what he had seen in the city in a way that made it clear he was holding back to not make Harry feel bad.

A chill overtook Harry at that moment. He folded the letters haphazardly and stuffed them into his pocket as he stood up to walk around the bailey perimeter yet again.

That evening, exhaustion drove Harry to his bed. Nothing short of nodding off in the library three times in a row could have done it. He took a sip of potion before pulling the covers up with painful reluctance.

His unease was more than justified. His dream this time was a confused blur of bloody white fur, animal panic, and an odd gulping swallowing of something still struggling ever so slightly, although part of him seemed to find that quite satisfying.

Harry fell down the steps to the common room and immediately vomited the little dinner he had eaten. He rubbed his mouth on his pyjama sleeve and suppressed the sob that tried to follow.

"Potter?" a voice asked as someone stepped in through the portrait hole. Harry looked up in surprise as Snape turned up one of the table lamps before coming over to him. "You are unwell. Let us get you to the dispensary."

Harry managed with some assistance to get to his knees. "No, it's the dream," he explained as another bout of shivering overcame him. Snape pulled out his wand and Scourgified the mess before stepping away. Harry watched him step straight to the corner wardrobe and pull down a blanket. Surprise at the implication of that erased Harry's fear. Dazed, he let himself be wrapped up and pulled to his feet.

Harry stepped toward the portrait hole and out, with Snape keeping a grip on his arm for support. Harry insisted on stopping at the toilet.

As he leaned on the sink to wash up, Snape said, "You are certain you are not ill?"

"It's just the dream," Harry insisted. He bent down, washed his face, and rinsed his mouth before washing the edge of his left sleeve. As usual, the warm water was a blessed relief to his panic. Finished, he finally had to turn it off. He glanced at his dripping face in the mirror and shivered again, despite the warmth of the room and the steam still rising from the basin. He tugged the blanket tighter around himself and held it with his left hand. He felt dizzy so he leaned heavily on his right, propped on the sink edge.

"She's cold," Harry explained. "He doesn't know to keep her warm."

Beside him, Snape straightened and said in a very serious tone, "To whom are you referring?"

Harry closed his eyes with a wince and replied, "Nagini."

Snape grabbed Harry's arms and steered him to the bench along the wall where he sat him down. Crouched before him, Snape said, "Occlude your mind, Potter. Now."

In a tired voice, Harry said, "I've been trying–I can't."

"Look at me," Snape ordered.

Harry raised his eyes to his teacher's unnaturally dark ones.

Snape said, "Put your emotion aside, Potter. You know how to do this. Force her out."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if it's me or her."

"It does not matter," Snape said in a sharp tone. "The result is the same."

Harry forced himself above the sickening fear. He organized his thoughts with no little effort, concentrating on the discomfort the tight grip Snape caused his left wrist. Like a switch being pulled, the second existence went away. Harry blinked in surprise, fearful it was just going to come back again in the next moment. After a minute of relief, his shoulders fell as he relaxed.

"Better?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry nodded and accepted the towel that was handed to him. He dried off his face and patted down his damp sleeve. With a hint of impatience, Snape held Harry's arm out and used a drying spell on his sleeve.

"Thanks," Harry muttered. He had left his wand beside his bed and he wasn't very good at that spell anyway.

"You should return to your dormitory," Snape commented.

Feeling almost himself. Harry stood up, hugging the blanket to himself for moral support.

As he escorted Harry back to the Gryffindor common room, Snape said, "Do not fall asleep without Occluding your mind first."

Harry nodded and stopped at the base of the stairs to the boy's dormitory. "Thank you, sir," he said honestly.

Snape didn't reply beyond tilting his head to the side.

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Harry's previous uneasiness around Snape returned with a vengence. He delayed going down to breakfast so that he would have to sit on the close end which was usually where Hagrid, Sprout, and Filch sat. Through breakfast he occupied himself with steering a reluctant Hagrid toward the topic of wombats, and avoided looking over at the occupants on the end of the table.

Feeling better than he had in days, Harry went back to his reading about parchment spells. Several times he thought of taking a break and checking if Snape needed help with anything; each time he vetoed the idea immediately.

Occluding his mind before falling asleep worked well to keep his mind from wandering, and after a few days, he didn't even have to think about it consciously. Safely separated from the horror of it, he thought back to the dreams to try to remember if there were any clues to Pettigrew's location. Other than being in a cellar, he could not recall any.

Harry fell back to his previous routine, fearing that he was going to spend the entire summer at Hogwarts. Pettigrew didn't seem to think he was in any danger, which didn't give Harry much hope. His notions of visiting Ron in London or the Burrow were now seeming to be only so much fantasy.

At dinner one evening the next week, Dumbledore observed, "It is almost your birthday, Harry."

Harry glanced up at that and thought about it. It was July eighteenth. A month of the summer was gone already.

"I think perhaps a small party is in order," Dumbledore continued. "Why don't you invite a few close friends–not as many as I invited last time if you please. You can have the Great Hall for that evening."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, feeling a bit honored by the offer. "I'll do that."

Harry used one of his new parchment spells to make up invitations. At first he was going to make them very elaborate, then decided all that showed was he had way

too much time on his hands. He went instead with a simple animated flourish at the bottom.

Hermione wrote back the next day, accepting his invitation and asking if she could bring her parents as Ron was bringing his whole family and she wanted them to meet again. She also made some suggestions about his new Map and thought it was coming along nicely.

Harry wrote again to Neville, telling him to bring his grandmum. Neville replied the next day, sounding surprised to be invited, which made Harry think he needed to try harder with his shy friend.

The day before Harry's seventeenth birthday party arrived. He got up early and asked McGonagall if she would take him to Hogsmeade to get favors. She seemed to have much less to do now that they had all been there for so long.

As they entered Honeyduke's, someone gasped and everyone turned to stare. Harry put his head down and looked around the shelves, determined to not be affected. He was uninspired though. Up at the counter he said to the clerk, "Anything new and interesting? I need party favors."

The lady in a pink striped apron said, "We have you on a chocolate frog card."

"Newer than that," Harry said, trying to sound easy-going. "A little tacky to hand those out at your own party."

"There isn't anything newer than that. And I'd hand them out at my party, especially if they had me on them. Oh, except these." She pulled out a box of red, shiny-wrapped sweets. "The wrapper is grain and sugar, so you can eat that. And inside each is different. All of them are fruit flavored and they turn your eyes the color of that fruit. Low-key, but tasteful."

She rang him up for those and as he reached for his package, she said, "Can you sign this for me?" as she held up his chocolate frog card. "Headmaster Dumbledore signed his," she pointed at the card pinned behind a sheet of glass on the wall behind her. Harry had never noticed it there and it looked like it had been there a while, given the amount of dust on the glass.

Harry shrugged and she happily slid the card over to him as well as handed him a never-out quill. When he gave it back, she stared at it a long moment before smiling at him and turning to slip it behind the glass next to Dumbledore's.

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Late that evening, Harry stepped into the Great Hall in search of a snack, and stopped just inside the doorway. A massive pile of presents had been stacked on a table near the fire. Since it was his birthday coming up, he feared they were all for him.

"A bit startling, isn't it?" Snape's voice came from behind him.

"Those aren't for me, are they?"

Snape ignored the question and stepped over to the table. "Professor Sprout has been intercepting the owls bringing these over the last week. The piles are sorted into people you might know . . ." He picked up a long narrow box. "Such as Victor Krum. And complete strangers." He gestured at the larger pile on the end.

Harry gaped at the varied and colorful packages. Some of the wrapping had wizard pictures on it with little moving scenes. "Well," Harry said quietly, "this makes up for a lot of birthdays with absolutely no presents." He reached out and picked up a strangely shaped box with maroon and gold wrapping. Curious, he shook it and then glanced at the tag. Alarmed, he set it back down gingerly at full arm's length.

"What is it?" Snape asked.

"Fred and George," Harry said and breathed out in relief when nothing untoward sprang out of it.

"I would imagine that nearly everything a seventeen-year-old wizard could want is somewhere in this assortment."

"Yep," Harry agreed, trying to keep the restlessness from his voice as he eyes roamed the pile. Some of the larger boxes from total strangers worried him. Fortunately, none of them appeared to have air holes. He stepped around to the other side, stopping beside Snape. "Do I have to write thank you notes for all of these?" Harry wondered aloud.

In his driest voice Snape replied, "Having never faced this dilemma, I do not know. Perhaps if Mr. Lockhart were here, he could tell you."

"Having spent detentions helping him answer his mail, I think I know what his answer would be." Harry sighed. The presents felt like a burden now, like a pale substitute for something more meaningful.

"There is perhaps one thing you still wish for that is not here," Snape stated as he picked up a silver-wrapped box, looked it over casually, and set it down again. Harry looked up at him in question as he went on, "A home besides this castle, perhaps?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, thinking that he would like to leave at some point.

Snape put his hands behind his back and appeared to bolster himself with a small frown. "It is not too late to be adopted, for example."

Harry laughed lightly. "Oh, you mean those twenty-seven offers of adoption McGonagall sorted through?"

"There were that many?" Snape asked sharply, surprised.

With a shrug Harry replied, "More than last time, according to her. She thinks it's because I'm less hazardous now. I'd like to think that's not true," he added, a little put upon. He looked over the piles again and sighed faintly.

"Don't want to take any of them up on their offer?" Snape asked.

Harry shot him a look of humored disbelief. "Not really."

Snape advanced a half step closer. "Any particular reason?"

"I don't know any of them . . ." Harry stopped. His brow furrowed as he tried to find words to explain. He couldn't deny that, in a fanciful moment or two, he had entertained the notion of being adopted by Lord Freelander, if only because it would mean hanging out on a nice estate instead of here at the castle for the rest of the summer. In reality the idea was awkward and strange, and he sensed that it wouldn't really address that deeply buried longing. With his hands Harry gestured that he couldn't explain.

"What if someone you knew very well wished to?" Snape asked evenly. "Someone who understands what has happened to you over the last six years."

Harry hesitated answering. Thinking about it meant opening up those buried memories again and since his life didn't depend on it, he really didn't want to; it threatened only to breathe new life into that tangle inside him. They both stood in silence for a long minute. Finally, Snape stepped closer still, making Harry look way up at him.

Quietly, Snape said, "Myself, for instance."

Harry blinked at him. "What?" he asked loudly. The question echoed in the vast hall.

"I think we know each other rather well," Snape said.

After a long stare of disbelief, Harry said, "You aren't joking–are you, sir?"

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"Have you ever known me to joke?"

"Not about something like this." Harry thought about it more. "Maybe not at all. No, that's not true," Harry corrected himself. He was scrambling for time to think. "I thought you hated me," he said.

Snape straightened at that. "Have I given you that impression at all in the last three months?"

"Uh, no. I guess not." He swallowed hard. "I don't . . . You . . ."

Snape backed up a step and put up his hand to halt Harry's speech. "You certainly don't have to answer now. And there is no time limit on your answer."

"I'm seventeen tomorrow; isn't that a little old to be adopted?" Harry pointed out.

"By wizard law, one can be adopted up to the age of financial independence, considered to be the average age to finish an apprenticeship, which is twenty."

"You've, uh, researched this," Harry observed. Snape returned a look that said, of course . Harry stared at his hard angular face again, trying to slow his fast circling thoughts. "You are seriously offering this?"

"I have been thinking it over since the end of last term."

Harry frowned and stated darkly, "This is Dumbledore's idea."

Snape held up one finger. "His idea, but not his instruction. He made himself very clear on that point. And I admit, the idea was . . . quite startling at first."

"But he talked you into it," Harry suggested quietly.

Snape suddenly stepped forward again. " You talked me into it, Mr. Potter," he said sharply, stunning Harry. "Every time I, rather surprisingly, looked forward to your company in the dungeon. Every time I showed you a spell and, no matter how complicated it was, you required only at most three or four tries to produce a reasonable replication of it, and I would think to myself how proud any wizard parent would be of you."

Harry dropped his eyes to the stone floor as the gap inside himself twisted around like a snake.

Snape went on, "I do not offer this simply out of gratitude, in case you think that true." Harry continued to stare at the floor and didn't respond. Softly, Snape said, "Consider it, Harry. You certainly know where to find me." With that, he turned and stepped away.

Harry felt a bit like he did staring down at Voldemort's body, as though someone had taken his heart out and haphazardly put it back in upside down. He stood in the vacant Great Hall for a long time, watching the flames make his shadow flicker across the uneven floor.

Chapter 13.

Acquiescing

Harry remained in his dormitory through breakfast. He had woken with an overwhelming desire to reorganize his possessions. There was a box in the far corner of the common room of things people wanted to give away. Harry dumped a few things in there and threw some others out. Around eleven, too hungry to avoid it, he went downstairs. The party was scheduled to start at three; that gave him plenty of time to see to any last-minute preparations.

When Harry returned from the kitchens to the hall with a plate of food, he found the teachers seated in their usual place. Unable to avoid sitting with them, he walked the length of the room. He set his plate down on the end, across from Dumbledore.

"Good morning, Harry," the old wizard greeted him warmly.

"Morning, sir."

"Sleep well?"

He shrugged. "Mostly." He had had very strange dreams about the Dursleys and his parents, though the details were escaping him now.

As Harry poured himself some pumpkin juice, Dumbledore said, "I hope you don't mind, Harry, if I give you my gift now. I'm not certain how long I can join the party for later." He pulled a long slender box out of his pocket.

Harry put down his fork and accepted it. "I don't mind, Professor."

"Harry, you of all people have earned the right to call me 'Albus."'

"Uh," he hesitated. "I'd have to work on that, sir."

McGonagall, beside Dumbledore, put her hand over her mouth to hide her grin.

"Only if you wish to, of course," Dumbledore said amiably.

Harry lifted the box top to reveal a dark peach feather quill with a gold tip. "Wow," he said, "thank you, sir." It was clearly a feather from Fawkes. The tip didn't have a well. On a hunch, Harry wrote on the inside of the box with it. The never-out charm wrote in continuously sparkling gold and peach ink. "Thanks. It's wonderful." He carefully boxed it back up and set it well out of range of his plate and juice.

Hagrid reached into one of his great pockets and brought out a smashed box and handed it over. "Can' compete with the las' one, but here yer are."

"Hagrid, you are talking to someone who used to get old socks for Christmas and no birthday presents at all, so I am pretty easy to please." As he said this he realized that maybe he shouldn't have with Dumbledore right across from him. He concentrated on the difficult unwrapping job, made worse by much knotted string, and tried not to flush. Inside were a pair of rabbit-lined gloves.

"Maybe a lil' more of a Christmas present, but they're the bes' I could think of. Made 'em myself."

"They're great Hagrid. They'll be useful for practice in the autumn."

McGonagall and Sprout had fetched their gifts from the pile across the room and presented them. Harry's plate grew cold while he opened them and they joined his small pile. McGonagall gave him colored sheets of reusable parchment and Sprout an ever blooming flower in a glass bulb to put in the window of the dormitory. The rose scent of it hovered around him, even after he had re-closed the box.

"Severus," McGonagall said airily, "didn't you get Harry anything?"

Harry paused in pulling his plate back, an unexpected defensiveness rising in him. "He gave me his present last night, Professor," Harry said, pleased with how even his voice sounded, given how much his heart broke from its usual rhythm.

Dumbledore looked closely at Harry before he leaned forward to look down the table at Snape. The headmaster then gave Harry a knowing look, and Harry twitched his lips in confirmation.

"Do we get to see it?" McGonagall asked eagerly. "In all the time I have known him, I don't think Severus has ever given anyone a present. No matter what the occasion."

"Uh," Harry started. He glanced at Dumbledore for support. In measured speech Harry finally explained, "I haven't accepted it yet . . . so there isn't anything to show."

McGonagall's brow furrowed deeply as she tried to figure that out. Harry expected her to ask more, but she didn't. He wondered if Dumbledore had nudged her under the table.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a hug when she arrived at the door. Ron, Ginny, and the twins trouped in behind her, each patting Harry on the arm as they passed, presents in hand.

"Thank you for coming," Harry said. "And I said, no gifts. You'll see why inside." He led them into the Great Hall. Hermione jumped up and greeted Ron and the Weasley parents warmly. Harry offered butterbeers all around. "We are still waiting on Neville and his grandmother."

"Small party," Neville commented from the doorway.

"Hi, Neville." Harry stepped over to him and took the large wrapped box from him with a shake of his head. "I was ordered to keep it small after the last one."

"Oh, yeah. I can imagine."

Fred held up his bottle of butterbeer. "Congratulations Harry. Never would've believed you'd make it to seventeen."

"Here here," Mr. Weasley, echoed. "To Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes as they all raised their bottles. "We had enough toasts at the last party," Harry insisted as he straddled the bench. The others joined him around the Gryffindor table and soon, loud conversation filled their side of the hall.

"How are you making out here?" Hermione asked.

"Bugger to be stuck here," Ron commented. "When is the Ministry going to catch those blokes so you can come visit us?"

"It could be more interesting, but it isn't so bad. It isn't the Dursley's," Harry stated emphatically as he cut himself another piece of cake.

"There is that," Ron agreed. He glanced over all of the gifts again. "I can't believe all of these presents," he said for the third time. "Wonder what is in 'em all?"

Chapter 13

Harry put his plate and fresh piece of cake down. "Let's find out!" he said and jumped up from his seat.

He and Ron tore into the boxes, revealing a mostly ordinary assortment of wizard gear along with a few Mugglish crossover things like t-shirts with magical pictures on them. Every time Ron expressed a liking for something, Harry gave it to him. Ginny, catching on to this, helped out as well. By the time they were finished, the table was a disaster of torn wrapping, open boxes and teetering gifts.

"So you ended up with Krum's autograph anyway," he said, looking over a heavily marked Quidditch bat.

"So, he and I are even, then," Harry said. He stood up to get another butterbeer. Ron gathered up his goodies and brought them over to mess with them. Hermione was discussing Muggle relations with Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley and Neville's grandmother seemed to be plotting Neville's future together. Harry looked at his friend in concern, but Neville seemed more interested in the flowerless chocolate plant Harry had received.

"You are definitely the right lady for the job," Arthur was saying to Hermione.

"I think I need Muggle expertise though to have a private practice, like law or policy." Her eyes glowed eagerly as she spoke. "I'm going to apply to some Muggle programs this autumn. I have piles of brochures but I don't have them with me. I'd be interested in your opinion."

"Have you looked at Waxman's Medicinals?" Molly was saying. "They have a farm and greenhouse not far from the Burrow. One of several, I hear."

Neville looked up in interest at that. "Do you think they have internships?" he asked.

"Certainly worth checking," Molly said.

Harry felt cold as he listened. Other than his sometime notion of becoming an Auror, he didn't have any real plans. Thinking he would find some commiseration, he said to his best friend, "What are your plans, Ron?"

Ron began putting away the advanced wizard chess pieces that were refusing to battle outside of a real game. He said, "Bill says he'd have me on as an assistant at Gringotts to see how I liked it. He said just getting around that place is an adventure." He shrugged. "I think I'll give it a try. Sounds interesting at least. Even get to train security Trolls every now and then," he added with an odd smile.

Harry pushed his third piece of cake around with his fork and frowned to himself. He couldn't imagine what else he would do other than become an Auror, and whatever

it was, it sounded like he was going to be doing it alone. He sighed and finished off his luke-warm butterbeer.

"I'm going to take my parents on a quick tour," Hermione said brightly many hours later as the gathering broke up and moved to the doors. "I'll come back down and say goodbye, Harry," she added as they disappeared around the corner.

"We had a nice time, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Hopefully you can come and stay with us soon."

"Happy birthday, Harry," Fred or George said as they departed. The other Weasleys echoed this as they shuffled out into the Entrance Hall. Harry hung back and, as their footsteps faded, returned to the table. The large front door to the castle boomed closed. Harry stood before the mound of open boxes and random gifts.

Halfheartedly, he pulled a larger box free and began digging around for items to load into it for easier transport to the dormitory. The sudden silence of the room pressed in on him and, when the next item, the official Bulgarian Quidditch bat signed by the team, wouldn't fit in the box, he set it down on the floor beside it and dropped down on the bench, facing the fire. The crackle of the flames was the only sound in the large dark space around him.

Harry wondered at the oppressive feeling in his chest. Discussions about the future had left him feeling uneasy rather than excited as it clearly had his friends. He deeply wished he felt the way they did but didn't know how to find his way there.

A shadow shifting in from the left brought Harry's attention up from the dwindling fire. "Sir," Harry said when he recognized the tall figure.

Professor Snape lifted a stray lid on the pile. "I do believe that you have not even managed to open them all," he stated dryly.

"No," Harry agreed then wondered if Snape were hinting at something.

"You gave most of them away," his teacher went on, as he held an empty velvet-lined box from Flourish & Blotts.

"Tried to," Harry said. "Hermione took that one."

"Ah," Snape said.

"Did you want it?" Harry asked, a little surprised.

"Hm." Snape put the box back down.

Grinning faintly now, Harry turned back to the pile. "There was another box like it with the same store wrapping." He dug around to the bottom and pulled out a

weighty, silver parchment wrapped box. With well-practiced movements, he pulled away the wrapping and opened the lid to reveal another dark gray desk journal with gold edging to the pages. After flipping it over, Harry observed, "You are in luck, this one isn't embossed. Hermione didn't seem to care that the other one was." He held it out to Snape.

"You are certain you do not want it?" Snape asked as he accepted it and flipped through the pages once.

"Carry that in my backpack all next year? I don't think so."

Snape closed the journal and set it on its edge. "Thank you," he stated levelly.

Hermione's voice issued from the Entrance Hall, still giving statistics and history at a rapid clip. Her parents followed her in and back over to the party table. "Well, Harry, we should go."

Harry stood up and gave her a casual hug. "Thanks for coming. Thanks for the books."

She started to turn away. "Hopefully I'll get to see you at Ron's before school starts." As she stepped between her parents to leave, she hesitated and looked back at her father when he did not immediately move to follow.

Mr. Granger looked from Snape to Harry. "You all right left alone here, son?"

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. His brow furrowed as he tried to figure the man out.

Hermione stepped back over. "This is one of our teachers, Dad, Professor Snape."

"Oh," he said and looked Snape up and down another time.

Understanding now, Harry glanced up at his teacher. In his long cloak with high collar and the dim firelight coming from floor level, he did look rather menacing, and, as usual, he wasn't trying not to. Harry felt that surge of defensiveness again, stronger this time.

Hermione's mother patted Mr. Granger's sleeve. "Come on, Hon. I'm sure they wouldn't hire anyone, uh, dangerous."

"Hire anyone who would try to kill Harry?" Harry suggested with such sarcasm that Hermione had to cover her giggle. "Can't imagine that," he finished a little bitterly.

"Poor, Harry," Hermione said in overdone sympathy and giggled again.

"Why are you laughing, dear?" Hermione's mum asked, alarmed and chastising.

"Ehem, uh, nearly every Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've had has tried to kill Harry," she explained making her mother look more alarmed.

"You know," Harry said, turning his head to look back at Snape, "as much as you didn't like Dumbledore hiring Lupin, at least he didn't have it in for me."

Snape crossed his arms. "You don't recall running across the lawn away from a werewolf, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, he didn't spend months plotting my death. That was an accident."

"Hm," Snape muttered noncommittally.

"Harry," Hermione said, "if you define it as danger to Harry–you have to count five of the Defense teachers."

"So, Professor, do I have to start worrying about you as well now?" Harry turned his head over his shoulder to ask Snape.

"You're teaching Defense next year?" Hermione asked sharply, sounding very concerned. "Who's teaching Potions?"

Snape replied, "A woman by the name of Gertrude Greer has accepted the position. I know her only by reputation. She is expected to arrive tomorrow, in fact." He gave Hermione a challenging look.

"I was looking forward to seventh-year Potions," she explained with a hint of a whinge.

"I don't mean to disappoint, Ms. Granger," Snape said airily.

"That's all right, sir. You should teach what you want to teach. It's just that we need Potions more than Defense now . . ." she trailed off. After a pause where her mother pointed out the time, she added, "We really should go." This time her parents followed her out of the hall. At the door she paused. "Bye, Harry," she said as her mother put a hand on her shoulder to keep her moving. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Harry replied.

The sinking feeling started again as the outer door closed, reverberating through the vastness. Harry distracted himself by picking up another larger box from the floor and putting gifts into it, tossing the smaller empty boxes into the hearth.

"Do you want help?" Snape asked.

Harry hesitated before replying, "Sure."

Chapter 13

They managed to pack everything into three large boxes. Snape handed Harry each of the last few unopened packages revealed at the bottom. Harry sighed and ripped them open, adding a ninth hat, a third broom compass, and a very soft scarf in Gryffindor colors to the last box.

"And this one," Snape stated softly as he pulled a small, slender box from his pocket and held it out. "In case you cannot accept the other one."

Harry stared, unmoving, at the box in Snape's hand. He had been merely sinking before–now he was plummeting.

"Harry?" Snape prompted him.

"You don't have to do that," Harry said, voice a little thick. Walls that he hadn't known were surrounding him seemed to have crashed in on him. "You don't have to do any of this." The flare of the hearth faded out at that moment, leaving the boxes and wrapping as glowing filigrees of ash.

Still holding the box out, Snape thought a long moment. "I find myself wanting to," he said quietly; too quietly to really know he he was also stunned.

Harry took the box and held it, unable to open it. He was certain he would lose his tenuous control if he did. The scene of minutes ago, of Hermione leaving with her parents, replayed again in his mind. He had never lost that ache of jealousy, of hopeless bitter longing, could conjure it now if he thought it useful.

"Are you sure about the other one?" Harry heard himself ask.

"I never do anything without due deliberation."

Harry still held the box lightly in his fingers. It was a little heavier than he thought it would be from the size. "No, I don't suppose you do," he commented, stalling for time to try to pin down the emotion churning in him. It felt like fear, but that didn't make any sense.

His internal struggle must have reflected in his face because Snape said, "I don't mean to distress you. My offer has apparently rendered you too vulnerable."

A measure of control returned to him as Snape said that, making Harry wonder if half the fear hadn't been of Snape recognizing what was happening to him. "You already did that," he commented and finally raised his eyes. "That is how I finally defeated Voldemort, you know." At Snape's intense expression, Harry went on. "You thought you'd made a mistake, breaking my concentration. I thought you had too," Harry explained, his heart racing as though it were happening all over again. "But he'd Occluded his mind too much–I couldn't get at him anymore."

"The Death Eaters were regrouping and I looked around and saw you. All of these confused emotions came out and Voldemort latched onto the hate. He came straight at me with it, so certain he knew you, so certain he had me." Harry paused and shook his head. He was breathing faster now as well. "I didn't have any choice–I had to pull out everything I'd felt at the abandoned manor. I had to relive all the memories I'd been avoiding because I couldn't stand to realize I'd been needing something that badly that I couldn't have." Harry's voice cracked at that. He paused to catch his breath and calm the burn in his eyes.

Snape gave him a moment and then observed quietly, "That most certainly would have done in the Dark Lord."

"He'd staked everything on that surge–hadn't left himself any way to back out of it. The memories did startle him rather a lot," he commented, attempting a lighter tone.

"I had been rather curious, but you'd avoided filling in the details to the Ministry, and I had no right to pry if did you not wish to discuss it."

"You deserved to know," Harry said tiredly. He didn't know where to go from here; numbness had seeped in where everything had churned injuriously before.

"Harry . . . you can have it, you know."

Harry closed his eyes and floated a moment. When he opened them again he could feel that his expression was unduly pained so he closed them again and held them that way. Snape stepped close, his robes swishing over the sound of the fire. After a long pause he put his left hand lightly on Harry's shoulder blade. Clenching his eyes tighter, Harry leaned forward and rested his forehead on Snape's chest. They stood that way for a long time, until Harry's breathing slowed to normal.

"What do you think?" Snape asked as he stroked Harry's back once, very lightly. After a long pause, Harry nodded. Snape caught his breath. "Are you saying 'yes?"' he asked, a little startled. Harry nodded faintly again.

Taking a half-step back and drawing himself up, Snape said in an unsettled voice, "Happy birthday, Mr. Potter."

The next morning, the teachers sat in a staff meeting. "I must say," Dumbledore began, "that having more time over the summer with this many of you here does

make preparations for the coming year go easier. Although I am certain you would like to go home at some point."

"Harry did apologize for keeping us here," McGonagall said. She sat back in her chair with her datebook open in front of her.

"I do hope you dissuaded him from his concern?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh yes. I pointed out how much busier we would be if he hadn't disposed of Voldemort. He seemed to accept that."

"Thank you, Minerva. He doesn't seem willing to voice his concerns to me."

A silence fell. Snape sat hunched, flipping his quill over in his fingers repeatedly.

"Yer antzier than a sack of fire beetles, Severus," Hagrid said from the end of the table.

Snape started at his comment, dropped the quill on the table, and sat back with crossed arms. Dumbledore looked him over once. "Everything all right, Severus?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't it be?" he retorted stiffly.

"You are behaving oddly," Dumbledore said gently.

"More so than usual," McGonagall added teasingly.

Snape glared at both of them but refrained from comment. Dumbledore shifted smoothly onto school business.

At the end of the short meeting, all but Snape stood up. "There is something I should discuss with you," Snape said to Dumbledore. The rest of the teachers paused and looked at him before continuing out of the room.

"Everything is not all right, I take it?" Dumbledore asked when the door closed.

Snape again flipped his black quill feather across his fingers nervously. "He said 'yes'."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Already?" At Snape's nod he added, "I would not have imagined that." The headmaster stepped to the window and looked out for a long minute. "It concerns me."

Snape rubbed his chin in thought. "I think it need not. Bringing the Dark Lord down forced him to admit things to himself that he would not have otherwise. I believe he had less to think over as a result."

"Well then, congratulations are in order," Dumbledore said. At Snape's dubious expression, he shook his head. "You do seem unsettled . . ."

Snape collected up his parchments, rolling them tightly. "I may have thought the likelihood to be lower than it actually was when I was deliberating."

Chapter 14.

Forms and Filings

Harry walked through the day in a daze. He didn't have any place he had to be or anything he had to do, which was unfortunate since he really could have used something to occupy his mind. His mind vacillated between stunned and hopeful. He was in a hopeful mood when he encountered Snape in the corridor that afternoon. His eyes must have given him away because Snape straightened sharply when their gazes met.

Recovering quickly, Snape said, "There are some arrangements to be made. If you are going to be available on Wednesday–"

"You think I have someplace else to go?" Harry asked.

"There is that. I have asked a solicitor to come . . . are you ready for this, Harry?" Snape asked.

Harry swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. Just a little fast."

"Do you want more time?" he asked levelly.

Harry thought a long moment. "I don't think that will make any difference." He looked down at his hands folded around themselves. "I'm still getting used to the idea."

"You may certainly have more time to do so, should you wish."

With a shake of his head, Harry said, "I don't need it. I'm not going to change my mind." Indeed, he'd latched onto the notion more fiercely than he had believed possible, imagining giving it up gave him a sick feeling.

Chapter 14

"Wednesday then. In the morning after breakfast, in my new office."

"All right."

They both stood still without any inclination to move on. "Would you care to help me test the efficacy of some old potions from the stocks?"

Brightening instantly, Harry said, "Yes."

Later in the afternoon, Harry sat alone in the Great Hall reading a Muggle paperback book Hermione had sent by owl that morning. It wasn't holding his attention as well as he had hoped; so, when the front doors of the castle opened and closed and hesitant footsteps sounded across the Entrance Hall, Harry looked up at the doors with some interest. A woman with short brown hair and a maroon robe came in the first set of doors, stopped, and glanced at the ceiling in surprise.

Eager for a distraction, Harry put down his book and stepped over to her. "Are you Gertrude Greer?"

She pawed through a large purse slung over her shoulder. "Are you the welcoming committee?" she asked without looking up. She apparently found the parchment she wanted; it had the school seal on it. She read it over quickly, her lips moving faintly.

"I guess I am now," Harry responded. "Do you want me to show you to your office and classroom?"

She put the parchment back away, stuffing it in at random. She turned back to the Entrance Hall without answering his question. "I came on an earlier train in case they didn't have room for my trunks on the fuller afternoon run," she explained in a tone that assumed he would care. In the outer hall stood five very large vertical trunks looking like menacing wardrobes.

"Maybe I should let you move those," Harry said, imagining them filled with dangerous ingredients and delicate instruments.

She muttered a hover charm of sorts and the trunks lifted in unison like a platoon and followed them across the hall.

Down in the dungeon, Harry was glad Snape wasn't around. A few cauldrons still bubbled on the benches against the wall. Greer slipped her gloves off and circled the room, glancing into the cauldrons as she passed.

"So what do you teach?" she asked as she opened a trunk and pulled out her desk set.

Grinning, Harry said. "I don't. I'm a student."

Still self-absorbed, Greer opened the drawers of the desk and began arranging her things in them. The scene bothered Harry somehow and he tried to shake it as silly.

"I read the school rules; students aren't allowed to stay for the summer," she stated in a nearly Umbridge-like voice.

"I think the headmaster made an exception," Harry said easily. He turned from her and walked over to the cauldrons. The Draught of Isis was turning a nice fuchsia color which meant it would be finished before tomorrow. He stirred it a few times, bringing a cloud of debris from the bottom.

"I wouldn't touch those if I were you," she snapped at him.

"Your dungeon, ma'am," Harry said, again feeling uneasy about that notion, as though he had something unfinished here that now never could be.

She shut one of the drawers loudly and opened the cabinet behind her, usually locked because it held restricted ingredients. Snape must have left it unspelled for her. "If the headmaster lets the rules be broken so easily, that doesn't bode well for my getting along with him, I must say." She seemed to be thinking aloud to herself, but it still made Harry narrow his eyes at her.

"Then I am glad you are not the headmistress, ma'am," Harry said. "I don't fancy being hunted down and killed in revenge by Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew. Although I admit, being here restricts me from doing the same."

She froze, her hands wrapped around a stack of files. "You're Harry Potter," she said with a momentary grimace. Her eyes finally sought out his scar. She shook her head and put the files in a box on the floor. "I suppose if exceptions are going to be made. . . . "

Harry stepped toward the door. "They do tend to happen for me," Harry admitted, thinking ahead to the next one he could annoy her with. "I'll leave you to your unpacking, Professor," he said.

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At dinner, Greer stepped in just as everyone took a seat. Harry sat down across from Snape, realizing too late that there was an empty spot to his left, across from Dumbledore. With so few people, it was difficult to box himself in. Greer stepped over to that seat and shook Dumbledore's hand before sitting.

"Gertie, if you had owled that you were early I could have made certain you were met at the station."

"It is no matter, I am accustomed to handling my own trunks."

Dumbledore went through introductions. Greer turned from the last one, Hagrid beside her, and rubbed her hands together as though overexcited by the food on the table. At least she didn't wear flowered things the way Umbridge did, Harry thought. "Mr. Potter was kind enough to show me to my office when I arrived," she said in a saccharine sweet voice.

Harry gave Snape a flash of dismay. "The Isis is almost finished, by the way," Harry remembered to mention to him.

"It is about time," Snape replied, as though the potion had it in for him. Greer looked between them calculatingly. "Mr. Potter has been assisting me in preparing the long-brew potions I took the liberty of starting before your arrival. During the school year, it is much more difficult to brew them successfully."

"You should use the second floor girls toilet, it's worked well for us in the past," Harry commented in a tantalizingly innocent tone. No other conversations seemed to have started as everyone served themselves.

"And what may I ask were you brewing?" Snape said.

Harry drank his pumpkin juice to stall. "Ask me in a year when Hermione has passed her exams."

"Something dangerous?" Snape went on.

"Was for her." Harry poured himself more juice. "She accidentally turned herself into a cat." The memory was far enough removed that he found it quite funny now. When he stopped laughing, he pulled the plate of chicken legs closer and selected two.

"What is wrong with this toilet?" Greer asked, slightly concerned.

Harry sensed that she really disliked anything that might not be orderly and predictable. "Moaning Myrtle is the reason no one goes into it," Harry commented. "She's a ghost. . . . You didn't go to school here?"

"I attended Durmstrang," she said in a tone that closed that topic.

More annoyed with the woman, Harry said, "Myrtle is harmless. Other things in there aren't so." He caught Dumbledore's gaze, which held equal parts disapproval and mischief.

"Why are such things left for the students to stumble upon?" Greer asked bluntly.

"Oh, well, this one was left by one of the school's founders, so it is a little hard to remove." In as ordinary of a conversational tone as Harry could muster, he added, "Although the Basilisk is dead now; someone put a sword through its head."

Snape broke in. "It does not pose a threat to you, Ms. Greer. Or to anyone who does not speak parseltongue." He gave Harry a dark look.

"Well, I certainly do not!" she said, insulted.

Harry jumped a bit at her reaction. As he settled down and adjusted his napkin, he muttered quietly, "Nothing wrong with that."

"Nothing wrong with it, Mr. Potter?" she asked him in sharp sarcasm as though he had done something wrong during class and she desired to make an example of him. "Only the darkest wizards are Parselmouths, Potter, or didn't you learn that in this school of bright windows? Perhaps you still have a few things to learn, eh?"

Harry stared at her. In a soft voice, he said, "I have lots. I have to take N.E.W.T.s." This comment brought forth wide grins from McGonagall and Sprout. Harry took a bite of mashed potatoes, which were staying warm on his plate somehow. He wondered who was doing that for him. "And I have heard that about Parselmouths, ma'am. In school. Second year."

Sprout and Hagrid looked at the ceiling at that moment. Harry mulled over whether to pop it on her now or save it for later.

"Well, that is good to hear," she calmed down considerably as she said this.

"All dark wizards, ma'am?" Harry asked when the table remained silent as though to give him an opening. "Or, all Parselmouths are dark wizards? I just want to make sure I have this straight."

Flustered by his sudden stupidity, she frowned and said, "I'm certain there have been dark wizards who weren't, many in fact. But there has never been a Parselmouth who wasn't." She waved her fork at him as she spoke with strong emotion.

"Do they have to register somewhere? You know, like Animagi?" Harry asked her with an honestly curious tone. He glanced again at Dumbledore, who continued to

eat calmly. Harry kept expecting a small shake of the head from him, telling him to stop it.

"They should have to," she blurted out. "Fortunately for all of us, they are incredibly rare."

"Ah," Harry said as though this cleared the topic up completely and it could be dropped.

As Harry ate then in silence, McGonagall caught his eye and gave him a disappointed look. Harry shrugged lightly at her. He had to take an entire year of Potions with this woman, after all.

"I hope you settle in easily here, Gertie," Dumbledore said as he waved his plate away. "If there is any way any of us can assist you, please don't hesitate to ask."

"I'm certain I'll be fine," she said primly, now sounding like Aunt Petunia.

As Harry finished his lunch, all he could think of was he hoped Hermione didn't take a liking to this woman; otherwise he might not make it through his three last terms of Advanced Potions.

"I am curious, Mr. Potter," said Greer as she encountered Harry in the corridor. Harry had unfortunately chosen that moment to check inside the suit of armor that always seemed to be humming to itself. "Didn't they give you any kind of a job to do around the castle for the summer? I have only been here two days but you seem to have no profitable activity to occupy yourself."

"Um," Harry began. "I'm only guessing, Professor, but I think the other teachers feel that offing Voldemort was worth a summer of unprofitable activity."

"Hmf," she breathed and strode away.

Harry wondered if he went down to breakfast now he could avoid her for the rest of the day or at least for the morning. Willing to eat alone in exchange for not seeing her for a while, he headed straight down to the Great Hall.

As it turned out, he didn't need to eat alone. Snape paced in vague agitation along in front of the head table. Concerned, Harry asked, "Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes," Snape muttered. As Harry took a seat at the end of the Hufflepuff table, his teacher ceased pacing and sat across from him. "You are up early," Snape observed.

"I went to sleep early. I think I'm bored. That and I was hoping to avoid eating with the Dragon Lady."

Breakfast plates appeared on the table. "You are not enamored of Ms. Greer?" At Harry's doubtful face, he said, "Perhaps you would be willing to leave with me after the hearing."

"You think Dumbledore would let me go?"

"I expect, Potter, that no one, Death Eater or otherwise, would expect to find you at my house."

Harry grinned at him, "Probably true."

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter, our house," Snape corrected.

Harry's eyes glazed as though he stared at something well beyond the side wall of the hall. A home to go to that wasn't the Dursley's. That thought was going to take some getting used to.

"Potter?" Snape prompted.

Harry looked at his plate as he pushed his scramble around with his fork. "I was just thinking how nice it is to not be at the Dursleys. I like regular meals and not being beaten up by my cousin." He fell silent, flushed in embarrassment.

"That bad?" Snape asked with a touch of his usual snideness.

"I think if you'd asked me to come home with you for a previous summer–I would have, just to avoid them."

"Quite bad, then," Snape stated dryly, making Harry smile.

After breakfast, Snape left to meet the solicitor in Hogsmeade. Harry wandered slowly up to the Defense office. His hands were cold and his heart raced. He stared with much more attention at the portraits on the wall as he went, as a way of stalling. They all paid him more attention in return.

"Prithee!" a knight in one of them said. "Have you seen my horse?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sorry." As he turned the corner, the knight was yelling, "She's a bay. Sixteen hands. Let me know if you see her!"

At the door to Snape's office, Harry stopped for nearly a minute before managing to reach for the door handle. The office was bright inside at this time of day. Books lined the walls now, half of them potion-related. He stared at the pensieve up on

the shelf and tried to assemble in his mind how he had arrived at this strange point. Voldemort seemed in the distant past compared to the seesawing of his emotions right at this moment.

Sooner than Harry had hoped, the door opened. As he turned to it, Snape stepped in. He looked pleased to find Harry there, drawing a sheepish smile from Harry.

The solicitor was a woman with short, stiff, auburn hair. "Mr. Potter," she said sincerely, "very pleased to make your acquaintance." Her auburn eyebrows bounced as she talked. "May I take this chair?"

"Of course, Ms. Kranden," Snape replied and sat behind his desk.

She pulled the chair up close to the front of the desk, opened her briefcase and pulled forth a thick assortment of parchments. "Now, since you are of age but under twenty, we can perform a custodial adoption or a successionary one." She waited for Snape to reply.

"Successionary adoptions are still allowed?" Snape asked.

"Anything you can get the council to approve is allowed." She finally found the sheet she was looking for. "One was authorized just two hundred years ago or so. The Nigellus family, I believe."

Snape leaned back in his chair, "Custodial, I should think."

Kranden pulled out a quill and dipped in the inkwell on the desk before filling in the date at the top of a long parchment form. "Given your age, Mr. Potter, and that no one would question your ability to attend to your own interests, you can in theory break from Mr. Snape at any time, just as one could from natural parents once one is of age."

"I understand that," Harry said.

She looked between the two of them. "Purely symbolic adoption, really," she commented as she filled in the names in the blanks buried in the middle of the first paragraph of highly stylized script. Her writing stood out as cold and factual.

Snape stared at his fingernails and stated quietly, "Symbols are important."

"Of course. I don't disagree," she replied automatically. She shifted the parchment up and scanned the intervening text quickly. "Now, Mr. Potter, you have no living immediate family?"

"No."

"Relatives? Godparents? Anyone who might contest this?"

"I have an aunt and uncle–"

"Ever co-habitate with them?" she interrupted.

"My whole life."

She looked up and considered him. She pulled out another form and made a note on it. "We'll have to get signatures from them. They never officially adopted you, I assume?"

"Not that I know of. I doubt it."

She frowned at the parchment in her hand. "The council is not going to like that. Can you bring them in to witness that they are willing to release you? It'd be very time consuming to go through a separation before the adoption. You might be twenty by then."

"They hate wizards," Harry said. "You'd have to trick them into it somehow. They hate me , for that matter."

Kranden tapped her finger on the desk as she thought. She frowned as she reread the second parchment again.

"They starved me. They made me live in a broom cupboard. They put bars on my windows to keep me from leaving for school," Harry explained, exasperated by the thought that Vernon and Petunia could still interfere with his life.

"We'll make a case for abused and neglected then," she said softly as she wrote out a note on the margin of the parchment.

Harry kept his attention firmly on her writing; he couldn't bring himself to meet Snape's gaze. "They'd sign anything you gave them if it meant they never had to see me again," he added.

"We'll start with that route then. If we can convince them that your relatives are wizard-averse Muggles, they may forgo the witness requirement. If not, we'll take the neglect route."

She made her way down the parchment, filling in each of the blank lines with her small, precise writing. She used a complicated spell to duplicate the parchment into five copies. Finally, she said, "Sign here," to Snape as she turned the identical stack around to him.

Snape pulled out his usual raven quill and signed the top copy. Harry leaned back in his chair as he watched, feeling dizzy. As Snape flipped up the bottom edge of the

parchment, he gave Harry a glance, then lowered his brow at Harry's expression of distress. Harry forced himself to breath deeply and felt a little better. After a long pause of consideration, Snape returned to his task.

The completed stack was turned toward the solicitor and she carefully straightened them before turning to Harry. "Mr. Potter, you do understand the ramifications of what you are entering into?"

"Yes ma'am."

"All right, then." She dipped her own quill again and signed each of the copies with practiced speed. She set the quill aside and straightened the sheets yet again. "We need two more witnesses to Mr. Potter's willingness. The witnesses need to have long-term familiarity with him."

Snape stood and gestured for them to move to the door. "The headmaster will most certainly be willing."

They stood in the headmaster's office as Dumbledore glanced over the long parchment with his head angled back to see through his half-moon spectacles. With deliberate motions, he arranged the stack before him and turned to Harry, who stood back from the group. "Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Sir?"

"All right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and then forced his demeanor to brighten against an unusual panic that tried to grip him. It receded as he looked into the old wizard's gentle, knowing eyes. "Yes, sir," he answered with confidence.

Dumbledore pulled out a peach-colored quill and signed each of the copies before handing them back to Kranden.

The three of them departed and Harry glanced up as he closed the office door behind them. Dumbledore's expression as he sat with his hands folded before him on the desk was more at peace than Harry had ever seen. He gave Harry a satisfied smile and a nod.

As he followed the others down the escalator, Harry felt that he might have done this just for Dumbledore, had he known what it meant to him. At the bottom, as the gargoyles leapt back into place, Snape stood in thought. "Professor McGonagall?" he suggested.

Harry shrugged and said to the solicitor, "If she thinks we are playing a practical joke on her, will that reflect badly on us?"

Kranden cleared her throat. "I'm not the council; I'm just here to help with the paperwork."

"McGonagall then," Harry said. As they walked toward the staircases, Harry started to grin as he imagined his Head of House's reaction.

At her door, Snape knocked and stepped in. "I am in need of a favor, Minerva, if you have a few minutes."

"Certainly, come in." She marked her page in the large book in front of her and closed it. Harry stepped in behind Snape with the solicitor trailing behind him.

"Do you want to explain first?" Harry asked as he stopped just inside the office.

"No, Mr. Potter, it is all right." He took the parchments from Kranden and held them out to McGonagall. "I need you to witness these, if you would, after the solicitor asks you a few questions."

McGonagall accepted the parchments and adjusted her glasses. Her face fell into shock as she read the first paragraph. She looked at the solicitor, then Snape, then finally at Harry, who sighed at her expression of stunned dismay. She dropped the stack down on her desk and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Just a moment. I want to talk to one of you," she pointed between Snape and Harry, "alone first."

Snape and Harry considered each other, unable to determine who should stay.

"Potter, you stay," she said impatiently. The others stepped out and closed the door quietly. She started to speak and then stopped. After another glance at the parchments she shook her head. "This had to have been Albus' idea," she said in dismay.

Harry stiffened at that. A little coldly, he said, "He suggested it originally, but that's all."

She frowned and rubbed her eyes tiredly after setting her glasses aside.

"All you have to do, Professor, is witness that you believe I am doing this willingly," Harry explained in a hard tone.

"Well, Harry, I can tell you are serious about this," she said. " Are you doing this willingly, or to please Dumbledore?"

"I honestly didn't realize how much this pleased him until five minutes ago."

She considered that and sighed as she again perused the top parchment. "Some things cannot be recaptured, Harry," she said wistfully.

Angry and hurt now, Harry replied stiffly, "And some things can."

"Harry," she said gently. "I will sign these for you–I don't mean to imply that I won't. And I do wish for you to find what you clearly feel you are missing." She clasped her hands together, leaned back in her chair, and considered him with a sad expression. Quietly, she said, "The night Albus dropped you at your aunt and uncle's house, I begged him not to leave you there. I am certain he did not realize how poorly treated you would be. But he insisted you grow up in isolation from your fame. Turns out he had other reasons as well that he didn't share at that time."

"I know them now."

"Any of us would have taken you then. Any of us would take you now."

Harry fidgeted a little. "I don't think you understand me as well as Severus does."

She sat forward and put on her glasses. In a lilting tone, she said, "Perhaps not. But had I known you were in the market for a replacement parent, I would have liked a chance to apply." When Harry smiled at that, she went on, "When I ask you if there is anything you need, I do mean it." She considered him. "Clearly what you need is permanence. Call them back in." She waved at the door.

"Are you certain bringing Mr. Snape along is a good idea?" Kranden asked Harry as they waited on the castle lawn. Snape was stepping down from the main doors, still out of range of hearing. "If they dislike wizards . . ."

"Are you kidding? All the better. They'll think I'm going to be miserable. They'll sign in an instant."

Snape wore a Muggle outfit of starched white shirt and dark trousers. The cuffs and collar of the shirt were far too wide for current fashion. Kranden had done a better job, wearing a straightforward, conservative wool jacket and skirt. "Shall we?" she said as they congregated.

They Floo into the nearest wizard enclave and then walked to Little Whinging. The sun was shining brightly and the wind was gentle. "You owled them, correct?" Kranden asked as they approached the drive.

"I used Muggle post, but yes. I didn't tell them the time; otherwise, they wouldn't be there when we arrived," Harry said.

The neighbor lady looked up from her weeding at Snape and gaped. Snape gave her a narrow-eyed look in return. Harry waved at her and said hello in his most friendly manner. Her pinched face looked more confused by this, mincing over to inspect her hedges in order to follow their progress up the pavement.

The door opened as they approached the step. Vernon held open the door and scowled, "Figures the neighbors'd see you. I don't know what you want, but you better make it quick."

"You didn't inform him of the purpose of this visit?" Kranden asked Harry.

"All I told him is that he'd be rid of me for good after this," he explained, as they followed Vernon Dursley into the house.

Petunia stood in the kitchen doorway with her arms folded and a sour look on her face that faded to fearful as Snape stepped past her with a dark glance. In the living room, Vernon took a seat in his regular chair without inviting others to sit. Snape followed into the center of the room and turned in a circle to look over the place; Vernon gave him a distrustful huff through his mustache.

"Thought I heard somethin'." Dudley, now as tall as Vernon, sauntered into the room. He walked menacingly over to Harry, who stood his ground and stared up at his older cousin. "Didn' think you were ever comin' back, Pottie."

"Just couldn't stay away," Harry retorted dryly.

Dudley gave Kranden a lewd appraisal then turned to Snape and froze. Snape, even in his approximation of Muggle clothes, looked like a wizard and, with his current fierce expression, not a very nice one. His black eyes stood out starkly in the frilly decor of Petunia Dursley's home. Dudley took an unconscious step backward and swallowed hard. "Who's that?" he asked the room uncertainly.

"My teacher," Harry replied casually.

"You let a wizard in here?" Dudley demanded of his father.

"I told them to make it quick," Vernon insisted.

"What do you want?" Petunia asked from the entry to the hallway. Her eyes darted fitfully between each of the guests in her house. Her prim voice contained barely controlled fury.

Kranden set her briefcase on the low table and pulled out a parchment. "We are here to ask you to sign a document stating that you are willing to relinquish your status as Harry's guardians." She held the parchment out toward Vernon.

Vernon accepted it with a snort through his mustache. He didn't look at it, just stared at Kranden. "Why?"

"It is mostly a formality, but it simplifies our other filings." She sized up Vernon before explaining, "Professor Snape, here. . ." She gestured at the man behind her. ". . . is making an application to the Wizard Family Council to adopt Mr. Potter."

"What?" Dudley sputtered, attracting Snape's quiet, intent gaze. He shut up immediately and backed up another step. "He can't spell me without taking out his wand, can he?"

"Yes, he can," Harry supplied confidently.

Dudley, sweating now under the piercing black look, backed up beside Petunia, stanced to make a run for it. "You're not going to let Harry do this?" he asked his mum.

Petunia's eyes narrowed. "We certainly don't want him back, ever."

Kranden stepped up to her instead with another copy of the parchment, pulling a Muggle pen from her inside breast pocket. "Sign here, then," she invited.

Petunia held the parchment and pen, one in each hand and considered Snape. "What do you know about this man?" she asked.

"I have a copy of his vitae," the solicitor offered, gesturing at her case. "He has taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the last–"

"Don't mention that wretched place to my wife," Vernon interrupted angrily. He hefted himself out of his chair and stepped up to Snape. With narrowed eyes he said in a low voice, "I've heard there are good wizards and dark ones. You look like a dark one to me."

Snape didn't react, just studied Vernon closely. "And that would matter, how?" he calmly retorted.

"Seems a little strange, Potter losing everything to dark wizards, and all." He looked suspicious now.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms and drew himself up straight. "I do not know, or care, frankly, how you might choose to classify me." He stared through Dursley in silence before stating, "I can tell you that I am a strict disciplinarian; any misbehavior in my presence is punished most severely. Harry's summer has been spent in long hours of extra readings, lessons, and menial tasks that I set him to; I do not tolerate wasted time."

Vernon grunted approvingly and turned to take the parchment from Petunia. Harry backed up against the wall to get out of his way. "So why did you agree to this, boy?" Vernon mockingly asked him.

Harry hesitated before replying, "He asked me."

"That's all it took?" Dudley asked in disbelief.

Harry shot him a dark look, pained to find too much truth in his response. "It's nice to be wanted."

On the way back down the front walk, the solicitor switched her case to her other hand after shaking Vernon's. After the door closed hard behind them, she said, "You lived here your whole life, Mr. Potter?"

"They were behaving better today to keep up appearances," Harry assured her.

"I cannot imagine," she said.

Harry leaned forward to look across at Snape. "You didn't mean what you said, did you, sir?" he asked, worried.

"Potter, as far as I am concerned, you have earned the right to a frivolous existence living off of others' pathetic gratitude. I would not recommend it, nor encourage it, however."

Harry let go of a deep breath in relief. "I suspected that you were just saying what he wanted to hear." He shook himself theatrically. "Legilimency with Vernon Dursley, brrrrr."

"The lengths I am willing to go to, Potter," Snape commented in a airy, suffering voice.

"I am not hearing any of this," Kranden said as they turned off Privet Drive.

Chapter 15.

A Home

The door to the Wizard Family Council room opened and an old witch with a small girl in hand stepped out. She bent and spoke reassuringly to the child. Harry stood patiently waiting for their turn. At the moment he was just grateful to have made it through the Ministry Atrium in one piece. The receptionist who registered his wand stared at him in silent shock for over a minute before he handed it back. By that time the entire Ministry, it seemed, had gathered 'round to shake his hand and thank him. When they had finally escaped, Snape had commented, "You have not been very visible; it is true." Harry had been relieved by that, since he had not been certain how Snape would react to such a scene.

Fortunately, the hearing room was in an out-of-the-way corner on the second floor below ground. Harry'd been worried about running into Mr. Weasley. Since he hadn't owled Ron with the news, he wasn't keen on making up a story on the spur of the moment, especially not in front of Snape.

Kranden gestured that they should enter. As they stepped inside, a witch seated at a small desk off to the side said, "Next we have the application hearing for Severus Snape. He is applying to adopt one . . . Harry Potter." The witch scowled at the paper and looked up at them in surprise. The members of the council sitting in elevated rows at the far end, murmured among themselves and perked up considerably.

As the three of them approached the podium facing the council, the murmuring stopped and all the council gazed at Harry with amazement. Kranden ignored this

and took out the sheaf of parchments. She unwrapped them, kept one copy of the long form for herself and handed the others over to the council secretary. "Good morning, members of the council, I am Felicity Kranden. I am assisting Mr. Snape in this application." She went on to explain their application in legalese. Harry stood beside her with his hands clasped extra casually in front of himself. That panicky feeling was trying to build again and he did not want it to show.

Finished with her statements, Kranden stepped back and waited patiently as the secretary handed the forms over to the council chair after registering each document. "Any of them can ask questions now," the solicitor whispered.

After looking over each sheet, at least momentarily, the chairwitch leaned forward. "Mr. Potter," she began with a quizzical expression, "this is a bit unexpected." She cleared her throat and sipped from a teacup before continuing. "The first question that pops into my head is, why now? Why not while you were truly underage and in need of a permanent guardian?"

Harry moved to the podium and glanced at Snape in question.

The chairwitch said stridently, "Do not look to him; I want to hear your answer."

"Sorry, ma'am," Harry said. "It is just that there are some things Albus Dumbledore didn't want anyone to know and it is hard to remember that they don't matter anymore." The gazes of the council grew even more interested. "You see, Dumbledore put a spell on my mother's sister's house to make me safe from Voldemort while I was there. I had to consider it my home for the spell to keep working. None of that matters now." He started to step back and then added, "That is why now, rather than earlier."

More murmuring ensued. It quieted as the chair said, "And your mother's sister has provided a signature I see, as well as your uncle. Is there a reason they are not here in person?"

"They hate wizardry, ma'am," Harry supplied.

Kranden stepped up beside him. "I know my comment isn't necessarily relevant, but for what it is worth, I will strongly attest to that."

An old wizard in the back row said, "You have survived well enough, it looks to me. Seems like sticking with blood is the best thing."

Kranden stepped up again. "If I may." She pulled out another parchment and handed it over to the secretary. "This is just a partial chronicle of Mr. Potter's treatment by the Dursleys."

The parchment was subjected to the same procedure and eventually passed to the senior member, who frowned at it. "Locked in a cupboard, Mr. Potter?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry admitted with difficulty.

"Manhandled? Were you every seriously injured?"

"No, ma'am. Repelling magic usually kicked in before then." The council peered down at him now in dismay and sympathy. Harry deeply regretted being there.

"Starved?" she went on, reading the list. "For how long a time?" she asked in an annoyingly factual voice.

Harry sighed painfully then jumped lightly as fingertips brushed the back of his arm. He angled his head and determined that it had to have been Snape. Bolstered by that gesture, Harry replied, "Not usually more than two or three days. My friends were sending me food packages by owl, but one summer my uncle bolted the window closed. And another summer the Malfoy's house-elf charmed my uncle's neighborhood to prevent any owls from approaching."

"Why?" she asked honestly.

"It is a long story, ma'am, and not really relevant," Harry commented.

The chairwitch continued to read the list. "Let's see, basically the rest is a long list of general neglect incidents." She stared at Harry. "You are telling me that Albus Dumbledore, whom I know very well to be a kind and compassionate man, left you in this household for years, knowing this?"

Harry said slowly, "It turned out that there wasn't any choice, but I also didn't explain to him very well why I didn't want to go back."

"Well, that is something we are very familiar with here, I'm afraid." She put the parchment aside. "Anyone opposed to dispensing with the witness requirement?" The secretary looked over the council and made a notation when no one raised their hand. The chairwitch then pulled the long application out again. "Ms. Kranden, this is a standard form, I take it. Right of board, abode, inheritance, all that? Nothing untoward buried in here?"

"No, ma'am. It is standard." Kranden stepped back and waggled her eyebrows once at Harry and Snape.

The witch on the left of the chairwitch leaned over and whispered something that made the chairwitch's brow furrow deeply. "You are certain?" she asked her fellow member and received an emphatic nod in reply.

"Mr. Snape, if I may?" she said. Snape stepped forward beside the podium and took on a pose of attentiveness.

"Is it true you were a Death Eater, Mr. Snape?" she asked in a very serious tone. Gasps sounded around the room.

"Yes, that is true," Snape replied evenly. Harry saw Kranden blanch before her professional face reasserted itself.

The chairwitch seemed to be at a loss for words. She finally managed to say, "Why in Merlin's Realm would we allow a former Death Eater to adopt anyone, let alone Harry Potter?"

Snape opened his mouth and Harry put up his hand to stop him. He felt a renewing anger pumping through him. "There are seven Death Eaters on the official Ministry wanted list. I can name them for you if you wish. You know as well as I that Professor Snape's name is not on it. Otherwise, I would assume we wouldn't have been able to waltz through the Atrium as we did."

"It speaks to his character," a younger wizard on the council said.

"That he put himself at risk spying for Dumbledore?" Harry asked the man. The wizard's face puckered at that.

"Is that what you were doing, Mr. Snape?" the chairwitch asked.

"Yes."

The chairwitch's eyes locked onto Snape's. "That is why you joined He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?"

"Yes," Snape replied again. Harry forced himself to remain casual at what he knew was a lie. Snape spent years fooling Voldemort, certainly he could handle one Family Council Chairwitch.

"Can't penalize him for that," the old wizard in the back stated. "Someone had to take a stand."

The chairwitch frowned deeply. "Mr. Potter, do you trust this wizard?"

Taken aback, Harry replied. "Of course, ma'am. I wouldn't have said yes to his offer if I didn't. He's saved my life several times."

"How many?" she asked.

"Um, I don't have a count. Well, let me see . . . the broom incident was probably the first time."

"I doubt you would have been killed. Just maimed," Snape commented blandly.

At the expressions on the council's faces, Harry elaborated. "Another teacher, Quirrell, was trying to get my broom to throw me in the middle of a Quidditch match. Professor Snape used a counter-curse to stop him."

"What happened to this Quirrell?" the chairwitch asked.

"Oh, he disintegrated when he touched me while he was trying to get the Philosopher's Stone." Harry shrugged. "Having Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head turned out to be a bit of a disadvantage." He waited for their expressions of shock to neutralize. He hated to say the next part, but he did it anyway. " There was the time he stepped between a werewolf and me and my friends. And then four months ago when he and Dumbledore rescued me after two Death Eaters tried to get even for my helping get Lucius Malfoy arrested." The litany was draining him. With a sigh he added, "And again during the final battle when Belletrix Lestrange came at me after Voldemort had fallen."

The old wizard in the back grunted. "Wanda, I think we should just give this boy whatever he wants. He wants to be adopted by an ex-Death Eater, I 'spect he can handle it."

The chairwitch, appraised Harry. "You want this Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said with assurance.

She glanced over the application again. "Does anyone have any objections?" No one did. She held the parchments out for the secretary to pick up. "Register these, please."

The secretary embossed each copy and brought all but one back to the solicitor. "You are all set, dear. Have a good day."

In the corridor, Kranden leaned over to Harry. "Nicely done."

"Thank you, ma'am. It wasn't as easy . . . as it should have been," he commented tiredly. His usual lack of sleep was wearing on him now. He needed lunch and tea.

"You need a break from things," Snape stated as they waited for the lift.

"When can we leave for your house?" Harry asked as they stepped into a mercifully empty lift. "Our house," he corrected himself. "Merlin," Harry breathed, "do I really have a home now?"

A Home

Harry spent the evening packing his trunk in a kind of daze. He had a hard time closing it and had to sit on the lid and bounce a few times to latch it. After he finally managed to, he noticed the bedspread and some other things that he would like. He'd have to borrow a second trunk.

Not sure where to find one, Harry headed down to McGonagall's office to ask. She looked up from her own packing when he knocked on the open door. "Do you know where there's a spare trunk I can borrow, Professor?" he asked.

She stood straight and thought a moment. "In the north wing attic, I believe, are some old unclaimed trunks." Before he could head off, she said, "Excited to be leaving for Severus' house?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't be," she commented quietly in a tone of disbelief, although she smiled as she said it. McGonagall moved her hands to her hips as she considered him. "Good luck, Harry," she said sincerely.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm not going to be gone long, so hopefully I won't need it," Harry pointed out before heading off to the attic.

He did indeed find several dusty trunks, one with a very nice blue satin lining. He hovered it back down to the dormitory and set about repacking. It was going to be nice to set up his things without having to hide everything wizard related. He looked forward to that, and to his own space that didn't feel grudginly loaned or borrowed. As he and his dormitory mates had aged, their tower room had begun to seem cramped.

The next morning, Dumbledore saw them off personally. Harry shook his hand as they stood on the steps to the castle. The headmaster seemed to be aging faster now, making Harry anxious to look at him. "We'll be back in three weeks, sir. According to Professor Snape."

Dumbledore smiled and touched the top of Harry's head fleetingly. "Have a good rest, Harry."

Harry hovered his two heavy trunks down the lawn behind him while he carried Hedwig's cage. He followed Snape, who had just one satchel. "Need assistance with those, Mr. Potter?" he asked pointedly.

"No, I've . . . It's going to take me some time to get used to calling you 'Severus'," he said.

Chapter 15

"Apparently."

They boarded the afternoon local train and found an empty compartment. Harry dragged his trunks inside and sat across from Snape at the window. He thought momentarily about hovering the trunks up to the rack and then decided that their present location in the middle of the floor would dissuade anyone from joining them.

With a hiss, the train started out again. Hogsmeade disappeared around a bend in the tracks and the trees closed in. Harry stared out at the mountains sliding by until the trolley came up the aisle. He jumped up and opened the compartment door. "Want anything?" he asked Snape.

"Tea would be nice, if it is hot."

"Two cauldron cakes, a chocolate frog and a tea," Harry said to the pink-frocked lady.

"Oy!" she exclaimed upon seeing him. Harry put his finger to his lips and she snapped her mouth closed and winked at him. "That will be eight sickles and a knut, Dear." Harry reached into his pocket and handed over the coins. He piled the cakes in his left arm and took the teapot with his right. The lady patted him on the head. Harry managed a false smile before turning and letting the compartment door slide closed.

"'Oy,' is right," he commented as he handed the teapot over.

"Your public persona is most interesting," Snape said. He unscrewed the metal lid and poured the tea out into it.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked as he unwrapped a cake.

"Do you expect to be treated that way?" Snape asked snidely. "Patted on the head?"

"No," Harry answered vehemently. "I get treated as though I'm thirteen or fourteen or something."

Snape sipped his tea and considered him. "Your small stature is partly to blame for that."

Harry frowned and sat back with his snack. A village came into view. The fields were radiantly green with pale dots of grazing sheep. After the second cake was gone, Harry opened the frog and let it hop onto the narrow shelf below the window. It tried to hop up to the open window, but Harry grabbed it in time. It solidified in that leaping pose as he sat back with it. He nibbled on one leg and worked the card free of the package. It was Dumbledore. The figure considered him with a tilt of the head, then stepped out of the frame. Chest constricted, Harry set the card on the

shelf and tossed the box in the rubbish bin beneath the window. Snape lifted the card and glanced at it before replacing it between them.

Comfortably full, Harry turned sideways and put his feet up on the seat. As he curled his arms around himself, he asked, "How much longer?"

"Forty-five minutes."

Harry leaned his head sideways against the back rest and closed his eyes. The movement of the train lulled him into a light doze. The next thing he heard was Snape saying, "We are here."

Harry sat up and stretched his cramped neck. The wooden sign on the station read Shrewsthorpe. Snape had already hovered one of the trunks out. Harry grabbed the other and the cage and followed.

On the platform, Harry looked around. The sun made the village look vibrant. Snape had said it was a half-wizard village. Harry couldn't tell it wasn't all Muggle by looking at it, other than that things looked a little old and outdated. He watched Snape hover one of the trunks along to the steps and decided that it was okay to do the same.

They walked down the road. The houses closest to the station were fieldstone with lots of white cement. Beyond that they were a little newer. Snape unhooked the gate in a low stone wall and stepped into the garden of an older house. Harry hovered the trunk through the gate and looked over the place. The mortar and face were rough where the whitewash had worn, the garden was a bit wild, the dark roof peaked steeply with tall narrow chimneys. It had an air of existing well past its expected era. It was about as far from Little Whinging as Harry could imagine.

Snape didn't seem to be looking for an opinion. He opened the heavy wooden door and led the way along a narrow corridor into a main hall that seemed much larger than the place looked on the outside. The hall opened up to the next floor with a dark wood railing over wrought iron posts around the edge. Harry peered into the drawing room and tried to glance into what looked like a library before they headed up the stairs to the first floor. At the end of the upper hall, Snape opened the door and stepped inside. The wide boards of the balcony led to the stone floor of a bedroom.

"Your room," Snape said as he let the trunk hover to the floor inside the door.

Harry looked around. The walls were plastered bright white with the dark heavy beams of the ceiling exposed. A massive hearth filled a third of the right-hand outer wall. The window was small. Harry stepped over and looked out at the garden and

the road. Two children on bicycles rattled past, apparently racing each other. He turned back to the room and ran his hand over the thickly restained bed post. It was all his.

"It's great, sir," Harry said honestly. It didn't remind him of the Dursleys one little bit.

They stood considering each other for a long silence, which Snape finally broke by saying, "I expect dinner will be in an hour or so."

Harry nodded and, spying the wardrobe, went over to it and opened its doors. As he hovered his trunk over, Snape left him to his unpacking.

He hung his clothes in the wardrobe. There wasn't much of any other storage. He hovered his trunks beside each other on the far wall, one under the window. The room, even in the summer, was chilly. Harry changed robes to a thicker one and opened the other trunk. The night stands had small drawers and shelf space under them. He sorted through his stuff for things he would want out. His Quidditch books he set on the bed to put out, then put them back in favor of two textbooks for next year.

He found one of the quilts he had received for his birthday. With relish, he spread it out on the bed. It was orange and maroon with little lions here and there on the fabric. Not quite the Gryffindor symbol, but close. He dug in the trunk again and found the photo album. He carefully lifted it out and took it to the far side of the bed to put it in the night stand. Instead of putting it away, he couldn't help flipping through it. Knowing it was a mistake didn't stop him either. The photos of his parents holding him and waving made him feel more ambivalent than he had ever felt. He shut the album a little hard and put it away.

A knock sounded on the doorframe. Harry jumped at it and turned. "Dinner?" he asked.

A chill passed over him as he followed Snape out of the room and down the balcony; he felt as though he had woken from a dream to find he was living someone else's life. It reminded him of when he had first arrived on Diagon Alley with Hagrid and discovered that everyone knew him and knew more about him than he himself did.

With impatient movements, Snape sat at the dining room table. His hair fell before his face as he did so. Harry sat across from him, pulling his chair up close to the table. A moment later a house-elf stepped in with a large tray of covered dishes. As his large eyes fell on Harry, he hesitated in setting the tray down.

"Tidgy," Snape said, "this is Master Harry, you will give him the same obedience as myself."

"M . . . Master Harry?" Tidgy recovered and quickly placed the dishes on the table, removed the covers and with a deep bow said, "Anything else, Masters?"

Harry wouldn't have minded some pumpkin juice, but he couldn't bring himself to request it. He shook his head instead. Snape eyed him with a tilted gaze. "Bring Master Harry pumpkin juice."

The elf bowed and quickly departed.

"Are you reading my mind?" Harry accused him.

Snape scoffed. "I do not require Legilimency for that. I have seen you drink it with every meal for the last six years."

"Oh," Harry said and realized he should relax. "Sorry," he added quietly.

Snape served himself potatoes and peas. "Not hungry?"

Harry started. He had been focusing on calming down as the food steamed before him. He stabbed a piece of roast chicken. "Smells good." As soon as his plate was full he started eating. It wasn't quite up to Hogwart's standards but it wasn't bad and there was a lot of it. Tidgy returned and gingerly placed a glass beside his plate. "Thanks," Harry said automatically.

Snape's fork and knife hit his plate a little hard as he set them down suddenly. "Potter," he scolded in disbelief, "one does not-"

"Potter?" Tidgy interrupted in a frightened squeak. "Master is Harry Potter, sir?" The elf backed up a step as he realized his other error of decorum.

Snape gave the elf a disgusted look which made Harry grin. With a dark look Snape said, "Tidgy, you may GO." After Tidgy backed out of the room, gaping at Harry, Snape said in a low voice, "One does not thank a house-elf merely for fulfilling their duties. One does not thank them at all, in fact."

"Hm," Harry uttered, unconvinced.

Tired from traveling and the oddness of settling into the house, Harry gave up on organizing his things and got ready for bed. He hung his clothes up and slipped into

his pyjamas. The stone floor was cold. He tiptoed over to the wardrobe and took out the slippers that Hermione had knitted for all of them last Christmas. They were gold and maroon with pointed toes and leather bottoms. Her knitting had improved, even Ron had been forced to admit. He jumped up onto the bed and reached way down to set the slippers on the floor for morning.

The strangeness of this new place made him uneasy. He frowned as he considered that this was probably going to make his nightmares worse. He sighed as he turned down the lamp and darkness filled the room. He snuggled down under the soft covers and closed his eyes.

Snape, not hearing anything from the boy's room for a while, stepped down the balcony and looked in. The door was open and the chandelier behind him cast warm light across the floor, illuminating a pair of maroon and gold footwear beside the bed. Upon the bed was a matching quilt. Snape wondered in that moment what had possessed him that he had adopted a Gryffindor. Arrogant and unthinking they were, he thought darkly to himself.

He stepped silently into the room. Harry was fast asleep, curled on his side facing the door. His dark thoughts escaped him, as Snape found himself hoping that the change in environment would mean a reduction in the boy's nightmares. Being away from the very place where he had confronted Voldemort for the last time couldn't hurt.

Harry woke with the grey light of dawn lightening the room. He was stiff with long sleep so he considered that he should get up. Grateful for the slippers, he padded across to the bedpost to pull down his robe. Snape's door was closed as he passed it quietly.

Yawning, Harry wandered around the ground floor. There was a library across from the dining room. He found a book on lumination spells and settled into a lounger. Three pages into it, Tidgy appeared with a tea tray which he placed on the table beside Harry. As the elf bowed low, Harry said, "Thanks."

"You a very great wizard," Tidgy said in a wavering voice, "to be thanking a mere house-elf." After a fidgeting pause, he went on in a whisper, "I don't want you to have trouble with Master, Master Harry. Not for sake of me."

"Don't worry about that," Harry assured him. He took a chocolate covered biscuit, noticing Tidgy noticing which he preferred. Tidgy bowed again and backed out of the room.

A while later another voice came from the doorway. "You are up early." Snape stepped in and poured himself some tea which he drank in one gulp.

"I went to sleep early," Harry commented with a shrug.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked. He had started for the door and stopped to ask this.

"Yes."

"No dark shadows?"

Harry thought a moment. "No. Not that I remember," he said, surprised.

"Good," Snape said. "If you do, let me know."

"Immediately?" Harry asked, half-joking.

"If it seems appropriate to do so. If you ever feel unsafe, certainly. I want you to feel secure here; it is the least that should be provided for you."

Harry considered that, feeling a twinge. "Yes, sir."

"I will have Tidgy start breakfast," Snape said before he stepped back into the main hall.

As Harry joined him in the dining room a few minutes later, Snape looked him up and down sharply. "Such Gryffindor gear," Snape commented at Harry's maroon robe with a crest on the pocket and his Hermione slippers.

Harry paused in sitting down. He hadn't thought about that. This was just his stuff. "Does it really bother you?" he asked in surprise.

Snape huffed. "Gryffindors in general bother me, yes."

"I can get other stuff." Harry shrugged as he replied. "This is just what I have."

Breakfast arrived and Harry took a piece of toast and started buttering it. Tidgy departed with a low bow. Snape hadn't replied to that offer. Feeling a little unsettled, Harry added, "Maybe you'd feel better knowing that the sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin." Harry said this as Snape's teacup was halfway to his mouth. He froze that way and gave Harry a very surprised appraisal.

"You turned it down?" Snape asked, truly curious sounding.

Harry thought the explanation to that was obvious, but maybe not so much in this company. "I'd met Malfoy and didn't particularly like him. I'd met Ron on the train and he was the first friend I'd ever met. So I talked the hat out of it."

Chapter 15

"That is not supposed to be easy to do."

Harry added jam to his toast as he said in alarm at the memory, "Yeah, it kept insisting how great I'd be if it put me in Slytherin." Harry shuddered and bit into his toast.

Snape sat back and crossed his arms to give Harry a long look. "I have to admit, Potter, it does make me feel better." After thinking further, he mused, "Wonder what it meant by 'great'."

Harry put his toast down and wiped his fingers. He poured himself tea and sipped it cautiously. "Before the final battle when my dreams were getting very . . . strange . . . " Harry fidgeted as he remembered those awful nights. Snape still sat back, considering him. "When it seemed sometimes like . . . Voldemort was trying to bribe me to join him . . . Who knows?" Harry shrugged. "There were minutes in a row where it seemed worth it, just to get it all to stop."

"What was he bribing you with?" Snape asked as he returned to his breakfast.

Harry shook his head. "I don't really want to talk about it," he said. The heart rending memory of his mother calling, wondering where he was, still chilled him as much as the Dementors' last stand did.

Snape didn't press the question.

After breakfast Harry went back to his room to finish unpacking. He was basking in the notion that he could actually leave things here when he departed for school at the end of summer.

In his old trunk he found a few old robes that he simply banished away because they were too small. Underneath on the bottom were a bunch of random things that hadn't been touched in a while, like his Sneakascope. It if hadn't been a gift, he'd have just been rid of it. His First and Second Year textbooks he shelved in the back of the wardrobe with the later ones in front on the high shelf. They hadn't been given summer assignments this year in yet another celebratory gesture, so Harry hadn't kept his texts in any order. Lining them all up by year like that was satisfying. They felt like trophies that way.

He banished a few other old things and then lifted out a few old Hermione hats, uncovering the silver mirror in the corner on the very bottom. Harry stared at its cracked glass as a kind of agony took hold of his chest. He reached in and lifted it out. The silvering was corroded more where the glass had broken. Unthinking, he ran his finger along one of the breaks, drawing a line of blood along it as the edge bit his skin.

The sting in his finger resonated with the pain in his heart. Uncontrollably furious with himself, he kicked the trunk before him several times until his foot throbbed.

"My goodness, Potter," Snape said levelly from the doorway.

Harry stopped and hunched over, cradling the silver frame against himself.

Snape went on, "I don't know whether to scold you or simply ask what is wrong."

Harry brought himself under some control and backed up to sit on the bed with his back to the door and Snape.

"Are you quite finished?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry replied snappishly. Snape's unaffected tone made him want to fling himself out of control, but he resisted it.

After a long pause Snape approached and said, "May I ask what is wrong?"

Harry adjusted his arms around the mirror to hide it. "I don't want to talk about it," he said quietly, forcing his voice to come out approximately normal.

Snape stepped stepped closer to the trunk. "You never opened it," he observed in an oddly easy tone.

The comment utterly chilled Harry. He wasn't facing Snape, he thought frantically, how did he know what was haunting him? Harry watched his new guardian reach into the trunk and lift out the small wrapped box he had given him on his birthday. Harry had forgotten completely about it. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he had put his robe away. Numbly, Harry accepted it as Snape handed it to him, now.

With the mirror face down in his lap, Harry unwrapped and opened the weighty box. Inside was a gold pocket watch with the cover embossed to resemble a snitch. Silver embossed wings arched fancifully around to frame the edges.

"It's beautiful," Harry said in amazement. The cover popped open when he pressed the tab on the bottom edge. The face was white with flourished numbers in maroon.

"Nine fifty-two, I believe," Snape stated.

It took Harry a moment to come to himself and realize he should set the time. He pulled the stem and dialed to the correct time, then wound it some so it would run. He closed it and admired its shape again. "Thank you," he said, feeling undone. He wondered if he ever again would trust his emotions to stay put.

"Do you need anything?" Snape eventually asked.

Harry finally looked up at him, at his intent dark eyes. "No," he replied, feeling calm now although his heart still ached. "I think I'm all set."

Chapter 16.

Its Always Calm

The next few days in the house in Shrewsthorpe passed unremarkably, considering. Harry finally had his things arranged in his room. Hedwig had adjusted to her surroundings and came back more quickly when he let her out to stretch her wings. When he awoke, the room ceased to surprise him.

"Are you settling in all right?" Snape asked him one morning.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. It occurred to him that they didn't talk very much, just sat in silence, though it wasn't awkward at all. "Should we be having more conversation?" Harry asked.

Snape thought a moment. "If you wish to have one, simply start one."

Harry smoothed the butter on his bread more than necessary. "I just wondered if it was too quiet."

"There is no such thing," Snape insisted. "Not after ten continuous months at Hogwarts." He handed Harry the hazelnut butter. "Not to give you the idea that I am against a conversation now and then."

"It is amazingly quiet here," Harry observed. He bit into his bread and tried to think of something to talk about. Hedwig flew in at that moment and dropped a letter before heading off again. "I think she likes it here. She's out a lot more."

"The open fields and the grain storage have far more vermin for her to hunt than the dense forests around Hogsmeade," Snape commented.

"That is probably why she doesn't insist on table scraps." Harry turned his letter over; it was his annual Hogwarts letter. He tore it open and glanced past the usual welcoming paragraph to the supplies list. "I don't suppose I can go to Diagon Alley?"

"You cannot be seen, Harry. Even the Floo Network is not considered safe for you– that is why we took the train." With movements of vague annoyance, Harry folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Snape watched him and said, "Have patience. The Ministry is working hard to get them."

Harry nodded and, with less appetite, went back to eating breakfast.

Later that afternoon, Harry had a reply for Hermione ready in an envelope, and no owl. He stood at his window and looked out at the grey sky and damp pavement outside. During the day, lots of autos and bikes and walkers went past. Harry's attention was caught by a bright yellow slicker walking on their side of the road. The person threw back the hood of the coat, allowing wavy dark brown hair to fall behind her.

The girl looked to be his age with a pert nose and dark eyes. Harry watched her make her way up the road. As she came alongside the gate to their garden, she glanced up at the house and apparently saw Harry standing at the window because a flash of consternation crossed her brow. She put her head down and walked faster. Harry stepped back from the window. He understood how it felt to be watched and certainly didn't want to bring that feeling on someone else.

Harry's new routine began to feel mostly normal, although he found himself fidgeting fiercely during moments when he considered everything all at once and felt startled by it all. In the morning this often happened when he looked about his new room and it happened this morning. Hedwig fluffed herself and put her head under her wing, apparently believing it too early to rise. Even though it was early, Harry felt almost too well rested; he hadn't had a single dream of dark shadows since arriving. This led him to believe that they were figments of his post-Dementor uneasiness, rather than actual visions. He was glad to be rid of them, whatever the reason. He put on his dressing gown, stretched, and headed downstairs.

Breakfasts still felt odd in the closer space of the dining room in contrast to the high ceiling of the Great Hall. While Snape read the Prophet Harry looked about the room, trying to make the room feel familiar, even the unusual objects on the mantel

such as the slender, engraved silver vase and the blackened wooden box with little drawers on three sides. On the other wall, the windmill turned slowly in the dark landscape painting.

Harry sat back when he had finished and Tidgy came in a moment later to collect his plate. As the elf departed, he bowed at Snape. Harry wished he did not do that. Even after a week, Harry wasn't used to it and suspected he would not ever be. Wishing he could go outside to look around, especially since it was a sunny morning, he propped his head on his hand and stared at the turning windmill.

Snape's voice interrupted his somewhat melancholy musings. "Is everything all right?"

Harry straightened and clasped his hands before him. "Yeah. Just, uh, a little bored. If I use an obsfucation charm, can I go out for a bit on my broomstick?"

"It would be best if you did not. Such a charm will not fool all of those wishing to find you." He spoke sternly but Harry didn't feel it as correction, but as something else he wasn't used to–protection. He gave up his imaginings of a quick flight of exploration. Thinking ahead of the long day inside, he must have sighed aloud because Snape said, "Perhaps I can show you a few spells?"

Harry brightened. "I'd like that."

"Go and move the items in the hall aside to get them out of the way, if you would."

Jumping up eagerly, Harry went to do this. The hall didn't contain very much– just a padded bench that angled up at the ends, a tall oil lamp, a small tall table, and a large rug. Harry hovered all this aside beside the door to the drawing room. The resulting open space appeared perfect for dueling. Harry was pacing it off when Snape stepped in.

"Not quite large enough," Snape said, sounding amused.

Harry found himself smiling. "What good spells do you know?"

Snape stopped in the center of the floor. "All kinds. What would you like to learn?"

Harry thought that over. "You know. Something I've always wanted explained–why can't a wizard levitate himself? It'd be very useful. Professor Flitwick insisted it wouldn't work on yourself, but why won't it work on, say, my shoes, with me in them?"

Snape crossed his arms, looking smug but amused at Harry who was studying his footwear. "It isn't simply that the spell will not work on the caster. It is more complicated than that."

Harry wasn't entirely listening. "When I hover something else and then step on it; the spell still collapses. But if someone else hovers it, well, someone like Hermione, lots of others can step on it."

With a flick Snape hovered a small battered step stool from the kitchen and let it rest on the floor before Harry. "Levitation is a spell of gravity. It is deeply entwined with gravity. The caster must be rooted on the ground to successfully cast it. If you were to levitate that stool . . . " Harry did so, holding it a foot above the floor. Snape went on, "As soon as you step upon it, you are no longer rooted to gravity. You can not push against gravity to retain the hover. Do you understand?"

Harry put one foot up on the floating stool, it twisted sideways, mostly because he wasn't maintaining the spell well while moving around. When he started to pick up his other foot, as soon as his weight began to lift from his lower foot, the stool sank in response. "Huh," Harry muttered, backing away and letting the stool rest on the floor.

"Come over here and I'll demonstrate it another way," Snape suggested. "You clearly have the levitation charm mastered. Given that you had six years to do so . . . one would hope that you would." He backed up a step. "In a moment I want you to try levitating it again. Wingardium Leviosa! "

Snape was pointing his wand at Harry, who drifted upward and couldn't help trying to reach down with his toes, only to be lifted just out of reach. Harry glanced around, he wouldn't mind being this tall, he thought. Snape said, "Go ahead and try to levitate it now."

Harry twisted in the air to give it a go. The stool refused to budge, even on several tries, and indeed the spell didn't feel right. The floor met his feet and the stool jumped into the air. "So you're saying even if someone else levitates me, I still can't make it work."

"Correct."

Harry rested the stool back on the floor with a thunk . "I understand." He went to pick up the stool to take it back down to Tidgy. With it tucked under his arm, Harry asked, "So, what if I'm on an aeroplane and I'm trying to hover something on the same aeroplane?"

"I have to confess to never having been in such a contraption." He sounded pleased about that.

"Oh. Neither have I . . . but I wouldn't be on the ground in that case, so, would the spell work?"

Snape looked honestly uncertain. "I don't know," he answered reluctantly.

Harry started past with his burden. "That's okay. I still understand why it doesn't work."

The silence of the house was most acute at night. The road, so close to the house as to present a hazard to traffic, carried few automobiles after dark. Harry listened to the rush of blood in his ears as he drifted off to sleep.

Harry awoke with a jolt a few hours after falling into hard sleep. He wasn't certain what had awoken him; he thought perhaps he had heard something. His heart raced as he listened, straining in the silence around him. Harry had experienced too many incidents of paranoia that had saved his life to fall back to sleep, even in a quiet house. He picked up his wand, slipped out of bed, and padded to the door. Silently, he pushed it open and stretched his ears to listen. The clock in the library ticked just at the edge of hearing.

Especially if you feel unsafe , played in Harry's mind as he considered that he should just go back to bed. Not following instructions had led Harry to more pain than he cared to recall. Before he could change his mind, he stepped onto the balcony and along the wall to Snape's door. He listened as he stood there . . . still no sounds. It occurred to him then that Tidgy might have been working on something. But Harry hadn't heard him any other night.

Harry carefully turned the handle to the bedroom and stepped inside, taking the inside handle in his other grasp and letting it close and relatch in near silence. Halfway across the floor he whispered, "Severus?"

The form on the bed started instantly. "Harry?"

"I heard something," Harry said quietly.

Snape tossed the covers aside and, with his wand in his hand from the bedstand, stepped over to him. "Stay here."

Harry disobeyed and followed him to the doorway. Snape opened it and looked out. He tapped his wand on the doorframe. Faint blue sparkles spread along the wood down to the floor and, a moment later, out across the walls of the hall. As they framed the corridor leading to the back entryway, the sparkles dipped to red. Snape

stepped back suddenly, pushing Harry back with his arm. They both stood there for a long moment, their breathing the only sound.

"How many?" Harry whispered very quietly.

"Several." He pushed Harry back farther. "Stay here."

"Not a chance. They don't know I'm here–draw them out and I'll hit them." Harry spelled his hands and knees with a murmured Gecko charm and ducked past Snape, who, in the inky darkness, reached out for him too late. Before he could be grabbed again, Harry climbed up the wall and over the ceiling along one of the dark beams. He lowered himself quietly into the far corner of the opposite balcony. In the dim light he could see Snape's form in the doorway, ducking down. This was a good setup–he could feel it.

Nothing happened for several breaths. Harry's mind raced. If he were attacking, he would come up under a cloak. Harry whispered, "Accio cloak" , as he pointed at the steps. A grunt sounded from there and a struggle started with black limbs appearing and disappearing. Harry incanted a binding curse and a half-covered figure toppled down the stairs and lay still. Another figure moved across the floor and bent over the first. Harry, feeling less generous, fired a blasting curse this time.

This was a mistake because the blue line of the spell gave away his location. He leapt to his feet and, bent low, scuttled toward the other end of the balcony. A blast came up through the wood where he had been crouched, throwing wood chips and heat at his back. Harry stopped in the middle of the balcony, in case the other end was too obvious. His heart continued to beat rapidly from the near miss.

Snape fired something from the doorway of his bedroom and an exchange of spells ensued. Now they would know that there were two of them, Harry thought with a frown. A curse hit Snape in the shoulder, spinning him back against the door. "Severus," Harry breathed. When Snape didn't reappear in the doorway, Harry panicked. He spelled his hands, feet and knees again quickly and scurried up the wall and over the ceiling.

"What is this?" a deep voice asked from below. A spell struck Harry as he sped across, breaking the Gecko Charm. He fell away from the high ceiling and hung suspended. A twist of his body gave him a dim glimpse of Snape pointing his wand at him, presumably using a hover charm. Directly below him, a Death Eater raised his wand. He could see his teeth glinting in the spare light from the window as he took a breath to speak another curse.

Thinking quickly, Harry waved his wand to cancel out the hover charm. He landed, relatively softly, on the pudgy man about to spell him. The dark wizard hissed and

grabbed Harry by the hair and they started to scuffle on the hard floor. Harry was about half the other man's weight, so in a moment, the wizard was on top, arm cocked to punch him.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice said from the nearby doorway. Harry looked up at Lucius Malfoy striding slowly over to them. The man, Harry assumed it must be Mulciber, leaned back with a sadistic smirk. "Imagine finding you here, Mr. Potter," Malfoy said with a tone of anticipated pleasure. Harry could only see his light-colored eyes surrounded by the halo of his long hair. He raised his wand, Harry saw the disk of green flash around Malfoy's feet. Mulciber's weight was on his legs, he couldn't twist in time to reach it. The words were just forming on Malfoy's tongue. Harry shouted and grabbed Mulciber, desperately twisting them both over onto the floor. Green flashed everywhere around Harry, prickles of pain spiked along his arms where he clutched the man's soft upper arms.

Harry heard Snape shout, " Expelliarmus! " and Malfoy cursing. "Harry?" Snape asked in concern. With a grunt, Harry pushed the limp weight of Mulciber off of him with ominously tingling hands.

"Merlin, I hate that spell," Harry muttered and he heard Snape exhale in relief. Harry felt around the floor for his wand. When he had it in hand, he stood up beside his guardian. "Did we get all of them?"

"Yes." Snape put a chain binding charm on Malfoy, knocking him back to sit against the wall. "Can you keep an eye on him while I summon assistance?" he asked Harry. With his wand free he waved the chandeliers up brighter.

"Sure," Harry replied and raised his wand to point it at the blonde man. Snape stepped away quickly.

In a tired voice Malfoy said quietly, as his head lolled against the wall, "What are you doing here, Potter? We thought we'd have a little fun punishing our traitor . . . didn't expect to find you. Really didn't expect to find you. Couldn't find you, in fact."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said and rather enjoyed saying it.

In a taunting voice Malfoy said, "Wouldn't have expected you to be anyone's plaything."

"What are you talking about?"

Malfoy chuckled. "Of course, of course," he said in a patronizing voice. "You are probably potioned to not remember. Pathetic, but it does have certain . . . interesting possibilities."

"Shut up," Harry repeated with more force.

Snape came back out of the library. "The ministry will be here shortly." He raised his wand at Malfoy. "Check the one by the steps."

"Which one?"

"The one that isn't dead already."

Harry, with a grimace, stepped over to the two forms on the floor at the bottom of the steps. The one tangled in the invisibility cloak lay with his head at a very odd angle. The other had a broken nose and was also in a chain binding. "Doesn't look like he is going anywhere."

"Find their wands if you can."

Harry found one on the floor. The other may have been tangled in the dead man's cloak. As he searched, he heard Malfoy taunting Snape. "Was he your reward for turning against our Lord?"

"You didn't add a binding curse to his mouth?" Snape asked from across the room.

"I was finding his stupidity entertaining," Harry replied as he lifted the edge of the cloak where the man's hand was trapped under his thigh. He found the wand there and, biting his lip, slid it out. He brought them both back over.

Snape took them in hand. "I'm not taking any chances. Unlike you, Potter," he snapped harshly. Harry hadn't heard that tone in a long time; he cringed from it.

The outside door opened and Tonks, Shacklebolt, and another wizard stepped out of the entryway, wands out. They relaxed as they took in the scene.

"Lucius Malfoy," Shacklebolt said. "How very good to see you."

Malfoy growled at him.

"One of these is dead . . . Rookwood it looks like," Tonks said crouching next to the half-invisible Death Eater beside the last step.

The other Auror pointed at the struggling wizard chained beside the stairs. "I'll take him and come back."

Tonks stepped over to them. "Where is Pettigrew?" she asked Malfoy.

The blonde man laughed a little crazily. "As if I would answer questions from a freak like you. Freaks like you." He looked around at them all. "You are an insult to wizardry–you disgust me."

Harry crouched before the other man. "Too bad you missed the show, Malfoy. You know, the one in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts. Twenty-two D.E. and nineteen students aged thirteen to seventeen . . . guess who won?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in fury. "Gloat while you can, Potter."

"I will, thanks. I got what I wanted; Voldemort is dead." Harry thought a moment. "That name doesn't have any power anymore, does it. Vold-e-mort. Just doesn't have the dark ring to it that it used to have. Sad, isn't it?" he asked mockingly.

Snape stepped over and patted Harry's shoulder. He looked up and Snape shook his head lightly. Harry took the hint and stood up and got out of the way. The Auror Harry didn't know returned and Shacklebolt took Malfoy away. The relay of prisoners and bodies continued until it was just the two of them and the Aurors.

"Well, he made a lot of threats regarding Pettigrew. Could be empty but we'll stand guard for the night and spell the place in the morning," Shacklebolt said. He and the others followed Snape's gesture for them to retire to the drawing room. Tidgy showed up with tea, shaking so the cups rattled. Harry took the tray before an accident happened and set it down, ignoring the dark look from Snape as he did so.

"You are in trouble, Potter," Snape said.

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he poured tea.

"I have to think of an appropriately severe punishment."

"Yes, sir," Harry repeated.

The Aurors looked between the two of them. "Kind of surprised to find you here, Harry," Tonks said.

"I live here," Harry said as he handed her a cup of tea on a saucer.

"You do?" she asked, confused. She looked to Snape for confirmation and received a raised brow in reply.

"It isn't generally known," Harry said, "but Severus adopted me."

Tonks dropped her cup and saucer. The noise of it smashing grated on Harry's nerves. The Auror cleaned it up with a sweep of her wand. "Adopted?" she choked. "You're kidding, right?" She looked between them. Harry gave her a hard stare. "All right, that was the wrong thing to say." She shook her head and breathed, "Wow."

Harry sat down and poured himself some tea, wishing it were mulled mead.

"When did this happen?" she asked, her voice forced into something conversational.

"August second," Harry said.

"Well, congratulations, Harry." She said automatically as she poured another cup for herself.

"Thank you," Harry said, trying to sound equally conversational.

Tonks looked at Snape over the rim of her new teacup, then blinked rapidly in disbelief.

Shacklebolt leaned forward. "This is Tristan Rogan, by the way," he said, indicating the other Auror. "I should have done introductions."

They each shook hands with Rogan. "Thank you for getting rid of Voldemort, Mr. Potter," Rogan said.

"No problem," Harry quipped.

"Who killed who in there?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I chained up Lucius and the other one. Harry did the other two," Snape stated.

"The two dead ones were Harry?" Tonks asked. She turned to him. "Getting a little rough, aren't we? Don't go for a Killing Curse as your first resort."

"I didn't," Harry said defensively. "The one on the stairs I put a binding curse on and he fell, got tangled in the invisibility cloak as well. Must have broken his neck tumbling. Malfoy used a Killing Curse on me and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid it. My hands are still tingling," he said, a little peeved, and held them up to look at them. They looked normal at least. "I would have blocked it, but I couldn't reach his feet–my legs were trapped."

"What?" Shacklebolt asked.

"The Killing Curse, when-" Harry stopped as he saw Snape shake his head. "Why can't I say?"

"Ask Dumbledore. He didn't tell the Ministry what happened–I assume he had his reasons."

Harry rolled his eyes. Rogan said tiredly, "I thought this Order business was over."

"It is," Harry said. "Or if it isn't, I wouldn't know anyway."

"It just sounded like you had a counter to the Avada Kedavra," Shacklebolt said.

"I do," Harry said with a challenging look at Snape. They all turned to him. "Well, I have something that worked once."

"When?" Tonks asked.

"A few months ago."

"I'd like to see it," Shacklebolt said.

"And therein lies the problem," Snape said dryly and with some anger.

Harry wondered if Dumbledore had kept quiet to protect him from some kind of spell experimentation. Shacklebolt interrupted his thoughts, "We wouldn't use it on him!"

"Then you cannot test it," Snape countered.

"We'd still like to hear about it," Tonks said.

The discussion went on through the night. Harry did explain how he'd countered the Killing Curse, even though Snape didn't recommend doing so. He was disappointed that they didn't think much of his description of what he did. Darkly, he thought that, for anyone else, surviving it would have been impressive enough. For him they thought it rather unremarkable.

When the sun finally lit the room, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open. More of the same tea he had consumed all night was not going to help. As badly as he wanted to watch the Aurors work their protective spells, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open for more than the interior ones. He finally followed Snape's repeated advice to go to bed.

By the time Snape woke him, the Aurors had left. Snape bent over him and shook his shoulder to rouse him. "Wake up, Potter; it is very late in the morning."

Harry blinked at him. He had only slept fitfully. His hands still ached. He clenched and unclenched them to relieve it.

"Get up now," Snape insisted, reminding Harry of his Aunt Petunia, which reminded Harry that he was due some kind of punishment. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and found his glasses. "The Aurors insist that Pettigrew cannot enter the house, nor even approach it now," Snape explained.

Harry's stomach complained about being empty and sour from the tea. "Do you have anything for a burning stomach?" Harry asked.

"Of course." Snape departed and returned a minute later. He gave Harry a swallow of a purple, creamy potion in a teacup. It made his stomach feel better as soon as it slid down that far.

"Thanks," Harry said as he handed the cup back. "It's working already." He tossed the covers aside and stretched to try to get his body moving.

"I will expect you downstairs shortly," Snape said as he departed again.

Harry gathered clean robes and went down to the bath beside the kitchen. When he came out, freshened and more awake, he found Snape in the drawing room, writing a letter.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape said, indicating one of the chairs still around the small marble table from last night.

"Uh oh," Harry commented. At Snape's questioning look, he explained, "You always use my last name that way when you are angry with me." He turned one of the chairs to face the small desk and sat down.

"I am." Snape bent his head to the letter. Harry fidgeted as he waited. He wondered, if he complained about his aching hands, could he delay his punishment. His forearms ached too, now that he thought about it. He closed his eyes as he remembered that horrible green flashing. That reminded him of the memories of his mother screaming that the Dementors drew out of him. That made him feel slightly unwell and achy more places than his hands.

"Potter?"

"Yes." Harry didn't look up at him; he didn't want to risk his current thoughts being snagged from him.

"You look as though you are punishing yourself," Snape observed.

"Not intentionally," Harry said flatly. "I'm just remembering all the times I've seen that awful green light."

"That would be a form of self-torment, at the least," Snape pointed out. After a pause, he went on. "You disobeyed me, at a time when your safety, and more likely your life, was at risk. I will not tolerate that."

"You wanted to take them all on alone?" Harry asked.

"I was in a good position to do so. As well, the house is spelled in ways you do not know. It was on my side as well, but not after you were mixed in with the others."

"I didn't realize that."

"Why did you so unwisely try to cross back over?" Snape demanded.

"You were hit," Harry said defensively.

"Not severely."

"It looked it from where I was."

Snape crossed his arms. "Altruistic or not, it was a stupid thing to do. You had lost the advantage of stealth."

"I wasn't thinking; I admit that," Harry said, chastened. He had panicked in a fundamental way he hadn't in a long time.

"You need to control this hero complex of yours." Snape said. Harry just frowned in reply. "I admit, I cannot determine a good way of punishing you for your disobedience. The normal things, bed without dinner, restricting you to your room, restricting your access to your friends, seem unduly cruel given your past treatment by your relatives."

"I also considered simply transfiguring all of your Gryffindor things into Slytherin ones, but after hearing you speaking to Malfoy last night, I feel that would be merely symbolic." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I ask you to tell me that you will not repeat what you did."

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"No?" Snape countered sharply.

"How can I let you face four Death Eaters alone? What if something happened to you? I'd end up having to deal with them anyway. Alone." He drew in a breath past a tight chest. "I can't lose anyone else," he confessed with a catch in his voice. His eyes were suddenly burning.

"Harry," Snape said. He stood up and came around the desk. After a moment's deliberation, he touched Harry on the shoulder. "All right, you may help, should there be a next time, BUT only at my direction."

Harry nodded, blinking to control the heat in his eyes. Snape stepped away, apparently dropping the issue.

That day, letters came in from his friends, redirected from the castle to home. He knew he should write them back today, but he couldn't think of anything to write about except what had happened the night before, and he wasn't supposed to tell

anyone about that. Instead, he passed the time reading an account of taming wild dragons he had found on the miscellaneous shelf in the library, hoping it would give him something to talk about with Hagrid. Finally, dinner came around. Harry ate slowly to draw it out.

As Tidgy cleared the plates, Snape said, "Hopefully this evening will be quieter than the last. It was good that you woke me. I did not hear what you did, obviously. Do not hesitate to wake me in the future, for anything that disturbs you."

Harry nodded and finished his pumpkin juice. He wished the clock would move faster so he could reasonably go to sleep. He wished he had something meaningful to pass the time. "Do you have a copy of the text Greer is going to be using?"

"I do not know what text she intends to use. I have several Seventh Year texts if you would like to read them."

Harry stood up. "I would. I need something to do."

Snape told him where to find them in the library and Harry curled up on the lounger and tried to focus on chapter one of each book. After two hours, Harry decided this was a good way to study. The important points were repeated in each book, so he didn't have to figure out what they were on his own, which made reading a lot faster and easier.

Finally it was ten o'clock. Harry put the books back where he had found them and said goodnight to Snape in the drawing room.

After the previous night, his body didn't want to relax, even though his brain was exhausted. He didn't have any potion here since he hadn't needed any. If he had any left from Hogwarts he hadn't seen it when he unpacked. Harry turned onto his side and forced the tension out of his neck.

With a groan Harry woke a third time from fitful slelep. Persistent shadows paced him through a long hall that vaguely resembled the one downstairs except miles long rather than thirty feet. Exhausted beyond reason, Harry slipped on his robe and slippers and went down the balcony. He paused outside Snape's door. By going in he was changing things, he knew. This wasn't the same as thinking something was wrong externally; this was needing help and asking for it from an adult trusted with his care. He wasn't used to this at all and it made him very uneasy.

Deciding he needed the potion more than his pride, he knocked on the wood in front of him. After a moment, a voice told him to enter. Harry did so. The room was very dark. He stepped in what he judged to be halfway. "I'm sorry, Severus, but I can't sleep."

He heard Snape sit up. The lamp flared to a pale glow. Snape was rubbing his eyes. "Come here," he said. Harry stepped over as Snape stood up in the long shrift he slept in. He used the bed for balance, making Harry realize how tired he must be as well.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated.

"Don't be. Sit down, I'll get you something."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and waited longer than it took for the stomach potion. Eventually, Snape came back with a teacup half-full of his usual sleeping potion. "I checked the spells; everything is secure," Snape said as he sat beside Harry. He rubbed his forehead as he held out the cup. Harry drank it down and handed it back. "I assume your nightmares have returned," Snape said.

Harry hung his head. "Yes. But I think I've figured it out."

"What is that?"

"Malfoy said they didn't know where I was. Now they do. The dreams stopped when they didn't."

"Interesting theory," Snape said doubtfully.

Harry shook his head. "Not a theory," he argued groggily. "I know that's what the shadows are. You're one of them," he added reluctantly.

Snape closed his eyes a long moment. "I am very sorry for that, Harry," he whispered.

Rambling, Harry explained, "When you wake me . . . in my dream there is a shadow very close, and then you wake me and you are right there." Harry swayed as he gestured with his hand.

Snape put an arm behind him to lower him back to the bed. By the time he was horizontal, Harry was out. Snape studied his sleeping face before he said, "You cannot know how sorry I am." Then after a pause, "What have you done to me, Potter?" He freed his arm and sat up. He shook his head with a huff of self-disgust and pulled out his wand to hover the boy to his own bed.

When he had settled Harry in and covered him, he stared down at him by the warm lamplight. He had given the boy a double dose and did not expect he would wake up again. He left the lamp up a little, just in case.

Harry yawned widely and rubbed his disoriented head as he entered the dining room the next morning. As he sat down, he had to use his hands on the table for balance.

"I gave you quite a bit of the potion last night," Snape commented.

"Is that why I feel like this?" Harry asked, rubbing his eyes to coax them to stay open.

"Undoubtedly. It will wear off in a few hours," Snape said conversationally as he read the Prophet .

Malfoy's insinuations played through Harry's mind but he dismissed them.

"Would you like this?" Snape asked as he held out the newspaper.

"Am I in it?"

"Remarkably . . . no."

"Yeah, sure." Harry accepted it and read the text of a speech given by Fudge where he took credit for his Aurors apprehending four of the remaining free Death Eaters. Harry shook his head, but felt a little relieved at the anonymity.

The next day, Snape said, "I need to go to a meeting at Hogwarts. I don't want you left here alone; you should come with me."

"You said Pettigrew couldn't get in."

"Nevertheless . . . "

"You are worrying too much, sir," Harry criticized as he put his quill down from taking notes from the Potions texts. Snape seemed to take affront at that. Harry went on, "You said, and the Aurors said, that the other two D.E. are not consequential and probably aren't even with Pettigrew."

Darkly, Snape said, "I think you want him to show up, Potter. So you can do him in."

Harry looked down at his parchments. "Well, you said I couldn't go after him . . . "

"Revenge is not what you think it is."

Harry didn't look up at him. He pretended to go back to his notes.

With a dismissive tone, Snape said, "Very well, I will trust the Auror's spelling and assume that if it fails you will call for help, NOT try to handle it yourself."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, although he didn't look up as he did so, afraid his lie would show for certain.

In a darker tone Snape said, "And if not, then you will suffer the consequences." He stalked off with a swish of his robe.

As he heard the sound of the Floo powder canister scrapping on teh mantel, Harry almost called him back. He had disappointed Snape and found himself hating to do that. He pulled his wand from his pocket and placed it on the desk beside his parchment as he went back to his notes.

An hour and a half later, Snape returned. Harry hadn't even moved. "Good meeting, sir?"

"Good enough. No opportunities for revenge, I assume?"

"No," Harry admitted, wishing this topic would get dropped.

Days later, Harry watched the yellow slicker go by again while he was looking for something in his trunk. He was careful this time to stay far enough from the glass so as to be invisible. The girl glanced up at his window and didn't see him, apparently because she continued by at the same pace. Harry wondered who she was. He envied her freedom to walk along the street. He slammed the trunk lid down hard in anger then sat on it until he had himself under control.

Pettigrew. Wormtail. He hated him now. Harry didn't want him in Azkaban, he wanted him dead, preferably after a bit of pain and some of that pathetic sniveling fear of his. Realizing that everyone from Dumbledore to Sirius would be alarmed by his fantasy, he stopped it and stood up.

Harry sat back on the lounger in the library and wrote to his friends after rereading their most recent letters. Snape sat at the very small table in the corner, taking notes out of a book almost too heavy for the table's spindly legs. Harry reviewed the

letters, folded them up and set them aside, not feeling energetic enough to go fetch Hedwig from his room. His eyes weren't focusing well; he rubbed them hard which made them ache more.

The clock read just after six. Harry wished it said a little later, he was feeling rather tired even though he had not done anything strenuous all day. For no particularly good reason, he felt like he had played back-to-back Quidditch matches, long ones. He slouched in his chair and mindlessly rearranged the piles of letters.

"It is dinner time, I believe," Snape said easily. He stood and set aside the large book he had been reading.

Thinking of food made Harry feel much worse suddenly. "Uh, I think I'm not very hungry," he said. He disinterestedly stacked the letters and set a book on them as a weight. He rubbed his eyes again, more gently this time.

"You are certain?" Snape asked.

It made Harry woozy to even consider it. "Yeah." He pushed himself to his feet using the lounger back. "I think I'll just go up to my room." The floor tilted a little, but he made it to the door. Snape followed him across the hall. At the bottom of the staircase, Harry hefted himself up a step using the handrail. Focusing his eyes had grown more difficult as he walked, but he resisted rubbing the aching things yet again. Snape took hold of his left arm and turned him back. "Are you feeling unwell?" he demanded.

Harry recoiled from his tone and had to take a step backward up the stairs to keep from falling. "I'm all right," he insisted. He tried unsuccessfully to straighten his back. "I'm tired, is all." Even standing up a step, he was not up to his guardian's height. Snape leaned closer and looked him over. He still had a hold of Harry's arm. "Really," Harry insisted. "It's nothing." He was feeling weak despite his assertions and he dearly wanted to go to his room.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he studied Harry. He tossed his hand free of his long sleeve and raised it to Harry's forehead.

"It's not–" Harry mumbled.

"You are feverish," Snape stated. He released Harry's arm with a push to urge him upstairs. "Go to your room, then." He stepped away with a flare of his robe and headed down to the toilet beside the kitchen.

Anxious, Harry watched him disappear. He could only force himself to move by degrees. Finally, he turned to continue, an undefined ache of worry in his chest. At the top of the steps, Snape caught up to him.

"Come along," he said, retaking his arm. "I found an antipyretic. It will make you feel better, at least."

Harry was led to sit on the edge of his bed. He could not find the strength for anything, so he waited mutely. Snape poured a blob of thick dark liquid into a small glass of water and handed it to him. "Drink it," he commanded levelly.

Harry put it to his lips and forced himself to swallow past a wave of nausea. Between sips he watched Snape recork the bottle and set it on the night stand along with a fresh jug of water and a cloth. Harry held the tainted water before his mouth and stared out at the dimmer main hall. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"You're what?"

Harry's lips moved mutely a few words before he repeated, "I'm sorry." He thought about drinking more of the dilute medicine, but he could not imagine swallowing around the anxiety tightening his throat. He held it out for Snape to take it back.

"Finish it," Snape said firmly. Harry tried to obey. His guardian paced away, rubbing the bridge of his nose. When Harry eventually set the empty glass aside, Snape asked, "Why are you apologizing?"

Harry thought that over and hesitated replying. He rubbed his eyes carefully and said in a quiet voice, "I don't mean to be a problem."

Snape froze with his hand pushing back his long hair. "You aren't. Have I given you that impression?" he asked in disbelief.

Harry could not find a response. The question had confused him. The hard tone and the words clattered together in his brain. "I just–" he stopped. He felt dizzy now and he could not understand why Snape wasn't angry with him, or was, but in some incomprehensible way.

"Lie down and rest; I'll check on you in an hour or so." When Harry did not comply immediately, Snape said, "Harry," in a firm tone.

That jarred him into moving, a bit like an automaton, to kick off his house shoes, pull off his glasses and lie on his side. The room did not cease to spin, it just did it sideways now, which was almost worse. Harry closed his eyes to block out the unstable view of his room.

Snape returned an hour later. It was dark outside now, so he turned up the bedside lamp. Harry lay in his day robe, half curled on his side. A sheen of sweat coated the boy's face and he looked pale in the warm light. Snape pressed his hand to the damp

forehead and found Harry was even warmer than before. Snape frowned, thinking that he had had too much faith in the potion he had given him.

"Harry," he said, shaking one boney shoulder.

Harry made a small noise and rolled onto his back. One hand clawed weakly at the damp robes clinging to him. He cracked his eyes and squinted at Snape, brow furrowing.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked. Eyes unnaturally bright, Harry blinked at him without replying. Snape straightened. "I'll contact a Healer; you may have something more serious than an influenza."

Harry shook his head clumsily. "Doctors are expensive," he mumbled.

"I would not summon you a doctor; a Healer would be much more effective," Snape commented.

Harry's eyes moved around the room, squinting hard. He then looked at Snape in confusion. After swallowing hard, Harry said, "Professor?" in a way that made Snape suspect he had lost track of the here and now.

"Yes, definitely a Healer." Snape stood quickly. "Don't move."

Harry looked like he wanted to say something, but Snape did not give him the chance. Before the hearth, he hesitated contacting St. Mungos, and considered instead contacting McGonagall and having her find Madame Pomfrey. The high likelihood that they were both out of the country, led him to request the hospital after he tossed in the powder.

The hospital greetingwitch insisted that someone would arrive within fifteen to twenty minutes. Snape straightened his tall frame and went back up to the boy's room.

Harry was half sitting, leaning over to pour himself some water. Snape intervened, taking the jug from shaky hands. He filled the glass and held it out. Harry looked at him uncertainly before accepting it. Snape stood beside the bed as Harry thirstily drank it down, then took the glass back. Harry adjusted his glasses and looked around the room with bloodstained eyes. Snape soaked the cloth in water from the jug and folded it in thirds. He held it in his hand. "Harry?" he prompted.

Clearly disoriented, Harry looked up at him. "Where?"

Calmly, Snape replied, "You are home." When this only increased Harry agitation, Snape said, "It's all right, Harry, you are ill and not yourself." He held out the cold, damp cloth. "Put this on your forehead, it should make you feel better."

Biting his lip, Harry accepted it and removed his glasses to press it over his eyes. Snape thought he could see Harry's shoulders relax as the cold made itself felt. The sight again of Harry's sweat-soaked robe sent Snape to the wardrobe for a set of pyjamas.

Setting them on the bed before Harry, just as he was readjusting his glasses, startled the boy. He looked sharply up at Snape.

"Harry," Snape said, trying to reassure him. "You are feverish. Trust me for a short while until you feel better."

Harry swallowed hard again and thought that over. It occurred to Snape that depending upon how disoriented Harry was, there may be no basis for trust. He hesitated while he considered how best to proceed. As he mulled over this odd dilemma, Harry felt his robe front and reached for the clean clothes. Snape stepped back to give him a little space. He hoped the Healer wasn't too long in coming.

Changed, Harry clumsily crawled under the duvet and dropped back onto his pillow. Snape returned to his side and rewetted the cloth.

"I don't. . ." Harry began as Snape tugged off his glasses before laying the compress across his forehead. Snape chose to disregard Harry's confusion this time.

"The Healer will be here in a matter of minutes. Relax."

Surprisingly, Harry seemed to accept that. He reached up and adjusted the cool cloth before closing his eyes. Snape brought an old straightbacked chair from against the wall and sat beside the bed. Minutes later, Harry's eyes snapped open. His alarmed gaze took in the room. He reached a hand out before him as though expecting to touch something that was not there. More confused by encountering only air, Harry's arm dropped to the bed. "No spiders," he observed.

Snape did something unwise then. Unable to resist his curiosity; he leaned over and caught Harry's gaze and pried his mind open. He had a vision of a cramped space, light leaking in only in streaks. A woman's voice in a difficult tone was scorning him for the inconvenience he was causing everyone. Harry's fevered brain couldn't manage anything more than pathetic apology.

Snape closed the Legilimency down, reeling and nauseous from Harry's hallucinatory mind. It took many deep, cleansing breaths before he fully returned to himself. Pushing the chair aside, Snape moved to sit on the bed. He took Harry's arms in his hands and spoke his name. "You are not with the Dursleys anymore–you are with me," he stated. When this again caused more confusion in Harry's eyes, Snape

released him and sat back with a huff. As compelled as he was to attempt to explain, he imagined the futility of it. Depending upon which Harry this was, he may be incapable of understanding. "Just be calm, Harry," he said. "You aren't in your cupboard." A stab of something went through Snape as he said that, surprising and dismaying him.

Harry's bright eyes looked around, dwelling on the large stone hearth. "This'sa nice room," he slurred.

Snape raised a brow. "I'm glad you think so."

Harry's lips moved in silence before he said, "You're being really nice to me."

"I do try . . . to do so. Now."

The sound of the door knocker rescued him from further explanation.

A middle-aged wizard stood in the doorway. Snape barely heard his introduction of himself before he hurried him in and up the staircase. "He has been feverish almost two hours. I gave him an antipyretic to no effect." Snape realized he was rambling and forced himself to stop.

The Healer stepped over to the bed, set his battered leather case on the floor, and sat on the edge. "Hello, son. Not feeling so well, I hear," he said in a friendly tone.

Harry shook his head in agreement. "Who are you?" he breathed in a bit of a challenging tone.

"Healer Redletting." To Snape he said reassuringly, "There is something virulant going around." He pulled out his wand. "Open wide."

Harry opened his mouth and was spelled in a way that made color radiate all around the inside of his mouth.

"Any trouble breathing?" he asked. When Harry didn't reply, Redletting turned to Snape, who shook his head. He used a few more spells then sat back in thought. "I would have thought it was Bostick Influenza, but it doesn't look like it."

Snape found himself immensely disliking the man's indecision. Harry fingered the compress on his forehead as though noticing it for the first time. "I knew . . . I knew they wanted revenge," Harry stated knowingly.

"Did you?" Redletting said matter-of-factly before giving Snape a questioning look.

"He has been a little delirious," Snape explained easily, although he hoped Harry did not feel the need to talk too much.

"Apparently," the Healer agreed. He removed two vials of silvery liquid from his bag. He uncorked one and used a spell to charm a drop of blood out of Harry's finger without pricking his skin. The drop fell from Harry's unmarred fingertip into the vial.

"He still wants to kill me," Harry commented.

"Who does?" Redletting asked as he repeated this with the other vial.

"There isn't anything else left," Harry went on, ignoring the question.

Snape rubbed his chin and met the concerned, bordering on suspicious, gaze of the Healer. Redletting tightened the corks on the vials and shook them a moment before holding them up to look through them at the lamplight.

"He killed mum and dad, why not me?" Harry went on. Snape stepped around the bed to the other side as Harry said, "He can't if I kill him first."

Redletting swallowed hard and gave Harry a disturbed look. He looked reluctantly up at Snape as if afraid he perhaps now knew too much. Snape sighed and reached over to pull the compress aside. He had to gesture with his head to get the other wizard to look down at his patient.

"Yah!" the man said, startled.

His reaction startled Harry as well, making him roll away to escape. Snape sat down and pushed him back. "Professor?" Harry said in confusion.

"Great goblins," Redletting blurted.

"That is why he speaks so," Snape stated. He narrowed his eyes at the Healer. "Perhaps the Misthrapherian has finished," he prompted.

"Huh? Oh." Redletting held up the vials. "Ah, it is Bostick. Bad case of it." He rummaged around in his bag a moment as he said, "Raised Muggle, though, right? That lack of childhood exposure to Diabolvirus makes adult cases much harder." He pulled out two bottles and poured some of each into the water glass.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter," he said as he handed it to him. Snape considered then abandoned his notion of assisting Harry with the cup. Harry sniffed it doubtfully before taking a sip.

"The Prophet has been complaining about not knowing where he is," Redletting said.

Lowering his brow, Snape demanded, "You will not be saying, correct? As you heard, his life is in danger."

Redletting sat straight. "No, of course not," he said nervously. Snape decided the man was telling the truth. He considered using a memory charm on him but if he needed to contact him should Harry not recover, that would make it difficult. Redletting indicated the two bottles on the night stand. "One more dose in four hours and he'll be completely recovered."

Harry had finished the cup and held it out. "Good boy," Redletting said as he accepted it. Harry's eyes darkened and narrowed to such a degree that the Healer stood suddenly. "Well," he muttered as he picked up his bag. "I'll be going then."

Snape followed him downstairs. In the entryway Redletting paused and pulled a blank parchment pad from his pocket. He muttered a charm and the bill appeared on it. He tore off the top sheet and handed it over. Snape squinted at the illegible writing before pulling his coin purse from his cloak pocket. He handed over a galleon and four sickles.

"Do contact me if he isn't himself by morning," Redletting said as he stepped out. He turned and said, "And do tell him I was very honored to meet him."

Snape nodded him out. Back upstairs Harry was sound asleep. The color had returned to his cheeks and the sheen had dried from them. More tension than Snape realized had built in him, drained upon seeing those signs. He turned the lamp down and left.

Four hours later, Snape reluctantly roused a very heavily sleeping Harry. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he sat on the bed.

"Better," Harry breathed. He accepted the offered cup of medicine and took a gulp. "Throat's a little sore," he commented hoarsely.

"No confusion about where you are?"

Harry froze with the cup to his bottom lip. "No," he answered carefully. "Was I confused?"

"Rather," Snape replied dryly.

"Oh," Harry said. "I hope I wasn't too much trouble."

Snape remembered Harry's uneasiness around him which contrasted starkly with his current relaxed posture. "No trouble. You worried the Healer with your dark talk of revenge and killing, but I explained."

"I what?" Harry asked. He then frowned , as though upset he had been taken in. "Right," he commented.

Snape's look was intent, but he did not argue, simply took the medicines and left Harry to sleep.

Chapter 16

Harry realized that the girl in the yellow slicker went by at three-forty every day. He started making a point of being at his window at that time. He only ever saw her go in one direction. As unproductive as it was, he spent time wondering if she were walking in a loop or just going back after dark when he rarely looked out. He looked for clues to whether she was a Muggle or a witch and couldn't decide from what he saw. Weighing the two, he found reasons to wish for one or the other.

He considered sitting out in the garden at that time, but he wasn't supposed to go out. Frustrated, he started practicing Transfiguration spells using his Sneakascope, which quickly rendered it even more inoperable than it had been before.

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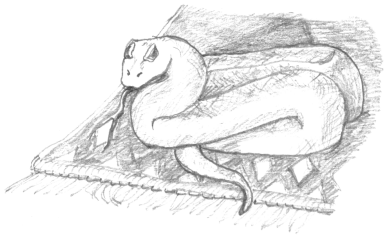

Unannounced Visitors

At breakfast one sunny morning, Snape said, "I have another meeting this afternoon. Do you think you can manage to behave yourself for a few hours?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You have been very quiet," Snape observed.

"So have you," Harry countered with a light grin.

"True."

"I thought you preferred that," Harry reminded him, just to make conversation.

"In general, yes. Do not use that as a reason to be silent." When Harry shrugged, Snape went on, "I realized this morning that we have only nine days remaining before I need to return for the next school year. I will expect you to return with me at that time." He said this in a tone that left no room for argument. "I will not have much time after that."

Harry took a deep breath. He hadn't told anyone what had happened. It wasn't the kind of news he would usually keep from his best friends. When he did tell them, he would have to explain why he had waited so long. That was assuming Ron hung around long enough to listen to that.

"I'll go back with you then , sir," Harry said. "I don't have much desire to be around here for long alone." As he said this he thought of the girl in the yellow slicker and wondered if that were really true.

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As he departed, Snape repeated that Harry should call for help with the Floo at any sign of trouble. "Yes, yes," Harry said, "even if Pettigrew bows to the floor and begs me to kill him. I remember from last time."

Alone in the house, Harry sat back on his bed with the eminently practical writing tablet from Fred and George. It had a never out kind of charm for parchment and a spill-proof inkwell. He dipped his quill and addressed a reply to Hermione's last letter. Even though he hadn't said anything in particular to her, because he kept thinking he should explain things in person, she commented about how happy he sounded. Harry grinned as he reread her letter again and thought about what to say in return that didn't include anything about his current digs, which were still supposed to be secret.

Halfway through his long reply, the door knocker clacking downwtairs pulled Harry out of his thoughts and imagined the girl in the yellow slicker standing at the door. He put his things aside, jumped off the bed and peered out the window. A tall man and a younger woman stood outside. Harry easily recognized the nose on the man; although the slight greying around the temples was different. He rushed downstairs, stopping in the kitchen. "Tidgy? Can you make tea, please?" Harry asked the house-elf.

Tidgy's eyes filled to near overflowing instantly. "Of course, Master Harry," the elf said in near ecstasy.

Shaking his head in disgust, Harry went quickly to the door and swung it open. The occupants of the garden turned to him and turned from curious to rather surprised. "You must be Shazor Snape," Harry said to the man. The woman, from closer view, wasn't as young as he had thought, but wore makeup as though she were.

"And you are . . . Harry Potter," the man said, stunned. His voice wasn't as low as Severus' and his jaw line was rounder, but otherwise they were identical.

Harry stepped back. "Do you want to come in?"

"Is my son here?" Shazor asked warily.

In a casual way Harry replied, "He had a meeting at Hogwarts. He should be back anytime."

As they stepped into the hall, Shazor looked up in alarm at the hole burned in the balcony and the other burn marks on the walls. Harry realized only then how they must look; he didn't even notice them anymore.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," the woman said earnestly. Harry knew from some previous careful questioning that this must be Shazor's second wife. "I'm Gretta, by the way."

They shook hands and Harry led them into the drawing room. He gestured for them to sit and took a seat himself around the marble table. Gretta smiled at him again as though pleased just to be there with him. Shazor sat rigid, looking critically around the room.

"How are you doing after that nasty fight with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?" Gretta asked him.

"I'm doing fine, ma'am. Thank you."

"It is such a relief having him gone," she breathed. "So much trouble just a few bad wizards can create." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Gretta," Shazor said stiffly, "I am sure he does not want to speak of it."

"I am all right with speaking about it, sir," Harry said in a friendly manner. Indeed, he had been spared this for quite a while.

"Such a nice young man you are, dear," Gretta said affectionately as she patted him on the knee.

Tidgy came in with the tea, setting the tray on the table and bowing. "Thank you, Tidgy," Harry said as he started to pour. Tidgy looked as though he might burst into tears. He bowed very low and rushed from the room. Harry steadfastly ignored the looks of total shock he was receiving from the two guests.

They all sipped their tea. After a polite pause Shazor said, "I am wondering why you are here, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked into his cup and decided which tactic to take. It was Severus' place to explain things, he supposed, and he was really not certain what this man's reaction might be. "I was bored of living at my school." Thinking more explanation was in order, he added, "My headmaster didn't think anyone would imagine I'd be here."

"You are hiding?" he asked with an edge.

"Yes," Harry admitted, "from anyone who might want revenge on me."

Shazor arranged his robes and sat back down. "Perhaps given who you are, Mr. Potter, you can answer my questions." At Harry's shrug, he pulled out a copy of the Prophet from a few days ago. "I am curious if my son is at risk."

Harry accepted the paper and glanced at the headline: Ministry to seek out every last Death Eater and Associate of Voldemort . He handed it back. "Why would he be?" Harry asked. "He–"

Shazor interrupted as he tucked the paper away, "Perhaps you are not the right person to speak with."

Calmly, Harry said, "I know he used to be a Death Eater, but the Ministry knows that he has been helping Albus Dumbledore for twenty years or so."

"He has?" Shazor asked. "How do you know that?"

"Because Dumbledore believes it," Harry said simply. "There are only three Death Eaters left free."

"Counting my son?"

Harry sat back with his cup. "I don't count Professor Snape."

Shazor relaxed at that and then with a furrowed brow asked, "May I inquire what happened in the main hall?"

"The hole?" Harry thought a moment. "I'm not sure, but I think that was Lucius Malfoy." He sipped his tea calmly.

"There was a fight here?"

"It mentions it in that article, I think," Harry explained. "Though it doesn't say where it happened."

Shazor took a biscuit from the open tin on the tray and examined it rather than eating it. "So you do not think there is any risk of the Ministry arresting my son?"

Harry took up a biscuit as well and munched on it. It was ginger flavored and very good. "The night of the attack, we sat around this table with Tonks, Rogan, and Shacklebolt until morning. They are Ministry Aurors," Harry clarified. "They had lots of opportunity to take him away if they'd wanted. They don't seem to have any interest in him. Quite the opposite–it was more like a reunion."

Shazor took that in. Harry was just topping up their tea when the Floo flare sounded in the dining room. With some trepidation Harry held still as footsteps came toward the drawing room. Severus stopped in the doorway and took in the scene with surprise that fast converted to resignation. "You did not inform me that you were coming," he criticized his father.

They all stood up in greeting. "I didn't think it necessary," Shazor said with an airy defensiveness.

Severus' eyes darted from Harry to his father before he pulled over another chair and they all returned to sitting. Harry poured out another cup of tea and passed it over.

"So," Severus stated levelly, "you have met Mr. Potter."

"Rather surprising person to have answer the door, I must admit," Shazor said. Severus raised a brow but didn't reply. Shazor made a noise of discomfort. "For several reasons," he hinted.

Harry looked between the two Snapes over the rim of his cup. "Is he referring to my dad?" he asked the younger one.

Severus sat back and crossed his arms challengingly. "I believe so."

"Oh," Harry stated casually. At Shazor's look, Harry went on with a shrug, "I didn't know him. Obviously." Harry picked up the teapot and discovered it was empty. He stood up with it and hesitated at the visitors' horrified expressions. Deciding to ignore them, he continued to leave for the kitchen.

"You have to forgive him," Severus sneered lightly, "he was raised as a Muggle . . . a Muggle house-elf."

Harry paused in the doorway to roll his eyes.

"I don't know whether to be more appalled by the strange manners of the hero of wizardry or your abominable manners, Severus," Shazor breathed.

When Harry's footsteps faded across the Hall, Snape commented, "He needs to learn that he need not cater to the adults around him. It is unfortunately the way he was raised."

After this formed a break in the conversation, Severus asked, "May I ask what you are here for?"

Shazor pulled out the Prophet again and handed it over. "Mr. Potter has already attempted to assure me that you are not one of the aforementioned."

Severus glanced at it and handed it back. "He is correct."

Shazor sipped his tea for a minute and frowned. "You joined them willingly–do they not know that?" he asked testily.

At that moment Harry stepped in with fresh tea. Shazor looked up sharply at him. Snape commented, "Mr. Potter knows most everything–do not concern yourself about him. If the Ministry ever knew, it has been forgotten, either accidentally or willfully. Should you wish to go over there and bring it up, they could very well take an interest, I am sure."

"I have no intention of doing so, Severus," he stated strongly.

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Harry set the teapot down. "Should I leave?" he asked Severus.

"It does not matter. Sit down."

Shazor said in a voice that indicated his patience might be shallow, "I would like to speak with you alone. There are other matters to discuss."

Severus refilled his own tea and his father's and sat back with it in a forced casual attitude. "Most anything you need to discuss with me can be said in front of Harry. I have adopted him."

Shazor choked on the sip he had just taken. "You are not serious?" Gretta blinked her long eyelashes at Harry and then smiled at him sweetly, clearly charmed by the notion.

"Harry?" Severus prompted.

It took a moment for Harry to realize that he wanted him to pull out the adoption parchment. He went over to the bureau and pulled out the rolled, embossed application form. He handed it over to Severus, who handed it to his father.

As he unrolled it, Shazor asked, "Why?" in a very doubtful way.

Severus thought a moment. "I admit the reasons continue to change," he said vaguely.

Harry paused beside his chair and stared at Severus. "Is that happening to you too, sir?" he asked in quiet surprise.

Shazor let the parchment roll itself up again suddenly. "I would have appreciated being consulted before you took such a step," he said angrily. "As inheritor I would like to know he is worthy, even given who he is."

Still with forced casualness, Severus said, "Harry, how long did it take you to learn the Columnar spell?"

"The one we did a few days ago?" Harry asked. "Uh, I don't know."

"Ten minutes? Five, perhaps?"

Harry shrugged. "Something like that. It wasn't very hard."

Shazor blinked at that. Gretta chimed in. She had taken hold of Shazor's arm apparently to calm him. "One would expect his magic to be very good, considering."

"Harry, in the bureau-" Severus stood suddenly. "Never mind. I will fetch it." He pulled another sheet out of a drawer and handed it to his father.

Harry recognized it from the back. "You have a copy of my O.W.L.s?" A little miffed, he added, "I don't plan to go on in Divination."

"Clap trap anyway," Shazor commented.

"Oh, Hon, that isn't true," Gretta commented and patted him on the arm.

Harry sighed and held his mouth closed.

"And what do you plan to do after your schooling, Mr. Potter?" Shazor asked, now looking calculating rather than upset.

"Depending on how my N.E.W.T.s go, I plan to apply to the Auror's program."

"Goodness," Gretta said, "haven't you had enough of that?"

"At the moment I feel that way, but in a month I think I won't," Harry replied evenly.

Shazor handed back the O.W.L. results. "Grades are all well and good. Are you an organized person?"

"I'm getting better," Harry admitted.

"Well mannered? Polite?" Shazor went on. "Never mind, you were polite to the house-elf as I recall." He shook his head. "At least he isn't blonde," he said.

Flatly, Harry said, "Severus was debating between adopting me or Draco Malfoy, but I had paper and Malfoy had rock." He took yet another biscuit and munched on it purely for the distraction.

Gretta patted Shazor's arm. "He has your sense of humor," she pointed out. She smiled at Harry with that ultra-affectionate look again. Her gaze shifted past him and she said, "My, what a lovely snake! Is that yours?"

Harry had his wand out before he even turned around. Snape jumped up with his at ready as well, but Harry made it out the door of the drawing room first. "Nagini," he whispered as he watched the great snake make her way around the edge of the wall from the far corner of the hall. Red trailed behind her. Harry stepped across the open space, Nagini changed course to follow.

"Potter!" Severus berated and aimed his wand.

"NO!" Harry shouted. "She'll know where he is," he explained in a low voice. "He sent her because he couldn't get past the new spells."

"What is this?" Shazor asked from the drawing room doorway.

"Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini," Severus explained. "Pettigrew undoubtedly-"

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The snake veered toward Snape's voice. " This way, " Harry hissed at her. She turned again. " Where is your master? " he asked her.

" I have not seen Master in a very long time ."

"Oh. Dear. Merlin," Shazor exclaimed. "You cannot have adopted a Parselmouth," he moaned.

" Where is Wormtail? " Harry demanded. Nagini had slowed but she still approached. Blood smeared her jaws.

"Potter," Severus said threateningly, his wand still aimed at the snake.

"One minute more," Harry insisted. " Wormtail cannot speak to you thusly. I speak to you as your master did–I see your mind as your master did. Tell me. "

Nagini hesitated. She lifted her head up and investigated the air with her tongue. " Will you give me a warm place to sleep if I answer? It has been too cold for too long. "

"Light a fire, Severus," Harry said, pointing at the hearth at the end of the hall. "Put the rug in front of it."

With a questioning expression Severus stepped cautiously past Nagini's long tail and ignited a fire in the grate. He dragged the rug from the center of the hall to the hearth, keeping a careful eye on the snake as he did so.

" There ," Harry said when it was set.

" Seven gardens south of this one and four east, " she hissed and turned toward the fire. Harry repeated that aloud. Severus moved to the library, staying carefully clear of the snake. Harry watched as Nagini turned herself into a great coil before the hearth and rested her head on herself. Her eyes sank to half closed and her tongue flicked less frequently as she basked in the heat.

Harry, fierce determination burning through him, turned toward the door. Severus' voice pulled him up short. "Harry," he said sternly. Severus faltered as Nagini considered him as he passed her then sped up to intercept Harry, who was choosing to ignore him.

Forced to stop because Severus' much larger frame was in his path, Harry said in a low voice, "Get out of my way."

"I have contacted the Ministry. The Aurors will be here shortly," Severus explained.

"He's mine," Harry said. Pain and rage filled him at the thought of facing Pettigrew again. "I let him go once . . ." His jaw hardened and he held his wand out as though he thought of using it right then.

"If the boy has valid revenge to take, let him go," Shazor commented.

Severus shot him a warning look before turning back to his charge. "Harry, I cannot stop you because I do not wish to fight you." He sighed and lowered himself on one knee so Harry was looking down at him. This did capture Harry's attention, making him lower his wand.

"If you go, you will carve out a piece of yourself that you cannot get back. You have come so far, Harry," he said earnestly. "Far enough that I must implore you to let this go." He reached out and grasped Harry's upper arms as Harry reluctantly considered this, his expression varying between pained and determined. Severus went on, "You have your whole life ahead of you. You can choose to live it whole. If you choose to take a few moments of gratification in revenge you will forever live it incompletely."

Harry's shoulders fell. "He betrayed my mum and dad," he insisted in a dull voice. "He's the reason I've been alone all this time." A tear blinked out of his right eye at that.

"I know that," Severus said, sounding a little desperate. He stood up and in a smooth motion pulled Harry against himself. Harry rested his forehead against Snape's chest and sniffled faintly. "I'm trying to do what is best for you, Harry," Severus said quietly.

"Oh, dear," Gretta wailed into a kerchief. "So touching." She dabbed her eyes and nose and sniffed daintily.

Harry took a step back, released at that exact moment. Flushing, Harry breathed in and out, bringing himself under firm control. Shazor stared at his son as though he had never seen him before. Gretta sniffed again and gazed at them sadly.

A knock sounded on the door and it opened. Tonks stepped in. "Everything all right?" At Severus' assurances, she went on. "Good tip. Where did you get it?"

"From the snake." Snape indicated the large coil on the rug.

"Oh my," Tonks breathed. Nagini raised her head and considered the Auror.

Harry froze. "Tidgy," he breathed and started toward the rear of the hall. Severus grabbed his arm. "Ms. Tonks, please check the kitchen," he said.

Angrily, Harry said, "What? You are going to protect me from everything?"

"Yes," Severus said, as if that should be obvious.

Tonks re-emerged thirty seconds later. "Dead. I have to call the photographer over from the other location."

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"What happened? You got him, right?" Harry asked. He tried to toss off Severus' grip and failed. He gave in with a huff and threw his arms down limply.

Tonks paused before them. "He seemed to think you'd be coming, Harry. Once he realized it was just us . . . he killed himself. Seemed pretty despondent about failing to get to you."

Harry jerked his arm again and this time Severus released it.

"You been hanging on to him all this time?" Tonks asked Severus in amusement.

"Trying."

Tonks chuckled lightly and tapped Harry on the chin with her fist. "Good to know someone is looking out for you, Harry, even at the cost of peeving you off royally." She leaned in close and whispered only for him, "Looks like you got yourself a real dad." She stepped back with a devilish grin and looked over at Nagini, who appeared to have gone back to sleep. "What we are going to do with that, I don't know."

"She isn't evil," Harry commented. "She's just a snake."

Tonks looked doubtful, then shrugged. "Maybe the zoo then. Unless you want her?"

"No," Harry and Severus said together. Harry went on. "Give her a warm quiet place to sleep and she might be willing to answer any outstanding questions."

"Gee, where would we find a Parselmouth to talk to her? Hmmm."

Harry rolled his eyes.

When Tonks had departed, Shazor said bleakly as he shook his head, "A Parselmouth." Even Gretta looked unsympathetic about that.

Harry shrugged at Snape helplessly. "I wasn't born this way," he insisted.

"You weren't?" Severus asked in surprise.

"Dumbledore said I acquired Parseltongue along with this scar."

"Hmm. That is reassuring, Harry."

"It is? Why?" Harry asked in disbelief. "You sound like Greer," he added accusingly.

That night Harry tossed fitfully, visions of Pettigrew, cornered and angry, kept invading his thoughts. When the bed tilted, he jerked in surprise.

"Difficulty sleeping?" Snape's voice came from the darkness. The bedside lamp flared brighter, casting a halo of orange light around them. "Sit up."

With a frown Harry obeyed. Snape pressed a cup into his hand. "I don't want to need this all of the time," Harry commented tiredly.

"Firstly, it is a very mild potion. Secondly, I will not let that happen. You have had a stressful day. You need to sleep soundly to recover or this will only repeat itself tomorrow night."

Harry fingered the cup in indecision. Finally, he drank it down and handed it back. "Sorry about upsetting your father," Harry said.

Snape scoffed easily. "You have not seen him upset. And you are hardly to blame whether you naturally are a Parselmouth or acquired it."

"He seems pretty hard to please," Harry opined.

"And I am not?" Snape asked as though insulted.

Harry huffed in humor at his tone. "I don't know–maybe you are." He rubbed his forehead and put his hands over his eyes. "I think the potion is working." He lowered himself back down to his pillow and curled up on his side, welcoming the maw of sleep closing around him.

"Good night," Snape said. Harry merely murmured incoherently in response.

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun slicing between the curtains into his eyes. He padded downstairs in his dressing gown and slippers. The house was completely silent, reminding him with a twinge that Tidgy was gone. He stepped down the half flight to the kitchen. Whatever blood there had been was completely cleaned up. With a sad sigh, Harry took out the pans and started breakfast, ducking and leaning over a lot in a room designed for an elf.

"Potter," Snape said sharply. "What are you doing?"

Harry screwed the coffee pot together tightly and placed it on grate in the space made for it. "I assume that is a facetious question, sir," he commented and wrapped the

hot toast in a towel. "I really don't mind and it seemed like the only way to get breakfast."

Snape took the towel and placed it on the tray. "I suppose you are correct on that last count." When the coffee boiled, he took that as well and carried it upstairs. In the dining room, he said, "We shall have to find another before the school year begins. It will not be easy on such short notice."

Harry had a thought. "Do you mind if I look for one?"

Snape gave him a derisive look. "With your extensive house-elf connections?"

"Yes."

Snape gestured with his hand that he was welcome to it.

After breakfast, Harry owled Dobby and that afternoon the doorbell chimed.

"Who is that, I wonder?" Snape muttered.

Harry jumped up. "I think it is the first house-elf applicant," Harry said brightly, even more amused by Snape's surprise. At the entry he waved in Dobby and a much dolled up Winky.

"See, Master Harry," Dobby said to her reassuringly.

"I am wanting no pay," she insisted.

"I figured that," Harry commented. As they entered the hall, Snape stepped over and looked over the two elves.

"Professor," Dobby greeted him, bowing. Winky did the same, not looking nearly as hopeful.

"Potter, in here a moment," Snape said. After he closed the drawing room door behind him, he said, "Crouch's old house-elf?" Harry nodded. "Probably the least likely choice I would have considered," he said aloud to himself. "Isn't she in the employ of Hogwarts?"

"They are willing to let her go. I checked that already."

"You do work fast, Mr. Potter."

"Hey, if you are going to yell at me every morning at breakf-"

"I did not yell at you."

"Scold then," Harry interjected. "Dobby vouches for her not being anything like him. She didn't do well after Crouch gave her clothes but he thinks she just needs to be bound to a household again."

"Most all of them do need to be. Ms. Granger's efforts notwithstanding, house-elves are not natural. They have been distorted, like an exotic breed of dog, to serve wizard needs. Are you set on this elf?"

"No, she is just the first one I thought of when you said they were hard to find."

When they stepped back into the hall, Dobby immediately ceased whispering to Winky and gave them a pleased look. Snape stepped over to them. "Tell me about your former master, Winky," he said.

She looked a little fearful and began turning her bright white tea-towel around in her hands. Quietly, she said, "He was maybe not nice wizard, but I loyal to him. I not saying anything."

"Look at me, Winky," Snape said in a tone not to be disobeyed. Harry took an unconscious step backward and bit his lip. After a moment Snape said, "You will do."

Winky looked very relieved and pathetically grateful while Dobby grinned toothily at Harry. "Dobby is going in that case," Dobby said, "Will be seeing Master Harry soon, he is thinking, at Hogwarts." At Harry's nod of agreement, he snapped his fingers and disappeared.

"He is an odd one," Snape commented. He turned his attention back to Winky. "You are prepared to be bound?" The elf nodded emphatically, keeping her eyes averted downward.

Harry stood to the side and watched, arms wrapped around himself. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like this. Snape pulled his wand out of his pocket and held it out over her head. As she started to shift to her knees, he said, "Stand. I think Potter would feel better if you do." His gaze slid over to Harry for an instant. Winky looked alarmed as she stood straight again.

Snape incanted something long and Latin. A yellow glow formed around Winky's small frame as he finished. She reached out her long hands as though a child looking for a sweet. Snape reached his hand out, palm down. Winky grasped it and kissed the back of it. At that moment, the glow flashed away.

"Potter?" Snape said, gesturing that he should take his place.

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"It is simpler if you do. You inherit her along with the house," he stated levelly. When Harry shook his head again, clearly uncomfortable, Snape said, "As you wish." To Winky, he said, "You will give Master Harry the same obedience as myself."

"Yes, Master," she said stridently.

"There are no limits to your run of the house. Go." He dismissed her.

She stepped across the Great Hall and down to the kitchen, peering in each room she passed.

Harry went up to his room. He badly needed a distraction after that, so he reread the last few letters from each of his friends. After that, he took out his new Map and worked on adding color to it. Eventually his stomach distracted him; he hadn't really had a good meal that day since at lunch he hadn't wanted to incur Snape's annoyance again and only had an apple from the fruit basket.

He wandered downstairs to the dining room. Snape was there, reading the post. Harry took a seat across from him, then jumped when dinner appeared on the table in a sparkle of spell, Hogwart's style. Harry, mouth watering, pulled over a plate with a pile of thin sliced roast beef surrounded by small potatoes. A bowl of fruit salad in some kind of creamy dressing also had appeared.

After waiting for Snape to serve himself, Harry started eating. The meat was really good. Harry ate what he had taken and took more.

"I will admit," Snape said between bites, "that you did very well choosing a house-elf."

"It is pretty good," Harry agreed, then felt a little guilty about Tidgy until pudding distracted him from it.

Chapter 18.

Mum

That evening in the library, sleepy from eating too much and feeling unusually secure now that he wasn't hunted, curiosity overcame Harry's better sense. "Can I ask you something?" he said to Snape.

"Only if you do not insist upon an answer."

"Is your mum still alive?"

Snape looked up from the ledger he was filling in. "Yes."

When nothing else was forthcoming, Harry asked, "Where does she live?"

"Quite a distance from here," came the level reply that sounded unwelcoming of further inquiry.

Harry put his book aside and considered whether this was worth the struggle. He sighed lightly and asked, "Do you see her at all?"

"Not in ten years," Snape replied and this time gave the very distinct impression that the topic had grown unsavory.

Harry sat back and considered that. "I can't imagine," he commented. Snape put his quill down and gave Harry a long look. "Ron said he didn't speak to his dad all Easter break. I can't even imagine that," Harry marveled. The very thought gave him a stab of jealousy that only faded reluctantly.

"You are thinking you would like to meet her, I assume," Snape said evenly if not a touch darkly.

Harry shrugged. "I hadn't thought of it until your dad showed up yesterday."

Snape closed the ledger and pushed it aside. "She lives in an autonomous coven in the eastern part of the country."

"I don't know what that is," Harry pointed out.

"It is a women-only community. A Muggle might call it a cooperative or even a cult, I suppose."

After thinking that over, Harry said slowly, "That sorta implies that your dad didn't treat her very well." When Snape didn't respond, Harry asked, "I'm out of line, aren't I?"

"No. Not if he isn't here," he added dryly.

"So how long has your dad been remarried?" Harry asked, feeling emboldened.

"Almost ten years, to the extreme displeasure of my mother." Snape sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "My mother is not exactly pleased with me, either."

"A son who's a teacher doesn't seem that bad," Harry opined.

"I think she saw only malicious intent in that."

Harry gave him a startled look. "Huh," he said, then remembered that he himself had only seen malicious intent in Snape at one point. After a long pause Harry said, "You really don't think she'd like to see you again?"

"And I am accused of being blunt," Snape commented as an aside. "I really do not know," he added with a hint of impatience.

"Ten years is a long time," Harry observed.

"I suppose it is not unreasonable to write her," Snape stated quietly.

"It is up to you, sir."

"I think you are oversimplifying the situation, but perhaps that is to be expected in your case." He sounded a little tired as he said this.

Harry got up from the lounger to depart for his room, partly because he was tired too and partly to give Snape a chance to write.

Snape's voice halted him in the doorway. "Franklin is away on another errand. May I borrow your owl?"

Harry brought Hedwig downstairs and perched her on the back of Snape's chair, where she proceeded to preen her wings. "Goodnight, sir," Harry said as he stepped out again.

Snape pulled a sheet of correspondence parchment out of the bottom drawer of the desk. It had a pleasant faint blue sheen, rather than a yellowed one. Trying hard to hold Potter's simple notion of familial loyalty in his mind rather than the memory of their last difficult meeting, he wrote out the salutation in neat script.

Each line required lengthy deliberation, especially because he did not want it to seem as if it did. Eventually, he wrote, I hope this letter finds you well and that you have made a home for yourself at the coven. I assume you have heard of the Dark Lord's final demise. This has freed me to consider the future more broadly than I have previously been able. At the beginning of August I adopted a son who, as I expect all orphans do, obsesses over issues of family. He is very interested in meeting you, if you are amenable. I as well am curious how you are faring.

He read that over, surprised to find that he was truly curious how she was. Potter was correct, perhaps, that ten years was a long time. He signed with a standard closure imploring a reply, finding that easier than asking for one outright. By the time he had the letter sealed in an envelope and addressed, Hedwig had her head under her wing. She perked up immediately at the sound of her name and took the letter in her claw. Snape stood up, intending to open the window wider, but the white owl swooped cleanly through the narrow opening before he could reach it. He watched her ghostlike form flit away over the trees before turning back to the warm, lamplit room.

Hedwig returned at the end of lunch the next day, a huge, Hogwarts kind of midday meal that made Harry again eat more than he could really fit in his stomach. Snape took the letter from her and she flapped up to Harry's shoulder and nipped his ear.

Harry looked at her and gave her a strip of chicken. "Long flight, I guess," he commented. She finished that piece and bobbed her head to request another. Harry fed her a choicer strip. Snape stood with the letter in hand and left the dining room.

In the drawing room he closed the door and opened the letter while sitting at the desk. The first thing he noticed was that the salutation was just his name. It was rather surprising to find this marvelous white owl delivering a letter from you. First off, let me assure you that I have indeed made a home here at Dreveshire, odd for you to question that might not be true. Snape flinched and put the letter down. He had forgotten how aggravating her penchant for misunderstanding could be.

He rubbed his temple and continued. I have to remind myself that eleven years is a long time and people can change in unlikely ways. Something has apparently changed with you–the Severus I knew would not have had the slightest inclination toward parenting. I suppose he is the child of an associate of yours, many of whom were killed recently I am told. I am being advised by my Covenelder, against my instinct I might add, to give you another chance. One which you do not deserve but, in the interests of satisfying the curiosity of this boy, and my own, I will grant.

Old arguments and bitter feelings rose up in Snape's mind much clearer now than they had yesterday when he agreed to pen his letter. They made him feel more angry than he had in a very long time.

Harry sat alone at the table, feeling pensive. Hedwig sat on the chair back beside him, fluffing herself and preening occasionally. He was starting to regret his suggestion. The dinner plates disappeared. After a while, Winky appeared. She wore a different tea towel now, but still a very bright, clean one.

"Master Harry like pudding?" she asked.

"Is is chocolate?"

She thought a moment. "It could be if Master Harry wishes."

"Yes, I'd like that."

Winky returned with a large tray containing one small plate with a slice of chocolate cake. She placed this before Harry and snapped her fingers, sending the tray away somewhere. Her magic amazed him; she did much more than Tidgy ever seemed to, without thought.

"Master is not being happy," she said, clasping her hands before her and leaning toward him.

"Huh?" Harry uttered. He wasn't accustomed to getting concern from this quarter. Then with a chill, he realized that she was referring to Snape. Harry frowned and put his fork down, deeply regretting his interference.

"Winky can . . . calm Master, but does not know. Winky not instructed."

He remembered now how she had kept the Death Eater Barty Junior under her power for years. "No, don't do that. Master Severus wouldn't want that."

She frowned and dropped her eyes. "Is Master being violent when he very angry? Winky is not allowing anyone to be hurt . . . "

"No," Harry replied, his heart sinking. He hadn't heard anything and wondered what she had seen. Maybe she just sensed things like that. He was starting to realize that he knew nothing about house-elves and maybe nothing about Snape. "It's all right, Winky. I don't think you need to do anything."

She started to turn away. "Winky will return if needed, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Winky," Harry said with forced calm.

Harry poked his fork into his cake and made himself take a bite. The chocolate would make him feel better, he assumed. He didn't feel he could move. If he went up to his room, Snape might think he had given up on him. Of course, Snape couldn't know what Winky just came and told him, either.

Harry was saved from making a decision by Snape's return. As he took his seat, a fresh hot plate of food appeared before him. He stared at it a moment in a kind of surprised annoyance before he took up his fork.

"I'm sorry, sir. I shou-" Harry started to say.

Snape cut him off. "Don't, Potter. You apologize too much. It is one of your more annoying habits," he snapped.

Harry felt like some kind of spell had passed through his flesh. He waited in silent stillness for what might come next.

Snape rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "I'm sorry, Harry; I should not have said that, at least not in that manner." His eyes roamed over the plate in front of him, unsettled.

"It's all right, sir," Harry insisted. Compared to things Snape had said in the past, that was nothing. But the meanings of things had changed; he had let them change, in fact. Harry longed to say something to undo everything, then wondered what it was about him that made him always wish for that. He took a small bite of cake just for an excuse to move.

"You are too concessionary," Snape said in a rambling way. "You need not be so careful around me. I am concerned you do this because you fear that if you displease me you could be sent away." In a harder tone, as though this were an old argument he wanted settled, Snape went on. "That won't happen. You cannot be sent away."

Searching for a response, Harry stared at his guardian with a pained expression. He had never seen this side of Snape before, had not even thought it existed. The letter had clearly undermined him. "I do appreciate that," Harry finally said. "And at the risk of conceding, I can certainly get by without meeting your mum."

Chapter 18

Snape pushed his plate away. It disappeared an instant later. "She did agree to see us."

Harry blinked at that. Clearly this wasn't something he was going to understand anytime soon. "You told her about me?"

"I knew it was the only way to get her to even consider it."

"Gee, Mum, Harry Potter and I would like to drop by . . ." Harry said flippantly.

Snape laughed strangely. "She does not know it is Harry Potter," he said a little mischievously. "I did not feel I could use you in that way. If the mere fact of my adopting did not peak her curiosity . . . "

The landscape was becoming a little clearer now. Snape's tone and mannerisms were giving Harry a sense of underlying damage that was usually kept well masked. Snape was remasking it even as he spoke. Harry hoped this meeting went well, or he was going to have one more thing to deeply regret.

Four days later, they took the Floo from the Shrewsthorpe train station to a pub in a very small village in the East Midlands countryside. They walked from the quiet pub–where no one had paid them any attention when they arrived in the hearth–down a narrow lane that once had been paved with river stone, but now was mostly dirt and dust. A mile along, a gate formed of an elaborate rose bush appeared in the stone wall along the road. Harry marveled at the way the rose wood wound around itself as it met in the middle.

"I believe they practice a bit of Druidic magic," Snape said as Harry continued to study it. He pulled a cord beside the gate and a rusty bell at the top rang dully.

They waited. Eventually, a bent-over old witch appeared beyond the flowered arch. She uttered a spell and gestured for them to enter. "We are here to see-"

"Anita, yes, yes," the old woman interrupted. "This way," she said pleasantly, gesturing with her long walking stick. She waited for them to pass, then muttered something at the rose gate. She smiled mildly at them and started to lead the way, then stopped with a startled expression. She stepped up to Harry and gazed quizzically at him.

"Hmm, no more poppy tea before noon, me thinks," she muttered as she started up the brick path that meandered through a rampant garden. At the first low building, they entered. "Wait here, dears," she said and went out the far door.

Harry wandered around the room. Books lined low, roughhewn shelves along two walls. Crowded paintings of widely varying skill hung above. The furniture was all composed of antler and bone with needlework pillows. He had to admit, the decor didn't appeal to him much. He stepped back over to the window and looked out over the garden and the roses forming the entrance.

"Severus," an unfamiliar voice said with mixed emotion. Harry turned slowly and watched as a thin woman with a strong jaw line and short grey hair came in the door on the far side. The old woman who had met them at the gate stepped in before her as though on guard. Anita reached out and brushed Snape's sleeve. "You have literally not changed at all," she said in surprise. She collected herself. "Anastasia, this is my son, Severus."

Snape shook the old witch's hand. "I have heard quite a lot about you," she said as though challenging him to try anything.

"Clearly," Snape said dryly.

Anita took a deep breath and glanced around their side of the room. "Did you bring your son?" she asked.

Snape turned to Harry, gesturing with his arm, and Harry realized it must seem strange, him rooted to this spot way over here. Harry forced his feet to move. He carefully navigated around the prongs of the furniture as he went over to them.

"Ma'am," Harry said in greeting when he reached them.

She was more than surprised when she recognized him; she appeared to fall into a trance for a long moment. "This is your son?" she breathed. She turned to Snape. "You adopted Harry Potter?"

Snape bowed his head, sending his hair forward. "Yes."

She put her fingertips to her forehead in a very familiar gesture. "I can't believe they allowed you to do that. I assumed you had adopted one of your fellow Death Eaters' children."

Harry searched in vain for a response since the adoption had taken a bit of arguing on that exact point. Left hanging by the silence, Anita said dazedly, "Well, have a seat." She moved to one of the antler rocking chairs and gestured for them to take the couch. Snape and Harry sat there. The old witch sat to the side on a stool, her staff between her knees. Harry wondered if the whole thing wasn't a wand of some kind and how that would work if it were. Their eyes met and, after a moment,

she nodded. Harry was certain she was answering his unspoken question. Used to Legilimency, Harry nodded in return and looked back at Anita.

"I need a moment to take this in," she said, staring at Harry perplexedly. She took a deep breath and asked, "So, you are living in the house in Shrewsthorpe?"

Harry answered, "For a few more days until classes begin at Hogwarts." He wasn't feeling very generous toward her. He kept remembering what her letter had done to Snape.

She clasped and unclasped her hands as though distressed. "You wanted this?" she asked him.

"To visit? Yes."

"I mean, to be adopted," she clarified.

"Yes," Harry replied evenly. "Very much so."

She turned to Snape who gave her a look as though, you were saying? "You believe you can find atonement this way?" she asked him bluntly. Snape's eyes narrowed.

Harry made a noise like a suppressed laugh. "You didn't tell me your parents were so much alike," he said.

"What?" Anita asked, very sharply.

"Shazor accused him of adopting me to protect himself from the Ministry. Actually, I should say, congratulated. You accuse him of having some kind of internal retribution to pay. Neither of you assumes he has altruistic motives." He could see she did not expect this much from him.

"You imagine he does?" she returned in a mocking tone.

Harry looked at her and thought, if you had seen him stopping me from going after Pettigrew, you wouldn't doubt it. The old witch cleared her throat, attracting Anita's attention. She gave Anita a solemn nod. Harry took a deep breath and Occluded his mind. He then intentionally waited for the old witch to look his way. She tilted her head to the side as if to say, ah, well .

"So, three weeks into this, you are still happy?" she asked Harry.

In a purely curious tone Harry said, "May I ask why you are asking me?"

A little uncomfortably, she replied, "Anastasia, my Covenelder, is helping me."

"I cannot read either of them now. The boy is as good as he is at hiding his mind once he realizes he needs to."

Anita looked at Harry a little suspiciously. "He taught you that?"

"Yes."

"You have something to hide?" Anita asked him.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I think you should trust people and what they tell you voluntarily. Everyone has things they would like to keep to themself. Even from a Covenelder living in the middle of nowhere."

"Old wounds they would like to continue nursing, for example," Anastasia said airily.

Harry pushed his glasses up and gave her a long look. She gave him an innocent one in return. "For example," Harry acknowledged grudgingly.

"Anita," Anastasia said, "I agree with the boy. You should trust first in this case. Severus could not have brought a more powerful icon of his true self or a better peacemaker. He has met you much farther than halfway." She waited for Anita to respond. When a time passed, she said, "What is still bothering you?"

After a long moment, Anita said quietly, "I raised a dark wizard."

Harry glanced at Snape, who was staring at the floor before his mother's chair.

"You would never believe I changed," Snape said. "Twenty years have gone by and you still refuse."

Her eyes went dark. "You were a monster–there was no path back for you."

Harry bit his lip and waited for someone else to speak.

Anita took a deep, calming breath. "I fear now that you have fooled this boy," she gestured to Harry.

In a level tone, as though he were being extra patient with a student, Snape said, "Even if you have no faith in me, you are seriously underestimating two people, Albus Dumbledore and Harry himself." Snape stood up and looked back at Harry still on the couch. "Are you ready?" he asked factually.

"To leave?" Harry asked in surprise. "If you really want . . . " He studied Snape. Whatever had emerged to unhinge him was completely submerged again. Harry wouldn't have known it was ever there, looking at him now.

Anita stood as well. "We prepared lunch for you," she said a little strained. "Please, give us a chance to be decent hosts, at least."

Snape bowed acceptance of that after a brief hesitation. Anita led the way out the back to a stone paved area with a wooden table. Harry only now got glimpses of

the other inhabitants, working in the gardens, weaving; he thought he heard a fire roaring hot nearby and imagined a kiln or a blacksmith. A wave of Anita's wand set the table.

A little sheepishly, she said, "I assumed your son would be a little younger, so I invited two of the young girls who live here to join us. They are nine and eleven. I think they will be thrilled to meet Harry."

The old witch had stepped away. She returned accompanied by a woman with long blonde hair with two sun-bleached children in tow.

"Severus' new son is a little older than I imagined, Caroline," Anita apologized to the woman as they gathered at the table.

Harry held out his hand. Caroline accepted it and said, "Caroline. We only have one name here," she explained.

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

The two girls gasped and the woman froze halfway to sitting down. "My goodness," she said.

"Are you really?" one of the girls asked.

"All my life," Harry returned.

"I want to sit next to Harry," one of them insisted and immediately leapt around the table to squeeze between Snape and him. The other, upon seeing this, jumped up as well. "Me too!" She took the short end of the bench. Snape moved down to make more room for them all.

"Hello," Harry said, feeling strange to be pressed between two glowing children with wide blue eyes of amazement.

"I'm Rattanita," one of them said. "Call me Ratta."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Harry said lightly, making her giggle.

"I'm called Princess, but that isn't my real name," the other one ended in a whisper.

"You have to forgive them," Caroline said. "They are very sociable, but we get very few visitors. Especially not ones that they already worship."

"When are you coming out with a poster?" Princess demanded.

Harry gave her an alarmed look in return. "Never, if I have anything to say about it." When she pouted, looking honestly crushed, Harry said, "You can always magically blow up the chocolate frog card."

Princess leaned forward to look at her sister in excitement. "Good idea!"

"I didn't really say that," Harry said in disgust, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

Snape said, "Ah, it is good to see how well Potter has adjusted to his fame."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Don't go there," he said in mock threat.

Ratta grabbed his arm rather hard and said, "I can't believe it! Harry Potter," as she shook him.

"Girls," Caroline admonished them. "Some decorum now, if you can manage."

They released him and sat up straight, primly putting their serviettes in their laps. Harry decided he preferred them the other way.

Salad arrived with dark red tomatoes and crisp cucumbers. Then cold soup. Then roasted vegetable sandwiches. "You eat well here," Harry said to the girls.

They shrugged. "What is your favorite food?" one of them asked.

"Chocolate cake," Harry replied.

"Birthday cake?" the other asked for confirmation.

"Yep. The first one I ever had was the best one," he said, falling into a mode of entertaining them. "Even though a giant had squashed it by carrying it in his pocket."

"No!" Princess insisted. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not," Harry said.

"How do you remember the first birthday cake you ever had?" Ratta asked in accusation.

"I was eleven. Your age."

"You didn't get one before that?" Ratta asked in horror.

"Not a one."

"We'll make you one!" They insisted.

"That's okay, really. I had chocolate cake for pudding last night. Our house-elf makes it all the time," Harry insisted, only then realizing the oddness of that.

"You still have that house-elf?" Anita asked Snape.

Snape shook his head. "A different one."

Chapter 18

"What happened to Tidgy?" Anita asked suspiciously.

When no one answered, one of the girls parroted while tugging on Harry's arm, "What happened to him?"

Harry took a deep breath and replied, "He was eaten by a snake. A really big one."

Anita gave him a disbelieving look at the same time as the girls whined, "Nooooo, silly."

"I keep telling you the truth; I can't help it if you don't believe me."

Princess put her hands on her hips in mock disgust. "What happened to the snake?" she asked as though to test his story.

"I told it to go sleep by the hearth. Then the Ministry took it away."

Princess eyed him strangely as though realizing he wasn't playing the game properly; his tall tales were not supposed to be true.

"You told it to go sleep by the hearth?" Anita asked carefully.

Snape said quietly, "You have no sense of when to hide the truth, Potter." The entire table had frozen, staring warily at Harry. To the table, Snape said, "You have to realize that he was raised as a Muggle; he doesn't understand the implications of what he is admitting to."

The girls leaned around Harry and whispered, then slid off the bench and scampered off. Harry felt a little alone on his end of the table now.

"More tea, anyone?" Anastasia brightly asked, her aged hand holding the pot up unsteadily in invitation.

The girls returned, giggling. Harry turned to them in surprise. Princess held up a green garter snake for his inspection.

"Girls," Caroline said, although it didn't have the sharp edge it could have.

"We want to see him talk to it," Ratta insisted. "We've never seen anyone talk to a snake before."

"Because only dark wizards can do that," Caroline replied slowly, eyeing Harry.

"Mum, don't be dumb! It's Harry Potter." She handed him the snake. It was all of two foot long and as green as grass. It asked to be put down.

"It wants to be left alone." At their doubtful expressions, he insisted, "That's what it just said."

"Oh, you can't really talk to snakes," Princess said in disappointment. "I could have told you that."

Harry sighed. "What do you want me to ask it?"

Caroline sat back with her tea. "Ask it if it ate Peralla's Crickets. They all disappeared one day."

"Where were they?" Harry asked.

"In a small white box," Ratta provided.

Harry asked the snake that. Everyone at the table stiffened as he did. "Whoa," Princess breathed. The snake nodded. "It did! Did you see that mum–it nodded!" she exclaimed. "You really can talk to snakes." She took the garter back gently and set it down in a patch of tarragon nearby.

"You sound really strange when you do that," Ratta said.

"I can't hear it," Harry said. "I just think I'm talking normally." Snape gave him a surprised look at that. Harry shrugged in return.

Ice cream was served for pudding. Harry savored every bite of each of four flavors, thinking with satisfaction that it was probably twice as good as anything Dudley ever ate in front of him. Princess curled up in Caroline's lap across from him despite being far too big to do so easily. Caroline alternated bites between herself and her daughter. She set the spoon down to wipe her mouth, then ran her fingers through Princess' hair before kissing her on the top of the head. Princess looked up and got a kiss on the forehead as well. Caroline picked up the spoon again.

Realizing that he was staring, Harry went back to his ice cream, feeling colder inside than the ice cream could account for.

Ratta came up to him and nudged him shyly. "Can you sign this?" she asked, holding his chocolate frog card.

"Oh, get mine too!" Princess said, sitting up suddenly, unbalancing her mother and herself.

"I got it," Ratta insisted, pulling another roughed up card from her pocket.

Harry borrowed a quill and signed them both personally. With ginger motions they picked the cards up and carried them off, careful not to smudge the ink.

"Thank you," Caroline said across from him. Harry shrugged that it was no big deal.

The girls returned and now sat more quietly beside him. “Did a giant really squash your birthday cake?” Princess asked.

“Not really,” Harry said. “It was only a half-giant.”

Princess punched him on the arm. “What other funny things have happened to you? Tell us something else.”

Harry gazed at her as though she were crazy. “How much time do you have?”

“Not that long,” Caroline replied for them.

“Awwww,” the girls complained. Princess grabbed his arm yet again. “Tell us something,” she pleaded.

“Uh, about what?”

After a moment’s deliberation, Ratta said, “The Tri-Wizard Tournament on the card. Tell us about that. How did you win it?”

“A dark wizard pretending to be a friendly wizard made sure I won it. I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“Why did they put it down, then?” Ratta demanded, insulted.

“They didn’t ask me before they wrote that. Otherwise I’d have told them to take it off.”

“Did you get the bad wizard in the end?” Princess asked conspiratorially.

“No. The teachers did.” Harry remembered that terrible moment in Moody’s office when he realized the other wizard intended to kill him. He had already been shattered by Cedric’s death and his narrow escape from Voldemort. He had been helpless, in shock. His heart pumped at the memory even two years later.

“Girls,” Caroline said quietly. She gave them a palm down gesture with her hand, and they fell silent.

“I do hope you are helping this boy heal?” Anita demanded of Snape.

Taken aback, Snape didn’t answer immediately. Harry did. “He is,” he said quietly.

“More ice cream?” Princess asked him, looking concerned.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a smile which removed her strained look instantly.

They made their goodbyes soon after that, while there was still plenty of good daylight left for the walk back to the pub. The train station was quiet as well when they Floo

in there. Traffic on the road in the village was light and soon Harry relaxed as the door closed behind him inside their house.

"I'll tell Winky that dinner can be late and light."

"I suspect she already knows," Harry said.

"She is unusually perceptive," Snape agreed.

Post had arrived in their absence. Harry picked up two letters and took them up to his room to write replies. He told Hermione about the two little girls without saying where he had met them. Neville had been helping him with the parchment spell, even going into the wizard library in London to look for books that might help.

After a small dinner, Harry wrote a long note discussing what he had learned since they had last corresponded and tried out some spells Neville suggested in his letter. He was running out of blank parchment. If he tore a blank sheet off of the writing tablet, it threatened to not give you another. And once a sheet had been spelled, it never worked quite right for a new spell. He went downstairs and found Snape in the drawing room at the desk as usual. When he looked up, Harry asked, "Do you have any parchment?"

Snape pulled open a drawer beside him. "It is here–help yourself."

Harry came over and pulled out five sheets before shutting the drawer again. He hesitated there. "The visit went all right," Harry commented. Snape made an ambivalent motion with his head. Harry could not see him well since he was bent over some kind of form and this made his hair fall over his face. "Sorry about the Parselmouth thing. It just isn't important to me, so I can't remember that other people care so much."

Snape didn't reply, so Harry stepped away. "Hey, can I go to Diagon Alley now and get my school stuff?"

"I thought we would do that on the way to Hogwarts."

"Okay," Harry agreed and realized that Snape was right, he was trying too hard to please him, but doing otherwise wasn't really imaginable.

After playing around with some new parchment spells in his room for a while, Harry grew too tired to continue. He changed into his pyjamas, noting that they seemed too tight, and crawled into bed. He dropped off to sleep after a short while, undisturbed by dreams.

Something touching his hair woke him. Harry, lying on his stomach, turned his head to see what it was. A shadow loomed close in his mind, outlined by the dim light from the hall beyond in his real vision. He was actually starting to get used to that.

Chapter 18

"I did not realize you would be so soundly asleep already," Snape said apologetically.

"Long day," Harry muttered.

The bed tilted slightly. "I realized something about you today, Harry."

"So did I," Harry murmured.

"What was that?"

"You are the only person who understands anything," Harry said sleepily.

"Hm."

A long silence ensued. Harry had to fight drifting off again. "Are you going to tell me?"

"I think not, upon further reflection."

Harry frowned into his pillow. "You are just here to make me nuts?"

"No," Snape countered softly. Harry started as something brushed his hair again. He opened his eyes to catch the dim silhouette of Snape's hand. He turned his face into the pillow as he realized that Snape had caught him staring at Princess and her mother. Flushed with embarrassment, he burrowed down under the covers. A hand rested on his covered shoulder a long moment before the bed tilted again and Snape left. A warm anxiety had replaced the cold ache and Harry marveled at how much better that felt.

Chapter 19.

Year Seven Begins

The morning of their return to Hogwarts, Harry packed his trunk and hovered it down to the main hall. He felt as though he had just arrived, and he wasn't really ready to leave yet, but the thought that the house would be here waiting made him feel whole in a new way. As he looked around the hall, the sun cut through the clouds and in the small windows at the end. The damage was still present from the battle; Snape had decided that he would prefer the noisy repairs happen while they were absent.

Harry stepped into the dining room and took a seat at the empty table. Tea came after a few minutes. Harry poured some for himself and sipped it, mostly to have something to do.

Snape finally came down as well. "Ready to leave it would appear?" he asked.

Plates of beans and toast appeared. Harry nodded. "Packed, anyway," he heard himself say.

Snape looked up at him with a strange expression. Harry returned to his breakfast without clarifying. They both ate quickly and the plates disappeared immediately after. Snape drank down an extra cup of tea before he stood up.

A small trunk sat beside Harry's in the hall. Snape stood beside his, thoughtful. "Not that it is impossible or even difficult to return, but I dislike needing to do so," he explained "I believe that is everything, though." He looked Harry over. "We shall

stop in Diagon Alley first, so let's take the Floo, Minerva has had the Great Hall hooked in for the remainder of the summer."

He hovered both trunks to the dining room hearth. As the trunks rested back on the floor he said, "Do you have your list for school?"

Harry pulled it from his pocket and waved it before restowing it. Snape started to reach toward the canister of Floo powder, than stopped. "I perhaps should ask if you need money for your supplies," he said.

"No," Harry said.

"Hm," Snape said as he took down the canister. "May I ask what source of funds you are using?"

"There is still some money left in my mum and dad's vault," Harry replied dismissively. Talking about this reminded him of living with the Dursleys. Maybe it was just the awkwardness. "It is enough to get through school," Harry said. "But, I don't know how much an apprenticeship costs."

Snape raised a brow. "For you, I would expect, nothing." Harry growled lightly at that. Snape held the canister out to him. As Harry took a handful, Snape said, "You will let me know if you need anything?"

"Sure," Harry replied curtly, wanting to cut the topic off. Snape gestured for him to go first into the Floo. Harry hovered his trunk into the hearth and stood behind it as he tossed the powder down beside his feet.

The sun shone over Diagon Alley as they stepped out into it from the Apothecary's, whose Floo they had used. "I have to go up to Gringott's first," Harry said, gesturing at the grand building at the next intersection.

"Be back here in an hour," Snape said.

Harry headed off, halting the activities of everyone in the street with his mere presence. He smiled faintly at everyone he passed and kept going even when suddenly befuddled people failed to move out of the way.

The Goblins earned his undying respect by not giving him the slightest consideration for being who he was and insisting on inspecting his key and himself suspiciously. Inside his vault, after filling his sack with a variety of coinage, Harry did a quick

count: only 400 galleons and change remained. It didn't sound that bad, but he needed to find out exactly how much an apprenticeship cost. He only knew that the good ones were considered expensive.

Back out on the street, a few wizards and witches he didn't know greeted him as though they did. "I have to get books for school," he explained as he escaped.

Inside the bookstore, a familiar voice cried, "Harry!" and Hermione came up and gave him a hug then looked at him sharply. "I think you've grown three inches; you're taller than me."

Harry looked at her in alarm, suspicion building in his mind as he thought about all the potions he had drunk in the last month. "It's good to see you," Harry said honestly.

"Bet you are happy to get out," she said. She leaned to the side and looked out the window of the shop. Harry glanced that way to find it full of people looking in.

"In one sense," Harry said in a pained voice.

"Well, let's get our books and get an ice cream. Ron and Ginny aren't getting supplies until later, they're both in Romania."

As they collected their assigned texts, Harry kept trying to think of a way of explaining his new situation. Every time he opened his mouth to try, someone interrupted, shaking his hand or even hugging him. They all seemed very happy. He imagined her reaction, how it wasn't the right place for it, and sighed quietly as he gave up.

At Fortescue's they sat at the outside table and ate large sundaes. Suddenly, Hermione said, "Hello, Professor," to someone behind Harry. Harry jumped and almost pulled out his pocket watch before he thought better of it. He turned his head to look instead, meeting Snape's oh-so-level gaze. Harry couldn't decide quite what to do.

"Mr. Potter," Snape greeted him with a knowing look.

"Have a seat, sir," Harry invited, indicating one of the three empty chairs. Hermione nearly choked, but covered it quickly.

"Ms. Granger?"

"Yes, sir. Please," she said quickly, shooting a shocked glance at Harry, who felt a bit twisted up inside.

Snape took a seat, crossed his arms and considered them. "Get all of your schoolbooks, Potter?" he asked.

Harry, while relieved that Snape was willing to play this game while he hesitated, felt very bad about it. "Yes, sir."

Snape had reverted smoothly to his old slightly sneering tone. "Do you have other things to get before we return to Hogwarts?"

"A few things." This time Harry did pull out his watch. "I still have twenty-five minutes, sir."

"But you are eating ice cream," Snape pointed out as though that didn't make any sense.

"I am," Harry said a little defiantly. "It is slow going, doing shopping, I needed a break."

"Perhaps if you didn't invite your fan club, it would go faster," Snape remarked. Witches and wizards had started to gather in the road near them, whispering.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Next time I'll remember not to."

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Harry," Hermione said. "I assumed you were here alone." She stood up. "I'll help you finish getting things. I'm going to Flourish and Blotts. Do you need quills and parchment?"

Harry nodded. "I have to get some things for Hedwig." He took a last bite of his ice cream; it had melted mostly anyway. "Do we get Hogsmeade weekends this year?" Harry asked Snape.

"I believe the headmaster is considering doubling them, in fact."

"Well, then I can skip the sweet shop." Harry stood as well.

"Out of chocolate frogs already?" Snape gibed.

Harry gave him a narrow look. "No. I just like to have a good stash of things at the beginning of the year. I never know when the staff will decide I'm going to be a prisoner again," he replied with more than a hint of annoyance.

"Where shall I meet you?" Hermione asked as she organized her things in a businesslike manner.

"In front of the Apothecary's," Harry replied.

"See you then. Nice to see you, Professor." She left quickly.

"You'd best get going, Harry," Snape said when she was out of hearing.

Harry nodded and looked around for Eeylop's, remembering it was behind him. "Can you hold onto this?" he asked, indicating his heavy bag of books.

Snape gave him a very dubious look but then relented immediately. "Yes."

After Harry had purchased a new perch and water holder for Hedwig's cage, as well as more broom polish at the shop across from Eeylop's, he met Hermione before the brick wall leading to the Leaky Cauldron. As they waited for Snape, she said, "You've clearly been hanging out with the teachers way too long."

Harry sighed, feeling trapped by the momentum of his situation. "I didn't have much choice."

"Now that they've caught everyone that matters, you could go to the Burrow," she pointed out. "Ron and Ginny wouldn't be there but Mr. And Mrs. Weasley would be."

"Huh," Harry muttered. That hadn't even occurred to him. He had been thinking ahead to a quiet week before classes started, although he would like to see the Weasley parents. Snape arriving saved him from having to voice his indecision.

Hermione immediately noticed that their teacher was carrying Harry's books. Harry took them back with a thanks, even though he had to hold too much in each hand to do it. He made his goodbyes to his friend, then he and Snape stepped into the shop just as a small crowd of surprised witches began to form at the nearby brick wall, blocking the archway open which made it ripple in annoyance.

Harry's trunk and cage with Hedwig still sat behind the counter beside the hearth. Snape thanked Jiggers for holding it all for him. The man just waved him off. Harry thought they must know each other well.

In the Great Hall, Harry dragged his trunk out of the hearth. The hall was empty except for Snape, who arrived behind him. "Can you handle that alone?" he asked.

"Yep. I can hover it to the tower. But I have a question for you," Harry said stridently, catching Snape's full attention. Harry held out his arm; the sleeve didn't make it to his wrist, clearly too short. "Have you been giving me growth potion?" Harry asked accusingly.

"No, do you want some?" Snape replied evenly.

Harry stared at him as though not believing him.

"Really, Potter. You can be six and a half feet by Christmas should you so desire. How tall would you like to be?"

"Not that tall," Harry retorted. "I just thought . . . " He scratched his head.

"I would not give you such a significant potion without telling you," Snape insisted. "I did not realize this was such a sensitive topic or I would have offered some."

"I don't want to cheat," Harry said stiffly.

"As you wish. Anything else you would like to accuse me of? I need to take care of some things before a staff meeting."

"No. Sorry, sir," Harry said apologetically.

Harry settled into his dormitory. It didn't feel as closed in as it had before. The prospect of the empty beds soon filling with his friends made it much less so. Upon closing his trunk lid, he realized that it was lunch time and headed excitedly down to the Great Hall.

Several of the teachers were there and greeted him warmly. Snape and Dumbledore were absent so Harry sat across from Hagrid, who gave him a wink. "Good ter see yer, Harry. Hope yeh had a good time away."

Harry nodded and served himself chips, not bothering to converse much because he was too hungry to.

After lunch, Harry followed Hagrid down to his cabin, happy to just be able to wander outside. "Anything happen while I was away?"

"I' was vera quiet, Harry. Everyone left." Hagrid commented.

"Everyone?"

"Pretty much. Professor Sprout was around fer a few days. I helped her with a coupla things. Filch o' course, was here. Eager teh get away they all were."

"I can imagine," Harry commented to himself as Hagrid watered his garden from a large can. "What is that?" Harry asked about several long rows of stalks.

"Thassa . . . blue corn," Hagrid said a little slowly. Harry recognized that tone and wondered what blue wombats ate. At least it wasn't a blue dragon, or a blue sea monster, or some large, hungry, dangerous blue thing. "So where'd they hide yer, Harry? Now tha' you can say, I suspect."

Harry blinked at him. Was it possible Dumbledore hadn't told anyone? "I was with Severus," Harry said.

"Really?" Hagrid asked in surprise. "No one'd suspect tha', I s'pose."

"That's what he thought. No one would suspect he adopted me either."

Hagrid laughed and patted Harry on the back as he put the large red can back under the water spout. In the cabin Hagrid made tea and they sat down around the crate he was using as a table. "Ah," the half-giant said in pleasure as he took a sip. He looked suddenly at Harry. "Now wait a second here . . ."

"He did, really," Harry said, enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hands even in the warm summer weather.

"Well, tha's a surprise. Glad to hear it though; ya' deserve a family, Harry. Though I am a bit . . . uh, b'fuddled by your choice . . ."

"I think it was a good one," Harry said defensively.

Hagrid patted his knee. "Tha's all that matters."

Harry's face twisted as he said, "I, uh, haven't figured out how to tell Ron and Hermione, so can you not discuss it in front of them until I do?"

"'Course, my boy. O' course."

By dinner all of the teachers had arrived and were gossiping when Harry came into the Great Hall. He felt a little out of place as he approached the table. Dumbledore gestured from the end that he should come down beside him where there was an empty seat across from Snape. Relaxing, Harry took the offered place and returned Snape's slightly formal greeting.

Dumbledore, patted Harry on the arm and said, "And how are you doing, my boy?"

"Good, sir," he replied sincerely, although he felt odd about being the only student, more so than he had at the beginning of summer. The teachers were talking vigorously amongst themselves as though at a reunion. They all sounded very happy. As he scanned them, Sprout gave him a nice smile, McGonagall a wink. His last year here, Harry considered with mixed emotion.

His eyes strayed to Snape, who was holding his sleeve back as he reached for his goblet. Unusual, countering tensions pulled at Harry as their gazes met, as though he could clearly hold in his mind, for the first time, all of the conflicting things he felt about Snape and being in school. Dumbledore's pale gaze graced him knowingly, making his face heat up. Harry turned to his mutton and potatoes and ignored them all in favor of eating.

Chapter 19

The last week of summer holiday rushed past. Harry, thinking ahead with obsessive concern to his N.E.W.T.s, read and took notes on the first three chapters of all of his books. He wrote to Ron back and forth. Ron was traveling around a lot visiting relatives before returning and Harry had to change owls each letter because they had travelled too far to be willing to go again immediately. Everyone, it seemed, was enjoying the freedom to move about safely.

The night before the students returned, Snape suggested eating dinner in his office instead of with the staff. "I feel I have been somewhat derelict with you", he said as Harry sat down across from him.

"You warned me you were going to be busy," Harry said as he uncovered his tray. Half a roast duck, jacket potato, and string beans were on his plate. "Looks good."

Snape said, "I am quite certain they are having chicken in the Great Hall."

"I got the trays from Dobby, remember," Harry said slyly.

As they ate, Snape asked, "Are you all ready for classes? I probably should have asked you that sooner."

"Yes, I am," Harry assured him.

They had a quiet evening of small talk that lasted until late into the evening. "I am perhaps leaving too much for tomorrow," Snape eventually commented. "But we have not had much time this week."

"It's only going to get busier, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"For at least the first few weeks. I will make time for you if you need me, but you will have to let me know," Snape said with a hint of firmness.

"I understand, sir."

Snape banished the trays with a wave of his wand. "You should probably get a good night's sleep as tomorrow you traditionally do not, correct?"

"Usually not. Especially not the night after you threatened to expel me," Harry said, teasing.

"You deserved to be," Snape stated unapologetically.

Harry stood and put the visitor's chair back were it belonged. "Fortunately, it wasn't up to you."

With a raised brow Snape acknowledged, "Fortunately." With a nod he sent Harry away.

Year Seven Begins

"Sit here, Harry!" Colin Creevey urged from farther down when Harry and his friends started to sit in the middle of the table for the welcoming feast. Harry shrugged and moved down to where the ends of the tables were left empty for the new house members. As Harry put his leg over the bench, Colin said conspiratorially, "You should welcome the new students to Gryffindor, Harry. Make a good impression for the house."

"Oh," Harry said ambivalently.

"Good idea," Ron interjected in agreement. "Make the others jealous."

Harry rolled his eyes and watched as the sorting hat was brought out and placed on a stool. The First Years shuffled in slowly, tightly packed in a group as though for mutual protection. McGonagall shepherded the alarmingly small children along up to the front, where she explained the procedure to them. The hat had a shorter poem this year–it was back to its old self, it seemed, now that things had calmed down. A few new students swallowed hard and looked uncomfortably at the old thing.

"Jona Albert," McGonagall read off. A sandy-haired boy took a deep breath and went up to the hat.

"Gryffindor!" the hat exclaimed before he could even rest it on his head. The boy jumped and dropped the hat on the floor but recovered it quickly and smoothly to its perch. He looked up at the cheering table on the left side and walked quickly over. Colin shook his hand vigorously as the boy sat down beside him. Jona grinned happily at Colin, looked across at Harry and froze in place.

"Hi," Harry said and smiled in welcome. A Hufflepuff was sorted out as they sat looking at one another. Harry held out his hand. Shaking visibly, Jona accepted it limply. "Harry Potter," Harry said by way of introduction.

"Uh huh," Jona muttered fearfully.

"This was not a good idea, Colin," Harry commented. Hermione waved and said hello to Jona, trying to distract him.

Another student was sorted into Gryffindor, a girl with auburn pigtails high on her head. She fairly bounced over to the table and sat beside Jona. "Hi, I'm Maybella," she said perkily and waved back at Hermione.

Jona elbowed her and whispered, "Thot's Harry Potter," as he pointed across the table.

Maybella's mouth fell agape. "Hi," Harry tried again. The girl actually looked horrified. "I really am harmless," Harry assured them.

The table fast filled up and the sorting was finished. Ten new Gryffindors sat chatting shyly, eating cakes and drinking pumpkin juice. New students at the other tables would occasionally stand up on their bench to get a look at Harry. He ignored them, although he did wave at Malfoy as he walked between the tables, garnering a seething look in return.

Harry eventually managed to get a few words out of Jona after much effort. "You killed Voldemort?" Jona asked in a small, disbelieving voice. The entire end of the table fell silent.

"Yes," Harry said factually. Ten sets of awestruck eyes stared unblinking at him.

"In the castle here, right?" A girl two down on the bench asked.

"Right out there," Harry pointed out the main doors to the Hall. "You walked past the spot."

"Hey, are they putting a plaque in that spot?" Ron asked excitedly.

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry returned.

"You should have seen it," Colin said in a low voice. "Harry hit him with a Killing Curse and he flickered green and just crumpled!"

Harry looked down at his hands. "Not something you want to do to someone unless you absolutely have to."

Colin banked his excitement. "Well, of course. And you did something to him before that; he wasn't fighting back."

"What did you do?" The pigtailed girl asked in a whisper.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Harry said to her, as if that were the end of it.

"Aw," many of the new students and some of the older ones complained.

Harry yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Pass the pumpkin juice, Hermione."

"You aren't going to say?" someone exclaimed.

Harry drank half of his juice and looked at their eager faces. He had to be honest with himself and admit that he didn't like remembering. It made him raw all over

again to do so. "I attacked him with my mind," Harry said. "I didn't use a spell, until the end."

"Whoa," someone whispered low and long.

"How did you get into his head?" Jona asked eagerly; he seemed to be coming out of his shell, finally.

Harry, feeling a little annoyed with their worshipfulness, said darkly, "I always had been. He was always putting visions in my head, especially while I was sleeping. I turned it around on him that day–went after him." He glanced around to survey the effects of that statement. Many of the students appeared to have stopped breathing as they stared at him.

"Didn't they try to stop that from happening?" Colin asked him. This was new to him as well.

Hermione cut in. "Occlumency lessons. Poor Harry." She shook her head.

"They did help in the end," Harry pointed out and stifled yet another yawn.

Someone leaned in behind him suddenly. "Not sleeping well, Harry?" Snape asked in his ear.

Harry looked up at him and gestured with his finger for him to come close again. "I was up late making a banner for the common room," Harry said back.

Snape straightened and looked at him closely as if assessing the truth of that. Harry shrugged. The professor's gaze then flickered over the First Years with a look of dark disdain. " Ten new Gryffindors. Just what we need," he sneered sarcastically and, after another glare at them, stalked off.

"Who was that?" Maybella asked in concern.

Harry suppressed his grin. "Professor Snape," he replied, "the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"What!" Ron exploded, then put his head in his hands. "Oh no! He isn't teaching Potions anymore. And I wanted to take Defense."

"Is that Greer up there?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked where she pointed. "Yes."

"Any good?"

"I got off on the wrong foot with her, but she seems okay."

"The text didn't look that tough."

The Gryffindor First Years were tracking Snape as he glided out of the hall. "We have to take Defense, right?" someone asked.

"Yes, it is required for first through fifth," Harry replied. "You don't need to worry. The Defense teachers always try to kill me . I'm hopeful this year though." He shrugged, enjoying their confused horror.

Ron stood up as well. "I'm not," he whined. "Maybe I can drop out now." Hermione slugged him on the arm. "Professor Snape isn't that bad," she said, making Harry feel better.

"I still remember his comment about your teeth," Ron pointed out.

"Well, there is that."

"See you all around," Harry said to the First Years with a little wave, smiling through his frown.

Out in the Entrance Hall Hermione asked, "What did Professor Snape want anyway?"

Harry waved her off. "We've had an ongoing conversation about something."

"You are having a regular conversation with Snape?" Ron asked, sounding sickened.

"Yes," Harry said flatly. "Try hanging around here for the summer. I needed someone to talk to."

"Stay with us!" Ron said sharply.

"I wanted to," Harry insisted, remembering the beginning of the summer when that sounded like heaven. Someone was tugging on his sleeve, but he was feeling too angry at Ron to pay attention to it. "I had four Death Eaters and Voldemort's pet snake to deal with as it was. You really wanted me to put your family at risk?" he asked hotly. Ron didn't immediately find a reply. Harry looked down at Maybella's strained expression as she stood clutching his sleeve. "Sorry, Maybella," he said. "We shouldn't be arguing here."

"You didn't tell us about the Death Eaters," Ron accused him.

"I wasn't supposed to," Harry replied in defeat.

"So those D.E. the Ministry touted capturing; you did that?"

"Not alone," Harry said and too late realized his mistake.

"Who helped you?"

Harry hesitated, an ache forming in his chest. "Tonks and some other Ministry Aurors showed up," he hedged and felt very bad for it for many reasons. Maybella released his sleeve, so Harry looked back down at her, loosely grasping her shoulder as she started to step back, apparently overwhelmed by his tirade. "Did you want something?" he asked her gently.

After a long pause, she asked, "Where?"

Harry blinked at her. "Oh, you mean Voldemort. Not the four Death Eaters." Harry stepped over to the spot and pointed at the stone floor. "Right here, I think. It was morning, which makes the hall look a little different." He glanced over at her and the other fifty students piled in the doorways watching.

"There were a lot of Death Eaters here too," Ron supplied.

"True. Ron was right in front," Harry said to Maybella. "He and Hermione." The students' heads all turned. "So, Ron, how many Death Eaters were there?"

"I didn't want to count."

"Twenty-two," Hermione stated.

"Gloating, Potter?" Malfoy said as he pushed his way out the door and stepped over. He was a good five inches taller than Harry now.

"You better believe it," Harry said. The students chuckled.

"Just you wait, Potter," Malfoy said in a low voice.

"That is exactly what your father said. Right after I put a binding curse on him so the Ministry could haul him back to Azkaban."

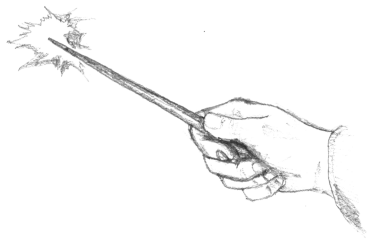
Malfoy took a step back and sneered harder. "You better be ready to duel in class tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I am," Harry said with a sly smile.

Malfoy lost his. "My father said you were playing at something. We'll see how long that lasts now that I'm back."

Harry had to work hard not to burst out laughing. He shook his head as he stepped away and his friends followed. "See you in class," he said sweetly to Malfoy. He gave the other gaping students a smile before turning to walk up the stairs.

Chapter 29.



Settling In

Ron had to be dragged to class the next morning. He sat in his seat between Harry and Hermione with his back hunched. Snape strolled in on the hour and looked them all over. "Well, some of you that I had thought I was rid of," he stared pointedly at Ron and then Neville, "I seem to have back again. A side-effect I had not considered, I admit, when I asked to teach this subject." He picked up the class list and glanced at it. "Well, one cannot have everything," he breathed.

He tossed the list aside on the front table and unrolled another parchment. "As all but the least astute of you know, this is Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is optional . If you do not intend to work hard, you should not be here right now. This class is for those who intend to take the Defense N.E.W.T. at the end of this year. I will expect everyone to do exceptionally well on it should they stay."

His eyes took in the silent room again before he looked over the other parchment. "These . . . are notes left by your previous instructor, Mr. Grey. He felt obliged to . . . warn, I suppose one could say, the incoming teacher about certain students." Reading now, Snape went on, "Mr. Weasley, he states, is the most accident-prone student he has ever taught. Ms. Patil cannot demonstrate a spell without giggling first. Mr. Potter, he writes . . ." Snape glanced up at this point with a chastising look. "Is arrogant, presumptuous to the point of distraction, and apparently feels he should be teaching the class."

Harry winced a little, but held Snape's gaze. When Snape started rolling up the parchment, Harry raised his hand.

With a raised brow Snape prompted, "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"There are no comments about . . . students from any of the other houses?" He had almost said Slytherins, but then thought better.

While continuing to roll the parchment tightly, Snape replied, "I believe it says Ms. Abbot shows promise, but she is unable to focus."

Hannah, who had been gazing out the window at the clouds, snapped her head around at that, eliciting a chuckle from the class.

"Other questions, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked with an unusual underlying tone. No one else seemed to hear it.

Ron raised his hand. When Snape's questioning look turned his way, he said, "Professor Grey didn't like Harry and me. His comments are unfair."

"He wasn't as bad as some of the others," Hermione countered. "He didn't try to kill Harry, for example."

"Yes, he did," Ron retorted. Harry slapped him on the arm to shut him up.

Snape took that in. "Explain that, Mr. Weasley," Snape insisted sharply as he stepped to the edge of the platform.

Ron's mouth fell open and he hesitated with a drawn-out, "Ah . . ."

With a frown and a huff Harry bailed his friend out. "He got really angry one day and challenged me to a duel. Which we had, just inside the Forbidden Forest. I don't think he was trying to really do me in though; the spell Ron is thinking of was just some kind of variant of a Blasting Curse that I ducked."

"Yeah, but the tree behind you just exploded!" Ron insisted and then slapped himself on the forehead and muttered, "Shit."

With another dirty look at his friend, Harry went on. "Basically, I beat him easily after that one shot and he left me alone after that."

Snape looked dangerous. "I presume that you didn't inform anyone else of this, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir," he admitted quietly.

"Stupid boy," Snape muttered and went back to the table, where he put the comment parchment back down, crumpled from his hand gripping it.

"I'd think you'd be happy to hear that, sir," Ron said accusingly.

"Ron," Harry said in a low tone as he grabbed his friend's sleeve. Snape was giving Ron a dangerously dark look, making Harry's heart race a little. "You are not starting

out the term well at all here." Ron pulled his arm out of reach and refused to look at his friend. Harry sat back with a sigh and crossed his arms.

"Stay after, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he flipped through his copy of the textbook.

"Yes, sir."

Snape smoothly moved on, "I will assume you have all read chapter one. Who can tell me the six crippling curses?"

At the end of class, Harry hung back. Hermione dragged Ron out before he could try to stay after as well. Malfoy stalled too but a sharp look from the teacher sent him out. When they were alone, Snape said, "Mr. Weasley needs to learn to think before he speaks."

"Tell me about it. He has the First Years terrified of me."

"That isn't far from awestruck, in any event," Snape commented as he stepped off the platform and over to Harry.

Harry met his gaze before dropping his again. He felt worse about not telling his friends the truth. He waited for Snape to say something about that. Instead, his teacher after a long pause said, "I am going to report the incident, so expect to get called to the headmaster's office to explain it."

"You think it's worth bothering Dumbledore for?" Harry commented. "Grey isn't teaching here anymore."

"It will undoubtedly be Professor McGonagall who questions you. This is for you to know, only, for the moment, but you are going to be assigned a new Head of House, probably at the end of the month. McGonagall is taking over more of the headmaster duties and does not have time for both."

At Harry's sad expression, Snape said, "It is inevitable, I am afraid."

Harry swallowed hard. "Do you think it's all right if I go up and visit Dumbledore sometimes?"

"I am quite certain that he would rather welcome that," Snape said. "The password is Roverandom." Snape stepped back to the front table. "Do you need a note for your next class?"

Harry hoisted his bookbag. "No. It's Transfiguration." He gave Snape a sly smile and departed.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said as he stepped into the Transfiguration classroom in the middle of the roll call. "Professor Snape kept me after."

She lowered her parchment and studied him over her glasses. "I am going to assume your are not in trouble already . . ."

Harry paused in setting his bag down on the floor under the table. "Uh . . ." At McGonagall's disapproving look, Harry explained, "It is for something that happened last year." He glared at Ron. "Something someone should have kept their mouth shut about. I've been informed, ma'am, that I will be explaining it to you at some point."

"In my copious spare time, Mr. Potter," she breathed.

"It wasn't Harry's fault," Ron muttered.

"Ron," Harry and Hermione said in unison. "You've helped too much already today," Harry finished softly.

At the end of Transfiguration, McGonagall stepped over to Harry as they collected up the crickets they had been transforming into crockery. "Stay after, Mr. Potter. I would rather miss lunch then add anything to my schedule at this point."

"Yes, Professor," Harry said.

The door fell closed behind the last student. Harry hefted his bag onto the table and left it there. McGonagall was storing the crickets in a large, screened-in cage full of grass clippings and a ragged and skeletal potted fern. He helped her empty out the boxes, sometimes having to prod the clingy black insects from the inside of the lid.

"I have to admit, Harry, that I haven't managed to locate the right paperwork to record Severus' conflict of interest, shall we say. Nor have I had to time to determine which policy applies to punishment." She shut the cage and hovered it to the top shelf. "If he sent you to me, he presumably doesn't want to punish you for it himself-"

"You misunderstand, ma'am. He just said he wanted it reported."

She stopped straightening things up and asked, "Wanted what reported?"

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Professor Grey's attempt on my life, ma'am."

McGonagall's eyes lifted to the ceiling. "You had to have a full set, didn't you, Harry?"

"I personally don't count the incident with Lupin," Harry said defensively as he crossed his arms.

"Everyone else does," she said. "So what happened?"

Harry summarized the events, pointing out that Ron thought the spell more violent than he did.

"What night was this? Do you remember the date?"

"I could figure it out from my study notes, I remember what he was trying to teach that week."

"Figure it out. Write out what happened. Sign it. Have Ron read it and sign it. Give that to me. It would help me a lot." She picked up her books from the front desk. "I admit it is much simpler now that he isn't here to be kicked out. If you can at all help it, don't get into a duel with another teacher for at least the next few months," she said stridently.

Harry followed her toward the door. "What about Severus?"

She put her hand on the door handle and gave him a soft grin. "You are on your own there, Mr. Potter."

"I am all right with that, Professor." Harry grinned back.

Potions with Greer wasn't the same as with Snape. She lectured more slowly as though they weren't very smart, leaving them rushed to brew before the end of the class, unless it was double-Potions. Hermione didn't seem to like or dislike Greer, which was okay with Harry. The other students, except the Slytherins, made a show of making her feel welcome, giving her little presents for the first week. While Harry thought it inexplicable, it did have the advantage of improving her mood.

She hadn't lost her impression that he was a little dim. Even by the end of the first week, she still seemed surprised when he turned in a successful potion at the end of class. Harry found this more annoying than it really deserved.

"Greer's okay," Hermione commented on the way out of class.

"She thinks I'm an idiot," Harry griped.

"Well, you do keep exceeding her expectations at least," she replied brightly.

"Yeah, great."

Harry enjoyed Defense the way Snape taught it. He seemed less concerned with their safety than previous teachers, or maybe it was just that they were Seventh Years now and expected to figure things out and control what they were doing. This meant they were allowed to try rather loud, bright, dangerous spells on occasion, sometimes even on each other. The added benefit of this was that Hermione didn't dominate the way she did in most other classes, since she didn't necessarily want to make as much noise as was required by a particular spell. He and Neville and most of the other boys found the noise half of the fun of things and shouted the spells energetically. Most, but not all, of the girls remained more demur as they practiced and demonstrated.

"Like this," Neville said to Justin while drawing a tiny rapid corkscrew in the air with his wand; a trail of shiny gold bled off from it and hovered. Snape was working with two of the other Hufflepuffs and Parkinson in the front, and had been for almost ten minutes. He glanced their way and then disregarded them.

Justin tried it a few times but he only got a gold sparkle or two. Hermione gave them a chastising look. "At least work on one of the spells from class, Harry," she whispered.

Neville answered before Harry had a chance, "This one is good for an ice curse, which is coming up after this."

"Is it?" Hermione asked with interest and leaned in to join them a bit, as did Ron.

From the front of the room, Snape cleared his throat. They all sat straight in their seats and waited more patiently for their fellow students to manage the assigned spells.

Finally the Hufflepuffs returned to their seats, looking worn by the extra effort they had been put to. Snape surveyed them a moment before announcing, "Mr. Longbottom wishes to demonstrate a few counters to the next curse, I believe."

Ron swallowed a smile as Neville slunk out of his seat and up to the platform opposite the teacher. Unlike in D.A., he stood a little slump-shouldered, but he had his wand up and ready.

Snape, looking unforgiving, said, "Mr. Longbottom will be demonstrating an Ororbis, correct?"

Neville nodded, obviously concentrating hard, but quickly adding, "Yes, sir."

Snape sent an ice curse his way after a "Ready?" Neville's arm was a blur as he drew a fast expanding spiral of gold ribbon in the air before him. As the curse arrived,

tiny ice chips rained down onto the floor, not reaching him. The charm was strong enough that it hovered many seconds after the attack.

Snape waited for it to fade before saying, "And the heating charm from the assigned reading?"

"Yes, sir."

When Snape spelled him, Neville performed both the heating charm on himself followed quickly by a fireball spell, which went off like a photographer's flash. Snape lowered his wand. "Timing is usually considered too sensitive to use that counter against an ice curse," he stated, apparently for the edification of the room. "Mr. Longbottom, however, managed to get the timing precisely correct, as surprising as that is. Although it did not leave him time for much of a heating charm as a backup. Take your seat," he ordered Neville.

Neville lowered his wand and jumped off the platform. Harry could tell by Snape's expression that his fellow student had earned a little of his grudging respect, but he doubted Neville realized this; he took his seat with a sigh, looking only relieved to have suvived the test.

As Harry left class, he glanced back to nod a goodbye and noticed Malfoy standing beside Snape's desk with his book open as though to ask a question. His chin-length blonde hair hung forward to frame his light eyes as he gave Harry a small sly grin. Harry rolled his eyes in return and closed the door behind him.

"Ms. Granger, may I speak to you a moment?" Professor Greer asked as the students filed out at the end of class.

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione waved Harry and Dean on and stepped to the front of the room.

"You are a very intelligent young lady, Ms. Granger. May I ask what career you plan to follow upon finishing school?"

"I haven't decided, Professor, something in Muggle relations. I'm looking for something outside the Ministry if I can find it."

"Why is that, dear?"

"They were too slow to admit that Voldemort was back. I haven't forgiven them for that."

"Dear me, you are a strident one, aren't you?" As she spoke, she arranged the potions turned in by the students into a locked drawer of her desk. "You have been here for six years; perhaps you can answer a few questions that have been bothering me?" Greer said this in an extra-friendly voice.

"I can try, ma'am."

"The students seem very pleased to not have Professor Snape."

Hermione frowned inwardly and hesitated. "He wasn't the nicest Potions teacher, Professor. The Slytherins aren't happy he's gone; that's why there are only two in the Seventh Year class."

"You have him for Defense though, still?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think he is happier teaching that." Hermione shifted her bookbag, wondering if she was out of line. Snape's demeanor had improved, although she felt uneasy about voicing a guess as to why.

"Hm," Greer muttered thoughtfully. "I've heard a few jokes about Parselmouths in this class, which is unexpected." She hesitated, her voice sounding forced steady. "I realize it is a bit unthinkable, but is there someone in this school who speaks Parseltongue?"

Hermione laughed lightly. "Yes, of course." She didn't notice Greer's alarm at this. "Harry Potter does. Everyone knows that."

Greer's expression went flat. Slowly, she said, "Really? That is very interesting. Thank you, dear. That is all."

Hermione smiled helpfully and exited, failing to understand the quirky, dark, false smile the teacher responded with.

Saturday was the first chance Harry had to wander to the fourth floor outside of class time. Snape was in his office grading essays. He greeted Harry relatively warmly, for Snape. Harry took a seat opposite the desk. "It will take me another hour to finish these," Snape said.

"That's okay," Harry said. He pulled out his Transfiguration essay and worked on that.

Finally, Snape rolled the essays up into bundles by class and tied them. "How was your first week of Seventh Year?"

Harry finished the sentence he was writing out as he replied, "Fine." He put his parchment and textbooks away. "The First Years are still terrified of me. And some of the other students as well who should know better. I'm not used to that yet and I can't figure out how to get past it with them."

"Does it matter?"

"It bothers me. I'm not scary or dangerous. They step against the wall to let me pass in the corridor like I'm going to explode or go on a spelling spree. Ron just thinks it's funny." Harry waited for him to ask if he had told Ron and Hermione anything, which he hadn't. Why the opportunity never seemed to arrive, he wasn't certain. His dreading the moment of revelation might have something to do with it.

Instead, Snape opined levelly, "Give them time. They read those newspapers that you pass off as rubbish. People like heroes and are slow to give them up."

They had tea and talked for an hour, until Harry noticed the clock. "I have D.A." He stood up.

"You are still holding that?" Snape asked in real surprise.

Harry pulled the Galleon from his pocket to check that he remembered the date and time correctly.

"What is that?" Snape asked.

Harry held the coin out. "Hermione created those for our meetings. The date and time are coded in the serial number with a Protean charm. We had to do that to avoid Umbridge."

Snape handed it back. "Bright girl."

"Too smart for her own good," Harry quipped.

"One wonders what she sees in Mr. Weasley," Snape commented idly as he placed the rolled essays into his satchel.

Harry hadn't thought about it like that. He shrugged. "They've always liked each other."

"Hm."

"Gotta run." At the door, he stopped. "Do you have time tomorrow?"

"Some. I will be brewing a few potions in the dungeon in the morning. Most weekends in fact."

"I'll try to come down," Harry said brightly.

Settling In

Sunday morning, Harry helped out in the dungeon for a little while, until Greer started hovering annoyingly. Harry begged off, not wanting to make trouble for Snape. As he headed back up the staircase, he realized that he was free to visit Dumbledore.

After the staircase bore him up to the office door, Harry knocked with anticipation that made him realize he should have remembered to visit sooner. Dumbledore stood looking out the window behind the desk, his hands clasped behind his back. "Hello Harry," he said, even before he turned.

"Good morning, sir," Harry replied brightly. On the desk a model of the solar system was rotating and catching the light from the window each rapid time around.

"Is there something on your mind, my boy, or are you just visiting?"

Harry took his eyes from the blue and green hollow orb with one white moon that represented the earth. "Just visiting."

"Please, have a seat." Dumbledore invited him around the desk and conjured a pair of overstuffed chairs in a bright flowery pattern. From their seats they had a nice view of the lawn, part of the pitch and a vast expanse of forested hills. "You are doing very well, I hear."

"We've barely had any assignments," Harry pointed out.

"I didn't mean in your school works," Dumbledore replied gently.

"Oh." He took a deep breath. "I guess I am. Good to be able to go out if I want. No one seems to think Avery or Jugson is any threat."

"The Ministry believes they will remain in hiding for a long while or leave the country. They were both considered by the Aurors and Professor Snape to be a bit of a drag, in fact, on Voldemort's organization."

Harry remembered seeing Voldemort brutally punish Avery in the graveyard. He had been a simpering wimp. Maybe Voldemort had kept him around just to take out his anger on. Harry fidgeted with his feet as a cloud moved over the sun. He thought about his inability to tell his friends about his new situation and fidgeted again.

"Something else is bothering you. Can I help?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry pulled his eyes from the view and looked at the headmaster. From this close distance, he looked much older than Harry remembered. It made Harry ache uneasily.

He dropped his gaze and admitted, "I haven't told Ron and Hermione about being adopted."

"Hm." Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers. "Would you like a butterbeer? I think I would." He conjured two bottles and handed one over. Harry sipped his: it was icy cold which was refreshing before the sun-soaked window. "I assume you believe that they will disapprove?"

Harry nodded and felt the persistent knot in his stomach tightening up. He drank more butterbeer, but it didn't loosen.

Dumbledore said gently, "In your place, I'd give them a chance. But then again, you know them better than I. A true friend feels obliged to share his thoughts but in the end he, or she, should support you. I believe they are true friends to you."

Harry's stomach loosened a little.

A silence fell. Dumbledore finally interrupted it. "Quidditch starts soon. A full season for your last year. No Voldemort. No Dementors."

"I'm looking forward to it, sir," Harry said, more upbeat and glowing a little in anticipation.

Chapter 21.

Potions with a Capital P

Tuesday Potions gave Harry more of a flashback than he ever expected to get. As they all took notes on the lecture, Greer called on him. She had a smile on her face that made him wonder with a jolt if she were actually Umbridge using a Polyjuice potion. It was a Nagini kind of smile.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, what kind of caustic is shared by Beetlejubs and Bezoars?"

Harry blinked at her. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione move in a way that made him think she didn't know the answer either.

"Mr. Potter?" the teacher prompted with a acidic sweetness.

The question did remind him of something. Something from one of the other texts he had read the first few chapters of over the summer. He racked his memory. "Uh, Clian- Clyentate?" That wasn't quite right.

"Wrong, Mr. Potter," she announced airily, enormously pleased. Harry glanced at the other Gryffindors. All of them shrugged that they didn't know either, making Harry feel better.

Greer spent an inordinate amount of time hovering around his cauldron while they brewed as well. This didn't bother Harry much; she couldn't touch Snape for intimidation. He acted surprised to find her there when she finally did critique their potions.

Chapter 21

"Perfect potion, Ms. Granger. Too much heat when you added the fly's legs, Potter. You will get graded down for that," she said happily as she strode on to the next bench, where the students suddenly stood straighter as she approached.

Harry glanced into Hermione's cauldron, then into his. They didn't look the least bit different. He shook his head.

At the end of class, Greer handed out essay assignments. This in itself was a little odd. She did it as they walked out the door. "Due Friday," she said happily. "That will leave your weekend free . . . " Several students actually thanked her for that.

Harry accepted his parchment slip and jammed it into his bag. Hermione read hers aloud as they walked, " Describe the uses of the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions . Doesn't sound too bad." She tucked it away in her book which she left in her hand since it didn't look like it would fit in her bag.

As they mounted the stairs to the ground floor, Harry looked around for a place to pull her aside. His secret was starting to tangle his insides and looking at her calm visage as she thought ahead to the rest of the day, reassured him that, she of all people, would understand. As they approached the Entrance Hall, he espied the staff lounge as Professor Vector stepped out of it. It looked empty and, although the door had closed, he knew the password.

Harry gave a tug on Hermione's arm. She turned to him with a questioning expression. "Um, there is something–" Harry started to say. His expression must have looked pained because her brow furrowed in concern.

"Hey there," Ginny said, stepping over to them.

Harry looked over at her and at Ron ambling up behind his sister.

"Uh," Hermione said.

"Lunch time," Harry announced, stepping through them all to lead the way. The thought of Ron finding out produced a cold fear in Harry, which made him feel trapped. He was very grateful that Hermione was smart enough not to prompt him more as they walked to their table.

As they sat at lunch, Hermione sent Harry questioning looks. He gave her small wry smiles in return. Ron asked her to read his essay for History and she occupied her self with that as she ate. Well, it's like this , he imagined himself saying to her. Professor Snape, well, adopted me . It sounded odd, even to him, in the context of the Great Hall filled with his loudly chattering peers. Six years of history complicated things incredibly.

Harry ate a nice crispy panini as he watched his two friends. They were sitting very close together; they had leaned in over the essay so they were touching all along their sides. It occurred to Harry with a twinge that Hermione's loyalty was almost certainly not first to him no matter the topic. Nor Ron's, he didn't expect. He turned to the head table. Snape's eyes narrowed for a half-second, a sign Harry knew that meant he was curious or even concerned. Harry managed a light smile for him before returning to his lunch.

After Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon, Harry went up to the second floor. Snape was reading intently from a large book when Harry entered. He closed the door and waited for Snape to put down the hand he had raised for silence. Snape's lips moved as he recited something from the text, making Harry curious. At the end of the page, he put his hand down and looked up in question.

"This is quick," Harry assured him, glancing upside-down at the detailed page of curse applications. "Do you have those other seventh-year Potions texts?"

Snape's brow went up. He pointed to a bookshelf in the corner. Harry went over and crouched to look on the bottom shelf, the only shelf that held books with textbook-like bindings. "What is this other one?" Harry asked of a worn, narrow, thick volume titled Potions Compendym.

"You may borrow that as well, should you wish to. May I ask why you feel you need them?"

Harry sighed. "Greer asked me today what caustic Beetlejubs and Bezoars have in common. I almost remembered," he said in frustration. "It was in this one." He set the books on the corner of the desk and pulled out a blue-covered one. He flipped it open. "Catalyndate. I was close."

"It was not in your regular reading, I assume."

"No. It was not." Harry opened his bag to fit the books in. He pulled out the parchment slip with his essay assignment to keep it from getting crumpled. He glanced at it and froze with a growl. It was a different topic than Hermione's–a much harder one.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked mildly as he flipped through the volume in front of him.

"Yes, but I'll handle it." He pocketed the parchment and loaded the books into his bag. "I'll take this one too," he said and pulled the compendium from the shelf. It barely fit in his bag lying sideways on top. He shook his head, thinking that the assignment was due on Friday to make it hard for him to get help. As he reached the door, he said, "I'll have to see you later, sir. I have a lot to do."

Harry worked every spare minute on his Potions essay, neglecting his other class assignments. On Thursday night as they all sat around studying, he asked Hermione, "Can you read over my essay for tomorrow?"

Hermione wiped her fingers from the biscuit she had been eating and accepted his rolled parchment. "This is long, Harry," she observed as she unfurled the top of it. After she read the first part, she said, "What is this?"

Harry, holding out his assignment slip, said, "I received a different assignment than everyone else."

In disbelief Hermione looked at his slip. "Compare and contrast the three major brewing techniques of heat-simmer, brew-ferment, and flash. Include detailed cases where one is superior to another and explain why. Harry this is nuts. This isn't even a N.E.W.T. essay. No wonder you've had all of those other books out."

"Snape loaned them to me."

"He did?" she asked in surprise. "Didn't he insist you tell him why you needed them?" She picked up the compendium. "Wow, this is hard to find. I'm surprised he trusted you with it."

Harry blinked at that series of confused assertions. He couldn't imagine Snape withholding books from him, of all things. "I didn't tell him why. I didn't want to sound like I was whining about another teacher." This at least was the truth. "Can you read it over?"

"I am not going to be much help, I don't think, but I'll try." She read the first part of it. "Did you discuss crystallization differences?"

"No, I forgot about that." Harry made a note to himself on one of the many parchments he had been recording his readings on. "See, you're helping already."

"Harry, why didn't you complain in class yesterday?"

"She was waiting for me to. Like I'd give her the satisfaction."

"She shouldn't have done this. And you're too accustomed to hating the Potions teacher, that's for certain," she commented as she read. "Boy, this is long." She unfurled it all the way. "You have declared war right back, I see."

Harry grinned.

Potions with a Capital P

In Potions the next day, Harry actually went so far as to use one of his old Occlusion exercises to keep his expression even as he fished out his essay and handed it forward. The student in front of him, Justin, weighed it in his hand and gave him a questioning glance. Harry just shrugged as though it were nothing. Surreptitiously, he watched as Greer glanced at a few of the essays as they came to the front, including his. But her reaction was to smile a bit more to herself, which confused him.

Deathly tired of the subject of Potions, but having no choice, Harry took out his quill and began taking notes.

After Potions they had no afternoon classes that day, so they went out on the lawn and relaxed in the sunshine.

"Greer didn't say anything," Hermione said in disbelief.

"You turned in that monster essay and she didn't make anything of it?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea what she is up to. Even Snape never stooped that low. Exactly."

Hermione said, "No, he just didn't grade your potions at all sometimes. Dropped them on the floor, for example."

"Actually, he said he did grade them," Harry said.

"When did he say that?" she asked.

"Over the summer I got mad and accused him of it in front of McGonagall. It was pretty funny the way she laid into him." Harry didn't explain that Snape had gone on to point out a bit angrily that Harry should have realized a show was being put on for Malfoy, Nott, and company.

"Wow," Ron said. "Wish I'd been there to see that."

It was a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry had a sense that Ron and Hermione wanted to hang out together, alone. He sent them on without him, saying he wanted to work on D.A. spells while it was quiet. In reality it was a good opportunity to spend time

with his guardian without an excuse. Last weekend, he had told his friends he had been with Dumbledore longer than he really had.

Snape wasn't in his office. Harry went down to the dungeon and found him in the corridor, ferrying extra cauldrons from the classroom. "Are you here to help?" his guardian asked.

"If you want help."

"Yes, of course." He walked Harry patiently through the currently brewing potions and the instructions for each, which were placed beneath them on the shelf. "If you will handle these four for the next fifteen minutes, I will start another one." He set the two empty cauldrons up as Harry quickly reviewed the instructions for the ones he had been assigned. The next twenty minutes was a blur of hurried stirring and ingredient adding.

"Holding it together there, Harry?" Snape asked at one point.

"Yes, Severus, I am," Harry said, a little put out at being doubted. He stirred two cauldrons at once before turning the burner up on one of them, wishing for a third hand, then wondering if there were a spell for one.

Once the other two cauldrons were simmering, Snape checked Harry's work. He made an ingredient adjustment on one of them and then nodded. "They can simmer now. Thank you for assisting," Snape said as he closed the lids on the prepped ingredient jars and put them away in a small cabinet.

"If it is the only way to spend time with you . . . " Harry said as he read through the corresponding discussion for one of the potions.

"It isn't the only way. Shall we go up to my office and have lunch in?"

Harry put the book back on the shelf. "I'd like that."

Hermione and Ron returned just before curfew, smiling and laughing. Harry forced down his feeling of being left out as he met them in the Entrance Hall. "Hey, Harry, " Ron called and waved, his cheeks a little red from the sun.

"We just ate," Hermione explained when Harry gestured for them to go into the Hall.

"All right," Harry managed levelly.

"We could do second pudding," Ron suggested.

"No . . . we couldn't," Hermione retorted in disbelief.

"See you later," Harry said and joined the stream of students going in. He sat with Ginny, Neville and Colin.

As the plates of food appeared, Justin stopped beside them and said, "Hermione told us Greer gave you an essay assignment ten times harder than the rest of us and that was why she handed them out rather than just telling us the topic."

"Looks that way. I did finish it," Harry said with a grin.

"That's nuts. You should have complained," he insisted, sounding like he was willing to take on some of the unfairness of it.

"I'm sure that's what she wanted me to do," Harry said. Justin shrugged and stepped over to the next table. Harry took a glance at the head table, Greer had her eyes narrowed at him all right. "I don't know what her problem is, but I'm not giving in," he said quietly.

Pointing at him with her fork, Ginny said, "Harry, I think you like being persecuted."

Harry's lips cocked sideways. "I did have fun working on that essay even though it was wicked hard."

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Ginny asked.

In a high pitched mimic of Hermione, Harry said, "We ate already in Hogsmeade and we're soooo tired."

Ginny laughed. "Oh yeah. I can see that. Getting serious, those two."

"That's why I split them up when we were fighting in the final battle," Neville said in a falsely stern voice. "I thought, if they are side-by-side they might forget we're fighting Voldemort."

They all laughed.

When he finished his plate, and before he stood to leave, Harry took another peek at the head table–this time to look for Snape. Even through the hair that had fallen over his face, he could see Snape's brow go up. Harry gave him a small smile. If he had glanced at Greer, he would have seen her eyes narrowing more at him.

Chapter 21

Tuesday in Potions, Harry waited impatiently for his essay to be returned. Greer strode back to the front of the room without returning it, but having returned everyone else's. Hermione gave him a wide-eyed look. He raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she drawled.

"I didn't get my essay back, ma'am," Harry pointed out in the nicest voice he could manage.

"See me after class, Mr. Potter," she said in a stiff tone he didn't recognize.

Harry made it through class and brewing, but just barely. Greer seemed downright predatory today as she stalked around the room. She was too chubby to slither the way Snape used to, but she still managed. Her long fingernails tapped on the bench tops as she circled. At Harry's table, they all made faces of dismay at each other when her back was turned.

Finally the bell rang and everyone packed up and departed for lunch. Harry packed his bookbag and left it on the bench.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked. She hadn't looked up at him so he had been forced to walk up to her desk.

"Do you know the penalty for cheating in this school, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "How does that matter, ma'am?"

Anger came through now. She had his essay in her hand, crumpled a bit. "Excessive assistance constitutes cheating, Mr. Potter," she announced in a victorious tone.

"I didn't get any help with that," Harry argued, pointing at the parchment.

"Don't lie to me; I can see right through you, my boy."

"Right." Harry said as he thought, you haven't seen anything about seeing through people.

"Who helped you with this?" she demanded. "Or need I not ask?"

"No one helped me with it," Harry repeated.

She huffed. "We'll see about that." She came around her desk and headed for the door. "Follow me," she ordered.

"Where are we going?"

"To see the headmaster. There are some other things he should be made aware of as well, I should think." She sounded righteous, much like Aunt Petunia often did.

Harry, thinking of Dumbledore not needing an interruption of his quiet contemplation, said, "I don't think it is worth bothering the headmaster for, ma'am. How about Professor McGonagall? She's the deputy headmistress."

They were going along the ground floor corridor now. "And your Head of House," Greer countered smartly.

"She has always been very impartial," Harry insisted.

Even though his legs didn't look any shorter than hers, he was rushing to keep up. She didn't respond to that assertion. Harry was out of breath when they made it to the far side of the second floor. She gave the password and the gargoyle leapt aside. Harry protested again, "I really don't think-"

She grabbed the collar of his robe and dragged him into the turning staircase. Harry was too startled to do more than regain his balance. Same as with Mulciber, she had him beat easily if he couldn't use magic. At the top, Greer barely waited for an invitation to her knock before opening the door. She pulled Harry in behind her, only letting go when they stood before the headmaster's desk.

Dumbledore glanced calmly up at them. He sat writing a letter it looked like, with his glasses perched on his nose.

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Greer began a bit pompously, "I have a number of problems with this student to discuss with you."

Dumbledore looked curiously at Harry as the latter straightened his robes from having his collar twisted. "Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore intoned.

"Good morning, Albus," Harry greeted him back. Dumbledore's eye twinkled at that. Greer seemed rather startled by it, which was Harry's intent.

"Now, Gertie, what is your concern?" Dumbledore asked as he put his quill aside, blotted, and rolled up the letter.

"First off, I must say this boy is treated far too casually and leniently by your staff."

Dumbledore slipped his spectacles off and folded them slowly. "Well, you will have to forgive us for that, as we are very appreciative of having Voldemort gone." She sniffed a bit doubtfully, making Dumbledore elaborate, "If you had been one of the ones who were duped completely and drawn away from the school just when the students needed us the most, and upon realizing this, imagined the absolute worst, only to return to find Mr. Potter here standing over Voldemort's remains and the rest of his club students incarcerating his followers. We perhaps have gone a little

soft on him. If we start to forget, we only need consider that the alternative outcome would have been utterly tragic." He gave Harry an affectionate glance before he sat straighter and went on, "Nevertheless, if there is a problem to be addressed, we will by all means do so." He favored her with a questioning expression.

Greer geared up her anger again as she pulled out Harry's essay. "Mr. Potter is receiving undue assistance on his assignments."

"I did not!"

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a firm tone. "You will get your turn."

Harry bit his lip as Greer went on. "I do not like my students receiving assistance on assignments that are used to determine a final grade. I have the records of his previous grades in Potions, they are marginal at best. It is not possible that he is capable of the work he is turning in as his own, yet he persists in lying about getting help. I am especially disappointed that it is presumably another staff member who is giving him said assistance."

She held out the essay, but Dumbledore waved it off.

Greer continued in a lower tone, "As well, I have observed what I believe to be an inappropriate relationship involving Mr. Potter and a member of your staff, which I am certain is outside the bounds of school regulations."

Harry stared at her now, trying to catch up with that. He was starting to suspect that she wasn't after him, but Snape. Dumbledore's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Harry, do you have a response to that?"

Harry mentally backed up. "I haven't had any more assistance on my assignments than normal. Hermione reads my essays over when she has time and notes things she thinks are wrong. She doesn't say how to fix it, though, so I don't consider it cheating and neither have any of the other teachers. I haven't had any help from a teacher with any of my Potions essays."

"Potter, you can't honestly expect me to believe you wrote this!" she held the essay out to him.

"I did," Harry insisted. "As to Professor Greer's second allegation, I'm not sure what she's referring to."

"Your grades took a very interesting turn upward the last two months of the previous year, Mr. Potter."

"I was studying harder."

"Don't play coy with me." Her voice dropped even lower, unimaginably low, as she pointed at the door with his rolled up essay. "I saw you in my office last Saturday. I'm certain you didn't know I was there." Harry shook his head and thought fiercely back to the weekend brewing session while she grinned happily.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"I honestly don't know what she is referring to, sir. I spent twenty minutes or so helping Professor Snape with some potions."

"Potter," she said as though he assumed she was stupid. "He had his hand on your back as he explained the potions to you, and he stood much closer than would ever be appropriate in my experience."

Harry gave her a studious look. He was a little embarrassed, mostly because he knew Snape would not want Dumbledore to hear this.

Dumbledore stood up and paced slowly behind his desk, rocking side to side more that walking, as though he were stiff. "Professor, if you will allow me to address these issues in the order of their seriousness."

She became all prim again. "Of course, Headmaster."

"When I hired you to teach Potions, we both agreed that since you had not taught in seven years, and not so many classes at once, that it would be best if you were not also burdened with the duties of Potions master."

Flustered, Greer stammered, "Yes sir, but-"

Dumbledore held up his hand to forestall her. Harry grinned and ducked his head. He really did love Dumbledore.

"If you have changed your mind or are feeling as though your territory is being invaded, you should have come to me to re-negotiate."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this," she insisted, gesturing at Harry with the parchment essay.

"Ah, but it does, I believe," he countered kindly.

Greer's mouth twisted to the side as she took that in.

"Harry, perhaps you should explain . . . " Dumbledore was giving him a look that Harry read as, see what happens when you keep things to yourself?

Harry sighed and said, "Professor Snape is my d- . . . guardian." Dumbledore gave him a sharp, amused look at that. "He adopted me," Harry added, a little rattled by his near slip.

After a long stare Greer breathed, "You aren't serious?"

"I witnessed the papers myself," the headmaster supplied. "Was there anything in what you saw that exceeded the bounds of a parent-child relationship?"

Harry rolled his eyes uneasily. Greer muttered in barely audible speech, "No, not at all."

Dumbledore retook his seat. "As to the allegations of cheating, I suggest you ask Professor Snape how much, if any, help he provided on the assignment. Good day, Professor," he said dismissively. With a smile he said more brightly, "Good day, Harry."

At the bottom of the tower, Greer thrust the rolled parchment at him. "Get it signed off by Professor Snape that you didn't receive any help. Then I'll grade it." She stalked off.

Harry used a flattening charm on his essay to take out worst of the wrinkles, then re-rolled it carefully. His bag was still in the dungeon; he would have to retrieve it before lunch ended. He went around the corner just in case Snape was in his office. He wasn't, but the classroom door was open. A peek inside verified that Snape was cleaning up from the previous class. Bits of wood disappeared from the floor with a banishing charm as Harry stepped in and closed the door.

"Harry," Snape greeted him when he looked up.

"I need to have you sign something," Harry said. "And to warn you that Greer has it in for you."

"I am already aware of that," Snape commented easily as Harry stepped over to him.

"Did you know she was in her office last Saturday?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head with a thoughtful expression. He took the parchment Harry held out as he explained in a annoyed way, "She insists that you sign that you didn't help with it. Otherwise she won't grade it." Harry watched in mild trepidation as Snape's eyes scanned the first section of the essay. "She dragged me up to Dumbledore's office just now to accuse me of cheating," he said to fill the silence. When Snape went on reading, Harry, with growing concern, insisted, "You don't need to grade it–just sign it."

"You did a good job on this," Snape commented. "Greer gives remarkably difficult essay assignments and could not have given you much time to finish this as it is only the third week of classes." He carried the essay, while still reading, over to the desk to pull out a quill. "Reyfrem is not a reagent," he said.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. "I said that wrong. I was pretty tired when I wrote that part."

"The entire class must be tired."

"No one else got that assignment," Harry said. "Everyone else had: describe the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions."

Snape looked up at that with an intense expression. "And you didn't complain?"

"I thought she was trying to get to me. I would have, if I'd known she was trying to get to you, by giving me an assignment she was certain you'd have to help with."

Snape quickly read over the rest of it. He pulled out his wand and obliterated the erroneous line. "Rewrite that and I'll sign it," he said, pushing the parchment over to Harry.

Harry laughed and shook his head. He crouched so he could write normally in the blank space and repaired the miswritten line. "I'm only doing this because I did know better, just didn't write it out very well."

"Of course, Harry," Snape stated patronizingly. He took the parchment back and added a line across the entire bottom edge of Harry's text and wrote just below it, No assistance provided , with his signature. As Harry rolled it up again, Snape said, "If I were you, I would insist it count as the mid-term."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I am impressed, Harry. Makes me think I didn't challenge you enough."

"Oh, you did," Harry strongly insisted, garnering a small smile from his guardian.

Essay in hand, Harry went back to the dungeon to collect his bag. The classroom was empty. He knocked on the office door and was told to enter.

"My assignment, Professor," Harry announced levelly. He brought it up to the desk and set it there. She kept writing in her log book with her quill, her grey roots showing in her thin scalp. She didn't look up. Instead she waved him off. Harry turned and started back to the door. Peeved at her silent dismissal of things, he turned at the door and said, "Professor, if you think you know how to see through people, you should look up Legilimency in the library next time you are there."

She gave him a withering look. "Did I ask for your advice, Mr. Potter? I am quite certain I didn't."

"I'll keep the second part of it to myself then, ma'am, which was listing the staff who know it. It is no matter to me. Good day, Professor," Harry finished in a calm, level voice that he thought even Dumbledore would be proud of.

Chapter 21

Breakfast was Harry's favorite meal, usually. This particular morning, however, it wasn't going as well. There was a lot more whispering and glances his way than normal. Much more. Students were passing around copies of what looked like the Prophet , and reading avidly. Harry tried not to look too alarmed by this as he reached for the honey.

Hermione was eating calmly and reading her own copy with her normal consumed expression. Harry resisted the strong urge to jerk it out of her hands. Torturous, long minutes passed as he tried to eat, tried to listen to the whispering, and waited for the paper.

Justin swept behind and hit him on the shoulder. "Hey, Harry," he said meaningfully.

"Huh?" Harry asked him.

"You don't have to explain," Justin said in a false sympathy as he stepped to his table. Harry resisted glancing at the head table, but just barely.

Luna stopped by next. " Really ," she said, sounding disappointed in him.

"What?" Harry asked her. His uneven heartbeat was struggling with the notion that the reactions were just a little off from what he feared.

"Oh, this," Hermione said, grabbing Harry's attention. He swallowed and waited as she read something on the back page. She shook her head in confusion and with a dubious look, handed the paper over to Harry.

This reporter is hearing rumors that a certain wizard hero is in a family way. More to follow when verification can be obtained.

It was Skeeter's gossip column on the back page. "Family way?" Harry asked aloud, not sure whether to laugh or cry. Everyone around him broke out laughing.

"Who's the lucky girl, Harry?" Ginny asked suggestively, then flickered her eyelashes at him. They all giggled again.

"No one," Harry snapped, tossing the paper back on the table. "Argh," he breathed. Even Hermione couldn't keep from laughing. Harry shook his head and finally managed to eat some of his cold breakfast. Skeeter was getting close though; he really didn't know how much longer he had to work things out his own way, whatever that way was.

Potions with a Capital P

After Herbology that afternoon, Harry watched Ron's and Hermione's backs as they disappeared into the rose garden, engrossed in conversation. This left Harry free to visit his guardian. He had a question about his Potions reading as well that he would much rather ask of Snape.

In the second floor corridor, Harry paused outside the door because Malfoy was inside. He looked to be having something explained to him, but it wasn't something out of their class textbook.

"I expect to finish this one next week," Malfoy was saying in what must be his Best Boy voice. "Which one should I order to read next? This book refers to another by Brutus Brindlestiff. Do you know of it?"

Shit , Harry thought, what is Snape teaching him? He had a flash of the future: him as an Auror facing off with a Malfoy armed with spells Snape had taught him. While he waited his shoulder tired, so he set his bag down beside the door. Malfoy noticed this and gave him that sly smile again. Harry leaned against the doorframe and waited patiently. Snape suggested a different book and gave Malfoy a slip with an address from which to obtain it.

The blonde boy slunk over to Harry. "Need extra help, Potter?" he asked snidely.

"No," Harry replied in an almost friendly tone, refusing to be baited. They passed close in the doorway.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he arranged a small stack of parchments on his desk. He glanced up at Malfoy and added, "and close the door."

Harry froze at that and at the dark look Malfoy was now giving him. The scene Greer had caused in the headmaster's office played through his mind. "Uh . . ." he started. Malfoy actually looked furious now as he glanced between them. Harry held the door open and said to the Slytherin boy. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes looked him over in silent, disapproving appraisal.

Harry stepped closer to him and dove in. "How about the truth?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape's head come up sharply. He glanced that way. "Trust me," Harry explained.

Snape rested his chin on the back of his fingers and considered them both. "Mr. Malfoy does know how to keep things to himself," Snape stated in a oddly mild tone,

leading Harry to wonder what he had on Malfoy. "Sit down, Harry. Mr. Malfoy, step in and close the door."

After Harry took a seat, Snape sighed and considered him in consternation a moment. Harry gave him a shrug. "Potter has apparently seen something here that I did not," Snape said. "Perhaps because you have been competing only against yourself, Mr. Malfoy, even though you didn't recognize it. To save you further effort and . . ." Here he looked over at Harry in question. " . . . to address something Mr. Potter is concerned about, I should tell you that I have adopted Mr. Potter."

Malfoy's mouth fell open. "What?" he finally breathed after long seconds of empty expression. He spun on his heel and paced a bit, actually whimpering once as he turned. After a few times across the floor he stepped over to Harry. "No wonder I couldn't bait you at all. It was taking all the fun out of it, frankly."

Harry chuckled silently and grinned at the boy. Malfoy made a noise of despair and put his hand over his eyes a bit theatrically, although Harry expected he meant it. Finally he put his arm down and said to his teacher, "Is that all, sir?" in a rather worn tone.

Snape, fighting a grin, replied, "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

At the door Malfoy stopped. "I couldn't tell the House that, sir. I'm not that cruel," he said before he left.

When the door closed, Snape gave Harry, who was still trying not to laugh, a questioning look. "I assume there was reason for that."

"There was," Harry insisted. "Haven't you noticed Greer is off your back?"

Snape raised a brow. "I did."

Harry sighed. "Let's just say that when she dragged me up to Dumbledore, she was pretty certain she had you gone." He watched Snape take that in before he added, "I really didn't feel like going through that again." Harry smiled again and quipped happily, "It is fun to beat Malfoy at anything, though. And to make him miserable."

"Was there something specific you wanted?" Snape asked slowly with a hint of dismay. "Or are you just visiting?"

Harry reached for his bag. "I did have have a Potions question, if you don't mind. But it's mostly a visit."

Snape accepted Harry's notes with a long exhale that implied he was trying hard to be tolerant. Harry laughed lightly, not buying it.

Chapter 22.

Painful Truth

"We have been given permission to do a few offensive spells," Snape said at the beginning of lecture. "Potter, come up here."

Harry, feeling a little trepidation, went up to the platform. As he faced his teacher, he had to remind himself that Snape was not going to do anything untoward.

"The first spell we are going to do today is the Mutushorum or Freezing Spell."

Harry growled lightly in disapproval of being part of the demonstration, causing many of the students to laugh.

"The canceling incantation for this is Locoinitio , " Snape went on.

Hermione raised her hand. "Why is this a restricted spell?"

"Because if incanted with too much force it can cause damage by temporarily inhibiting breathing or even cardio function."

Hermione slowly put her hand down. "Oh." She glanced worriedly at Harry and sat back slowly in her chair.

"I would not be teaching you this spell if I didn't think all of you capable of controlling the force of your spells," Snape went on. He turned to Harry. "Are you ready, Potter?"

"No," Harry said, causing more chuckling.

"I suspect your ego can handle it," Snape said with a hint of derision.

Harry glanced at the ceiling. Snape raised his wand and paused just a moment before casting the spell. Without any forethought, Harry raised his wand as well. The Mutushorum scattered away. Snape crossed his arms and gave him a disapproving look.

"What was that?" Snape asked snidely.

"A Chrysanthemum block?" Harry replied sheepishly.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Snape demanded.

"Telling you, sir. I can't just stand here and be spelled," Harry complained. Someone snorted at that in humor.

"Give me your wand," Snape said. When Harry gave him an appalled look. The teacher stepped over to him. "Potter," he said threateningly.

Harry closed his eyes and held out his wand. Snape took it and pocketed it before stepping back to his previous spot. Harry looked very uneasy. Snape dropped his wand hand and said with some disgust, "Potter, if I had designs on harming you, I have certainly had ample opportunity to do so . . . unobserved ."

Harry gave him a dark look, but forced himself to relax. Snape aimed his wand and cast the spell at him. As promised, Harry couldn't move. Snape came over to him, lecturing as he went, "We can see that he is still breathing. And blinking, you will note."

Harry thrashed in his mind, trying to get free. His limbs refused to budge and straining made no difference, at all.

Snape went on, "Cast properly, no autonomous function should be disturbed." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him backward. He tipped up like a statue. "Usually the target will fall over, but Mr. Potter was well balanced." He pulled Harry back level, squeezing his shoulder before he released it.

"This is not an Imperio, although one could bring about the state you are seeing with a command under an Imperius curse." He paced back away. Harry really hoped this would be over soon. "The spell will wear off on its own in an hour or so. But it can

be canceled anytime with a Locoinitio .” Snape spelled him as he spoke. Harry hit the floor on his hands and knees, startled.

Snape said levelly, “Then there is that. The victim eventually relaxes since their voluntary muscles are not functional.” He watched Harry get to his feet slowly. “Ego still intact?” Snape asked him.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said evenly. “Can I have my wand back?”

Snape held it out, handle first. Harry came over and retrieved it before returning to his seat. He slouched back in his desk chair, feeling grumpy. Hermione gave him a sympathetic look.

“Everyone pair up. Be extremely careful as you are trying out the spell, won’t you?”

Classes wound on. Ron stopped complaining as much about the long periods Harry and Hermione insisted they spend on assignments. Harry suspected that his first set of grades weren’t as good as he had hoped. Ron fidgeted a lot as he worked though, annoying Harry.

“Can we take a break?” Ron asked late one evening.

“Sure,” Hermione said. She put her things away with a sigh, indicating that she too was tired of studying.

“Should we go for a walk around the castle?” Ron asked.

Hermione stretched her neck. “Sounds good.” They dropped their stuff in their respective dormitories and headed out the portrait hole. The corridors were quiet and dark as they walked and shared minor gossip.

As they turned a corner, they heard a gasp and quick footsteps go one way, then another, toward them. Dennis Creevey came around the corner and stopped short upon seeing them. “Filch!” he gasped in horror.

Harry saw what had him panicked: the statue of Roland the Rider now sat upon something more like a possum or some member of the stoat family, rather than the usual armored steed. “Dennis, what are you doing?” Ron asked in his prefect voice.

“It was just a joke,” Dennis insisted in a frightened voice.

Chapter 22

Uneven footsteps sounded around the corner along with the malevolent voice of Filch. "I'll get you this time you little scoundrel. Hang ya' by your little toes I will . . . 'til they pull out of their boney little sockets."

Dennis moved to hide behind them. This was relatively easy for Dennis. Harry waved him away. "Go on," he hissed. Dennis gave him a very grateful look and ran off.

"I wouldn't have done that," Ron commented. "He needs to learn not to be stupid."

"Look who's talking," Hermione hissed.

Filch was upon them, so angry spittle flew from his mouth as he raged at them, gesturing at the statue. "This is the last straw . . . "

"Sir," Ron said, "we just found the statue like this. We don't know who did it."

"I've taken more than enough from the lot o' you," he said, bloodshot eyes roving over them. "Ya' tryin' to tell me it's someone else. Who else is in this corridor, eh?"

"Look, we're both prefects, and she's Head Girl," Ron insisted, gesturing at their badges. "If we knew who did it, we'd tell you."

"I knows troublemakers when I see 'em and this one's been sticking in my craw for a long time now." He came right up to Harry with that. He dropped his cat on the floor and grabbed the collar of Harry's robe and dragged him away. Harry, thinking that this was happening far too often, struggled a bit but was outweighed as usual.

Filch let out a stream of invectives as he towed Harry down to his office. "Restrictions, my arse," he mumbled. "Treats 'em like a bunch a pansies, they does. Branding was the way in my day I'll tell yer." He tossed Harry into his office. Harry, a little rattled, took the visitor's seat he had half-fallen into.

"Really, sir," Ron said, stepping into the doorway. "Harry didn't do anything."

Filch ignored Ron. "It's just occurring to me, Potter, that with the headmaster feeling less than his usual self and you having no parents to squawk, that there is no real limit to your punishment." He grinned a yellow, toothy grin. With sadistic pleasure he said, "Well, now, yes, that does seem to be the case, doesn't it?"

"Didn't you hear? I got adopted over the summer." Harry said, rubbing his neck where his collar had cut into it.

"Nice try, Harry," Ron quipped. To Hermione, he said, "Maybe you should go get McGonagall."

She looked from Ron to Harry with a bit of a helpless frown. "I will if we really need to. She isn't usually very helpful in these situations." She fingered her wand pocket, looking concerned.

"Let's see now," Filch murmured to himself. "If this is your seventh offense that means we can use the hot irons." He chuckled to himself and pulled out a long file drawer. "Tenth, we can turn the flesh eatin' slugs on ya'. We must be at least up to that, Mr. Potter, hadn't we? Works slow, they does. Nice and slow." He chuckled again.

Harry swallowed hard despite himself and wondered, not for the first time, why Dumbledore kept Filch around. With long fingers that emerged from holes in his straggly grey gloves, Filch opened Harry's file and frowned at the top sheet. Harry recognized it from the back as a smaller copy of the application to the Wizard Family Council. The caretaker pulled it out and studied it intently, his hand shaking as he held it up. With an angry motion he stuffed it back into the file and slapped it shut, making everyone jump.

"Let's go up and see him then, eh?" he threatened, then said thoughtfully, "I trust he can dole out punishment–at least as well as I."

With extra forced confidence Harry asked, "Whom do you think he'll believe–you or me? Whom do you think he'll be more angry with?"

Filch growled low and long, sounding like his cat might. He slapped the file into the drawer and closed it with a boom. "Get outa my sight. I catch you agin' I don't care who your dad is, you understand me?"

Harry jumped to his feet and led the way out the door, forced to part his friends who were standing, mystified, in the doorway.

Two corridors and several staircases later, Hermione caught up with him. "Uh, Harry?" Harry slowed so they could come abreast. "What was that?" she asked carefully.

Harry stopped, breathing deeply from more than the fast walking. "It's what I said. I was adopted."

They both gaped at him. "You didn't tell us?" Hermione sputtered in disbelief.

"I didn't think you'd understand," Harry admitted. If anything, this made them gape more. Scrambling for a decent excuse, he said, "I'm seventeen, I assumed you would wonder what my problem was."

"Harry," Hermione said sharply. "We would never do that. I still need my parents, Ron still needs his, even though he fights with them half the time."

"'Scuse me?" Ron said.

"Why would we think that?" Hermione asked. She sounded very hurt.

"I . . . " Harry started then stopped. He felt really awful. "I just didn't think you'd understand," he repeated miserably. He started walking slowly down the empty corridor away from them; they immediately came beside him again.

"I wish you'd trusted us, but we're really happy for you, Harry," she insisted. "You've been through so much; you really need someone besides us. Really. If you thought we'd feel put out."

"It isn't that," Harry said quietly. "It's just . . . " He stopped and grimaced.

"What's the problem?" Ron asked. "It isn't like you've been adopted by Snape or something."

Harry turned on him, his green eyes intense.

"Ron," Hermione said in a warning tone, putting a hand out to hold him back.

"You didn't!" Ron blurted in horror.

Figures at the end of the corridor by the staircases had stopped at the sound of Ron's voice. Hermione pushed them both forward, hard. In rapid speech she said, "The Room of Requirement is just around the corner. Hold it in until we get there."

The door to the room closed behind them and Ron was on Harry. "What the hell!?" he demanded. His voice died out quickly, bouncing off padded walls and floor.

Harry just stared at him, leaning toward his friend challengingly even though he was having to look up an awful lot. Hermione took Ron's arm. "Back off, Ron. You're making a huge mistake."

Ron shook her off. "That's sick," he said to Harry. "What the eff is wrong with you?"

A long pause ensued. Hermione took Ron's arm more gently this time and gave Harry a pained look.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," Harry said quietly, fiercely.

Hermione huffed in frustration. "Tell us what happened," she suggested helpfully.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well . . . it is a bit of a surprise," she replied.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "You don't get it. You have parents you've had all your life, you can't possibly get it."

"Let's start with the basics," Hermione said slowly, gesturing for them to calm down. "When did this happen?"

"August second. Severus put-"

"'Severus', listen to you!" Ron exploded.

Harry fell back into a brooding silence where he glared at Ron.

"Ron, so help me. Shut up." Hermione said. "You aren't helping."

"Helping?" Ron asked with a false laugh. "Aren't you listening. He's telling us he's been adopted by Snape , the greasiest git in the wizarding world."

A shell closed around Harry at that, isolating him from Ron and letting him see his oldest friend in a way he hadn't before, as cruel and shallow. Hermione frowned as she watched this. "Harry, please," she said, grabbing his arm instead of Ron's. "You must admit that four, five months ago, this would have seemed very disturbing, even to you."

Harry dropped his gaze. Of course he could remember that. "Yes."

"All right," she said. "So you understand where Ron is right now. Tell us what happened," she pleaded. Harry's face went pained as he tried to sort out a story for them. "You spent the summer here . . ." Hermione prompted.

"It started before that," Harry said in a defeated voice. "The day Goyle and Crabbe grabbed me . . . tortured me. I know it'll be hard for you to believe, but Snape took care of me that night when we couldn't return right away. No one has ever done that for me." Harry turned sideways to them. "I didn't like that exposed feeling afterwards. He was always so cruel; I was terrified he was going to cut me down again and know really how to do it this time. But he never did. Instead, the night before the Quidditch match, when McGonagall turned Neville and me away, he asked me what I was dreaming, gave me a potion to sleep, even told me what was going on. He was the only one who bloody cared! The rest of them were too wrapped up in not feeling helpless or outrightly frightened to give me even a moment."

He paced around the soft floor of the empty, padded room. More reluctantly, he went on, "When I lost Sirius, I lost the only person I could ever turn to. I didn't think I'd have another chance to have someone like that again. Dumbledore suggested it to Snape and a month later, he asked me." He looked at each of them, pleading for understanding. "I'd spent half the summer around him at that point, helping brew potions for the stocks, helping him prep for Defense class."

Harry swallowed hard and ignored Ron's disgusted expression. "I said 'yes'. It's signed and filed with the Wizard Family Council. I spent the rest of the summer at our house in Shrewsthorpe." Ron blanched at that. Harry stepped right up to him. "You don't know what it's like to have no place to call home. You with your quaint wizard house and property large enough to play Quidditch on it."

"You can't be jealous of me ?" Ron sputtered.

"Why not?" Harry yelled back at him.

Ron gaped at him as though Harry had completely lost it. "You're a nutter," he said, not in a teasing way. "What are you saying, anyway? You went home with him?"

"Yes, he's my guardian," Harry insisted in the hardest tone he could manage.

Ron spasmed. "I can't take it," he said. "You don't let him touch you, do you?" he asked in horror.

Harry stared at him with absolutely no expression, then turned away and walked to the door.

"Harry," Hermione said, intercepting him. "Just give him a chance to get used to the idea . . . "

"What? You expect me to spend time thinking about that?" Ron asked in complete disbelief.

Harry opened the door and stepped through it. The corridor was even darker than before and completely deserted. He strode to the staircases and stopped when he got there. The dormitory was not an escape, but he was in no mood to talk to Snape, either. He headed for the headmaster's office instead. He had to talk to someone.

The lamps in the dark windowed tower office were supplemented by candles. The mood of it calmed Harry just on its own. Dumbledore relaxed in a lounger, writing in a large book. "Come in, Harry," he said welcomingly.

Harry shut the door quietly and stepped up to the desk. He couldn't figure out what to say.

"What is it, my dear boy?" Dumbledore asked. He set the book aside and stood up. "Have a seat," he insisted as he came around to the other side of the desk. Harry, his eyes heated now, took a seat in the visitor's chair after Dumbledore waved it into an overstuffed armchair. "What is it?" Dumbledore asked again.

"I told Ron and Hermione," Harry said quietly. Then after a pause. "Ron went berserk." That knowledge felt like one of the torn strands of the Dementor's web.

Dumbledore leaned back against the desk and clasped his hands before him. "Hmmm," he murmured.

"I realize now that I knew I'd be choosing between them," Harry said. "He refuses to understand."

"You may just need to give him time to absorb the idea," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry scoffed.

"You couldn't keep it secret forever."

"No. And I felt bad about doing that at all, anyway. It wasn't fair to Severus."

"Give it a little time, Harry," the headmaster stated sagely. "I still believe Mr. Weasley is a true friend to you."

Harry frowned and thought, not anymore . He stood up. "Thank you, sir. I needed someone to talk to before I go and share a dormitory room with him."

"Do you regret the adoption?" Dumbledore asked.

"No."

"Then the rest was inevitable. Accept that and move on. Do not apologize for taking what you truly need. You have given everyone else too much to even consider it. This is your time now."

Harry considered the old wizard for half a minute. This was a different attitude than he was used to from him. "Yes, sir. I'm realizing that."

"Good luck, Harry."

By the time Harry returned to the dormitory, Ron's drapes were closed. Harry changed and crawled into his own bed and closed the drapes. He lay awake for quite a while until he relented and used a small sip of potion to knock himself out.

The next morning, Ron changed in silence and left quickly. Neville watched him stalk from the room. "What's up with him?" he asked Harry.

"We had a fight last night," Harry said.

"What about?" Dean asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't feel like losing any more friends right now," Harry added as he pulled on his shoes.

"Harry," Neville chastised him. "You can't lose friends that easily."

Chapter 22

"It took five minutes to lose him," Harry pointed out. He thrust his robe over his head and jerked it straight in anger.

At breakfast Hermione separated them on the bench. As everyone settled in, Dumbledore stood and announced that the Head of Gryffindor house was being reassigned to Professor Sinistra. He smiled broadly as he said this, as though it was the best thing that could have befallen. Harry's heart sank a little more as he heard it.

"What's that about, then?" Parvati asked the table in general.

Harry replied quietly, "McGonagall is too busy with her Deputy Headmistress duties to be our Head anymore." He and Hermione shared a look of understanding which was interrupted by breakfast appearing.

As he ate, Ron didn't look as though he had relented at all. Ginny prodded him, sensing his mood. "Ask Harry what's wrong," he finally snapped at her. Ginny gave Harry a questioning look, to which he dropped his gaze to his plate.

"Disgusting," Ron muttered a few minutes later.

Harry put his fork down and walked away. It wasn't until he was at the door to the hall that he realized Ginny had followed him. She took the door from him and closed it behind her. A few students sitting on the grand stairs gave them a curious look. Harry met her gaze before turning and heading up. Ginny followed him, eventually pulling him into the empty Transfiguration classroom. "What happened with Ron?" she asked bluntly.

Harry ran his fingers over the worn, carved surface of the desk beside him. "I told Ron and Hermione something I should have told them sooner, but I was afraid they were going to react the way Ron did," he confessed.

Ginny stared at him. "He gets unthinkingly vicious when he's really upset. Charlie's like that too." She stepped a little closer. "I don't suppose you'd tell me?"

Harry looked away.

"I promise not to behave like Ron." When he didn't respond, she said. "You have me really curious. Can I guess?"

"You are not going to guess this," Harry said, glancing around the classroom. The mice were skittering around in their cage.

"You're gay?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Yeah, too obvious, and I would expect better from Ron, but then again, maybe not."

"I have to get my books for class," Harry pointed out, voice flat. He started to turn to the door.

She grabbed his arm. "Look, I owe you a lot. You've never given me a chance to make it up to you. I can help with Ron, especially if he is in the wrong, but frankly, even if you are."

Harry stared into her bright eyes. He knew the knot in his middle would loosen if he told her. "Professor Snape adopted me."

Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open as she read his face avidly as though looking for the truth in that. "Wow. That is a surprise." She exhaled hard and tilted her head to the side comically. "All right, that is really weird. Just as well I didn't keep guessing. Can I ask why?"

"Because he wanted to," Harry stated as though it were obvious. "I spent part of the summer at his house . . . met his parents."

"We are talking about the same Snape . . . the teacher here?"

"Ginny," Harry chastened her.

"Just checking. I thought you hated him, is all." She finally released his arm and rubbed her cheeks in thought. "Are you happy with it?"

"Very."

"Wow. Well, what else matters?" she said, clearly to herself. "You're much less moody now than you were at the end of last year. And frankly, he's a lot less nasty. I guess it works both ways." She glanced at the clock. "I'll work on Ron."

"Thanks."

As she reached the door, she said, "And I'll leave it to you to tell anyone else, because no one would believe me anyway. Who else does know?"

"McGonagall signed the papers as did Dumbledore. Hagrid knows. Ron and Hermione. Greer." He skipped mentioning Malfoy.

"Thanks for trusting me," Ginny said as she pulled the door open on the busy corridor.

"Thanks for believing I know what I'm doing."

Chapter 22

The next evening, Ginny sat with Colin and Margory working on assignments.

"Do you understand this section of the text?" Margory asked the two of them. She turned her book around and pointed.

Ginny took it and read it through. "I thought it meant a binding charm wasn't like other object-producing spells because the bindings are not really physical."

"That can't be right, though," Colin said. "It says at the beginning of the chapter that they are all examples of the Grafting class of spell, which are all physical."

Margory frowned at her essay. "I don't know how to write this out to dodge the issue and this is due tomorrow."

"Why don't we just go ask," Ginny said. "I need a break anyway."

"You mean as in, just go ask Professor Snape?" Colin suggested in horror.

"He is the teacher," Ginny pointed out.

"You go ask him, then," Margory said.

"Watch my stuff."

As Ginny stepped out of the library, Colin jumped up. "I'd better go with her. What if she never comes back again?" With a hiss, Margory collected her things together as well and asked Dennis to watch it all.

Ginny looked at them both in surprise as they caught up to her. She walked with her textbook in her hand with her finger marking the page.

As she knocked on the Defense office door, she had to remind herself that this was Harry's dad to keep from leaving, or at least backing up to the middle of the corridor. The door swung open suddenly. "Ms. Weasley?" Snape greeted her.

"We have a question about the reading, sir," she said, proud of how casual it came out.

He gestured for them to enter. Colin jumped when the door boomed closed behind them. Ginny held out the book to the right page and pointed. She explained their confusion as he read it through.

He handed the book back and said, "Technically it isn't a Grafting spell. The book is incorrect." He glanced over them. "Any other issues?"

"Ron," Ginny replied, meeting the teacher's gaze steadily.

Snape tilted his head and considered her a long moment. "Yes, well, that is unfortunate."

"I'm trying to work on him, but . . . " Ginny said, then shrugged in frustration.

"I do appreciate that, Ms. Weasley." He gestured with his hand toward the door. "I believe you have essays to finish?"

On the way to the staircases, Colin said, "That was really strange; he was almost nice. What were you two on about anyway?"

"I expect everyone will know soon enough. I said I wouldn't say."

Margory frowned at her. "And who is your best friend?" she teased in annoyance.

Chapter 23.

A Time to Reap

"Severus," Dumbledore's voice came from the back of his office.

"You asked to see me?" Snape said as he stepped in. He could see the robed headmaster through the graceful limbs of a delicately balanced metal mobile on the desk. He went around to where the headmaster sat by the tall windows. A wren alighted on the sill before being caught in the wind and flitting away.

A large diary sat in Dumbledore's lap and he held a white quill in his age-spotted hand. "This will be short, I know you have things to do," he said.

Snape locked his hands behind his back. "It is no matter, Albus."

"Harry was here a while ago," Dumbledore said slowly. "I wanted to tell you how very impressed I am with you. He seems very healed, especially given the rift currently separating him and Mr. Weasley."

Snape didn't reply, just stared out at the evening sky and the dark forest.

Dumbledore went on, "It eases my heart immeasurably to see his forgiveness. It still amazes me how calm and understanding humans become when their pain has

been removed." He sighed. "Most of his anger was perfectly justified. We expected far too much from him in some instances and far too little in the rest." With slow movements, he opened the wide cover of the diary and pulled out the chocolate frog card he was using as a page marker. "Look at him," Dumbledore said, holding it up for Snape. "The eyes of someone older even than myself." He took the card back and held it up before himself. "But the Harry who visited not an hour ago had the eyes of a seventeen-year-old, as he should. You are to be commended for that."

Snape still didn't respond, even after a long silence.

"I think you were the best choice, Severus. You usually take nothing for granted, and I suspect neither does Mr. Potter. It makes for a good match."

After a minute Snape stood straightened and spoke finally, "My mother accused me of looking for atonement, my father of attempting to protect myself from the Ministry. Harry laughed at both of them." After a pause he added, "I earned his faith somehow; I do not know quite how."

"Harry is capable of fierce loyalty. Craves giving it, in fact. You earned it by being on his side when it mattered the most, and remaining there when you did not have to."

"He accuses me of understanding him too well."

"There is great power in that as well." Dumbledore tucked the card back away and sighed. "I was afraid we had sacrificed his future for our own, but I see that has not come to pass. Thank you, Severus," he said.

Snape bowed and, after a lengthy hesitation, departed.

Harry found himself calm around Ron now. He was generally polite to his friend and pretended the single syllable responses he received in return were sufficient. This seemed to ease the strain on Hermione a lot.

Ginny made a point of being extra nice when she was around, in fact, seemed to enjoy showing up her brother. "It's his choice," she would say when he was being difficult. Or, "He doesn't go around mocking dad, does he?"

After D.A. one evening, Harry trapped Ron after everyone else departed. Ron seemed surprised to find the two of them alone. "I just have to say a few things," Harry said.

"Yeah?" Ron retorted.

"For the first time in my life, I feel whole. Don't try to cheat me out of that."

Ron looked very taken aback. "I don't-"

"And don't make me choose between you and him. You aren't going to like my choice, as hard as it is to say that."

"I keep thinking you're under an Imperius Curse. I even went and looked up how to tell."

"So, am I?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"No. Doesn't seem like it," Ron conceded. "It still makes me nauseous to talk about this." He really did look unwell.

"Then we won't. I don't need to." With that, Harry left him standing alone in the Room of Requirement.

"Mr. Potter, come with me, please," Professor McGonagall said the next Saturday morning as they sat studying in the Library. They were rushing to finish things before Quidditch practice.

Harry closed his books and left them with Hermione. McGonagall's expression reminded him of the one she had the night Ron and he flew the Ford Anglia to school. Musing about why he might be in trouble, Harry followed in silence up to the headmaster's office.

Pomfrey sat whispering with Sprout in the main part of the office. McGonagall led Harry past them into a side room. Harry stopped in the doorway of what was clearly a bedroom. Dumbledore lay upon the bed, clothed in a bright blue dressing gown, covers pulled up to his waist.

"Harry," he said with affection and patted the bed beside him. Harry, stunned and pained to find his headmaster bedridden, moved to his side. Dumbledore grasped Harry's arm above the elbow. "My dear boy," he said with emotion.

"How are you, sir?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "I have been better," he replied amiably. "And how are you?" he asked pointedly.

"Pretty good, sir," Harry admitted.

"Quidditch is going well, I assume?"

"Very good." Harry then added in a burst of honesty, "Especially since Malfoy is too big to play Seeker, and he didn't make the team in any other position." McGonagall, standing by the door, rubbed her brow and appeared disapproving.

"Ah, not too much joy at another's expense, my boy."

"They'll have the last laugh, I think," Harry said. "If he didn't make at least Beater, they must be pretty good this year."

"It does all seem to even out in the end, Harry." Dumbledore lifted a gnarled hand and pushed his student's hair back, thumb brushing his distinct scar. "So good to be done with all that," the old wizard intoned. His intense blue eyes peered into Harry's. "So good," he repeated softly.

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore put his hand behind Harry's head and pulled him forward against his chest. "I am so very proud of you," Dumbledore said. Harry gave in and rested his cheek and arm on the old wizard's broad chest in something of a hug.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said evenly. Harry would have sat up if a hand hadn't been holding his head down. Professor McGonagall's hem came into view as she stepped forward. "Take care of the school," Dumbledore intoned.

Harry took a sharp breath and held it. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself not to make a sound. If he made any sound, it would only be a scream of denial. He heard McGonagall say, "Of course, Albus," in a very unsteady voice. This only made it worse, forcing a tear out Harry's eye. He held perfectly still. It seemed incredibly important to do so.

No one moved for long moments. Harry heard someone sniffle from the doorway. McGonagall went into motion then, stepping around the bed, taking Harry's shoulders and pulling him to his feet. Harry held his eyes closed, trying desperately for control. She held him loosely, letting his forehead rest on her shoulder.

"Pomona, get Severus, will you?" Her voice was back to normal. "Get everyone else for that matter."

Short minutes later, Snape stepped through the unusually open headmaster's office door. Sinistra, Flitwick, Vector and Pomfrey stood in the doorway to the bedroom.

When he reached them, one glance at Dumbledore's peaceful visage told him everything, and he shook his head. McGonagall gestured for him to come over to her side. Potter was clearly on the brink.

"The rest are on their way," Sprout said as she came in behind him.

Snape stepped around and turned the boy to him by the shoulders. Harry sniffled, eyes clenched shut. "Harry," Snape said. He glanced down at the old headmaster and put an arm around the boy. "Let's go into the other room."

As they stepped around the bed, Snape raised his gaze to the astounded ones of his colleagues. He shot them all a dark challenging one in return. They watched with wide eyes from the bedroom doorway as Snape led Harry to a spot before the headmaster's desk. Harry still had his forehead resting on Snape's shoulder. "Come now," he cajoled, "I don't think Albus wanted anyone to react this way, least of all you."

McGonagall stepped through the startled throng blocking the door, still paying little attention to the deceased. "Called him up here, in fact," she pointed out.

She and Snape's eyes locked a moment. "Quite an honor, Harry," Snape said. "Greatest wizard of our time wants you beside him-" He stopped and rubbed his forehead with his free hand. More evenly he asked McGonagall, "You have notified the Ministry?"

"Not yet." She sighed and stepped over to the hearth.

Snape patted Harry on the back lightly and waited for him to pull himself together. His brow furrowed as he saw a disconnected pair of shoes coming up the still staircase. A gasp sounded and two sheepish faces appeared above an invisibility cloak.

"So it's true then?" Hermione asked. Ron beside her looked like he deeply regretted his current location. His adam's apple bounced as he swallowed hard.

"Yes," Snape replied.

McGonagall returned to the front of the office, giving the two on the steps a very disapproving glance. "Fudge and his retinue are on their way, so if you don't want to be on the front page of the Prophet , I'd take him down."

Harry lifted his head and gave his friends a very pained look and sniffled again. Snape looked him over and steered him by the arm. "Come on, Harry, you are a front page image to die for at the moment. Let's get you out of harm's way." A sharp look got Ron and Hermione moving as well.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harry hesitated about following his friends. He looked from them to Snape with a beaten expression. Snape stepped back over and said, "It is up to you."

Harry gave Hermione a long look before turning and walking the other way. Ron choked in shock. Hermione had to give him a tug on the arm to make him follow her.

Halfway down the corridor, Harry asked his guardian, "You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

In the Gryffindor tower Ron was still aghast. "Ron. Chill," Hermione insisted.

"I can't believe it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Did you find out what's going on?" someone asked.

"Dumbledore died," Hermione said quietly.

General exclamations of denial and unhappiness went around. Students were called out of the dormitories and told as well. The common room became crowded.

"Ron's taking it pretty hard," Dean commented, his eyes red-rimmed.

"That isn't what's bothering him," Hermione said with a disgusted shake of her head.

"What is?" Dean asked.

"Harry," Ron seethed, "went off with his dad rather than coming to the tower."

"What?" several people chorused.

"Too embarrassed to tell anyone," Ron said mockingly to Hermione.

Ginny stepped out of the crowd and said, incensed, "Ron, you can be so miserable!"

"That's the best you can do?" Ron retorted.

"He's your best friend. At least try to be understanding," Ginny argued in a low voice.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dean said, stepping between the three of them. "Let's back up to the 'dad' part."

"Harry was adopted by Snape ," Ron explained.

"Ron, what have you been drinking, mate?"

Ron put his hands on his hips. "You think I'd make that up?"

"It's true," Ginny confirmed.

The entire room fell into an odd silence until Neville stepped over and said, "That's what you two have been fighting about?"

"It disgusts me. I can't take it," Ron stated sullenly.

Neville's eyes narrowed giving his usually friendly round face a menacing edge. He closed the rest of the space between them. "Harry found a father and all you can do is give him hell about it?" he asked, incredulous.

"It's Snape !"

"That's not your problem!" Neville shouted at him, surprising Ron and everyone else. "Ginny's right, you are a miserable friend."

The portrait hole opened at that moment and Professor McGonagall ducked to come in. The room erupted at her arrival.

"Dear me. Everyone calm down," she admonished them.

"Is it true?" Colin asked in dismay. "Professor Snape adopted Harry?"

McGonagall checked her reaction. "I had thought the topic would be the headmaster, but I see, as usual, that I am mistaken. The answer is 'yes'. And that is the end of that for the moment." She composed herself, giving Ron and Hermione stern looks as she did so. With a deep breath, she said, "I am here with solemn news. We have lost Headmaster Dumbledore."

Most everyone dropped their eyes, even though this wasn't news.

"He will be sorely missed by all, I am sure. There will be a memorial tomorrow; the time will be announced at breakfast."

Dennis raised his hand. McGonagall composed herself again and said, "Yes, Mr. Creevey?"

"What were his last words, Professor?" he asked curiously.

"Last words?" she echoed.

"Yes, ma'am," Dennis insisted solemnly. "Someone always records the last words of great wizards and witches. For example, Gretta Gobstobber's were, 'May there always be time for the growing of poppies and marigolds."' After a pause, he added, "Marvin the Magnificent's were, 'Bloody, where did I drop my wand this time?"

Half the students ducked their heads, this time to laugh. Even McGonagall smiled with crinkled eyes. "Ten points, Mr. Creevey, for making me laugh when I dearly need to." She cleared her throat and looked around the ceiling in thought. "Let's see. He told Potter that he was very proud of him." Everyone shuffled a little where they stood. "He told me to take care of the school . . . and that was it."

She took another deep breath. "And on that note. I expect the prefects to take up the slack for the rest of the day; the staff are very chaotic at the moment." She picked out the relevant students with her eyes before she departed.

Harry refilled his teacup and leaned back on the couch in Snape's office. "I miss him already," he said, thinking painfully that at dinner the center seat at the head table would be empty. He looked at Snape staring into his own cup. "Thanks for letting me come down here. I can't take a crowd right now."

"I prefer this to the alternatives as well." He stood up and paced over to the window. "The Ministry and the press are here in force," he observed.

"Did you lock the office door?"

Snape gave him a small smile. "Yes." Then after a pause: "I should not shirk my duties for long. Leaving my colleagues so startled was probably not wise."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"You were otherwise distracted by internal matters in the headmaster's office, but we were the main attraction. Alarming really, given that the foremost wizard of our time had, moments before, passed on."

"You never told any of the other teachers?" Harry asked in surprise.

"It is none of their concern," Snape said, as though that were obvious.

They fell silent for a long time. A breeze blew in the open window, upsetting the papers on the desk. Harry fiddled with his cold teacup. "I feel bad that I feel so . . . liberated." Snape turned to him with an intense expression. Harry explained, "The two wizards who were running my life are both gone."

"The two most powerful wizards in the world, no less," Snape drawled, "of the century, perhaps, even." He paced across the floor and passed his eyes over the bookshelf on that side. He shook his head. "We are far too similar, you and I, for being so utterly different."

"Too many powerful wizards mucking about," Harry quipped sadly.

"That is what powerful wizards do, Harry," he said a little snidely. "Or they avoid mucking until the very last moment and only do it so no one else knows it is them and no one has the slightest clue what is going on."

"You're just trying to make me feel better, aren't you?"

Snape returned to the table and topped up his tea. "I am trying to make myself feel better." He drank down the cup as though wishing it contained something stronger

and considered Harry. "And I suppose your little friends have gone up to the tower and told everyone."

"I expect," Harry said with a shirk. "If I'd thought of that . . . but I should have said something sooner anyway. I was being very unfair to you."

"Unfair to me?" Snape asked in confusion. "Believe me, Harry, I was quite content to keep my personal business, private."

"I was afraid you'd think I was embarrassed or something," Harry explained carefully. "I wasn't. I just knew I'd lose Ron's friendship," he said sadly. He thought a moment and considered Snape's angular features and rough hair. "It does ruin your reputation, doesn't it?" Harry asked with a crooked grin.

Snape frowned at him. "Yes, indeed," he said grimly, making Harry smile more. "A Gryffindor, no less," he went on in a disgusted tone.

Harry stared at the far wall and chewed his lip sadly. "I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have you right now," he said quietly.

Snape stepped back over and sat beside him. "I do believe this is the moment Albus had in mind when he made his suggestion to me."

Harry shook his head. "Mucking about as usual." Harry unwrapped a sweet from a bowl on the tray and popped it in his mouth. "Did you know this was coming? Did he warn anyone?"

"I should have. He made his peace with me the other day. But he has always been exceedingly old and he would initiate little conversations like that periodically, so I thought nothing much of it."

"He didn't say anything surprising?"

"No. In retrospect I am surprised by what he left out. The conversation was entirely about you," he complained in his most disgusted tone.

Harry laughed lightly and scrubbed his face with his hands to shake his seesawing emotions. Every time he thought about never seeing Dumbledore again his chest ached horribly. This mood overcame him again and he stared at the floor without seeing it.

After long minutes of silence, Snape said, "I should go."

Harry hoisted himself to his feet off the low couch. "Facing the Gryffindor tower will take my mind off of Dumbledore for a while," he commented bleakly.

At the door, Snape said, "Come and find me if you need to."

Silence fell over the crowded Gryffindor common room when Harry stepped in. He gave the room an uncertain smile, wondering what they were all thinking.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, breaking the stillness.

"Neville," Harry returned as though they were having an ordinary conversation.

Dennis chimed in, "Does this mean Professor Snape doesn't hate Gryffindors anymore?"

"I doubt it," Harry replied dryly.

"He has been nicer in general, for Snape," Ginny pointed out.

Harry wanted to head for his dormitory room, but he had to get through this. He took the empty seat by the fire across from Lavender. She stared at him as though he had turned into a Dementor. Hermione came over and sat on the arm of the chair and crossed her arms.

"I'm happy for you, Harry. Everyone else should be too," she said in a low voice while scanning the room. A few murmurs of assent followed this. She gave Ron, moping by the staircase, an especially long look.

"It's all right, Hermione." Harry sat back casually. "I'm happy. I don't care what anyone else thinks."

"Good for you," Hermione said. She patted his leg as she stood up. She stalked over to Ron to glare at him from closer range. Ron finally escaped up the stairs and disappeared.

Harry's shoulders fell as he watched this from the corner of his eye. Eventually everyone went back to their quiet conversations. The ones around Harry sounded like they may actually be about Dumbledore.

Severus Snape encountered a not dissimilar audience in the staff lounge, where McGonagall was preparing to speak to the press gathered in the Great Hall. He gave the stunned gazes an extra malevolent one in return.

"Wha's the matter here?" Hagrid said from his seat by the window.

McGonagall looked up from her notes and shook her head wryly. Sprout, standing at the half-giant's shoulder, said in a low voice, "We are a little surprised to discover Severus has adopted Potter."

"Ach, is tha' all?" He waved a great hand in dismissal. "Harry told me tha' ages ago. Doesna make no difference, 'cepting to Harry o' course."

The staff shifted uncomfortably but didn't argue.

McGonagall held out a parchment to Snape. "Read this over. Tell me if you see anything glaringly wrong or omitted."

It was a list of Dumbledore's accomplishments. Snape was stunned to find nothing on it that really held any meaning right then. "I don't think I am the right person to go over this." He started to hand it back.

McGonagall's head jerked up. "That boy has made you soft," she scoffed and snapped her fingers near his nose. "Get it together! I expected to rely on you."

Chastised, Snape took the parchment and a quill and sat down at the table to make edits.

That night Harry couldn't sleep. With a sigh he sat up in the darkness. He had lain awake for hours without feeling any more likely to sleep. The drawer of his nightstand held a half-full potion bottle, but he resisted using it. It felt disrespectful, somehow.

Silently, he pulled the drapes apart, put his legs over the edge of the bed and sat in thought. He noticed it then as he grew more alert: the castle didn't feel right. Harry pulled down his dressing gown, wrapped up in it, and quietly left the dormitory. On the stairs he realized he had forgotten his slippers. He decided it wasn't too cold and continued down to the common room. The silence felt oppressive, the castle too still as though it were waiting for something. He didn't have to be alone, he considered, as he eyed the soot-blackened, cold hearth.

In the corridor Harry stepped lightly, his bare feet slapping the worn stone floor. The sound kept him company as he headed to the staircases. Something definitely was different. He stopped at the top of the first staircase and took a deep breath, expecting to smell something of the change. His hand rubbed the top of the banister as though trying to awaken a spell in it, or a djinni.

The thought that Dumbledore's magic was that strong, that he could sense its loss, frightened him, made him long for reassurance from someone. He went down five long staircases. Even the portraits along the way seemed a little duller, less interested in him.

At Snape's door Harry hesitated because he realized it was three in the morning, but thought of walking back through the castle's empty corridors made him knock. The door opened after a brief moment. Snape gestured gallantly for him to enter. He still wore his robes from earlier in the day.

"You haven't slept?" Harry asked as he entered the dim office. Snape shook his head. Harry dropped onto the couch with a sigh. A lamp on the desk flared higher as Snape adjusted it. He didn't immediately turn back. Harry watched his stooped back as he fiddled with the guard on the lamp. He was surprised Snape didn't burn himself as he rotated the glass collar by the top edge.

"Does the castle feel different to you?" Harry asked, curious.

"Yes."

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and sat back. The two of them could have been alone in the castle for all the sense of life Harry now had of his surroundings. Finally, Snape turned his head to consider him. He pushed the lamp farther onto the desk and came over and sat beside him.

"I wish he hadn't gone," Harry said, blinking back a sudden dampness in his eyes.

Clasping his hands together tightly, Snape said, "His certainty that Riddle would rise, and return, was the only reason he was still with us."

"Still," Harry said. "I don't know if I like it here anymore," he said with a shiver, rubbing his arms.

"I think you will get used to it," he said levelly. He sat back as well and after a moment's hesitation, put an arm behind Harry, who leaned closer and rested his head on his shoulder.

Silent minutes later, Harry was asleep. Snape was grateful that they were in a comfortable position, because he didn't feel he could move. He listened to Harry's steady breathing for a while and wondered if Harry's sense of the changes in the castle were the same as his own occasional bouts of rampant uneasiness.

Harry shifted in his sleep and curled up his legs. For the first time Snape noticed that his charge was barefooted. Had Harry been awake, he'd have chastised him for it; as it was, he merely tightened his arm around him.

Chapter 23

The Memorial service in the Great Hall was a staid affair. The students were in rows on the right side and the guests were arrayed on the left. The walls were lined, three-deep, with standing visitors. McGonagall made a long speech which Harry couldn't concentrate on, nor remember, as though it were in a different language. He felt worse today than he had the day before. A reporter, with a photographer in tow, slunk closer to the front along the center aisle to get a picture. Harry could see him scanning the students' faces as he went. Harry carefully kept Ron's taller frame beside him between himself and the stranger. Hermione had selected these seats in the middle for exactly this reason. Dean stood on Harry's other side in case someone came up the right aisle, although now it was too crowded for that to happen.

The speeches concluded. It required a full minute of silence for Harry to realize they had. A student a few rows ahead was sniffling repeatedly. At some signal Harry couldn't see, the crowd began to disperse. The four of them stayed put until most all the students had left. Harry could now fully see the stone platform at the front. Dumbledore was in the same sky-blue robe he had worn during the welcoming feast. The sight of his peaceful face and long beard laying across his chest was too much. Harry's eyes started to burn.

Grappling for control, he turned away from the sight. Dean took this as a cue to move and led the way out of their row. Harry followed close behind, eyes closed more than open. At the doors out of the hall, Dean stopped suddenly and Harry ran into his back. His friend's arm came around and pushed him against the wall behind the open door.

"They look like they're waiting," Dean said quietly of the reporters meandering in the Entrance Hall. "I assume for you, but maybe not." When Harry didn't respond, Dean turned his head around. "All right there?" he asked.

"No," Harry replied thickly. He brushed his face with his sleeve surreptitiously. Hermione was close beside him then, patting his arm. With enormous force of will, Harry won the battle with himself. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He was pinned between Dean and Hermione. Out in the Entrance Hall he could hear Skeeter asking about him.

"Do you have something you can say?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. "No." After a beat he said as though quoting, "We'll all miss him."

"Good as it gets," Dean quipped. "Shall we go? Or we can wait 'em out. Your choice."

Harry leaned against the stone wall beside him and looked at Hermione. The Hall behind her was empty except for the platform and Dumbledore's still, supine figure. A chill ran over Harry's limbs.

Someone stepped sharply in the far set of doors; it was Snape. He glanced sideways at them before turning smartly around and shrugging melodramatically to someone beyond in the adjoining hall. He pulled out his wand and sliced the air with it as he stepped back out. All six doors swung closed with a boom!

Harry breathed out in relief. He stepped forward to sit backwards on the last bench on that side. Resting his head on his hands, he said, "I'm sorry. I just can't take it all today. I just want to be left the eff alone." When his friends shifted a bit, he added quickly, "Not by you. By them." He gestured at the closed doors. "I can stand to give a piece of myself away if people are worried about Voldemort being gone, but what I'm feeling now is no one's business." He sat back. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to rant."

"Losing him is hard, but it had to happen sometime," Hermione said sitting beside him.

Harry's brow furrowed. "It happened when he wanted it to," he said sharply. "He wanted to go." At her doubtful look, he went on. "You think I can't tell the difference between alive and dead? One moment he's talking to me and McGonagall and the next poof! he's gone like a snuffed candle?" Breathing hard, Harry looked away from their stunned faces. Angry now, rather than hurt, he stood up. "It sounds quiet out there."

Dean went to the center doors and peered between them. "No. Still crowded."

Harry huffed and paced a bit, sparing a glance for the blue figure lying at the front of the room. The center doors opened. McGonagall leaned in and said, "The press have been convinced to give up."

"Good," Harry breathed and stalked around her to leave.

She gave his friends a questioning glance. "A little moody," Ron commented as he followed Hermione out. "Ma'am," Dean said as he passed. "Mr. Thomas," she replied before pulling the door closed behind them all.

Classes resumed on Monday. Harry found himself resisting heading down to Defense class. He stalled until the last moment and made it just as Snape stepped upon the platform at the front.

Chapter 23

"We had a rather distracting weekend, but I still expect all of you to perform the assigned spells today." Snape glanced at Harry as he took a seat. The other students studiously avoided glancing at the straggler.

In pairs they were called up to demonstrate a Ferrus counter curse. When Ron and Hermione stepped up, Snape said, "Perhaps you should wait for the next demonstration, Ms. Granger."

"Why?" Ron asked sharply.

"I would presume, or hope, Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered, "that you would prefer to aim dangerous spells at a different classmate." Several students giggled at that. Ron turned bright red and waited as Neville changed places with an also blushing Hermione.

Ron, feeling vexed, threw a very hard blasting curse at Neville, who countered it easily. They reversed and Ron countered the carefully controlled spell Neville sent his way.

"As usual Mr. Longbottom," Snape said, "nicely done." When Neville stood stunned, staring at the teacher, Snape said in a tone of thin patience, "You may return to your seat, Longbottom."

Neville blinked and shuffled off in a hurry. He sat at his desk and stared ahead while the next pair went ahead. Eventually he leaned over to Harry and whispered, "What did you do to him, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing," he insisted.

"No," Neville insisted. "Somethin'."

Harry watched Snape working with Padma on the spell. "He likes teaching this better," he suggested, mostly because he knew Snape wouldn't want anyone to suspect him of softening up.

Harry made it through the next two days without dwelling excessively on Dumbledore's memory. He was feeling set free, and the more time passed, the stronger that feeling became. Even the emptiness of the castle began to seem more like new potential.

It was easier to visit with Snape now that everyone knew. Or had heard but didn't believe, as he found out one day when Pansy Parkinson came to ask for help while Harry was there working on his Potions essay.

"You don't really think you can hang out here, do you?" she sneered at Harry.

Snape's gaze as he accepted the rewritten essay she handed over went positively dangerous. She backed up and looked nervous a moment before asking in an almost elf-like voice, "You aren't saying it's true, are you, sir?"

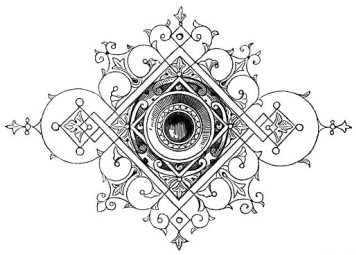
"Yes, Ms. Parkinson. It is."

Her whole body drooped in a positively tragic way. Her eyes slid over to Harry and looked him over with total distaste before she drooped still more. She sighed deeply. "My essay, sir. I'm turning it back in," she stated sadly and dutifully before shuffling out the door and closing it softly. Harry actually wished she had slammed it.

Harry thought that over, feeling an odd tugging of sympathy. "You do tend to look out for them . . . more than the average Head of House," Harry opined.

Snape stared at the closed door. "And I don't intend to change that," he said thoughtfully. He remained thoughtful a while before returning to his grading. Harry took his leave soon after, not really in the mood to ruin more Slytherin egos, although he wasn't sure why he cared.

Chapter 23a.



Getting Detention

Author's Notes:
This story was written at the request of xrayjuliet who very generously contributed to the Support Stacie auction for the prerogative of determining the plot. It is an additional chapter to the story Resonance. It is written to stand alone, however, if you have not read Resonance or have not read it lately.

After Dumbledore's death, the castle continued to feel emptier than it should have given how many students and staff dwelt within its walls. The late autumn sunlight leeched through the dusty windows with decreasing vigor. The wind inspired even colder drafts to chase around the dreary corners of the castle's rooms. And Filch's squint had taken on an even more malevolent glimmer.

Late in the evening, Harry sat with his friends in the library, his many thick textbooks stacked around him. It should not have felt drafty there, especially with how adamant Madam Pince always was about keeping the door closed, but Harry felt chilled nevertheless. He vigorously rubbed his arms and wished he had worn his cloak. His movements attracted Ron's attention. Ron started to say something, but choked it off and ducked back to his notes.

Harry swallowed a sigh and resisted rolling his eyes because Hermione was watching him over a book entitled Advanced Art of the Arithmancer. Harry repeated to himself

that he did not care how appalled Ron was at Harry's new family situation. Being from such a huge family, Ron could not possibly understand and Harry felt no need to work for his friend's approval, quite the opposite.

Harry sighed without trying to and went back to looking up what methods of transfiguration were easier on objects composed of cells. He did not remember reading anything about that in the latest assigned chapter and hoped it did not come up on an examination or quiz because none of it made sense to him. So little of Transfiguration made sense this year that asking Hermione for help only made Harry's head hurt. He wished he had Astronomy calculations to do instead, a true measure of his frustration.

The other students trickled out and with the additional lamps snuffed the library grew almost too dim to read in.

Ron, without preamble, stood up and said, "I'm going to bed. You nutters can stay and rewrite every last essay you've ever written, but I'm tired."

"Ron . . ." Hermione began, then glanced at the time while Ron made his escape. The door to the library closed and Harry watched Ron's distorted shape move along the glass windows.

"I hadn't realized how late it is," Hermione said, stacking her things together. Her face showed the kind of stress it usually only did around exam time. "He'll come around, Harry," she said.

Harry shrugged. He turned back to his essay and said, "I still have to work out a few more things on my Transfiguration assignment."

She shyly offered, "Want me to help?"

"You mean the way you help Ron, usually? No. That won't help me, really. I care about my NEWT scores. Ron doesn't."

"Right." Hermione packed up her things to depart. "Don't be too much longer. It's almost curfew."

"I don't care," Harry said, and he meant it.

With her bag weighing her down crooked, she moved the chairs back under the table. "Well, they probably won't do anything to you anyway if they catch you out."

The door clicked closed behind her more quietly than it had behind Ron. Minutes later, it clicked open again. At first, Harry did not see anything, and assumed it was the wind, but then he heard scuffling.

Chapter 23a

Harry leaned forward to see better and noticed two small figures in hooded cloaks creeping in the door: the Creevey brothers; it had to be. Harry put down his quill and watched them slink their way over to the gate leading to the Restricted Section. Harry crossed his arms. One of them reached up to open the latch, and they slipped inside. Colin pulled a little folding step ladder out from under his cloak and leaned it against the gate. When he turned to oh so carefully close the latch, he finally saw Harry sitting there, facing him, and he sucked in a yelp.

Dennis merely shushed his brother as he moved farther inside, holding his lamp up high to light the plaques on the ends of the shelves.

Harry and Colin stared at each other until Harry shook his head and went back to his assignment. He could hear Colin's sigh of relief as he and his brother moved out of view. The rustling of large lambskin pages issued forth forming a backdrop to the brothers' whispering.

In his determination to defeat his complete lack of understanding of chapter 5 of McGonagall's assigned textbook, Harry nearly forgot their presence. He worried acutely that chapters 6 through 26 would bring on serious hurt if he did not. If he slacked on Transfiguration this early in the year, he might as well quit now and find something better suited to him than being an Auror, like bartender at the Hog's Head, or hazardous pet groomer.

Half an hour later, about the time Harry decided to give up, the door to the library swung open again and Harry was reminded of the clandestine operations only by the hurried shuttering of the lamp light in the Restricted Section. Madam Pince, wearing a frilly dressing gown, shuffled inside in her slippers, which were trying to fall off her feet. Harry looked up at her and she squinted back at him, nose forward like a blind vulture. She gave up recognizing him and patted her pockets to retrieve her glasses.

"Ah, Mr. Potter." She looked around the room, adjusting her glasses and making a face like they were the wrong pair. "One of my new alarm devices woke me up." She sniffled. "It is after curfew, my boy."

"Is it?" Harry said. He wasn't certain why he found this limit interesting to push, but he did. He certainly did not have to worry about facing Dumbledore's disappointment any longer about anything he did wrong.

Harry stood and collected his papers up, taking his time and rearranging them several times. "I'll go up to the tower then."

Pince was still squinting around the room, her eyes enlarged by her thick glasses. "You're alone? Your friends have all left?"

"Yes," Harry said, feeling secure in that lie.

"Do close up when you are done," she lectured him and after bundling her frilly edges together better, shuffled out, heels half off her footwear.

Harry waited a full minute, while slowly packing things into his bookbag. "You'd best go when I do," he said to no one in particular.

The hooded figures crept into view. Small already, they were startlingly reduced by their crouching. Colin stuck his nose through the slats of the gate and whispered, "We still haven't found what we need."

"The alarm will know you are still here," Harry said. "I expect."

"What alarm?"

Harry looked around but saw nothing. Unlike much of the school, the library was well dusted so he could not use that to figure out what had been added recently. "I don't know what's detecting that someone is in here. It might be a spell. It might be a Sneakoscope. I don't know."

The brothers came through the gate, one toting the lamp, the other the step ladder. These were both stashed away under cloaks that must magically alter to hide what one was carrying because their forms remained unnaturally small.

"What are you looking for, anyway?" Harry asked.

The brothers glanced at each other and did not answer right away. Colin finally said, "Some stuff."

"Just some stuff?"

The brothers glanced meaningfully at each other again. "We don't want to tell you," Colin explained.

Taken aback by this, Harry said, "Why not?"

The brothers stared at him. Dennis blurted, "Because you'll tell Professor Snape," in a tone that conveyed that he believed Harry thick.

Colin elbowed his brother, and said, "You're a bit tight with the staff now, you must admit, Harry."

"You think I can't be trusted?" Harry asked, stunned. When the boys shrugged helplessly, Harry argued, "I didn't tell Madame Pince you were here."

"That's different."

"Right." Harry opened the door to the corridor and looked both ways. "Come on," he said, letting his annoyance bleed into his tone.

Harry led the way back to the tower, always waving the all-clear at each turn, although the small students in their dark cloaks barely needed the assistance. They could hide in the shadows of doorways or furniture without much trouble.

The common room was empty as well. Harry, still irritated, made his way to the dormitory stairs without saying good night.

Before he reached the first landing a small voice said, "You really won't tell?"

Harry turned back. Colin pushed his hood back and said, "Because we need your help if we can't get into the library." Dennis tugged on his brother's sleeve and they whispered together, arguing. "If you could talk to Ha- Ha- Hagrid for us, we wouldn't need to do research."

"I don't know why you are scared of Hagrid," Harry said, glaring down at them, arms crossed.

Dennis whispered something to his brother that sounded like he looks like a teacher and Colin said, "Are you still a Gryffindor, or not?"

"I'm still staying here in this Tower, you'll notice. Never mind," Harry said, getting more than annoyed now, and this whole thing wasn't worth getting angry over, really. He stomped up to bed.

Harry pondered his Transfiguration assignment during breakfast since he would not have another chance to look at it before turning it in. The light of day only made the print easier to read, not much else. Shaking his head, he put it away and ate breakfast, feeling desultory.

"Are you sure you don't want me to help you with that?" Hermione asked from across the table.

Ron answered before Harry could. "Harry can get as much help as he likes. Anytime."

Harry felt like telling him to stuff it, but it would not be a good way to start the day.

Defense class was mostly discussion, so Harry did not get a much-needed outlet for his bottled up emotion, like he had hoped. He had picked a seat in the very back of the room, and Ron had dragged Hermione to the front, where she usually sat. Neville sat beside Harry with an uncertain smile.

Harry did not raise his hand for any of the questions he knew, which was most of them. Every question that went by ground on him that this was so easy but that

he might still not be allowed into the Auror's program. Snape's gaze paused on him every time it went around the room. By the end of the lesson, Harry did not have to see it; he could sense it. But he did not feel like talking, so he slipped out with the mass of students when the bell sounded.

Harry could not escape his guardian for long. Snape entered the Great Hall at dinner time through the door near the Gryffindor table and paused behind him. He put a sharp pair of fingers on Harry's shoulder and said, "My office. Directly after dinner," before gliding away toward the Head Table.

Harry looked back in time to see the Creevey brothers as well as Ron looking away from him.

Chocolate-stained dessert dishes littered the table. They got up to leave. Ron put his arm around Hermione and walked her off to the largest of the hearths, which was burning high to combat the autumn chill. Harry had eaten his chocolate raspberry bomb as slowly as possible, which was a kind of torment in itself. Snape had already departed along with the rest of the teachers. Ginny and her girlfriends sat with their heads bent together over a magazine, whispering avidly. Harry had no excuse to remain any longer, unless he wished to share in the latest news about sparkling hair accessories.

Snape's office door stood open, which was unusual. Harry stepped inside and left it open, leaving Snape to wave it closed.

"Is there some problem?" Snape asked as Harry contemplated sitting at the desk in the middle of the floor, the one students wrote lines at during detention.

Harry scratched his cheek. Without looking up, he replied, "Same ones as usual."

"Why don't you take a seat and reiterate them for me."

Despite the gentle tone, Harry felt uncooperative. "I have assignments due tomorrow, Severus."

Snape appeared to make a decision. "As you wish." When Harry put his hand on the door, Snape added, "Do remember I am here if you change your mind."

"Mr. Potter, are you assisting Mr. Thomas with his assignment?" Greer asked the next morning.

Harry had been, but the Slytherins and the Hufflepuffs always did that.

"I am quite certain I did not make this a group assignment. You get a zero for today."

Harry rolled his eyes and put a hand on Hermione to quiet her before she too lost her mark for the day. He scooped up his backpack from the floor, intending to leave, but Greer said, "You may come to the front and prep the juncus belticus for everyone's potion. It is the last ingredient today."

Harry breathed out through his nose and dropped his bag so it smacked the floor. Malfoy smirked at him as Harry sat at the bench near the front and picked up a small knife. To him it still felt at least as dangerous as a wand. He ran the edge over a stone, stalling before picking up a handful of dried rushes and chopping them neatly, at a perfect 45 degree angle, just to take away Greer's right to chastise him yet again.

At lunch Harry pondered the color of his finger tips.

"That stuff stains," Hermione said.

"Got a Potion for it?" Harry asked. "The neutralizer didn't work."

"Not on me," Hermione apologized. "Greer probably did that to avoid staining her own hands for the inspection."

"What inspection?"

Hermione shoveled her lunch into her mouth faster than normal. "The Ministry is inspecting the school on Saturday. It's supposed to be a secret, but it was in the Prophet this morning." She stood and collected up her bag. "I have to make a stop in the library for my Arithmancy assignment. I'll see you later."

Harry gave her a stained wave good bye and returned to his lunch. His other table companions sat silently, blinking up at him. Harry turned to Dennis Creevey beside him and said, "What do you want to ask Hagrid?"

Dennis' mouth stretched into a broad grin.

Harry had Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon. They stood in the cool air while Hagrid explained about Ogregnomes, which as far as Harry could tell from the lecture were simply exceptionally ugly gnomes. His thoughts were echoed by Hermione who, when Hagrid opened the box, leaned over to Ron and asked, "Doesn't that look like an ordinary gnome to you?"

The potato-nosed little man in the box shook his fist at them and tried to spit on Lavender who had leaned in too close, especially considering the kinds of things Hagrid often had in boxes.

Ron whispered, "He's a better than average looking one, really."

Harry waited behind while the rest of his school mates tromped back to the castle. Hagrid looked up and grinned. "Want to help me a bit, Harry?"

"Sure, Hagrid," Harry said. He felt a little bad about using Hagrid, so he thought he should make it up to him ahead of time.

He helped carry things back to the shed at the edge of the pumpkin patch while listening to Hagrid's litany about missing Dumbledore.

"He was great man, Dumbledore was," Hagrid repeated with a snort into the checkered tablecloth he was using as a handkerchief. "School won't be ter same w'out 'im."

"No, it won't," Harry agreed. Thinking that, for one thing, the Creevey brothers were going to be much more trouble.

The shed door banged closed. "I have some other things to 'tend to, if'n yer want to help?" He sounded hopeful.

"Sure, Hagrid," Harry repeated.

Harry found himself in the school rowboat, in charge of a heavy sack of rusty metal tools. Each pull on the oars by Hagrid sent them skimming half the length of a Quidditch pitch. Worried they may lose the tools overboard, Harry tied the sack around the seat. The castle receded behind them and the air grew green and chilly.

Harry needed to work his question into the conversation, and to do that he was going to need to make conversation, even on a difficult topic. "Hagrid, you remember that Ron and I followed the spiders out of the castle that one time? When the Basilisk was scaring them off. I mean, you were, er, off in Azkaban, but do you remember telling us to do that?"

Hagrid was looking around the lake's glassy surface, letting them drift across what appeared to be the sky. "Huh? Oh, yeah."

"I was wondering, you know, what should we have done to keep the spiders in check? You know, to keep them from attacking us."

Hagrid hauled on the oars again. Harry's upper body dipped backward and forward with the force of the motion. "Well, you shouldn't walk all the way into ter lair, you know."

"Right," Harry said. "Probably the wisest plan."

"Bring an offerin' of some kind. That always makes 'em happy. And less hungry."

Chapter 23a

"Okay . . ." Harry had insisted the Creevey brothers not give him details, so he could pretend to know nothing later. In retrospect he wondered if that was the best plan. He imagined his wee schoolmates, incased in rope-thick sticky webbing, suspended from a tall tree in the darkest part of the forest, stored there to be sucked dry at a more convenient time. The Creevey brothers insisted they knew what they were doing.

Harry sighed and tried to banish his imaginings by remembering how boxed in he had felt by the same rules when he was their year.

"Would something like a . . . bubble gum hex work, maybe?" Harry mused aloud.

Hagrid peered down into the water. "Better to feed them treacle tarts tainted with Drowsing Draught, that way they can't bite you while they are getting sleepy." The ripples from the boat were the only disturbance on the vast water. A hawk circled above the nearby cliff, never needing to flap to stay there. Harry's thoughts had settled into a nice relaxed meditation, lulled by the serenity around them, when without warning the world rushed up around them accompanied by a shower of bitterly cold water.

"Ah, there yer are," Hagrid said happily.

Harry had jumped forward to his knees, arms stretched across the gunwales, in a desperate bid to keep them from capsizing. The Giant Squid slid around the boat, keeping its exposed eye aimed at Hagrid.

"Harry, hand me . . . what're yer doing down there?"

Harry rocked back to the bench. His knees were soaked, as was one of his shoes. He had to prop his feet on the sides of the hull to keep them out of the sloshing water they had taken on. Hagrid had a great hand out. Harry righted the tool sack, which made a wet metallic rattle.

"Hand me the big pick outta there, Harry. And ter file."

Harry rummaged around inside the sack, pulling out one thing after another. Until Hagrid said, "That one'll do. And the file there."

"Open wide then," Hagrid said to the squid. The giant eye slipped backward under the silky water then rose up in a brief shower, which cleared to reveal a massive white beak, surrounded by hooked tentacles.

Harry gaped at this nightmarish vision, stunned, not even shifting his weight when Hagrid stood up in the rowboat to use the file to smooth a jagged edge Harry would

not have ever noticed. The smell was something unreal, like muddy rancid fish oil. Harry pulled his robes up over his nose and sat waiting to exchange tools. The reflection of the sky came right across through the boat, it had so much water in it.

"That'll do it." Hagrid handed the tools back, and Harry cinched the sack closed.

"Now look at all the water in ter boat," Hagrid complained to the squid.

Harry barely grabbed hold of his seat in time. The boat rose up out of the water then rotated neatly sideways. Harry clung to the seat by his hooked elbow, hand locked to his wrist, legs dangling while the water escaped over the side. When the last of the water dripped free, the squid gave them a little shake for good measure and set them gently back down.

Harry re-took his seat, and met the squid's eye as it sank away under the surface.

"All right then. No trouble at all," Hagrid happily pronounced, as he grabbed up the oars.

Harry cleared his throat. "Right."

Harry tried a drying charm several times as he sloshed his way up the lawn. He gave a cough and mounted the front steps, wondering what he had been thinking. The Creevey brothers were waiting inside. They peered at him eagerly as he closed the door and blinked to force his eyes to adjust.

"'ello, Harry," Dennis said hopefully.

Harry coughed again and stomped by them, his robes leaving a streak on the floor. "I'm going to the tower," he announced.

Showered and changed, Harry barely made it back down to the Great Hall before food arrived for dinner. His stomach gave a great rumble like the growl of one of Hagrid's pets.

Across from him, Ginny asked, "How are things with you, Harry?"

Something about the forced innocence in her tone made Harry consider her. Colin Creevey sat beside her, leaning in to listen to Harry's answer. Harry glanced between them, wondering if she was in on whatever they were planning. It made him feel more secure to imagine that.

Ginny smiled broadly, as if reading his thoughts.

"Later," he said to her. He gave another faint cough and tapped his pumpkin juice with his wand to make it steaming hot.

Chapter 23a

In the Gryffindor Tower common room, Harry settled in with his books, determined to keep up with his readings for the week.

Ginny settled into the chair beside him, and proceeded to flip through her Defense textbook too fast to be reading it. Hermione and Ron sat on the battered couch, also working quietly. Ginny held out her book to Harry and said, "Can I ask you about something?"

A note was stuck inside her book, it said: what did Hagrid say?

Harry took the book and slipped the note out. She leaned in close over the book, close enough he could smell the shampoo she used. Muttering, he said, "Drowsing Draught laced Treacle Tarts." Then he proceeded to explain some meaningless detail about the diagram in the book, even though he knew she did not need it. Across from him Hermione winked. Harry expected she was not in on whatever was being planned, but was instead lobbying for Ginny.

Ginny made a doubtful noise and sat back with her book. She sent Harry a dubious glare, to which he could only shrug in response. He bunched up the note and tossed it onto the nearby roaring hearth.

Harry's belief that he was catching up with his NEWT subjects, at least enough to get through them, was knocked back by the pop quiz McGonagall handed out at the start of class the next day. Unlike those of his other teachers, her quizzes did not leave open the option of simply regurgitating his notes or the textbook. The questions were things like, compare these two methods, or summarize this theory, and explain how it is useful. Hermione bent to aggressively scratch out her usual long answers. Ron sat beside her with one tense hand lodged firmly in his hair. Others around the room fidgeted uncomfortably, so at least Harry was in good company. He filled in something for the last question, based on Hermione's last attempt at explaining it more clearly just last week. Then he re-read the first question and closed his eyes while pondering whether it was more embarrassing to leave it blank or fill it in with something hopelessly confused.

As he sat there, a guess came to mind. It drifted into his thoughts the way a cold draft comes around a room. Shrugging that at least it sounded well thought out, he wrote it down. It was not a complete answer, but it put something in that blank spot. He was just attempting to do the same for either of the other two blank questions when time was called and he had to give up.

Watching McGonagall marking the quizzes out of the corner of his eye meant that Harry also did not do well on that day's practical exercise. He tried not to care what she thought but could not manage it. Her disappointment loomed painfully.

Snape caught Harry in the corridor that Friday, just as he was on his way back to the tower with his friends for butterbeers and some games. Ron and Ginny were just loudly insisting that all assigned books be banned from the common room that evening when Snape stepped out of his classroom and gestured for Harry to enter.

Harry's friends went on without him, promising to keep a butterbeer warm for him.

"Sit," Snape commanded and returned to cleaning up from spell exercises. Harry slid into a desk in the front and propped his hands under his chin.

"Did you do your readings for your courses this week?" Snape asked as he folded a practice dummy into a wardrobe and had to lock the door with a spell to keep it inside, stacked as it was on top of many other things.

"Yes," Harry insisted, defensive immediately.

Snape went on as if Harry had not answered. "I thought nothing of your silence in my classes this week, until Minerva commented that you did rather poorly on a quiz yesterday."

Heat filled Harry, squirming as it made its way around his insides. "Care to quiz me now on your readings?" he snapped.

Snape stared at him for confirmation, then returned to his task of straightening his notes. "If you fall behind in any NEWT subject this early-"

"I KNOW that," Harry interrupted, fully angry now.

Snape put his things down. "I don't appreciate that tone, Harry."

Harry stood up. "Then why are we talking?" he asked. He felt odd saying it and stranger still, relieved to have said it.

"You were not dismissed," Snape stated softly, the tone that signaled he was halfway to trying menacing as a tactic.

With a show of obedience, Harry swung back into the desk and sat in it crooked, limbs akimbo.

Snape stepped around the front of his work table and crossed his arms. "If you are having difficulty in any subject, you should ask for help."

Harry, finding freedom in his anger, gave no ground. "Sure."

Snape's eyes narrowed and Harry Occluded his thoughts, relaxing easily into the needed emotional isolation. Snape shook his head and returned to finishing up. "We

will talk more this weekend, after you have calmed down. Clearly it is going to be unproductive to talk more now."

Harry levered himself out of the low desk. "You aren't going to have much time this weekend what with the inspection and all."

Snape raised a brow. "I will find some."

Harry departed and gratefully settled into a game of wizard chess with Dean in the common room. At one point in the evening, he noted that certain of his classmates were missing, but not imagining it had any significance, he forgot again.

Harry's stomach, fed too many sweets and butterbeers the night before, woke him early, demanding something more substantive. He found Ron washing up in the boys' toilet. They glanced at each other warily in the mirror. Generally Hermione was there as a buffer, and without her they had nothing but hurtful words hanging between them. Harry finished up quickly and started down for the Great Hall.

In the Entrance Hall, the main doors stood open and an entourage of well-dressed witches and wizards migrated inside, greeting McGonagall and Snape. Harry spotted Fudge and his usual assistants, and now could pick up his pompously annoying voice over the murmur of the small crowd. Harry made his way slowly down the Grand Staircase. The doors to the Great Hall stood closed as everyone watched the arrivals mingle.

Harry stopped by the stairs leading down to the kitchens. Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones were just coming up from their chambers, but slowed at the top of the stairs when they saw the unexpected guests. Harry stepped aside to let them pass. As he turned he spotted the Creevey brothers, clumped in the corner by the main doors. One was biting his lip and the other watched the visitors with a hungry avidness. Harry stared at them, finding something about this scene worrisome.

"So much for a quiet Saturday," Susan complained in her friend's ear. "My aunt told me that she thought an inspection a complete waste of the Minister's time, that he was simply avoiding more difficult things that need addressing."

Fudge and his retinue moved toward the doors to the Great Hall. The doors creaked open, revealing it to be unusually dark inside. Harry squinted across the Entrance Hall, trying to see why it might be dark just over there when the morning light was flowing in the main doors with such abandon. Ron, complaining about needing breakfast, tugged open the doors on the right. Harry heard a giggle and glanced toward the stairs where Ginny was biting her lip.

"Oh no," Harry mouthed, and charged forward toward Ron's retreating back, wand out.

Ron screamed. A spider the size of a pillow dangled before him, legs grasping, maw open. Harry hit it with a Blasting Curse that sent it into the rafters. In the middle of the Great Hall, Minister Fudge's retinue had surrounded him, wands out, trying to target the scurrying spiders slashing out at their legs. Giant webs filled the ceiling. Harry grabbed Ron by the collar and dragged him, stumbling, out of the hall. Ron did not assist much; he was whimpering loudly, holding his hands over his head. Hermione, wand out and tracking everything, met them halfway and accelerated the retreat. The doors slammed closed behind them. Harry released Ron and let Hermione take him to sit on the stairs until his shakes subsided.

Feeling less generous toward Fudge and Percy, and the others, Harry did not charge back inside. He backed up to the stairs and stood beside Hermione. Professor Sprout, hair askew, swept through the Entrance Hall and shooed them all either up or down the stairs.

"To your common rooms, go!" she commanded. "Prefects, you are to hold your students there until instructed otherwise." She came over to Harry and his friends. "Unless he is hurt, get him up and out of here."

"I hate spiders," Ron squeaked into his arms.

"They are no one's favorite, Mr. Weasley," Sprout said before turning back to the Great Hall.

Harry assisted Ron in standing up, then let go because Ron tugged at his hold. Harry waited to follow, letting the pair go up the stairs ahead of him. When he started up, something took hold of his robes and pulled, hard.

Hermione glanced back in surprise, but her expression fell calm as she looked over his shoulder, making Harry put his wand back away rather than striking out.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said, voice vibrating with underlying fury like Harry had heard once or twice before. "In here," he said. And, using Harry's robes, gave him a toss toward the Staff Room.

Harry checked the Entrance Hall for any of his classmates but it had been cleared. He opened the door and went inside, leaving it open. Snape stepped in and pushed the door closed behind him. His gaze held all the soft warmth of obsidian. Harry's heart rate went up as he tried to think a few steps ahead of where he was.

"Sit. Down."

Harry did hesitate this time, taking one of the chairs around the long table.

"What do you know about this?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged.

Snape came around his chair and grabbed hold of the shoulder of Harry's robes and pushed him back in his chair. "You know something," he said, voice silky. Harry thought then that it reminded him of the blade of a Muggle surgical instrument being wielded. He did not give Harry a chance to think before adding, "I happened to be looking at you. You knew what was happening before it was clear to anyone else."

Harry blinked. "I . . . I guess," he admitted.

Snape still had a hold of his robes. "This inspection is of utmost importance to this school," he said. "I don't know what childish motivation possessed you, but I assure you, you will be punished well enough that any future thoughts in this direction will fill you with sufficient aversion to put better sense in your head."

Harry stared at Snape, trying to Occlude his mind. But Snape had transformed into a stranger, and that was making his thoughts circle crazily. "I didn't do this," Harry said.

Snape released his robes. "But you knew."

"Well . . ." Harry said, tugging the kink out of his robes. "Sort of."

Snape leaned closer. "I don't know what kind of an answer you believe that to be."

Harry finally found some emotional grounding and sat forward. "I found out some information for someone. I did not know what they were going to do with it. Or when they were going to do it."

Snape studied Harry's eyes, getting nothing, Harry hoped. "That is all?" he asked, mocking in his doubt.

"Yes."

"And to whom did you give this information? This . . . harmless information that led you to no suspicion about how it may be used, yet the Great Hall of this school is now a Giant Spider colony?"

Harry's Occlusion held. He felt good about that and about the notion of being obstinate. "I'm not going to say."

Snape did not react to this, just stared him down. "Then you will be punished as if it is entirely your doing, or until the perpetrators are found." He stood straight, giving Harry time to absorb that.

Harry huffed. "Fine," he said.

Snape moved to the door, turning back one last time. His veneer had cracked, and his eyes flickered with uncertainty. In the next instant, he was gone through the door.

Harry stood up and checked out the door before exiting, not wanting to encounter any other teachers. Crates of spiders were being carted out the main doors, directed by Hagrid, taking all of everyone's attention.

"Careful there, don't want any more o' them getting hurt than already have."

"Hagrid," McGonagall threatened. "I would just as soon flatten every last one of them."

"Aw, yer don't really mean that . . ." And the main doors boomed closed.

Harry snuck away in that opening, halted at the top of the stairs by a hiss. He found the Creevey brothers hiding behind a curtain.

"Harry!" Colin whispered. "What'd'ya think?"

"I think you shouldn't be caught here," Harry said, and stalked off.

Harry slipped into the common room, which was packed with students gossiping excitedly.

"Did you see the look on Fudge's face?" Dean was saying. "Oh, if I live to be two hundred, I will relish that 'til the end."

Hermione slipped over to Harry to whisper, "Did you happen to see Dennis and Colin?"

Harry nodded. They must have slipped in behind him, because they were now standing in the dim corner by the portrait hole. Harry pointed.

"Oh," Hermione blurted, checking them off on her list.

Harry went up to his bed, not in the mood for celebration. He dropped down on top of the duvet without even removing his shoes, and drifted there, listening to his stomach rumble in complaint.

Dean came up a while later. "They are serving breakfast now," he said to Harry.

Harry followed him down. The Great Hall had completely returned to normal. Fudge and his retinue were installed at the end of the Head Table, chatting. Between bites Fudge stopped to survey the room with his beady eyes, accusation in every twitch of his gaze.

Snape came down off the dais and said to Harry, "You are in detention for the rest of the day. Do not leave the hall until you are told you may do so."

Everyone at their end of the table stopped eating and stared, except the Creevey brothers and Ginny who blinked in a slightly different kind of surprise.

Hermione leaned forward and whispered, "Harry, did you do it?"

Harry ignored her and watched Snape returning to his seat. McGonagall asked him something as he sat down. Snape, his gaze stabbing over to Harry, replied, "He knows more than he will let on, so he is being punished until he relents."

McGonagall's lips replied, "Ah."

After breakfast, Harry sat in his seat while everyone departed around him or took out their books to study. Many students stopped by to congratulate Harry, or simply pat him on the back. News of his punishment had spread fully around the school just in one breakfast, and that was the same as proof of guilt, or award of success, depending upon the viewpoint.

"The Weasley Twins would be proud," Jack Sloper said. "Don't you think, Ginny?" he prompted one of the handful still clustered around Harry.

Ginny nodded slowly, eyes wide.

Hermione had her Astronomy essay out in front of her, she kept shooting Harry questioning looks, which Harry studiously ignored.

Snape slipped up behind Hermione, and jerked his head indicating Harry should follow him. Harry stood up and obeyed.

Snape strode purposefully, saying nothing. He led the way not up the central staircases but around to Filch's office. In response to Harry's noise of surprise, he said, "Detention with me would not be much of a punishment, so you will spend it with Mr. Filch." With that, he strode off, leaving Harry standing there, forced to knock.

Filch was ranting already when he swung the door open. "Bloody mongrel students," he grumbled. "What is it?" he snarled, spittle flying in Harry's face.

"I'm to serve detention with you."

Filch considered this. Harry hoped he was not smart enough to make the connection between his detention and this morning's events. "Hm," Filch muttered, lips twitching into a distorted mockery of a smile. "Are you then?"

Harry's day of labor started out all right. He polished doorknobs. This left him in plain sight where everyone could stop by and praise his brilliance at pranks. He had no response to this outside of a shrug, which rather than put off his new found fandom, only seemed to increase it due to his modest attitude. Malfoy mocked him for a while, but Harry sent him off by pointing out how very happy giant spiders would be living in the Slytherin dungeon.

Harry did not get lunch. He finished the second floor and returned to Filch's office, expecting a break.

"Finished?"

"What? With every single knob? No."

"Then get back to it, boy!"

Harry stared at him. When he did not move right away, Filch said with queer innocence, "We can go to Professor Snape's office instead, if you prefer?"

Defeated by that, Harry said, "All right." And took up fresh rags and a new tin of polish before heading out again.

His knees protested acutely each time he crouched to work on a keyhole. His stomach complained bitterly about being empty too long. His mind filled with visions of Ron eating a second helping of everything that morning, and this made his mouth water uncontrollably.

Harry most likely had missed any number of knobs, but a quick circling of the first floor didn't reveal any still tarnished, so he returned to Filch's office and declared the task finished. He did not expect a break this time, and just as well. Filch opened a window and held his hand out. "A nice cold rain. Perfect."

Harry was sent up to the roof, to weed the gutters. At least the open air cleared the noxious polish scent out of his nose. Harry, wand in hand in case he needed to spell an emergency Tethering Charm, crawled along the edge of the tiles and fished out the small trees and soupy rot that had collected there. He had been forbidden to use a broom and the Gecko Charm behaved unpredictably on the wet tiles so he moved with care, a few feet at a time. He had decided against ruining his Quidditch gloves, so he needed to stop frequently to respell his bare hands with a warming charm, which if nothing else was forcing him to improve his left-handed spell casting.

The shifting clouds kept him company. He paused often to gaze out over the forest, listening with interest to the sounds that shifted as the afternoon wore out and the evening came on. Different creatures grew active, then quiet again in overlapping waves, serenading him.

A tile broke free when Harry pushed off near a dormer and he bumped and slipped down to catch a hand and a foot in the gutter. He should have cast the tether. His wand was still gripped in his right hand, but he had been too tired to react except in a wholly Muggle way. Something about the endless remedial tasks put him firmly back in that mindset.

The ground, and the tall wall leading down to it teetered below him, drawing him downward. Knuckles bruised and throbbing, he cautiously pushed himself back onto the solid roof edge, afraid the groaning metal of the gutter may decide to not hold his weight if he moved too rapidly. Too bad he couldn't fly without a broomstick, his tired brain thought.

On aching muscles he crab-crawled a few feet higher so he could safely put his wand away and duck out of the wind. He then wrapped his hands inside his clothes under his armpits to try to ease the bitter sting from rasping them over the tiles when he slipped. He sat hunched that way for many minutes.

"Harry," a familiar voice called down from the small landing at the tower door that led to the roof. It was Hermione.

Harry rolled on his side and crawled up to her.

"I brought you some cauldron cakes."

"Oh," Harry said with a tinge of ecstasy. He cleaned his hands with a spell and accepted the pile she held out.

While he gobbled down the first one, she said, "Harry, the students responsible should be doing their own punishment. There is no way you were that involved. I've been around you too many hours of the day for you to have worked it in. Unless you sneaked a Time Turner from somewhere."

Harry opened the second cauldron cake, swallowing hard. "And if I did, I would not use it to waste my time on luring giant spiders to the Great Hall."

"Exactly," she said, sounding strained. "Harry, you should say."

"I'm not telling on my friends," Harry said.

"They should tell, then."

"They'll probably get expelled," Harry pointed out, suddenly thinking of this. "They can't expel me. Even if they really think I did it."

"True." A light mist beat at them, carried on a gust. "You should quit for the night. It's getting late."

"Filch will just make me do something else." Harry said. "At least the view is nice out here. Thanks for the cakes."

He climbed back onto the roof. She said, "I'll save you some dinner."

"Thanks."

The rain came down full force as Harry tried to finish that wing. It fortunately battered him upward rather than threatening to batter him down off the roof. He sensed someone watching, and wondered if Hermione had really departed. He glanced around but he did not see her, and the tower door was closed tight. The rainwater slid over the tiles in a film, filling the gutters, which backed up against the muck collected in them. Each handful he lifted out caused the water to surge around to fill the new gap. Eventually, the remaining chunk broke free and began washing away down the pipe at the end.

Satisfied, Harry crept gingerly on abused limbs back to the landing. It was farther away than it looked and he had to stop and rest once to make it. The clouds pressed down on him as he went, lashing at the hills around him, tossing dead leaves along with the rain. At the tower, he shook himself off and located many screaming muscles just tugging open the door. Inside it quickly grew steamy from his breath and the rain he brought in with him. He tried to dry himself with a few spells, but this only worked marginally. He longed for a hot shower and dry clothes but instead marched to Filch's office, where Filch took great pleasure in Harry's state.

"I'm told you're done for the day. Immediately after breakfast tomorrow, you better be back here, or else."

Harry was too tired to care about tomorrow. He trudged to the Gryffindor Tower, showered and fell into bed, ignoring everyone in the common room, even though every single one of them gave him their full attention as he stumbled through.

Neville, smelling strangely of beef stew, roused him. "Hermione asked me to bring you this."

"Dinner," Harry breathed. "I slept through it; didn't I?" His neck screamed at him as he sat up.

Neville handed him the tray and stood beside the bed. "Seems like you are taking the fall for someone else."

Harry was too busy eating to reply. His resistance had turned into a battle on a completely different front, one he was unclear on, but that did not make him slacken his will.

The next morning Harry again reported to Filch. This time he was assigned to scrape and touch up the enamel on the carriages. They were parked in a long shed that still gave off an odor of horse manure, even though there were presumably no horses and had not been for years. At least he found a stool to sit on so he did not have to crouch. And his friends must not have known where he had gone to because no one brought him lunch. He had kept a few rolls in his pocket from breakfast, pressed around rashers of bacon, but they did not suffice.

Exhausted, fingers battered, Harry quit when he heard the bell for dinner. He set the paint and tools inside Filch's door and walked off while the man chuckled. "If I had my way . . ." he began, but Harry closed the door before hearing the details. He could make them up himself, really.

Harry stopped to clean up, so he arrived for dinner when desserts were served. Hermione had a plate for him set aside. She quickly set it in front of him and reheated it. Then touched her face strangely. "You have paint . . ." she said.

Harry rubbed his cheek where she indicated. "Least of my troubles."

Harry ignored the Head Table and focused on eating. The more sensible part of his brain had broken into a mantra about how his assignments were sitting unfinished, but his body screamed for sleep, or a long hot bath, or a long sleep in a long hot bath. Or a drowning; that would have been acceptable too, according to some subset of his joints and muscles.

Harry ignored his Defense essay on the grounds that Snape could not have expected him to find the time to do it. He worked on his Herbology one instead, slept half the night on it, in fact.

During Defense he sat lethargically in the back, when he was called on, he tossed out an answer that may have been correct. He was too exhausted to make up a fake one, even though he would have preferred to have answered incorrectly. Snape wanted to demonstrate a Counter for a Hair Growing Hex, and he called Harry up to do that.

Harry wanted to refuse. He wanted to sit there and sulk, but he could not, so he stood up. He was very long in doing so, creating an uncomfortable silence in the room.

Harry did as he was instructed and nothing more. Normally he would have helped his classmates, especially when it would have been easier than facing their wayward spells, but he stood there, dealing with the rogue magic instead.

Harry was not released back to his seat but remained there on the platform throughout the spell demonstrations, playing target. When the bell rang, he looked up for permission to go, but Snape shook his head and said quietly, "Stay."

Harry stood there. Unmoving, his aches transformed into a throbbing numbness that pulled his thoughts to a blessed standstill.

Snape's voice broke him out of it. "I forgot what a penchant you have for self-abuse."

Harry stared at him. Not quite understanding. Some response was expected. "So?"

"You did not turn in an essay, I noticed."

Harry was just generating a withering look, when Snape turned away and added, "I'll assume you were otherwise engaged. But do not make a habit of it."

"It's sort of difficult to write an essay on the roof of the school in the middle of a rainstorm. On a sunny day, maybe." He jested, but it brought a bright sting to his heart. "I'm going to be late for Transfiguration. Not that I have my essay for that class either."

Snape paced around. Footsteps built outside the door. Snape waved a charm at it to lock it and said, "You are not going to say whom you helped, are you?"

"If I ever was, I'm certainly not going to now," Harry said, happy with how solid that sounded. Every bit of ground he established between them felt like safety. Partly as a trial of that unexpected effect, he emotionally stepped back again and said, "So, if you wish me to continue and graduate with honors from the Dursley School of Remedial Manual Labor, that's your choice."

Snape studied him before saying, "I expect discipline from you, Harry. Maturity. Some leeway has been provided for you. Quite a bit in fact, but there are limits. They exist for a reason."

"You would think better of me if I told on my friends?" Harry asked. He had broken free of something and now felt heedless, uncertain where the boundaries were. "Loyalty means that little to you?"

Snape's head came around with a jerk. He pointed a finger at Harry. "Do not lecture me about loyalty, Potter." Snape immediately pulled back from his angry expression, physically put his shoulders back. He rubbed his face and paced, breathing audibly.

Chapter 23a

"Get out of here. I need to figure out what to do with you, and I regret there isn't time right now to do that."

Harry collected his things, also feeling regret as well as freedom in equal doses. He parted the students waiting to get into the Defense classroom and walked slowly to his next class, stalling, because this late it did not matter how much later he became. The freedom did not feel like the good kind. It felt like the freedom to forget to use a Tether Charm and then subsequently fall off the roof of the school.

During lunch, while Harry tried in vain to do his Astronomy reading, Hermione asked, "Do you have detention again tonight?"

Harry shrugged. He had not thought to ask. Ginny bit her lips and leaned close. "I'm going to confess, Harry. This even-"

"Don't bother," Harry hissed, keeping his head down so only she could hear.

"Why not?" she asked, going from sympathetic to angry with two words.

"Because it's not about that anymore," Harry said.

"What's it about?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his eyes. He could care less about the celestial bodies making up Centaurus A. He had something far more important to work out, but did not know where to start.

That evening, Snape came to the common room, stopping everything everyone was doing. Students shoved things away that were perfectly allowed.

"Do I have detention?" Harry asked as he followed him into the corridor. He had waited to ask because he saw Ginny appearing to work up her courage and he did not want to give her a chance.

"Of a sort. Follow me."

Assignments had only felt like torture to his distracted mind, so Harry felt relieved at abandoning them. Snape led him to the gargoyles and up to the Headmistress' Tower. The late evening sky dominated the room, setting all the metal and glass in the room aflame. Harry took the indicated seat and waited while McGonagall finished something up.

"Harry," she said politely as she slipped a letter into an envelope and sealed it. When it was neatly arranged with some others she steepled her fingers and said, "Severus informs me you had a very tiny hand in what happened this weekend."

Harry shrugged. He planned on doing a lot of that this meeting and figured he might as well start early.

She smiled faintly, like she had him figured out. He let himself slouch more, which his tired body preferred anyhow. McGonagall said, "I'm quite surprised your friends – presumably they are your friends – have sat idly by and let you serve out such grueling detentions."

"So I was bait," Harry said.

"In a sense," she replied pleasantly.

Harry looked to his guardian to see his response. His eyes remained fixed on the rug. Harry said, "I told my friends not to say anything."

"You what?" Snape said, like a whip crack.

Harry turned to him more fully, "You think I want all that suffering of mine to go to waste? I don't know what you plan to do to my friends. Why shouldn't I take the punishment? You can't expel me."

Snape rolled his eyes, inspiring Harry to add, "You are the one who always insists I should use my influence more."

"That is not at all what I meant, and you know it, Potter."

Harry leaned toward him. "How am I supposed to know what you meant . . . I don't speak Slytherin."

McGonagall held up her hand. "Stop!" She sat back, making her chair creak. "Harry, you can go."

Harry's shoulders fell; he was just getting going. Head down, he stalked out.

After the door thudded closed, McGonagall turned to Snape and said, "I did not realize how thoroughly you had lost his good will, Severus. I apologize."

"Why are you apologizing? His actions merited punishment."

She shook her head and studied her fingers. "You are losing far more than is acceptable under the circumstances. In the annals of Hogwarts history this is a minor affair, really."

Snape stared at her. "The Minister of Magic, on an annual inspection, was set upon by a horde of giant spiders in the Great Hall and you label it a minor affair."

She gestured gallantly at the door Harry had exited through. "Harry himself fought a basilisk within these walls. He fought Voldemort, several times. Shall I go on?"

Snape looked away with a huff that sounded grudging.

McGonagall said, "I cannot bear to see you lose your adopted son over this, Severus. The matter is closed. Why don't you focus on repairing the damage and consider Harry's rather exemplary work this weekend as more than sufficient pay back to the school. It sounds to me from the scant facts we have that he was merely too trusting at best and too mischievous at worst. Either way he does not deserve to lose his first ever family over it." Her voice fell stern at the end, commanding even.

"I am out of my depths," Snape said after a beat.

"Severus, if you managed to find middle ground with Harry before there must be copious amounts of it there." She pushed forward and adjusted her glasses on her nose. "Don't let his will harden, however; he's got rather too much of that going."

Tuesday, Harry scrambled to finish assignments during breakfast and lunch, but could not quite manage. A renewed energy or even panic had set in. If he was on his own, he had to get into the Auror's program, and he was feeling very much on his own. Maybe he preferred that after all, he thought as he thumbed the index of his Herbology book looking for slime molds that may glow when cut or crushed.

During dinner Snape stopped behind him. "You have detention this evening. My office."

Harry rubbed his forehead, feeling overwhelmed. Snape added, "Bring your schoolworks with you."

"At least it's not roof repair," Hermione said.

Snape's office had more than the usual number of lamps burning in it, lending the room a cheery appearance. Harry took the desk, finding all kinds of biting nasty things on his tongue, ready to escape.

"What do you have due tomorrow?" Snape asked, voice neutral.

Harry shrugged, but then gathered his thoughts. "Your readings. Transfiguration."

"Why don't we start with Minerva's assignment."

"We?" Harry echoed. "Suddenly you care how I do?"

Snape did not respond to this, simply waited for Harry to pull out his things. He held his hand out for the book. "What chapter are you on?"

"Five."

Snape paged through that one. "And your assignment?"

"Summarize the chapter. Answer some questions."

Snape handed the book back. "Have you read it?"

"I somehow haven't worked it into my chores," Harry said, voice still trying to carry an edge, still trying to cut.

"Read it aloud then," Snape said.

"Right now? Bother you with it? You don't have anything better to be doing?"

Snape stared him down, but not as a challenge, as something else. "No. Go ahead."

Harry shook his head, feeling disgusted, but he opened the book to the start of the chapter. "You do this to your House students, draw them in, then cut them down, then draw them in again?"

"We are not discussing my House students. We are discussing Advanced Transfiguration."

Harry felt like he was fighting against ice. He could get no purchase and the ice did not care. Jaw muscles tight, Harry began to read.

When he finished, voice hoarse, Snape asked him questions, forcing him to reframe what he read and tie it into previous chapters. As Harry composed his essay aloud before writing each line with a hard stroke of his pen that tore at the parchment, he grew more obstinate, angry even. Snape's careful patience was irritating him more than he thought possible.

It was with extreme relief that Harry wrote out the last line of the essay. Before Snape could suggest it, Harry said, "I don't need your help with my Defense essay." This came out stronger than he intended, and Snape's chin came up, then his head cocked.

"No, I don't imagine you do." He looked up at the clock and said, "A little early to be released from detention. Why don't you tell me what else is going on with you."

"Like what?" Harry asked. Clipping his words.

"Such as, you must be somewhat stressed about your sub par performance in Transfiguration, since it has such bearing on your future plans."

Harry pressed his lips together. "I'll get through it. Even without your help, I can get through it. I don't need your help. I don't want your help."

Snape nodded sagely, like he had confirmed something. "Work on your other subjects, on your own, for another half hour and then you may go."

The next day, the weather turned warm, a last echo of summer. The sun contended with only a handful of puffy clouds. Harry and his friends took their sandwiches out on the lawn at lunch time, then dallied out there, enjoying the air.

A cloaked figure stepped by them, stopped and turned. "Potter," Snape said. When Harry raised his head, Snape said, "Follow me."

With a half huff, half sigh, Harry pushed to his feet and followed down the slope, glancing back at his friends whose expressions of concern remained discernible from rather far away. Snape crossed the lawn to the lake edge and made his way over a soggy boardwalk through the reeds that led to a trail. Harry followed several paces behind, happy enough to stretch his still-complaining limbs with some easy exercise.

The well worn trail led away from the lake through tall trees, then back again to the precipitous edge, then down into a swampy area. Harry followed, losing himself in the walk and forgetting his troubles. Snape strode on, his broad cloak flapping as he walked. Harry had to jog up a steep slope to avoid falling farther behind. At the top of the rise, he stopped to catch his breath and looked back. The school sat like a fortress at the edge of the lake, distant. Harry had never come this far before on foot.

The path thinned, becoming less a trail than just beaten down brush. Then it disappeared all together. Still Snape walked on. Harry jogged again, thinking to ask how far they were going, then he remembered he was trying to be difficult and continued to follow in silence.

At a gentle rise backdropped by massive trees, Snape came to a stop. A stone bench sat at the apex of the hill, just at the lakeside. He waved a spell to clean off the surface and sat down, gesturing for Harry to do the same.

Harry's legs were tired, so rather than make an excuse for not complying he sat down as well, not quite on the far end, which was crumbling.

Sets of ripples rolled across the lake, interspersed with spans of glassy water where the sky and the far trees were perfectly reflected. It occurred to Harry that afternoon classes must have long since started, that Snape was missing his teaching and Harry his Herbology lesson. The view was too lovely to mention that, not that there was any chance Snape was unaware.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Snape observing him. He met his eyes like meeting a challenge, then glanced away again.

"I'm still not telling you," Harry finally said, just to say something.

"Minerva has closed the issue."

"She has?"

Snape nodded.

"Oh." Harry did not know where to go after that.

"Telling you last night seemed meaningless given that you were being obstinate entirely for your own reasons," Snape said. "Reasons I was slow grasping." He leaned forward, touching his fingertips together experimentally. "I warned Albus that I was not good at this. But nevertheless . . . here we are."

Harry searched through the last few days trying to grab hold of his anger again. Snape spoke into these thoughts saying, "I want you to repeat something you said to me yesterday."

Harry waited, but Snape did not say more. "What?"

With unusual patience, Snape said, "I want you to tell me you don't want or need my help."

Harry stared at Snape's angular profile, wondering what he was thinking with that. But just imagining repeating it emptied him of defiance. He remained silent, his dry tongue stuck firmly to the roof of his mouth.

Snape turned to him, eyes darker than normal compared to the bright daylight. "You do not wish to say it?"

Harry held still, watching him, wary now. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Snape shifted closer on the bench. "I do not intend to unhinge you, Harry. I am simply trying to ensure that I understand what is happening with you. I let my own anger blind me before to any kind of apprehension of your deeper state of mind."

Harry waited, curious but also anxious about what Snape may say next.

"You've been pushing me away," Snape stated, eyes fixed with interest on the far shore of the lake. "I initially thought you were merely reacting to your punishment, and perhaps it germinated from that, but I think you found some advantage to the distance and began working to maintain it. You deserved to be punished, but I should have found some other means of doing so given how very capable you are of falling into a quiet state of persecuted suffering."

Harry frowned, insulted and therefore free to talk. "I didn't think you cared. Around here, you like punishing people, and you've never cared before."

Snape turned to him, eyes intense. "There are many ways of caring about and for someone, Harry. Even I, of all people, realize that. You made an unwise decision regarding irresponsible classmates; then you refused to make amends for it directly. Letting you get by without any censure would be irresponsible and uncaring." He contemplated his knitted fingers. "You assume, also, I suspect now, that I was not keeping an eye on you. Did you really think that?"

Under the bench, Harry's feet twisted around of their own accord. "But you left me out there . . ."

"You think it was easy to do so?"

Harry could not hold Snape's gaze. He looked away and gave a falsely casual shrug. "I just assumed you didn't care that much."

Snape grasped Harry's arm, then released it immediately to put his arm around Harry's back.

"I insisted Mr. Filch assign you something safer the second day."

"More boring," Harry complained, finding his footing again by doing so.

Snape took his hand back. "Well, we can't have that . . ."

"You couldn't just treat me as an adult?" Harry snapped. "Letting me be treated like a First- or Second-Year, or like a Muggle?"

Snape took a deep breath. Harry could see his chest filling, shoulders shifting back. "You need to act like an adult if you wish to be treated as one. But I think you are doing it again. I see it easily now. I could not see it before and I let you put far too much distance between us before Minerva intervened." Voice soft as ever, but with no threat, Snape asked, "Are you aware that you are doing that?"

"A bit," Harry said, not comfortable discussing this. He looked away, watching burgeoning ripples traverse the lake, sending V shapes racing to opposite shores: the Giant Squid swimming laps.

"But you keep at it," Snape said. Then fell silent.

The gap opened and Harry felt compelled to fill it. "I . . . it feels, I don't know," he complained, getting defensive.

Snape's brows were angled back when he faced him again. "It feels what?" When Harry did not respond, Snape said, "I could be mistaken. It is certainly likely for

me to be. I'm hoping to draw the answer out of you in case I am wrong, rather than forcing an explanation upon you. But it occurred to me only after you departed yesterday evening that on the heels of Dumbledore passing on you may have been reminded too fiercely of having father figures dying and leaving you to your own devices."

Harry took a deep breath. "Maybe," he said, mouth wet now. And the wind was making his eyes sting all of a sudden.

"Yes, I do think that is it, and I do apologize for not seeing it sooner. Punishing you is fraught enough with pitfalls. My actions sent you off on a mission of independence, willingly taking on others' burdens as you are wont to do. Instead of reassuring you, I kept feeding you perfectly valid excuses to push harder."

Harry found that word insulting. "How were you going to reassure me," he said, nearly mocking and not sure why.

Snape stiffened and faced him on the bench. "I don't know. Apparently I still have not."

Harry clenched his jaw and looked away. "Dumbledore didn't have to go. He could have stayed for the rest of the school year. He could have given me some warning . . ."

"I half agree with you, Harry. He was certainly physically capable of remaining, albeit at a reduced quality of life. It was his failing health that motivated him to suggesting I adopt you. You were the most significant thing he would leave unfinished, and he told me he was determined not to let you be sacrificed to the larger cause he had guided you through." Snape breathed in and out. "On the other hand, it was beyond his time to move on. The wizarding world needed to learn to live without him. That I agree with."

"Because you're a cold hearted bastard," Harry said.

Snape, brow high, peered at him in surprise. "Are you still trying to push me away?"

"I don't know." Harry searched his face, wanting a response that gave him something to react to. Snape's calm made him a bit crazy. He blurted, "Are you going to avoid dying on me? Ever?"

Snape studied him slowly before shaking his head. "I can't assure you of that, Harry. I've seen too much death to make such an empty promise."

Harry looked away like he had been slapped and gazed fiercely out over the lake, eyes burning again.

Snape knitted his hands in his lap and cast his gaze out to match Harry's. "I can assure you that I will guard myself better than I ever would for my own good. That I will fight to remain here for you with every bit of strength I have."

Harry blinked rapidly. He was clinging to the words he was hearing and he did not even want to listen to them. "What if that's not good enough?" he retorted, angry at nothing in particular and everything in the world, both at the same time.

Snape held up his hands spread out in supplication, even though his voice grew harder. "That is all I can offer. I refuse to be dishonest enough to promise more than that. You deserve more respect than that. And if such a promise is insufficient to reassure you, and you believe it best to live with more distance between us, than I shall be here in whatever capacity you will accept me at. I made promises, and I shall keep them by whatever means you will allow."

Harry turned away to swipe at his right eye, then pushed his hair back to try to hide that he did.

Looking for something to say, Harry said, "Dumbledore trusted you, that I understand, but he thought you could be some kind of substitute for him?" This came out accusing to his own ears and he wondered why he had said it that way.

Before Harry could apologize, Snape calmly crossed his arms and said, "Now there is an assertion."

Harry burst out in a weak laugh. His mind was on overdrive, trying to find some place to rest. "What if I don't get into the Auror's program?"

Snape sat straighter. "Um . . ." After a pause, he said, "You do, sometimes, need to let your influence get you things, Harry."

"I don't want it to get me that."

Snape held up his hand. "Right. You've said that. Admirable. In that case you will have to think of something else. The year has barely begun. Do not despair yet, it is the coward's way out, and it is not an option that one is ever limited from pursuing at a later date."

Harry chuckled and sighed. "I thought once Voldemort was gone, things would be easier. But now I have to figure out what I want. I didn't ever get much of a chance to do that before. I suppose I'm not use to it."

Snape sat forward, matching Harry's posture, which let their gazes meet. "Things are easier, Harry. You are making them more difficult than necessary. I am not helping much by catering to your wounds rather than helping you heal them."

Harry wanted to deny that, but couldn't open his mouth.

"Yes, no one likes to be discussed in that manner, but we have had too much miscommunication the last few days to worry about such niceties."

Snape sat back and pondered the scenery, looking relaxed. Harry said, "You're missing your classes."

"Yes. No matter."

"No matter? Have you ever missed a class before?"

"I am still learning to balance my myriad responsibilities, but you are far more important than the rest of them, Harry. Something else I'll try harder to keep in mind, lest it slips again." After a beat, he added, "You are especially more important than the third year Hufflepuffs."

While Harry smiled weakly, Snape put a hand on his shoulder, then brushed his hair back lightly. "Are you all right, now, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, feeling lightheaded more than anything else.

"Your favorite answer lately. Shall I simply grow accustomed to it, or can I convince you to elaborate?"

Harry scratched at his nose with his sleeve. The passing sunlight was nicely heating his dark uniform. "It's true I don't always want to need you as much as I do. It's . . . " He fell away, not wanting to give voice to what rose up in him like a Dementor, pricking his insides with icy spikes.

" . . . Frightening?" Snape completed for him. "So much so that it seems appealing to instead have nothing at all to lose?" When Harry did not reply, Snape said, "I do understand this, Harry. We found middle ground on precisely this kind of similarity. And you will grow out of needing any kind of father at all soon enough."

Harry stared at him. "All this talk of promises . . . you almost make it sound like you don't prefer that I grow out of it."

Snape sucked in his lips before saying, "I certainly do not prefer that. I am in no hurry to be anything less to you. With a bit of improved effort on my part I hope to be more to you while there is still time."

"You're only telling me that because of the trouble we just had," Harry said. It did make him feel better to hear these words, partly because he knew how hard they were for Snape to say.

"Ah, we've moved to the past tense," Snape observed. "I am pleased to hear that."

A large cloud slid over the sun, rendering half the lake into a cold slate slab. Harry tugged his robes tighter at the neck. "I don't really want things to change with us," he said. "But I wish I understood better why Dumbledore left, especially without explaining much." He tossed his hands helplessly. "I'm glad I have you to count on. You think I'm making things harder for myself, but . . . I just wish . . . I don't know . . . maybe I just wish that I didn't feel like I could lose everything." Just voicing that made Harry's heart slip downward in his chest.

The lower edge of the approaching cloud hung with blurry tatters of rain. Snape stood, gesturing that Harry should lead the way back.

"We won't make it," Harry said, glancing repeatedly at the sky.

Snape took hold of his shoulder to come alongside him. "Trust in something other than yourself, Harry. Believe me when I tell you I am very much aware of how difficult that is to do. But do try."

They started walking, with Harry finding the bent grass that marked their journey here and following it back. At the bottom of the hill, the breeze fell off and the air grew warmer. Harry glimpsed something out on the lake, but when he stopped to find it, it was lost in a shimmer of sunlight on the water. It slid into view a minute later.

It was Hagrid and his rowboat, and he was heading straight for them. Harry searched for a good spot for the boat to come ashore where they could board it without getting wet. He found an area where large flat rocks had long ago fallen off the cliff into the water, forming a natural quay. Harry stepped out onto it and held his hand to his eyes to watch Hagrid's approach. The ripples fanned out from the oars in surges, slapping on the rocky shore before the boat made it half way to them.

Snape stepped up close beside Harry and in a low voice, as though worried Hagrid could somehow overhear from out on the lake, he said, "I am a survivor, Harry. I have survived to this point against terrible odds and I intend to live on much longer now that they are vastly improved." His hand rested on Harry's back. "If it is humanly possible, trust that I will be here for you."

Harry's eyes burned again. The creak of the oars grew musical as the boat approached.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Harry said, mouth thick with emotion.

Snape put his hand on the back of Harry's head and pulled it down to his shoulder, holding him that way against his sun-warmed robes. Harry closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic thunk of the oars, smelled the living green of the lake water.

Harry was released and he raised his head to see Hagrid waving from the boat. The half giant cupped his hands and called out, “Would yer like a ride?”

Harry nodded, then worried it may not be visible at that distance, waved his hand over his head.

Chapter 24.

Rendezvous

Harry thought of a use for the secret passage. It came to him in the shower that morning as though it were something he had thought of previously and simply forgotten. Grinning, he dressed and got ready for class. Even the prospect of Potions didn't diminish his newfound buoyant mood.

At breakfast as the post owls arrived, Pig dropped a letter in Harry's lap and zipped around Ron's head a few times until the redhead waved his hand to chase him away as though the small owl were a fly. Harry avoided looking up at Ron as he noticed the return address of the Burrow. As he was opening it, another owl, this one small and dark, dropped another one beside Harry's breakfast plate. It was from Lupin. After a moment of indecision Harry continued to open the one from Mrs. Weasley.

Dearest Harry, I do hope you are coping well with the loss of dear Albus. It has been rather glum here at the Burrow since the memorial, I'll confess, and I do apologize for not finding you afterwards, but it was too crowded to, apparently. We were both concerned that he meant too much to you to take his passing in stride. Ginny owled us with assurances that you are taking it well enough and with the news that you have acquired a guardian. I must admit, I felt I needed to confirm this with Prof. McGonagall, given our children's penchant for practical jokes. Minerva explained that you had not informed anyone of this, which worried me until Ginny explained your apparent reasons.

My dear Harry, I do apologize for the abominable behavior of my youngest son. Would it not have embarrassed you as well, I'd have sent him a howler straight off. Rest

assured he has received a sharp missive instead with strict instructions to straighten up.

Harry casually lowered the letter and let his eyes move over the table. Ron was eating with his usual gusto although his eyes looked a little empty as they stared at a spot just above his plate. With a small frown Harry returned to the letter. He sort of wished Mrs. Weasley had let Ron work it out on his own.

I must admit to being surprised by who has taken you on as an adopted son, but I know the choice of accepting was certainly yours alone to make and that no one forced you to make it. Although Minerva tells us that it was Albus' intent that Severus should do this, I cannot help but imagine what your father would think.

Harry sighed and took a drink of pumpkin juice. His plate had gone cold. He nibbled on some toast as he went back to the letter and avoided Hermione's gaze, which seemed to be trying to catch his. He reread that last line and thought that his father wasn't exactly here to complain.

Well, Arthur informs me I should not have stated that last part, but I feel I should.

Harry grinned at the notion of them fighting over the letter, even as he felt a twinge at her desire to speak for his parents.

You are viewed as Albus' protégé, you know.

That startled him. He couldn't imagine living up to that and willed her to be mistaken.

Ginny believes you still wish to keep the adoption quiet despite your schoolmates all knowing. I expect that given your age, fewer in the wizarding world will take an interest than you expect.

Harry hoped that were true. The rest of the letter was wishes that he be happy. He folded it and put it in his pocket. Breakfast was winding down. He stashed Lupin's away as well and stood up with his friends.

During Transfiguration Harry considered that McGonagall seemed to be taking Dumbledore's death rather well; he was watching her circle the room helping students with a three-stage transfiguration. They were supposed to change an onyx crystal into a tulip, which qualified it as a metatranscendant transformation as the two were opposite classes of object. This class had become a bit of a letdown each Monday after the ease and fun of Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry watched the teacher help Justin with interest. The Hufflepuff couldn't do the spell either and Harry was hoping to pick something up before she came around to

their table. Beside him, Hermione was trying to figure out how to get a yellow tulip with a red center, rather than just a yellow or just a red one. It was getting harder to not have her success pile onto his own frustration. Worse yet, this was making him understand Ron better.

Ron was still transfiguring the onyx crystal into quartz. Harry had that down at least. Getting the quartz to make it to thistle was proving beyond him. He got something that looked like a glass pine cone tinged green instead. It was pretty, but far from correct.

Justin finally managed the spell, but Harry couldn't tell how from the other side of the room. Harry tried it again himself, thinking, as he had been instructed, of the natural growth angles of quartz and the branching of the thistle plant. McGonagall had left him with the impression that she thought this an easy step. He thought hard about long spines as he incanted the first two spells. The resulting very spindly pine cone actually collapsed in a shower of quartz needles. Harry could hear the Slytherins laughing at him. He banished the mess and took another crystal from the box provided to each table. He had not ceased to notice that McGonagall always stocked their table well.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said as she strode up to them, "that didn't sound very promising."

"No, Professor," Harry agreed. His newest onyx crystal sat before him, looking innocent. When he looked up at the teacher for any advice, he found her eyes tinged with something like regret. He lowered his wand to his lap and slouched a bit; transfigurations seemed unimportant all of a sudden.

"You are having trouble with the second step, correct?" she asked. At Harry's nod, she said, "Study the thistle a bit more." Harry did so. It sat in a pot on the table in the middle of the room, looking dangerous. McGonagall gave him a moment to consider it before saying, "It is alive, Harry; you must make it not only a shape transformation in step two, but also a protasmic one. Neither is really hard but both are necessary. Try it again."

As Harry stared at the chunk of smooth, dark rock before him, he remembered that Transfiguration was Dumbledore's subject as well. Harry regretted that he had never had a class with him, although it was just as well he couldn't see his current slow performance. He cast the two spells, the first now quite rote. Before him was . . . something. It was kind of a plant and it was kind of green. The weight of the long quartz needles on its leaves was making it droop as he studied it.

"Closer," McGonagall said flatly. "I think."

Harry was starting to dislike tulips rather a lot. Ron finally got a quartz crystal, to grand congratulations from Hermione, who was now trying for a purple tulip.

After classes, Harry finally had a chance to open his other letter when he let his friends go on ahead to the tower without him. He stood in a window looking out on a cloudy day and opened it. It was much shorter than Mrs. Weasley's.

Dear Harry, A great deal of news about you in the last week. Unfortunate that you didn't feel you could share your new home circumstances, but far be it from me to fault others for keeping secrets. I have been assured that Severus is treating you well, as odd as that notion is. It leads me to believe he must have been under far too much strain these many years. Trust that I and many others share your grief about Dumbledore. He truly had an impact on us all. Please owl if you need to speak of anything at all, Remus.

Harry folded the letter and put it with Mrs. Weasley's. Something that had been on his mind for a while came to the fore. He headed to the staircases with purpose.

"Professor?" Harry said as he pushed open the door to the headmistress's office. It had been left ajar, which would have been unusual before.

McGonagall sat at her desk, concentrating hard on the parchments before her. "Yes, Mr. Potter," she said in a flat tone.

"This is very quick, Professor," Harry said apologetically. "I was just wondering when Severus' birthday is."

McGonagall raised her eyes at that and grinned a little mischievously. She pulled out a file drawer and flipped through it and parted one of the files to peer at it without pulling it out. "November the twentieth," she replied with a small crooked grin.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You are quite welcome, Harry," she said in a much more amiable tone.

Harry grinned to himself as he left her office and went straight to the kitchens to get what he needed for his prank. He needed a large cork and just the right size jar. Dobby turned out to be a great help, patiently bringing him one empty jar after another until he found one that made exactly the right noise when the cork was pulled. It was a small jar too, which was even better. Contemplating a bit of trouble made him feel better than he had in a very long time; he was just a little bothered that he didn't have Ron in on it, although he imagined he was going to enjoy it.

Chapter 24

Late that evening, Snape looked up from the book he was studying when McGonagall entered his office. She had an odd look upon her face, as though reminded of something of mixed emotion.

"Among Albus' things I found a collection of these," she said, holding out a small sealed envelope.

Snape accepted it and examined it. The parchment looked aged, yellowed, especially around the gum seal. His first name was written in Dumbledore's hand on the front in faded ink. Snape made a noise of conflicting interest.

"You probably won't be able to open it," McGonagall commented.

With a doubtful look, Snape tried to slip his thumbnail under the seal–it steadfastly refused to budge or even tear a little.

"Pomona's and Hagrid's are that way as well. Mine was open when I found it. Most everyone's opened when I handed them out. Just as well to put off reading it," she opined.

He looked at the ordinary but unopenable seal again. "Powerful wizards mucking about," he breathed, annoyed. At McGonagall's dubious look, he explained, "Potter's words."

"Ah. I always thought not much was getting past him." She adjusted her robes and turned to leave. "There was no letter for him, by the way."

"Good."

As students settled in for Defense on Friday, a note was passed surreptitiously. It read, Do not react. Act normal. Used to this sort of thing, they followed it immediately, maybe too much.

Snape took roll call visually, his brow furrowing momentarily as he noticed Harry's absence. He scratched his brow and started the lecture, determined to give his charge no extra consideration.

"Today we will continue with cutting spells," he said. As he gave them an overview of what they would cover that day, he noticed that they all seemed somewhat extra

attentive, almost innocently so. He shook that off and described the advanced narrow burning spell.

If Snape had turned around, he would have noticed one of the wooden panels behind him swing open. He almost certainly would have seen Harry step silently out from behind it and close it, tapping it once with his wand very lightly. The class obediently kept their eyes on the teacher as Harry pulled the small jar from his pocket and pulled the cork.

A loud pop! made Snape turn around. Harry stood behind him, hands in his pockets, looking inordinately pleased with himself. A few students giggled.

"Potter," Snape said with his old sneer. "You do not expect me to believe that you have managed to Apparate inside the castle. Or Apparate at all for that matter, since I know for a fact you are not licensed to do so."

Harry gave him a shrug and stepped around him. "Sorry I'm late, sir," he said.

Snape looked around behind him, then back at Harry, who was very much Occluding his mind, but made up for it with a very sweet expression of innocence. The class grinned as one now, even Malfoy and the other Slytherins.

"I am sorely tempted to take ten points from Gryffindor for your intentional disruption of class," Snape said in harder tone.

Neville piped up, "It would be worth it, sir."

Snape closed his eyes a long moment then managed to glare at the boy. "Stay after class, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry said easily.

At the end of what felt like a long class Harry did as he was told and hung beside his desk as the room emptied. He received a lot of winks and waves as his fellow students departed. Snape stepped down and over to him. He sighed in dismay and said, "You did not really Apparate, did you, Harry?"

Harry grinned widely. "You really think I could manage that?" he asked, flattered.

Snape glanced around the platform with narrowed eyes before turning back to him. "I am finding myself conditioned to not underestimate you."

Harry still smiled. "I didn't Apparate," he reassured him.

"Good," Snape said. "Things would have become very complicated had you done so."

Harry took the bottle and cork out of his pocket and held them up. He then laughed. "The look you gave me was pretty funny," he said. He set his noisemakers down and reached in his bag for a copy of his Map. He held it out for Snape. It was blank so he tapped it with his wand. The seven floors, the towers and the dungeons appeared. "And don't tell any students, I showed you this part," Harry said as he incanted, "Passages," while tapping the parchment again.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked the page over. "This reminds me of something," he breathed.

Nervously, Harry said, "Really?"

Snape gave him an intent look and held the parchment out.

"You can keep it," Harry offered.

"Does it do anything else?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he added, "Pity. I presume you still have the original?" Harry looked away, reluctant to answer. Snape dropped his arm, making the parchment flutter. "Potter, I have no intention of taking it away from you. I suspect you have very few things that belonged to your father."

Harry relaxed. "I still have it," he admitted. "I've been trying to figure out how it works, without much luck. Even with some help from Remus." He shrugged. "I don't have time to work on it with classes now. Speaking of which, I'm going to get detention from McGonagall for being late again." He hurriedly packed up his things and slung his bag over his shoulder.

As he motioned a casual goodbye, Snape asked, "You really expect Minerva will do that?"

Harry breathed deeply. "We'll see."

Harry didn't get detention, but he received a very stern talking to in front of the class when he arrived. By the time he walked in the story had been told and McGonagall was ready for him.

When the tongue-lashing concluded and McGonagall returned to the lesson with a disappointed huff, Neville raised his hand and said, "If you'd seen the look on Professor Snape's face, ma'am, you'd think it worth it."

She glared at him a moment and said, "Yes, well, I didn't have the luxury of that, so it does not count in Mr. Potter's favor." She turned to stalk to the front of the room and murmured, "Next time, Potter, be sure to invite a few more bystanders."

Harry shared a look of relieved amusement with his friends.

Rendezvous

The weather turned colder, but that didn't dissuade them from heading into Hogsmeade on Saturday. The crowd in the Three Broomsticks was thinner than the previous visit. Harry and his companions sat at a table by the side wall and Madame Rosmerta brought them a round of butterbeers immediately.

"We get such great service with you here, Harry," Hermione commented. Ron looked like he might be in agreement, but he didn't speak. Harry shook his head in dismay at both Rosmerta and Ron. They held up their mugs in a silent toast to Dumbledore before sipping the cold, sweet liquid.

"What is this?" Hermione asked the table in general. At their questioning looks, she nodded at a table near the window.

Harry turned and espied an ordinary witch in mauve robes sitting with a man whose back was to them. "That's Professor Snape, isn't it?" Hermione asked. Harry squinted and nodded that it probably was. "Who's the woman?" his friend asked. Harry just shrugged. "Huh," Hermione huffed suggestively. "Hasn't said anything?" she went on.

"Why would he?" Harry returned. As they chatted and drank a second round, Hermione's notion began to gnaw at Harry strangely. He shook it off several times, but his gaze seemed to end up over at the other table without his will.

Harry stood reading sections of the Dragon Lair Book of Dangerous Spells before D.A. Neville came over and tipped the front edge down to glance at the page he was on.

"Finding anything good?" Neville asked. "Where did you get that anyway? The library doesn't have a copy."

"Snape," Harry replied, lost in the description of something called the Cuisinart Spell. It sounded like the kind of thing that would kill a giant spider, if not at least cut its legs off. One would have to be very careful with it, though. Very careful.

"Goodness," Neville said, reading over Harry's shoulder now. "Professor Snape really loaned you this, or he just failed to notice you removing it from his shelf?"

Harry laughed lightly. "He really loaned it to me. Just warned me I was personally responsible for anything anyone did with anything they learned here."

"Still," Neville commented, reaching out and turning the page to read more of the next spell, the Nostrafresca. "Aye!" he said and dropped the page back down. The woodcut illustration was rather gruesome. "Don't teach anyone that one."

Harry closed the book, still smiling at Neville's antics. He put it back in his bag by the wall where Ron, Ginny and Hermione were standing.

"Something wrong, Neville?" Hermione asked.

"Just imagining being turned inside out by my nostrils," Neville said with a wince. "So nothing is really wrong."

More students wandered in, fourth-years, chatting boisterously. Harry still wasn't used to the fun feeling most members brought to the meetings now. It used to be so strained, almost to the breaking point, with everyone in a near panic that if they didn't get each spell right, they might not survive.

"Are we going to do any curse detection?" Ernie asked as he, Owen, and Laura wandered over to the four of them.

"I'll add it to the list," Hermione said, reaching for her bag, "if it isn't already on it."

"My parents owled to say they were thinking of getting rid of an old trunk in the attic that belonged to my great aunt. She always warned us the thing was full of stink cursing, eyeball eating, slime producing objects. As kids we never believed her, but she's gone now and we kinda want to look through it."

Harry, sympathetic to this, said, "Star it on the list; it sounds less dangerous than some of the other suggestions."

"Today we are doing more blocking, though, right?" Ginny asked. "I always get paired with Striver Bletchley during Defense class and I'm tired of landing on my bum."

"Want me to complain for you?" Harry asked.

"Oh!" Ginny said brightly. "You could do that, couldn't you? You don't think Professor would just instead pair me with someone worse, like Mortimer Montague?"

Harry thought that over. "I really don't know," he replied. "It would depend on how I asked, I suppose."

"Maybe not bother," Ginny said warily. "Just help me out so I can kick anyone's arse, please."

Harry grinned. "Sure thing." He turned to the room, which had about thirty students in it, and got everyone's attention to start.

Rendezvous

Harry spent the week wracking his brain for a present idea. He had asked for the date with less than three weeks to spare, making him very glad that he hadn't put it off any longer. No good ideas came to mind, though. He finally broke down and went down to Hagrid's cabin to ask his advice.

"Tea," Hagrid said with authority. "Drinks a lo' of it, doesn'e?" he added at Harry's doubtful expression.

"Doesn't seem very creative or unusual," Harry commented, as he petted a bright young Fawkes who sat on his perch beside the hearth.

"Don' try so hard. Trust me–tha'll only go wrong in the end. And HOW," Hagrid said with embarrassment. Harry wondered what brought on that flush of dismay, but held his questions when Hagrid muttered a bit about people who really didn't want an exotic pet even though they said they might . . . several times.

The weekend arrived. As Harry sat in the Three Broomsticks, mulling over his dilemma, Hermione nudged him and pointed at the door. Snape and the same woman entered and sat at a table in the corner. Snape seemed too preoccupied to take in the occupants of the room, which wasn't like him.

"I have to run an errand," Harry said suddenly, feeling an urgent need to get cracking on the present.

They waved him off, whispering between themselves. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders and walked down to the teashop.

As he turned off High Street, he encountered an eager face. Harry wondered why Skeeter seemed to be waiting for him. He shook off his suspicion and said a flat hello as he stepped by her. She beat him to the shop and put her foot at the edge of the door to hold it closed.

"You are a tough one to get at when you are in school, you know that? I am looking forward to you finishing, just so I can get access to you."

"What do you want, Ms. Skeeter?" Harry asked, continuing to stare through the glass into the shop.

"A moment of your time," she said as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

Harry sighed, "What do I get out of it?" When she hesitated replying, he added, "More stupid entries in the Rumors column?"

"I admit, the Dumbledore retrospectives have distracted me from tracking more of that rumor down." She did make that sound like a confession. Biting her lip, she went on, "How about doing something for me for old-times sake?"

Harry gave her a very doubtful look, then glanced up and down the street to see if anyone was approaching. He released the door handle and stepped around the side of the shop where the wall overlooked nothing but a sheep field back-dropped by the Forest in the distance.

"Look," Harry said as he crossed his arms and leaned against the peeling paint of the siding, "I'm continually reminded how much I'm owed by everyone. I've never called anyone on that, but I'm doing it now. Leave it be."

"Why? The public deserves to know," she said, sounding over-rehearsed.

"I don't ask for much. Actually," he said, leaning closer to her, "I haven't asked for anything. All I want is to be left to myself. The public deserves to know that Voldemort is really gone and I'd spend hours helping you convey that. But my life is mine."

She adjusted her heavy bag on her shoulder. "You wouldn't believe the rumors flying about you right now: You're secretly married. You keep illegal pet dragons. You have pregnant girlfriends. Sometimes all of the above in odd combinations."

Harry shook his head. "Why does anyone care?" he grumbled.

"Their own lives aren't interesting enough to hold their attention. Now you may argue that if they paid more attention to their own lives, rather than yours, that they may become more interesting." She shrugged. "It sells papers, so I'm not complaining." While she studied him, she took out a cigarette and put it between her lips. At his dismayed look, she said, "Yeah, I know; I'm supposed to smoke a pipe like a proper witch. I hear it all the time."

Harry didn't know how to tell her that wasn't at all what he was thinking.

Talking around the cigarette, she said, "Look, I know a nice scoop is staring me in the face, but I can't get anyone at the Ministry to talk. I've never seen anything like it." She took two long drags, then stamped out the cigarette on the cold ground. "Am I right?"

"Probably," Harry admitted.

"Help me and I'll drop it."

Harry closed his eyes. "What do you want?" he asked warily.

"Dumbledore's last words. Were you there?"

"Take care of the school," Harry replied, seeing no harm in that.

Deep in thought, Skeeter took out her pad and a normal quill. "I didn't buy that from your new headmistress. Serves me right." She didn't write anything down, just considered him. Eventually, she asked, "Are you worried about Jugson and Avery? No one else seems to be. I thought Fudge declared victory a little early."

Harry watched a flock of small birds circle and dive over the field. "I watched Voldemort torture Avery for being disloyal. I don't think he ever did anything he wasn't forced to. Jugson I don't know as much about. I do trust some of the Aurors and they seem to think they are unlikely to come out of hiding." He shrugged. He wasn't having dreams anymore, but he wasn't about to tell her that. "I feel safe," he added instead.

She made a few short notes. It made Harry wonder if he should be authorized to speak with her. He could mess up a lot of people should he choose to.

She put her pad back away. "I'm thinking that I'd prefer to hold this over you. I'll keep things quiet, if you answer my questions."

Harry felt the blanket of blackmail descending. "If that's what it takes," he heard himself say.

"So tell me what it is I'm keeping quiet about," she said as her quill went into her bag and she buckled it.

Harry grinned lightly. "I was adopted."

Her face twisted and immediately untwisted. "You're joking." She laughed, sounding regretful. "Figures. Got a few owls from some old friends saying just that. But it sounded like a dead end, Mr. Seventeen-Year-Old."

Harry shrugged, feeling sweetly like he had won this round even though it felt an unstable victory.

Skeeter stepped away, shaking her head. Harry followed her to the road and watched her stride slowly to the next street. As he entered Puddifoots, a bell chimed somewhere in the back.

Chapter 24

After a long discussion with the teashop proprietress that almost qualified as an educational seminar about rare teas, he ordered a canister of high-altitude Himalayan first flush. Grateful to have that out of the way, but still feeling like he was failing in this task, he went back out to the road. Ron and Hermione were hovering outside the Three Broomsticks. Harry caught up to them and they headed toward the castle together.

"They were looking pretty chummy in there," Hermione teased Harry as they left High Street and headed on the path to school.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively. He shrugged his cloaked shoulders to indicate he didn't care, but part of him thought he should have come up with a better present.

Harry arrived early for D.A. to set up some things. He wanted to try a few spells that countered potions, but making his fellow students drink stuff that would make them ill smacked of Fred and George so he wanted to be prepared. The lonely walk through the castle hadn't felt as uneasy this evening, for which he was grateful. He wondered idly as he set his bag inside whether the castle was adjusting to Dumbledore's absence or he was.

He glanced around the avocado tile floors and walls; the Room was apparently a little confused about what he wanted. He stepped back out and in a few times, thinking differently about what his real needs were for this session.

"Having fun?" a voice sneered from the shadow of a doorway across the corridor. Draco Malfoy stepped forward into the light of a flickering wall lamp. His face looked its usual condescending.

"Yes, actually," Harry replied easily. "What is it to you, anyway?"

In a mocking singsong, Malfoy said, "Ah, the famous Harry Potter, playing musical doors."

Harry shrugged but didn't open the door again. "Something you want?"

Malfoy pulled his wand out. "Yes, there is." Harry didn't move, just glanced at the wand as though it were harmless. "Don't taunt me, Potter," Malfoy threatened. "Get yours out."

"What, you want to duel?" Harry asked in properly sneering disbelief.

Malfoy smiled with pleasure. "Yes," he drawled.

"Come on in then," Harry said easily and opened the door. Inside was now a regulation dueling platform. The walls were solid granite all around with no windows.

Malfoy stepped in suspiciously although he let his wand fall. "This is a bloody interesting room, isn't it?"

As they stepped over to the platform, Harry said, "You must be bored now that you've lost your junior Death Eater status. How is your dad, anyway?"

Malfoy's lips crooked as he huffed. "He chose a losing side," he commented quietly then smiled a bit more.

Harry stood with his wand out at his side. "You've been getting along better than I'd imagined," he commented, "given how much has changed."

"I discovered that power vacuums are made to be filled," the blonde young man replied as he raised his wand to ready. Harry matched him. "You are clearly too stupid to do so," Malfoy went on.

Harry went on mockingly, "I'd have thought you'd miss running around in a dark robe with a mask, dodging in and out of shadows like a cockroach."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I don't know how someone as pathetic as you brought down such a great wizard–"

"Don't worry," Harry cut him off. "The same thing wouldn't work on you–you actually have feelings."

This caught Malfoy off guard and he blinked a moment as he took it in. Then he scoffed, "You've been hanging around Snape too long." With no warning other than the movement of his arm, he fired a blasting curse at Harry who blocked it and sent one back that Malfoy also blocked.

"He's been teaching me on the side," Malfoy said maliciously. "Far as I can tell, you only have him for class." He fired a Figuresempre and got one in return, both of which were blocked easily.

Harry was starting to enjoy this. His heart was pumping nicely rather than panicky and his mind was clearly focused. "I finished Seventh Year Defense in one afternoon," Harry pointed out and cast a wide cutting spell at the other boy. It wouldn't have done more than given him a red streak on his skin, but Malfoy ducked and did what Harry'd hoped he would, he got angry and incanted something nasty back. Harry

blocked the hatchet curse and the following narrow cutting spell that would have done real damage.

"Can we do this every week?" Harry asked hopefully as he stepped back into position after getting knocked back.

Malfoy growled and incanted something Harry didn't recognize. Harry put up a titan block since it was usually a good bet. Part of the spell bounced off, but the air sizzled with red tendrils after the block dissolved. Two of them struck Harry on the arm and chest before he could roll out of the way. From a kneeling position, he used a very hard Figuresempre back again, knocking Malfoy back, almost off the platform.

Harry's arm and chest burned as he stood up, wondering fiercely what had hit him.

The door opened at that moment and the two of them froze. Neville and Dean stepped in and looked between them. "Drat," Neville said, "What are we missing?"

Harry laughed despite the sharp streaks of pain. He didn't lower his wand. "Draw for now?" Harry asked the other.

Malfoy lowered his wand. "I don't want an audience," he said in a spoiled voice and jumped off the platform. After he had stalked out of the room, Harry unhooked his robe and unbuttoned his shirt to look at the damage. Nasty red snaking streaks were on his chest and upper arm.

"What is that?" Dean asked.

Harry winced and headed for the door. "Look up a spell with the incantation 'Aduroreptum' for me, will you?" he said as he left for the hospital wing. "Thanks," he breathed as he closed the door.

Pomfrey was her usual unsympathetic toward him. "And what were you doing, young man?" she challenged him when he showed her the strange welts.

"Practicing spells," Harry said as though it were obvious and completely normal.

She went to the supplies and brought back a tin of salve. "Try that one."

Harry rubbed a little on and sighed at the instant relief.

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Do recall that I have someone to report you to now."

"You may do so, Madam," Harry said easily. He was feeling cocky after holding up so well against Malfoy in an all-out duel. He grinned widely as he said, "He'd have to take points from Slytherin, so he probably wouldn't want to hear the whole story."

Rendezvous

McGonagall gave them Hogsmeade privileges again the next weekend. Harry suspected she was trying to balance out losing Dumbledore. The opportunity worked well for Harry, otherwise he would have had to owl for the package from the shop and although it was a short flight, Hedwig wouldn't like the package if it were heavy. Hermione and Ron skipped going down because it was very windy. Harry enjoyed the solitary walk down the path to town. Only a few other students were ahead of or behind him and they were a distance away. As he walked, all he heard was the crunch of his boots on the snow and the creak of the thin ice on edge of the lake. He slowed his pace, despite the biting wind, just to take it in longer.

At the teashop he pulled open the door and pulled off his hat and mittens. As he stepped up to the counter, he heard a gasp from near the window, followed by whispering. Harry stuffed his mittens into his cloak pocket and turned toward the sound. He recognized the violet-robed woman after a moment's consideration. She was leaning over, talking excitedly to Snape who gave Harry a positively disgusted look.

The shopkeeper came out of the back and, when he saw him, set Harry's package on the counter in a fancy bag with pink yarn for handles. Harry forced his smile down and put some coins on the counter and took up the bag. When he stepped back toward the door, the woman gave him such a bright look, he almost couldn't hold back on his grin.

"Sir," Harry said to Snape.

"Potter," Snape replied flatly.

"You know him?" the woman asked Snape in delighted surprise, severely testing Harry's control.

Snape hesitated just an instant. "He is a student at Hogwarts," he explained with a hint of short patience.

"Ma'am," Harry said.

She put out her hand. "Candide Breakstone," she said.

Harry took her hand. "Harry Potter," he said.

"Wow," she said gleefully. "You are."

Harry couldn't risk a glance at Snape, or he knew he would lose it.

"You must have things to be doing, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry, feeling free since Snape had started the game this time, said conversationally, "Not really, sir." He turned back to the bright-eyed woman just as she finished giving Snape a sharp look. "So, what do you do?" Harry asked her.

"I'm an accountant. It is the end of the fiscal calendar year this month, so I spend all of my time with my firm's clients here in Hogsmeade."

Harry blinked at her before saying, "That's nice," as levelly as possible.

"Oh!" she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a white mug. "Would you mind terribly?" she asked Harry with a pleading tone. She held it out.

Harry accepted and looked it over. It was some kind of a commemorative mug celebrating the Year of the Dark Lorde's Demyse . It had a fake seal format to it and lots of gold accent. "Yee," Harry uttered in dismay.

"Yes, it is rather horrid, I know," she admitted. "But my boss gave them to all of us. If you signed it, he would be livid with jealousy."

Harry swallowed hard, mostly because it was his fault this particular encounter had gone this far, and gave her a pleasant smile. He took a quill out of his bag and used the marker pen charm on it. Snape had taken the mug to look at it with an appalled expression. Harry took it back a little impatiently and signed it To Candide, from your friend, Harry Potter . He then spelled the fresh ink with a permanent charm.

"You have a spell for every possible autographing circumstance?" Snape asked him in his most snide tone.

"I do try, sir," Harry said sweetly as he handed the mug over to Candide. She looked at it with a glowing smile before stashing it in her bag. "Thank you," she said honestly.

"No problem. Nice to have met you." Harry said. He picked up his package from the floor and said, "Professor," to Snape in a very formal tone.

Later that evening back at the castle, Harry stopped by Snape's office. "Didn't mean to interrupt your date," he said as he stepped in.

Snape gave him a dark look. "I don't know if one would call it that," he said as he flipped through a large book on his desk.

Harry waited an appropriate amount of time before saying, "Candy the accountant?"

Snape's eyes came back up to him. He gave him a long dark look and said, "Go away, Potter, before I say something I'll regret."

Harry frowned a bit and departed in hard silence.

In the common room most of his friends were enjoying themselves with games or talk. Harry, not feeling sociable, collected his books and took them to the library, which was almost empty. He worked on Potions since he was in a bad mood already anyway and could use sharp phrasing in his essay as an outlet for it.

Harry's dark mood didn't abate much by Monday. He was quiet in Defense class, which attracted a few long looks from Snape, especially when Harry couldn't find any patience for his spelling partner, Lavender.

Snape stepped over and reviewed the Quiescent spell with her. Harry kept his eyes averted, watching Ron and Hermione practice making each other swoon onto large cushions. He rolled his eyes at the appropriateness of that, and waited for the chance to practice more. Finally, when Lavender was ready to try it again, Harry paid attention. Fortunately she still didn't have it right, and all he received was a dull buzzing in his ears.

Thursday was Snape's birthday. Harry's annoyed mood had lightened a bit, but not enough to make him relish the notion of giving a gift to him. He borrowed wrapping paper from another student in the House and wrapped the large square tin when everyone went to breakfast. He dropped it into his bag, thinking that an opportunity would arise to hand it over. He put it off until after the last class of the day. This was usually a good time to catch any teacher in their office, since they were often taking care of things before heading down to dinner.

Snape's door was closed. Harry knocked on it just in case, but there was no answer. Sighing, mostly because this meant he was going to have to work himself up to this again, he stepped away.

After dinner he came straight back. The door was open this time and Snape was filing things when Harry knocked on the doorframe. This was going to cost him some pride–he could feel it.

Chapter 24

"Harry," Snape said evenly. It was the usual greeting, but Harry felt he could have used a tad more encouragement.

Harry checked the hallway and seeing it was empty, stepped farther in, unbuckling his bag as he walked. He set it on the visitor's chair and took out the lime-green wrapped present. As he placed the package on the desk, he said evenly, "Happy birthday, sir."

Snape put down the parchment he had in his hand and gave Harry and the gift a stunned look. Holding that gaze cost Harry more pride than he had expected. He hefted his bag and stepped out while he still had a little of it left.

Snape sat in the teashop alone that Saturday. It occurred to him now that it was the gift Potter was picking up when he had encountered him here. The boy had done a good job of not giving that away.

The proprietress brought him more hot water, turning his thoughts to the time. Candide had made it sound very doubtful that she would make it. But she had done that the weekend before as well. He did believe that she worked every day, including weekends, as the end of November grew closer, but he couldn't help but suspect that he had botched it somehow. Though tempted to blame the incident with Potter, since she had seemed mildly upset by his treatment of the boy, it had really started before that. The week before, when her friend had joined them briefly in the Three Broomsticks. After that Candide had insisted on meeting elsewhere with a tone that said, "if at all".

The door opening interrupted his musings. "Hope you weren't waiting too long," Candide greeted him as she stepped over. She set her packages on the floor, took the seat across the small table, and pulled over a cup and poured for herself. Her eyes were much more distracted than usual. He resisted the strong temptation to Legilimize her.

After a long sip she tossed off her cloak and let it fall over the back of her chair. "I don't think we should meet anymore," she stated simply.

"May I ask why?" Snape heard himself say.

She shrugged. "You can ask."

"Your friend Roberta didn't like me, I assume."

"She knows you better than I," Candide said. "She was three years behind you at Hogwarts, but I don't think you recognized her."

Snape shook his head.

"Anyway," Candide murmured, picking at her nails nervously.

"I certainly enjoy having tea with you," Snape said.

Her eyes darted around the room. "You are interesting to talk to. Most people aren't, really."

Snape raised both brows. This was one of the more endearing things she had ever said. A shadow moved outside the shop window. Snape rapped on the glass, startling Candide. "If you do not wish to have tea with me anymore, or mead, that is your choice," Snape said to her with a tone of finality.

The shadow outside hesitated then stepped up to the door and opened it. Harry shut the door behind him against the cold wind. "Sir?" he asked.

"Come over here, Harry," Snape invited.

Harry pulled his hat off and stashed it in his pocket. His cheeks were red from the wind and he was breathing as though he had been walking quickly. He loosened his cloak and coat collar. "Hello again," he said to the woman. She smiled and returned his greeting.

Snape stood up and took his own cloak down from the hat rack behind him. "You were not introduced properly last time," Snape said as he pulled his cloak around his shoulders. Harry watched this in confusion. "I'll head back to the castle with you," Snape explained to him.

"Okay," Harry said easily.

"Thank you for the birthday present, by the way. Well chosen."

Harry smiled at that, forgetting everything he had felt in between. "You're welcome, sir," he said brightly.

"It was your birthday?" Candide asked.

Harry rapidly looked between them, trying to figure out the situation. Snape turned to her, his hair falling into his face as he looked down to get his gloves out of his pocket. He nodded faintly as if it were no matter. As he clutched his black gloves in his hand, he exhaled audibly. "Harry, this is Candide Breakstone. Candide, this is my son, Harry."

Harry gave her a normal smile, thinking that Snape must have some reason for going straight at the jugular. Her expression was rather shocked. Her startled eyes gravitated to Harry who gave her a small nod. Snape had been plotting an exit–Harry could go for that. "I have a D.A. meeting to prepare for," he said to Snape. It was somewhat true, inasmuch as it was always true. "Nice meeting you again," he said to Candide.

On the way down the road, Harry said, "So she broke it off, eh?"

"Yes," Snape answered in a low tone.

"I don't know," Harry said, trying for a teasing voice. "She failed the Harry test."

"Very true. I would not have imagined such mindlessly adoring behavior from her."

"I am sorry," Harry said, minutes later, as they stepped along the path beside the lake. It was true; as odd as the notion had made him feel, he could see the other side of it easily now.

"It wasn't her–it was her friend," Snape complained. Something in his tone made Harry think this brought back bad memories, so he let the whole thing drop rather than risk sending Snape into a funk.

The next morning an owl dropped a letter in front of Harry. He opened it, surprised to find it was from Candide. Was Severus serious? You nodded, but I simply cannot imagine. Please reply to the address below. The address at the bottom was an in the care of one of the businesses in Hogsmeade.

"Interesting letter?" Hermione asked as Harry stared at it.

"Merlin, don't ask. Can I borrow a quill?" Harry wrote a reply on the back, explaining that yes, Severus had adopted him and should she care to, she could look up the filing with the Wizard Family Council. As to their odd behavior the first time around, that was a little game they played since the adoption wasn't general public knowledge. He signed it and folded it to take it to the owlery after breakfast. He gave the quill back and poked at his food again.

Later, as he handed the letter to Hedwig, he realized he was most likely reopening this thing between his guardian and this woman. He would have to try to hold the mindset he had had the day before when he had expressed regret as they were walking back to the castle. It wasn't going to be easy; he could feel it slipping away, even as Hedwig sailed out one of the upper openings.

Harry didn't want to be seen has having intervened, so when he went down to visit with Snape that evening, he left the topic well alone. He had brought all of his books and assignments to work on. Usually he selected just one to bring in case Snape was busy. This time he found himself settling in for a long evening.

Around the end of the second hour, Harry looked up to find Snape considering him in silence. "Would you like some tea?" his guardian finally asked.

Harry, having much more to finish that evening, said, "Sure." As tea was being made, he returned to his efforts at describing the origin of wizard community law in the five-hundreds. At least Binns seemed to have realized that something other than Giant wars and Goblin rebellions had happened in the past, though Harry wished it were something more interesting.

Snape set a cup of tea before Harry, who raised it to his nose and hesitated. It smelled of sunshine and fresh herb. Distracted from his reading he took a sip. It wasn't anything like any tea he had had before; it was earth and enchanted green leaves with a bit of toasted something at the end. He blinked into his cup. "Is this the stuff I got you?" he asked.

Snape sat back, holding his cup with his fingertips. He looked amused. "You didn't try it first?"

"I got talked into it. It was a special order." Harry took another sip and marveled all over again. "Wow." He felt better, realizing that he had managed all right on the gift after all.

Harry found himself hanging out in Snape's office a little more often that week, even though he really didn't have time. Instead of being there, he should have been finishing assignments before Quidditch practice or practicing spells for D.A.

Snape didn't comment or make an indication that he noticed Harry's change in visiting habits. Twice, Harry opened his mouth to ask if anything had happened with Candide, before he cut himself off at the last instant. The second time he had to scramble for another topic. "Big match this weekend," Harry said. This was at least true; it was Gryffindor against Slytherin.

Chapter 24

"And you are expecting to win?" Snape asked.

"I actually don't know," he admitted. They had secretly watched the Slytherins practicing and they had appeared intense and disciplined in a wholly new way. Only Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had played so far, so no one had seen Snape's house on the pitch. "Your new Seeker is awfully small," Harry commented thinking of the white-haired girl with grey eyes he had seen practicing and since then, noticed in the hallway. Ron had thought her name was Suze Zepher.

"Seekers are supposed to be," Snape pointed out rather pointedly.

"You think I'm too tall?"

"You are certainly getting there. But far be it for anyone to suggest you leave the position." When Harry gave him a dark look, he went on, "Did anyone try out against you?"

"No. That rarely happens though."

"Not on the Slytherin team. Positions are always in jeopardy," Snape stated.

"No wonder they all look so intent," Harry mused.

"I would expect."

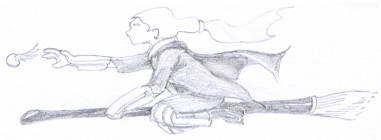
"They don't look like they are having fun, though," Harry commented as he collected up his books. He needed to get to a meeting.

"Winning is its own reward," Snape observed.

"It would have to be," Harry quipped as he went to the door. "Later, sir," he said as he departed.

Author's Notes:
Yes, I have Snape's birthday wrong, but this was written before jkrowling.com announced it on the calendar.

Chapter 25.



Another Big Match

The weather turned warmer for the big Quidditch match. As they stood waiting to fly out, Harry noticed for the first time that he was taller than one Chaser and the same height as one of the Beaters. He mulled on this unexpected observation as Ron gave them a little pep talk before the door fell open. Ron clenched his fist and pounded the air a lot as he urged them on. Harry considered commenting that they all wanted to win as much as Ron, and that he didn't need to worry about that, but held back.

Finally the door fell open. It felt good to float out over the green expanse. He felt freer as the memory of the match of last year dimmed, overlaid by the here and now. He appraised Suze, the opposing Seeker, as they waited for Madam Hooch to release the balls. She gave them a long talking to, giving Harry time to notice that the girl was actually smaller than her broom, which had no label. Harry suspected, with a bit of a jolt, that meant it was a custom one. A sinking feeling tried to take hold of Harry's stomach. No Dementors this time, he reminded himself to help get back in game mode.

Madame Hooch's whistle blew just as the sun cut through the clouds. As Harry turned to take up his circling position, he saw Suze squint her very pale eyes in the bright light. With any luck, the Snitch would stay high, Harry thought.

Slytherin scored first on their first possession. Harry could read Ron's lips as he swore and paced between the posts. Suze dove suddenly. Harry, used to being faked out by Malfoy, turned and dove mildly to check if she were serious. When she continued to dive, the crowd began to rise. Harry pushed his speed up a notch. Suze pulled up a few feet from the ground and soared along at ground level, turning suddenly at the far wall and heading straight up. Her broom didn't seem to believe it had a rider aboard, the way it maneuvered.

Harry forced himself to ignore her and returned to scanning where he normally found the Snitch: above the stands on the periphery. Suze came around beside him and slowed instantly to pace him. The Slytherin stands cheered another goal. Harry ducked to circle lower and when she matched, with a floating ease, ducked again. She sped up then. Harry let her sail ahead and bend around the turn in the pitch. He regained a little altitude and continued looking for the Snitch as the opposition scored yet another goal.

Suze lapped him, coming up close beside on the outside. Harry hoped that she cut off part of the loop, otherwise her broom was faster than he had imagined a broom could be. She sloth rolled gracefully beneath him to pace on the inside. The crowd murmured at that provocative maneuver. Harry dove suddenly to test her. She matched him so easily it might have appeared to the crowd that they moved as one. Harry regripped his broom, feeling moisture between his palms and the straps of his wristguards.

Every move he made, she matched without appearing to even try. Harry flew in a wider loop and sped up, barely skimming the fabric covering the stands, watching intently for his target and trying to pretend he didn't have a shadow.

Someone shouted and one of the Slytherin Beaters came at them, swinging hard at a Bludger. Harry's first thought was to wonder why he was aiming at his own teammate, since Suze was directly in the path of it. His hesitation at this confusion cost him. She curved easily out of the way and the ball careened into Harry's chest, knocking him back into the fabric of the stands. His shoulder took the brunt of the collision with the wood of the staircase behind the bright cloth, and he ducked his head to try to protect it. Instinctively, he held onto the broom as he fell, bouncing off the tower once, and just righting his flight as he struck the dirt track around the pitch. The crowd made a noise of dismay, he was heartened to hear.

Harry slowly stood himself up off the ground and took a deep breath. No sharp pains resulted from this so, a little unsteady, he hovered his broom. The students in the stands above him were cheering down at him, all Ravenclaws. He gave them a small wave as he kicked off. Ginny swooped low to check on him. He waved her off as well.

More determined now, Harry scanned the pitch. The Slytherin Seeker was circling high, looking about herself with a cold assurance. Harry turned to pace beneath her, feeling she was a little high. She dropped smoothly beside him, giving him a sharp look. Harry wiped his forehead and blood came away on his fingers. He didn't feel any pain, so he wiped his hand on his cloak and ignored it, and her.

Gryffindor finally managed to score but it was answered within a minute. Harry shook his head and avoided checking on Ron, assuming Ginny would do that. He fell

into a mode of cold concentration then, distracted only by having to wipe the blood that seeped into his right eye.

They circled slowly until the sun streamed out of the clouds again. Harry tail-turned and angled up at it, accelerating at the limit of his broom. Suze apparently felt she had no choice but to follow. Harry angled steeper and sideways a few times to mimic the way he would have to chase a Snitch. Behind him, he could hear her thick cloak flapping as she trailed close. Without warning, Harry tail-turned again back to level and cut into a tight spiral. He would have cleared her, but she panic-dodged to avoid a collision anyway. They were dizzyingly high, even Harry had to admit, although the fall from here was barely different from one at the height of the stands.

Harry spiraled downward a few turns before kicking violently out of it and plummeting level. Suze flew nearby, indecisive about following. Back at the level of the flags, Harry turned out in a broad, banked circle. She had decided to follow. Harry swerved, using the flag as a pick and forcing her to fly wider. He turned to maximize this advantage and used the next tower again as a pick. She stayed directly behind him after that, so close that he suspected her of holding his bristles. A glance back, as he wiped his face on his sleeve, showed her hands firmly on her own black broom handle. His brow stung fiercely from being rubbed on the gritty fabric of his sleeve, making him look around harder for the Snitch to end the match as soon as possible.

The crowd cheered but Harry didn't spare any attention for it to find out who had scored. The larger of the two green-clad Beaters loomed up around the next tower. Harry swerved hard and a Bludger struck him on the leg from behind. He had been flying at top speed making the next tower loom fast, requiring him to pull up sharply to avoid it. He clipped the Hogwarts flag on the top of it, sending it end over end to the ground.

Suze was no longer behind him. Harry turned and immediately had to duck a Bludger as he looked for her. She circled broadly, intently looking about for the snitch. He sped up, then slowed as the Slytherin Beaters rose to block his path. The crowd booed something. Harry leaned back and reversed before dropping into a plummet when the Beaters started forward. He was too close to the ground for this maneuver, but he didn't care. His padded knees bounced on the grass as he recovered from the drop and looped under the overgrown Slytherins who couldn't move as agilely.

Harry came up behind Suze, breaking hard to match her. Her white hair was coming loose from its tie, and it flapped madly as she turned suddenly. He followed, forced to grip his broom as hard as he could to stay on it. The wind whipped his clothes as she sped up and he matched again, although it took two breaths for him to gain

the same speed. He pulled up very close, this time on the inside, limiting where she could turn. He shifted his weight back on his broom, knowing she would slow down to cut away from him. When she moved her grip, he started breaking, matching her perfectly and leaving her no place to go except to fly farther out of the pitch area. She did so, looping tight considering their speed. Harry cut her off again, anticipating correctly that she would drop lower to avoid him.

Around the pitch they flew in their crazed dance, chased by the green-clad Beaters. Harry barely had any attention for searching for the snitch since it took everything he had to stay ahead of her and avoid getting bludgeoned. It required every ounce of preemptive strategy and instinct he had to maintain close proximity to her feather-light form and advanced broom.

She finally slowed down a bit. Harry was out of breath but didn't dare reveal it. Lack of air made him feel dizzy as a result. His hands felt tired as well, and he regripped a few times to help them recover. He swallowed hard and took a long slow breath to relieve his screaming lungs.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a golden flutter. Relieved more than excited, he didn't turn his head. Instead, he swerved the other way across the pitch, away from it, toward the Beaters who had returned to harassing the Gryffindor chasers, who were scoring easily without them.

One of them turned to Harry and redirected a Bludger his way. This gave Harry an excuse to turn back when he swerved to avoid it. Suze, directly behind him, swerved the other way to avoid a head-on. Harry's heart leapt–she was now heading in completely the opposite direction from the Snitch. He kicked his broom down fast and headed directly at it, finding it easily against the green grass behind it. His head swam with the acceleration.

The Snitch dodged upward as he closed on it, which forced him to break hard and lift, making him dizzier. One hand slipped free of the broom, too tired to hold on. He reached out with it and rolled upside down to stay with his target. The fluttering wings brushed his fingers as something collided with his right side. With no thoughts except for the Snitch, he tugged the broom to meet the collision and strained his arm at the shoulder. His hand closed over the struggling thing as another padded arm bumped his, hard. Harry marveled that Suze could have made it across the pitch so quickly.

A roar went through the crowd as the end of the game was announced. Harry, knocked off balance by Suze pulling away suddenly, struggled to right himself over his broom.

His vision tried to tunnel in. He bent over himself to recover, but instead, blacked out completely.

For an instant, Harry imagined he was flying, which didn't alarm him too much. The blackness of his vision did more so. But that was wiped from his mind by his impact with the flat grass of the pitch.

Indistinct voices and running feet roused Harry. A high-pitched, elf-like voice nearby said plaintively, "I'm sorry, Professor. I should have had him beat."

"You got it!" Ron cried, accompanied by a ceasing charge of pounding footsteps.

Harry opened his eyes. The sun behind Ron was an orb painted on the shifting clouds. As he looked up at his friend, Harry considered with slow thought that it used to be much easier to breathe. More faces were appearing in his narrow vision, including Snape's, much closer.

"Potter," he said with an ambiguous tone as he crouched and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. The wraithlike Slytherin Seeker stood beside Snape, looking glum.

Harry wondered what made him think it was worth it. "Sorry for ruining your game, sir," Harry said.

"He's delirious!" Ron shouted in concern. "Quick, get him to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry found the strength to hold the Snitch up in Ron's direction. Ron took it from him with a wide smile. "Oh, well, that's all right then," he said.

Darkness took Harry at that moment with a last fleeting thought that, if he wanted to stay aware, he was going to have to breath more despite the invisible troll that was apparently standing on his chest.

Harry woke up in the hospital wing. He felt around for his glasses on the side table and put them on. A basket of chocolate frogs was there as well as some jars of sweets. He wondered how long he had been out.

"And how are you feeling, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked. She stood at the foot of his bed, hands on her hips, looking very unsympathetic despite her words.

Harry touched the bandage on his forehead. "Not bad, Madam, thank you."

"You had quite a gash there. It was still bleeding when they hovered you in," she admonished him.

"I couldn't feel it," Harry said.

She humpfed, rolled her eyes and stalked off, muttering something about it not mattering if the Dark Lord was gone as long as there was still Quidditch.

The door to the wing opened and Hermione and Ron appeared. When they saw he was awake they rushed over. "Feeling better?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. Have a frog," he said. Ron accepted one without meeting his eyes.

"Did Madam Pomfrey tell anyone you were awake?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Professor Snape wanted to be told." She pulled out her wand and put down the half-eaten frog. Talking around the chocolate, she said, "Let me see if I can do this." She closed her eyes and said, " Flickerus Pravda Snape. " She pointed the wand at the wall in the direction of the rest of the castle. A silver bird shot out of it and disappeared through the stone. At Harry's impressed look, she said, "It only seems to work about half the time. I wasn't going to show it off until I had it down better."

Pomfrey stepped over to them. "Can Harry leave soon?" Hermione asked her.

"A double dose of blood replenisher requires a six-hour stay," she stated, leaving no room for argument. After straightening the covers with sharp movements, she stepped away again.

"Too bad," Hermione said. "You'll miss dinner." She took another bite of frog.

Harry pushed himself up a little straighter; his body complained in many, many places as he did so, making him glad he didn't have to move until at least late in the evening. He reached for a frog as well and unwrapped it slowly.

The door to the wing opened and Snape stepped in. Harry rubbed his eyes to try to perk himself up some and set his uneaten sweet on the night stand. Snape's expression as he approached wasn't readable. Ron reflexively stepped aside to get out of his way, although he didn't need to move all the way to the end of the bed, which he did. Ron put his hands in his pockets and looked away from all of them.

Harry turned from him to Snape, who stood with his arms crossed beside the bed. "Feeling better, I presume?" he asked. Snape's eyes flickered over to Ron, who studiously stared down the wing toward Pomfrey's office.

Harry began to have a sinking feeling that something had happened after he had passed out. "Yes, sir," Harry said. His shoulder throbbed at that moment and it occurred to him that winning wasn't necessarily fun after all.

"Ms. Zepher is considering resigning as Seeker."

"She shouldn't," Harry said stridently.

"Yes," Snape said. "I tried to explain that she lost not a battle of skill but one of will, of which she has far less experience than yourself. Perhaps you would speak with her, should you see her."

"Sure," Harry said, disregarding the startled look of dismay this caused on Ron's face.

Snape uncrossed his arms. "Should you need anything, Harry . . ." he said then looked between them. "I don't know who sent the bird."

Harry pointed at Hermione. "Hm," Snape said and turned to her. "Dumbledore would be most pleased to see his spell being replicated by a student. You need to temper your power, though, it burned out very fast after it arrived."

She brightened at that and fell thoughtful. "I'll show Harry," she said.

Snape nodded at her and departed with a swish of his cloak. Ron relaxed, sighing with relief when the door closed.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed and taught Harry the bird spell. She then asked Ron to stand outside in the hallway to signal if he had received one because getting it to go through a wall was the hardest part. When their friend was out of hearing range, Hermione said, "Ron lost it with Professor Snape after you passed out. It was ugly. He's lucky he didn't get spelled into a newt or get a lifetime's detention or something. Give it a try," she said.

Harry, distracted by her story, couldn't generate anything. She started from the beginning, explaining the spell all over again, sending a bird through the wall to Ron, who waved in the window of the door that he got it. Harry put aside his questions and nearly panicked concern, and incanted the spell. A silver arrow that bounced off the wall was all he managed. He tried several more times, doing no better.

"Finish the story. Pomfrey will have let me go before I get this right."

Hermione sent another one, apparently to keep Ron occupied rather than to demonstrate. "It was really unfortunate, too, because it was clear to everyone else that Professor was really worried about you." She sighed, her eyes unfocused as she said,

Chapter 25

"Professor Snape put Ron in his place so forcefully that some of the Slytherins are demanding a new Head of House."

"What?" Harry asked. He tried the spell again. The silver arrow left a burn mark on the wall this time. "Why?"

"He made it a little too clear, although he didn't say it outright, that you were all that mattered," Hermione said cautiously.

Harry gave her a doubtful look then felt chagrined. He tried the spell again, this time it was a bird, but it spiraled away out the window. Ron opened the door and watched it leave. "I don't think I'm going to get it," Harry said to him.

"I can't either," Ron commented, "so that makes me feel better."

Harry intentionally didn't react to Ron's talking to him, although he and Hermione shared a very fleeting look of understanding as Ron sighed and fidgeted a bit.

Harry saw Suze the next day, sitting in the Great Hall after lunch. She was with a small group of younger Slytherins whom Harry didn't know. The rest of the Slytherin table was empty. Harry waved his friends off and stepped over there. The group looked up in surprise at his approach.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked Suze.

She blinked her pale eyes at him and shrugged one shoulder. "I'll see you 'round," she said to her friends as she slid off the bench.

She followed Harry to the front of the room to the bench below the tall window at the end of the head table. She reluctantly, it seemed, sat beside him and didn't meet his eyes. "Professor Snape mentioned that you were considering leaving the team," he said. She clasped her hands together and didn't respond. "Don't do that. If we played ten matches, you'd win the next nine, I'm certain," Harry said with painful honesty.

She looked up, her white brow furrowed. Harry wondered if she were part something other than human, or just albino. "What year are you?" he asked.

"Third," she said.

"You have all those years of Quidditch ahead," Harry said, sounding a little jealous, which at one level he was. "You're very good now. Even just another year is going to

make you completely unbeatable." He could see the impact of his words in her eyes. It made him a little nervous to think he had that much sway.

Her eyes moved over him at that. "You think I am good enough to play?" she asked slowly.

"Are you kidding? You are the optimal seeker and you have a killer broom. You just need a little more playing experience. Some things you can't pick up on the practice pitch. Don't quit because you lost to me," Harry insisted. "I'd feel really awful if you did that."

She looked stunned by that.

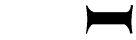
"I gave that match everything I had and it was essentially a tie. And you didn't end up in the hospital wing overnight, so in essence, you won." When she didn't reply, he went on, "Learning to lose and keep going is an essential skill in everything–you'll set a bad precedent for yourself if you give up this easily now."

"I let my team down," she said quietly. "Everyone else was playing really well."

"Hey, they want to put up another seeker against you, let them try. I can't imagine they have another one better than you."

She went thoughtful at that. "Hm," she breathed.

Harry stood up and Suze nodded a goodbye. She looked like she was going to sit there for a while longer, thinking.



"Are you brewing in the dungeon today?" Harry asked his guardian the next Sunday as he stood just inside the office door.

"No," Snape replied, "the stocks are set until next term."

"Oh," Harry said, a little disappointed. He wandered around the office a bit, pulling down a book about the history of Dementors.

A knock sounded on the door and Malfoy stepped in. "Professor, I have–" he stopped upon seeing Harry. "Figures you'd be here." To Snape he said, "I have my extra credit essay," he said, handing over a scroll. "For what it is worth," he added darkly.

Snape unrolled it and glanced at it. "If it makes you feel any better, Mr. Malfoy, I will inform you that I am grading Mr. Potter twice as hard as yourself, or any of the other students."

"What?" Harry blurted.

Malfoy laughed at him, got control of himself, and then laughed again as he departed. The laughter echoed in the hallway. Harry shoved the book he held back onto the shelf. Dully, he said, "I'd better get back to revising."

Chapter 25

Harry sat in the common room reading his Potions notes. He was bored with it, with all studying, really. His eyes kept getting dragged back to the flames in the hearth which, despite being pretty ordinary, seemed much more interesting than bone growth potions.

Hermione dropped into the chair across from him. "You aren't waiting until the last minute again, are you?"

"What?" Harry asked her.

She gave him a disapproving look, not unlike the one usually reserved for Ron. "The Christmas Ball, Harry," she said as though he were a little slow.

"Headmistress just announced it two days ago. I have two weeks," Harry retorted. At her raised brow, he frowned. "Okay, I get your point."

More quietly, she said, "Whom are you going to ask?"

Harry laughed painfully. "I have no idea."

"Whom would you like to?"

"Tonks," Harry returned without thinking.

Hermione took that in. "Are you serious?" At Harry's shrug, she said, "She's a little old for you; she must be twenty-three, twenty-four."

"I wasn't serious about inviting her–you just asked me who I'd like to ask," Harry retorted.

"Oh," Hermione murmured, looking a bit parentish in her concern.

Harry frowned more deeply. "I hate these things," he said darkly, accepting the truth of it as he did so. At her sad look, he explained, "There isn't a girl in this school I can connect with."

"That's not true, Harry," she said, sounding a little offended. "I understand you." After a pause she added, "Ginny does too."

"She's going with Dean."

Very quietly, Hermione said, "I think she'd rather go with you."

"I'm not getting into that," Harry insisted firmly.

Hermione sat back, "Let's see. Seventh Year girls," she murmured as she tapped her finger on the chair arm. She mumbled off a few names thoughtfully. Eventually she frowned. "How about Sixth Years?" At Harry's shrug, she thought some more. "Mirna isn't too bad. A Ravenclaw. And she just broke up with someone so she is . . . probably not the best bet."

Another Big Match

Harry stepped into Snape's office and dropped into the visitor's chair with a huff. "Can I borrow Candy for the ball?" he asked in frustration.

Snape eyed him oddly. "You aren't serious–are you?"

"McGonagall insists I have a partner, if not a date." More angrily, Harry said, "This Ball is apparently a bit of a P.R. thing. The press has been invited as well to show, quote, how much things have returned to normal here."

"Harry," Snape said sharply. "You aren't being singled out and used, as you seem to be implying." Harry looked away at that, still fuming. Snape said stiffly, "Step out into the hallway there." He gestured with his hand. "And ask the next girl who comes along. She will most certainly say, 'yes'."

Harry dropped his gaze to the floor and flushed.

"What is the problem?" Snape asked harshly.

"I don't know," Harry mumbled.

"It is one ball, Potter. Not a commitment. Just a party. I think you are taking it too seriously. You are the single most famous individual in this school. Half the girls who already have dates would drop them if asked to go by you."

"I don't want to do that," Harry said stridently. He wondered fleetingly what Cho was doing now. Her last letter was months ago, she was probably busy. Harry asked, "You don't think McGonagall is using me?"

"I should hope not. If you feel that to be true, you should most certainly discuss it with her, as I am certain she would not want you believing it." Snape sounded as though his anger had solidified somehow.

Feeling worse than he did before coming here, Harry stood up to stalk out.

"Harry," Snape said in a less harsh tone. "I don't mean to be . . . unsympathetic to what you clearly believe is a dilemma, but you are making much too much out of this." At Harry's frown, he went on. "Pick a girl. Ask her. And you will be finished with it. There are literally hundreds of girls in this school, surely one of them will suffice for one evening."

Harry could hear in his tone that Snape truly was unsympathetic, but Harry wasn't looking for sympathy, he didn't think, just a way out. With a frown at the heat of anger that still burned in his chest, Harry departed.

Chapter 26.

The Christmas Ball

Harry studied in the library, in the far corner, mostly to avoid Hermione and anyone else who might see fit to remind him he needed a date. He had ten days; that was plenty of time. The previous night he had seriously considered owling Cho, but upon reviewing her last two letters, decided that she had dropped hints of an engagement that he had not picked up on before. He had also looked for Mirna at dinner last night and thought she looked down and teary-eyed, which reminded him of Cho in a bad way.

The whole thing made him angry with McGonagall again. He found himself wanting somewhat to get even.

He sat with his back to the corner, blocked in nicely by shelving and a plant. He was feeling sullen toward Snape and McGonagall, and maybe even Hermione and Ron. His Transfiguration text was not holding his attention. Even his usual method of forcing his attention on a subject, that of imagining himself needing some skill or knowledge as an Auror, wasn't working right now.

A group of students went by, talking in low tones about Quidditch. Harry recognized one of the tall, bulky Slytherin Beaters over the low shelf in front of him. Wereporridge was his name. Harry wondered that he could actually read. Then he heard a familiar high-pitched voice, lilting a bit so as to not sound too loud in the library.

Harry's brow went up as the seed of an idea germinated. What if their little Gryffindor hero took a Slytherin to the ball? he wondered. She most likely wasn't going already since third-years couldn't unless invited by an older student. The group sat down at a table, talking over a book. Harry tried to hear what they were saying, but couldn't.

Thinking that he would love to get this over with, Harry stood up and went over to them. Wereporridge gave him a very challenging look as Harry approached. "Can I talk to you for just a moment?" Harry asked Suze.

Wereporridge stood up at that. "What about?" he asked Harry as he towered over him.

"I suppose if I told you it wasn't any of your business, you probably wouldn't go for that," Harry sighed.

"You would suppose correctly," the other boy replied in a low voice.

Harry glanced at the other three; they looked a little alarmed by their fellow's behavior. If he were actually going to take her to the ball, he would have to be willing to have them know it. "I want to ask Suze to the ball," Harry explained to Wereporridge.

"You what?" One of the others asked in disbelief.

Wereporridge pushed his finger painfully into Harry's chest. "Why in the world would she go with a loser Gryffindor?" Harry glanced at Suze–she looked stunned and not much else. Wereporridge went on, shoving Harry with his hand now. "We don't mix with non-Slytherins, get away."

Peeved a little, Harry said, "I am the adopted son of your Head of House, you know."

Wereporridge blinked at that and looked a little concerned as he considered it. Harry ignored him and turned back to Suze. "Uh," Harry said, suddenly not sure the best way to proceed. "Think about it, I guess," he said to her still-stunned gaze. "Let me know."

As he walked back to his corner and picked up his books, he could hear their table whispering avidly. On his way out, he gave Suze a casual smile. At the door to the library he considered going back to the common room. At least if Hermione asked him if he had asked anyone, he could say he had.

In the corridor Suze caught up with him. "You weren't just teasing in there?" she asked.

"No," Harry answered stridently. "Why would I do that?"

"It wasn't just some Gryffindor practical joke?" she asked next.

Harry stared at her pale eyes, thinking that Snape had no clue how hard this was. His other backup plan, of pretending to invite someone from outside the school and then falling deathly ill the night of the ball from a potion he could cook up, was seeming

better all the time. "No," Harry replied, a little frustrated. Feeling like he should explain, he said, "I thought we'd have something to talk about. I discovered at the last ball, that matters more than I expected it to." It occurred to Harry then that she hadn't been in school during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. That, Merlin forbid, she might have learned he won it from a chocolate frog card.

He shrugged. "I really am asking you. And it is up to you," he restated.

Her eyes darted around the walls a moment. As though thinking aloud, she said, "I don't get to go otherwise and it sounds like fun. They don't hold them very often." She put her pale hands on her hips. "Why are you inviting me?" she asked curiously.

"I'll be honest with you," Harry said. "I have to invite someone. You are the first person I've asked because you are the first person who came to mind who isn't already dating someone, or who wouldn't be too giggly to spend an evening with."

She studied him long moment. "You are really Professor Snape's son?"

"Yes."

"That is so odd," she breathed. "All right-"

Harry held up his hand and interrupted her. "I feel compelled to warn you," he said. "The press are going to be there, since this ball is partly a show for the outside world." Her eyes narrowed at that. "So if you don't like that kind of attention, you aren't going to like going."

"Clearly, you do," she observed sarcastically.

Harry laughed. "I hate this whole thing. I'm trying to make the best of it," he rambled.

"You are telling me that the press are going to be taking pictures at the ball and that my mum and dad might pick up the Prophet at breakfast and see the two of us on the front page?" A strange crooked smile had formed on her face.

"If you view it that way, then you can probably survive the evening."

"Sounds like fun," she said earnestly.

"Oh, good," Harry breathed in relief. "Professor Snape thought I was pathetic for having such a difficult time finding a date. He was kind of angry even, although I shouldn't have asked to borrow his girlfriend."

"You what!" she blurted in shock.

"That probably was a mistake," Harry confirmed thoughtfully.

Suze doubled over laughing, then made herself stop with effort and dabbed her eyes, still chuckling occasionally. "I'll see you the night of the ball, then."

"I'll meet in you in the Entrance Hall at the bottom of the staircase," Harry said.

"'Til then," she said with an unfading smile.

Hermione actually held off on saying anything until four days before the ball. She wouldn't have needed to say anything if she had been able to correctly interpret the odd looks the Slytherins were always giving Harry as he and his friends went about their classes.

Examinations were starting in two days and he was panicking over his new understanding of the higher standard he had been put under in most of his subjects. He was buried in a textbook when she came over and leaned on the arms of the chair and put her nose close to his.

"I have a date," Harry said to her, cutting off her question.

"Who?" she asked, sounding like she might not believe him. Harry noticed others nearby stopping to listen to the answer.

"You'll see," Harry replied. "No one you know."

"Someone outside the school?"

"No. We have a lot in common. She thinks posing for the press will be fun, so I think I'll actually survive the evening."

Hermione breathed out loudly. "Well, that's good. Glad to hear it. I'm curious as Crookshanks, but I deserve the torture of not knowing, I think." She went back to studying with Ron and Neville.

Hermione wasn't the only one checking up on Harry. McGonagall called him up to her office the night before examinations started. When he opened the door, she immediately put down her quill and closed the large book she had been writing in. "Mr. Potter, come in," she invited.

Harry closed the door and stood before the desk. The room didn't look that different since she had taken over from Dumbledore. There were still a few of those mysterious balanced contraptions around, but the biggest difference was the shelves were cleared and held just a few rows of books and some glass sculptures.

"Did you find a partner for the ball?" she asked blatantly.

"Yes," Harry replied flatly.

"Good," she smiled. "Now you are going to be opening the ball–"

"Just me and my date?" Harry blurted.

She gave him a disapproving look. "You and the Head Boy and Girl. So three couples. We are opening with a waltz," she started, looking like maybe she was already at the ball in her mind. At Harry's alarmed expression, she returned to the present and said. "You don't know how to dance, do you, Harry?"

"No, Professor," Harry admitted, expecting her to change her mind about the whole plan.

She stood up. "You need to learn then," she said resolutely.

Harry dropped his head and said with the barest hint of a whine, "And I thought I was past all the things I was going to have to get over at this school."

When he looked up, she looked displeased. "This is one of the normal teenage things, Mr. Potter, getting over the awkwardness of asking a pretty girl to dance and then managing a reasonable facsimile of actually dancing with her. Lifelong torment by a powerful dark wizard bent on killing you is not a normal teenage thing to have to get over. You should be basking in this opportunity to be a normal young man for once."

She pulled out her wand and tapped the sculpture of a swan behind her. It began spinning and playing a song like a music box, although it sounded much better than a Muggle one. When she stepped around the desk and stood before him, Harry gave in, mostly because he was afraid he had offended her with his comment, which he really hadn't meant to do.

She took his hands, placed them, and then counted to the music. On the third round of counting, she stepped backward, pulling him with her. After four bars he finally had a vague hang of it. After ten he thought it was actually pretty easy. They began turning as the music continued. "Around the dance floor counter clockwise. Got it?"

Harry nodded, forcing himself to not look at his feet.

"You're a natural, Harry," she said. Then she laughed lightly at his expression of disbelief. She finally released him and stepped back to the swan. "One more. My favorite is swing."

End of term examinations left Harry a wreck, but he was hopeful that he had done all right. Everyone else, even Hermione, seemed strung out by them, so at least he was in good company.

The evening of the ball was the evening before everyone left for holiday. After his last examination, he pulled out his dress robes and took them to Hermione for a quick flattening charm, which she did before handing them back.

"I'd tell you to do it yourself, but you look so pathetic," she said. "I hope your date realizes how determined you are to not have a good time," she said evenly.

"I told her I hated the whole notion of it, so 'yes'," Harry replied in a put-off tone.

"My goodness," Hermione said. "You aren't taking a Slytherin are you?" she teased him.

Harry gave her a very sly grin.

"Ah," she breathed in audibly. "Harry!" She hit him on the arm. "No wonder no one knows who it is. I can't believe you."

"Hey, it wasn't easy. I had to argue that I was an honorary Slytherin because of Severus to even get a chance to ask."

"I can imagine. They are pretty insular when it comes to dating. And everything else." She held the robes up against him. "Put those on and come back down," she commanded him. Others were congregating in the common room as well, getting hair styled and exchanging jewelry and scarves.

Harry slipped back up to the dormitory and did so. When he came back down, she looked him over appraisingly, tugging on the shoulders and the cuffs. "Okay. Just fits. You look good. Although . . . you might try to do something with your hair," she said critically.

"I was," Harry retorted, a little offended. He went back up to the dormitory for his kit. He espied his watch on the side table and slipped it into his pocket. In the toilet it was crowded with boys all trying to improve their appearance. Harry wetted his hair down and combed it repeatedly until it dried. It looked a little better as a result. He combed it carefully one more time when he got a chance at the mirror.

"Why are you always hiding your scar under your fringe?" Dean asked him from the next sink over.

Harry stared at his friend in the mirror. "'Cause I don't like to see it, so I don't expect anyone else to," Harry replied. He combed his hair apart, revealing it completely. "It's

the first thing everyone looks at when they meet me, like there's no more to me than that." He squinted and leaned into the mirror, rubbing the jagged scar with his finger. Mystified, he whispered, "I think it's fading."

Half the boys in the room stopped what they were doing and turned to him.

"Do you think so?" Harry asked Dean, leaning toward his friend.

"Maybe," Dean answered. "It looks flatter, maybe. Not so carved into your skin like it used to. Though I have to admit, I don't pay that much attention to it."

As Harry turned back to the mirror to comb his fringe forward again, Dean said, "Who are you going with tonight?"

"You'll see," Harry breathed airily, glad to have something else to think about.

Right on time, Harry reached the top of the staircase. As he had walked to the Entrance Hall, he had passed many transformed female classmates and had really started to wonder, and worry a bit, what Suze was going to look like. His date for the evening stood by the curl in the railing at the bottom of the steps, looking pretty much herself except for the stylish slate grey robes she wore that made her skin look much warmer than normal. She had a sparkling tie loose in her long white hair.

As Harry considered the crowd from his high perch, he noticed Professor Snape eyeing Suze and starting through the crowd toward her. Harry hesitated, curious. Snape asked her something and she gestured as she replied. Harry headed down to them, thinking Snape might be challenging her being there as a third-year.

"Severus," Harry said in greeting. "Suze." He offered her his arm. As he did so he received such a priceless look of surprise from Snape, he almost broke out laughing. "I'll see you inside, sir," Harry said evenly with a broad grin.

The Great Hall was laid out with round tables each with a floating horizontal wreath full of candles. Harry led Suze to the center of the floor where they stopped to admire the decorations. Monstrous pine trees sparkled from each corner, fairies flickering among their branches carrying little colored lanterns.

McGonagall stepped up to them. "Mr. Potter," she said. Her eyes flicked down to Suze. "Ms. Zepher," she said without missing a beat. Harry was a little disappointed in her reaction. "You are at the head table there," she pointed at the large oval table at the front of the hall where the platform normally sat but had been removed.

As the headmistress stepped away, Suze said, "Cool."

Harry turned to her and gauged that she was taller than his shoulder, which was higher than he remembered. "Did you use a height charm or potion or something?" Harry asked.

She pulled at the knee of her robe and stuck out her left foot to reveal matching glittery shoes with thick, thick soles–at least five inches thick. They must be heavy. "You are walking really well in those," Harry commented. "But you didn't have to wear them." When she looked up at him curiously, he went on, "It will make it easier to dance, but you shouldn't worry about being yourself."

She blinked at that, apparently trying to take it in. Harry shrugged and led the way to the head table where Hermione and Ron were already standing, watching them in surprise. Ron gaped at them, but Hermione held out her hand to Suze and introduced herself. Hermione was dressed in blazing red with long red gloves that stretched above her elbows.

"That's a shy outfit," Harry said.

Ron gave him a look of dismay and quickly looked away to avoid having it be seen by their mutual friend. "I've decided red is my favorite color," Hermione said happily.

Justin and Lavender stepped over. "Is she with you?" Justin asked of Suze. At Harry's nod, he asked, "Aren't you the Slytherin Seeker?"

"Yes," Suze replied in a voice that said, if you are making something of it, be prepared .

"Oh," Justin said, glancing oddly at Harry who smiled sweetly in return.

They moved behind their table as the hall began to fill. The headmistress and the four Heads of House also joined the head table. Harry took a seat near the middle, was actually herded there by the headmistress. As he held the chair out for Suze, he received another sharp look from Snape. Ignoring it, Harry sat down and watched the amassed students arranging their seating. Finally, when everyone was seated and the sound of movement quieted, Professor McGonagall leaned over to the students at the table and said, "Everyone ready?" At the resulting general nodding and shrugging, she stood up and clinked her goblet for attention.

"Welcome. I hope everyone enjoys this evening as much as I intend to. After the feast there will be a quintet providing music for dancing. I do hope you all have a wonderful holiday and return to us whole and safe in the new year. But for now, let's eat."

Harry picked up the menu on his plate and said, "Duck." A plate of duck, potatoes and little carrots materialized before him. Suze shifted in her seat and peered at the menu before ordering lamb. When it arrived, he gave her a smile, which he was glad to see made her relax.

Chapter 26

During the long dinner, Harry lost his date to Ron when his friend asked Suze which Quidditch team she followed and she replied Falmouth. What ensued was a frighteningly detailed discussion of defense tactics. Harry shared an amusingly dismayed look with Hermione over their dates' bent heads and gesturing fingers.

Harry turned instead to the headmistress who looked as though she was enjoying her job of presiding. "Professor," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter," she returned. "Having a good time?"

"Mostly it's been dinner," Harry pointed out as a Prophet photographer moved in and took a few photographs. Harry ignored him.

"Ah, just wait," she said. "I love balls. The music. The movement of the couples on the floor."

"I got that sense, ma'am," Harry said in a slightly suffering tone.

She looked out over the murmuring crowd and sighed. "I think I'm going to miss you when you are gone, Harry."

Harry wondered at that comment, since he was trying to be a bit difficult. "I'm not going far."

Her lips twitched. "I suppose not."

Harry turned back to Suze. She said, "I'm sorry, I should be talking to you, not your friend."

"That's okay. Catching the headmistress after . . ." Harry leaned forward to peek into McGonagall's goblet. " . . . a bit of mead is always an interesting experience."

Suze giggled, but not in an annoying way. Their plates vanished and the lights dimmed except for the fairy lights that hung in a square around the area designated for dancing.

McGonagall stood with a sweeping motion of her arm. The students at the head table stood as well when they noticed. "Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, inviting him to lead. Snape gave them a dark look as they collected themselves. Harry held his arm out to Suze, who accepted it with high decorum. He gave Snape a look back that he hoped said, you said to ask anyone . The look he received in answer he could have interpreted as, don't try anything , but Harry couldn't imagine that was what it meant.

They stepped off the platform, passing the quintet of string musicians who now sat on a platform beside the dance floor. As he watched Ron positioning his arms with Hermione, he wondered where they had learned to dance.

"I hope you can dance," Harry said. "I just learned two days ago."

"My mum sent me to ballet for five years. Thought it would make me grow taller," she replied.

The music started and Harry managed to remember the correct foot to start with. After that it flowed smoothly. "You're not bad," she commented.

Harry watched the photographer as he crouched to take a photo of Justin and Lavender. "I hate to admit it, but the headmistress had to teach me," Harry confessed.

Suze grinned. The photographer came over to them. Harry danced without turning until he finished. Suze smiled nicely for each shot. In comparison, Harry wondered if he would look glum.

At the end of the first piece, McGonagall swept past. "Careful, my boy, you look like you might be having fun."

"So what are you doing after Hogwarts?" Suze asked when the headmistress was out of range.

"I'm going to try to get into the Auror's program," Harry said. "If that doesn't work, I'm not sure." The next song started up and more couples came onto the floor. "How about you?"

"Me?" she asked in surprise. "I'd love to play Quidditch. My mum is an actuary, and my dad is a spell developer. They aren't so keen on sports as a profession."

"Your dad's a what?" Harry asked. "I've never heard of that. Who does he work for?"

"A publisher of spell books called Yuring Press. The second largest. He also does research to figure out old spells that have been forgotten. He goes to estate sales of old families and looks for forgotten books or even notebooks and diaries. He found two rare books at the Black estate, for example. Kept him busy for over a year."

Harry stopped dead at that.

"What is it?" she asked in alarm.

Harry shook his head and found the pace of the song again with his feet. "Nothing. Just remembering. That's not usually a good thing for me," he quipped darkly.

As Suze glanced over her shoulder at the head table, she asked in concern, "Do you think Professor Snape is upset with me?"

"No, why would he be?"

"I'm worried about that look he gave us earlier," she said. She really did sound worried, making Harry realize that even a student with two normal parents could crave approval from another adult.

"That look was for me. Trust me," he said reassuringly.

After that song, they sat back at the head table. The teachers were there, talking amongst themselves. Rita Skeeter stepped over and crouched between Harry's and Suze's chairs. "Hello, Harry," she said in a falsely friendly tone.

"Ms. Skeeter."

"And who is your lovely date?"

"This is Suze Zepher," Harry said. Suze held out her hand to Skeeter, who shook it while appraising the girl. "Suze is Seeker on the Slytherin team. She is going to be a professional Quidditch player," Harry provided. Skeeter grudgingly jotted that down. "Maybe ask her who she is hoping to play for," Harry said levelly. Suze's eyes went wide.

"What do I get in return?" Skeeter asked quietly, glancing at the teachers who were keeping a casual-appearing eye on the proceedings. She watched Harry think that over. "Do you have anything right now I might want?" she asked a little snidely.

"Lots. Nothing I want to give up. Give me a topic."

"The last set of D.E. that were caught. That seemed fishy. The releases and interviews from the Ministry didn't jib."

"I'll anonymously confirm that was fishy," Harry returned quietly.

"Off the record?" she prompted.

"I don't want you to print the truth," Harry stated calmly.

"So much for inheriting Dumbledore's mantle," she said sarcastically.

"I wouldn't want it anyway," Harry came back.

"So of the five, three were killed. Tell me how."

Harry turned a bit so he was facing her better in case the teachers could read lips. "Rookwood fell down the stairs after a binding curse and broke his neck. Mulciber got in the way of Malfoy's Killing Curse. Pettigrew killed himself when the Aurors showed up. He'd hoped it would be me." Harry knew that only the last was official.

"Okay," Skeeter said. "Ms. Zepher, who would you like to play for?" she asked, back to her friendly tone.

Suze's jaw fell open and she pulled it closed again when Harry winked at her. "Falmouth. They are my favorite team. I like their defensive strategies."

Skeeter jotted that down. "I do something for you, Potter. . . you end up owing me more."

"I realize that," Harry said blandly. "A delay would be nice."

"I'm good at what I do," Skeeter snapped at him as she closed her notebook the quill pinched between the pages.

When she was gone, Suze started to speak. Harry stood and invited her back out on the dance floor where they could talk out of range of prying ears. "Thanks for that," she said. "How did you know all that?"

"Because the D.E. were all after me when they were caught. The binding curse was mine and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid Lucius Malfoy's Avada Kedavra."

She gaped. "You say that so calmly. Guess you could be an Auror."

"I don't know what else I'd do."

They danced another song. Harry noticed Hermione looked like she was thinking of switching partners. Next one , he mouthed at her. She nodded.

"So you haven't asked the obvious question," Suze said a little put-upon.

"What would that be?"

She gave him a dark look. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked in annoyance. "Why I look this way?"

"It's just the way you are," Harry said. From anyone else that might have sounded stupid. She blinked at him as though assessing that. "Is it a wizard thing?" Harry asked.

"Of course."

"You have to understand–I was raised a Muggle," he explained.

"Really?" she asked. At his nod, she said, "Then maybe you don't know what Triptendora is." He shook his head. She went on, "It is also called Wizard Measles. It is easy to treat but if you get it as an infant and it isn't treated in time . . . you end up with no color and very short."

After a moment, Harry said, "So your parents weren't very smart, I guess."

"That's just it–they're very smart. I don't know what their problem was," she said sharply.

"They mean well most of the time?"

"They mean well all of the time. Makes me crazy. They are perfectionists like you wouldn't believe."

They passed the head table in silence. After passing the quintet, Harry said. "You probably remind them of their failure. Through no fault of your own," he added quickly. "That would make them hard to live with I can imagine."

"I hadn't thought of that." She blinked at him in surprise. After a pause, she asked, "What do I do about it?"

He shrugged. "Live with it. Tolerate their craziness." At her doubtful look, he said, "I was raised by my magic-hating aunt and uncle who lied about how my parents died, kept me locked in a broom cupboard until I was eleven, and barely fed me enough to stay alive. That's why I am small for my age."

"You're serious, aren't you?" she asked warily.

With long-suffering humor, he said, "Why is it when I tell people about myself, they assume I'm making it up?"

She giggled then apologized for it.

Harry said, "Well-meaning would go a long way in my view of parenting."

The evening ended with one last waltz. Ginny had cut in on his dancing with Padma the song before. Harry insisted they both switch back to their original partners for it. Suze still seemed as chipper as when the evening had started. Harry wondered at that–he was exhausted. "Hope you had an okay time," he said, stifling a yawn.

"I did. I hope they have a few more of these while I'm in school."

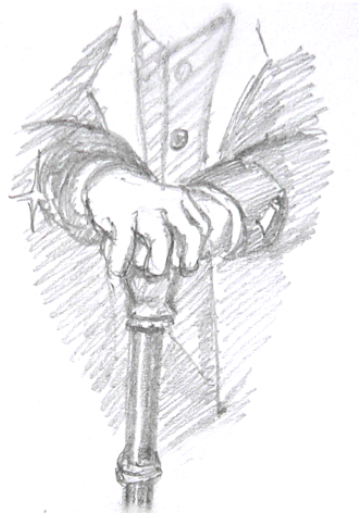
"Tell McGonagall. She loves them too."

"Cool."

As the song ended, Harry bent down and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for coming with me."

She ducked her head and giggled. "Thanks for the invitation," she returned with a grin.

Chapter 27.



Holiday Blues

The train left Hogsmeade right on schedule the next morning. Harry had gone down to the platform with the rest of the students and he waved Ron and Hermione off as the train chugged away. They both shouted, "Merry Christmas!" to him out the window, making Harry realize that Ron must have finally accepted things at some point without Harry noticing.

Hogsmeade lay quiet as Harry wandered up the street to Puddifoots where he had tea and a scone. Six months to go, he thought. He envied Suze her upcoming years here. His friends would think he was a nutter for that; they were all so eager to leave. But he had missed a lot over the last six years, he was begining to realize. Being tormented by Voldemort had cheated him out of things, like getting to know most of his classmates. Getting through a year without something suspicious and tragic happening had been impossible and had left him with only stolen moments of enjoyment.

Harry paid for the tea and stepped back out into the crisp air. He strolled slowly back to the castle through a light dusting of snow. The Entrance Hall and the Great

Hall were empty and echoing too much, so Harry wandered up to the Defense office in search of company. The door was open and Snape was packing books from the shelf behind his desk into a small trunk.

Snape glanced up at him and said, "I am caught up with grading, so we can leave shortly."

Harry was looking forward to Christmas with mixed expectations. "Whenever you're ready."

"You appear to have survived the ball," Snape commented as he compared the spines of two books.

"It was all right," Harry said as he leaned casually against the doorframe. In the window snow lay in little ridges on the sash, haloed by ice crystals.

Snape raised his dark eyes from the books. "Interesting choice of date."

Harry chewed his lip. "You did say . . . "

"Yes, I did. It was unexpected, nonetheless, but you seem to have handled it appropriately, in the end."

Harry crossed his arms and leaned harder on the doorframe. "Why wouldn't I have?" he asked, sensing that he was wading into something murky.

Snape selected one of the books in his hands for the trunk. "As you yourself said: I do look out for my students," he stated.

Something inside of Harry shifted and he didn't like the feel of it. He tried to pin down the squirming thing. "As opposed to me," he heard himself say.

Snape set the book he had just pulled out onto the desk. His eyes narrowed as his head tilted to the side. "In this, I do not expect you to need it."

Harry considered that, before he pushed himself straight. He didn't feel like arguing over something he wasn't clear on himself. "Let me know when you're ready. I'll be in the tower," he said before walking away.

The next morning in the Zepher household, Suze rubbed her eyes and sat down to breakfast. Her mother had woken her early to eat with them. Even though it was

not a work day, both her parents were dressed well and sitting properly, her mother with her pinky extended as she gripped her teacup.

"How did your examinations go?" her father asked, sounding not too confident of the answer.

"All right," Suze replied, feeling defiant but working hard to keep it out of her voice.

"Hm," her father said in a "we'll see" kind of way.

Suze frowned and buttered her toast rather than get into anything. They acted like she didn't try at all.

"Wurther's called a meeting for this afternoon," her mother announced to her father from behind the orange-tinted Financial Times . "I'll pick up your robes on the way back."

Suze wondered if her parents had ever been interesting people who went to balls. She propped her chin on her hand and remembered yesterday evening while munching her toast. It seemed even more fun in retrospect than it had at the time, and Harry had been much nicer than she had imagined. She sighed a bit as she cracked her egg with her butter knife. They had rotated around the Hall so many times she could still feel the movement this morning.

Hope I can live down being at the ball with a Gryffindor , Suze had commented when she had felt a little more at ease.

I'll tell you a secret , Harry had said. The Sorting Hat tried to put me in Slytherin, but I made it change its mind.

She had laughed very hard at that notion, and without thinking had said, You are the very picture of Gryffindor. I hear they're going to replace the lion with your face. This was a rephrasing of a snide Slytherin comment and she had immediately wished to retract it.

He had made a noise as though she had mortally wounded him, then laughed. Merlin, I hope not , he had said, not angry at all.

"Are your school supplies all set?" her mother asked sternly, interrupting her pleasant reverie. "Make a list if you need anything. I'll get things today but I don't want to have to go out again before the holidays." Her tone indicated impatience held over from past times when Suze had forgotten things.

Suze got up and made the list right then. She bit her tongue as she handed it over, and her mother took it without comment, wearing a serious expression. By the time Suze returned to it, her egg was cold. She ate it anyway.

Chapter 27

A scratching at the window announced the post owl, so her mother pointed her wand over her shoulder to open it. The owl dropped the paper, picked up a sickle in its beak from a small bowl on the table, and flew off again. The window closed itself after the owl left.

Suze watched, barely breathing, as her father unrolled the Prophet . He read the headlines and then flipped it to unfold it. On the front page was a photo from the ball. It showed Harry on the left talking to the headmistress as Professors Snape and Sprout looked on with polite attentiveness. She was cut off; not even a hint of sleeve showing. Suze sighed as she squinted to read the headline and the first part of the article before the paper moved. It was boring stuff about how things were completely normal at Hogwarts. Or as normal as they ever were, as McGonagall was quoted. Pages rustled as her parents read. Suze heated a piece of toast from the bread basket with her wand and buttered it.

Being a professional Quidditch player sounds like fun , Harry had said.

I don't know what else I would do , she had returned, echoing his earlier comment.

Just keep getting a little better all the time. You don't have far to go from what I can see. She replayed that in her mind a few times, pinning dangerous hope on it–hope that would not have come from anyone else's opinion.

Her father's confused voice said, "Isn't this you?" He folded the paper around, then folded it in half again before laying it on the table for her to see. Down the right-hand column was a rather nice picture of the two of them dancing. They were swaying to the music and Harry was talking silently. "Isn't that Harry Potter?" her father asked in near utter confusion.

"Yeah," Suze replied as casually as possible. "Harry asked me to the ball," she stated as though it happened everyday.

Her mum put the Times down and leaned over to look. She grabbed up the paper in a sudden motion and read out the caption, " Harry Potter and Suze Zepher enjoying the Hogwarts Christmas Ball. I didn't know you knew Harry Potter," she said in surprise.

Suze shrugged. "He's the Gryffindor Seeker."

"We know that," her father said. "But isn't he a seventh-year?"

"We just went as friends, Dad," she said, borrowing one of their tones.

"I didn't mean that," he said, "I'm just surprised you got to know him that well."

"We had a good match–we talked about it afterwards. That's how we got to know each other," she felt compelled to explain. They rarely asked her about her friends or her playing, even though they seemed to follow the school's Quidditch matches rather closely.

"Slytherin lost that match," her father pointed out.

A little miffed, she said, "Yes, but Potter ended up in the hospital wing overnight."

"You put Harry Potter in the dispensary?" her mother asked, appalled.

"One of the Beaters did. Potter got knocked into a tower by a Bludger and despite bleeding like crazy, he wouldn't quit. He passed out from lack of blood right after catching the Snitch and fell about sixteen feet." In a darkly determined voice, she added, "I was so close to beating him to it."

Her parents appeared startled by this speech.

"You should come to the matches more often," Suze commented levelly.

"All right. From now on we'll try to do that," her mother said. Suze couldn't tell if she were really excited by the notion or thought it would make it easier to keep tabs on their daughter.

Diagon Alley was decorated up for Christmas: wreaths with twinkling miniature lanterns hung on each lamp post, house-elves in green and red costume tossed glittering dust on passers-by. A dusting of snow lightened the scene and neatly covered the grime.

Harry went to Gringott's first. As he waited behind a hunchback, a family with four misbehaving small children, and a hag, for a goblin to take him to his vault, he tried to estimate what his list was going to cost. It was at least fifty or sixty galleons, he thought. Once he got to his vault, this seemed like an extravagant amount given his dwindling piles of coins. But he reassured himself with the thought that even after he filled his sack, he would still make it through the school year.

Back out on the road, Harry headed first for the Quidditch supply store. He had only yesterday thought of what to get Ron, and if it were going to work out, he would have to act fast as there were only seven days until Christmas. At the shop he purchased an authentic Chudley Canons cloak, cringing a bit at that much orange fabric in a

single garment. The stitching on the logo was nice, though, unlike the cheap versions he had sometimes seen.

He folded it up tightly and took it immediately to the Post. He had already written the letter out, which he took out to reread as he waited in queue. The letter was basically a plea for the team to autograph the cloak. Harry had not missed the look Ron had given the Bulgarian bat at Harry's birthday party. He hoped his own personal request would be enough to get the cloak back signed in time for gift-giving. He suspected with chagrin that it would be, and felt a little uneasy about doing this at all, but he had not thought of anything better and was desperate.

With the cloak owled off to the team captain, Harry went back down to the bookstore. He perused the recent arrivals, looking for anything Hermione or Snape might appreciate. He pushed through the crowd to move around the table and picked up a new book on advanced counter curses and flipped it open to read a few random pages. Beyond the book, his eye was caught by the sight of a silver-tipped cane tapping along the floor as someone approached.

Startled a bit, Harry raised his eyes. A greying, portly man in a fine, three-piece suit and satin-lined cloak approached, but unlike Malfoy, this man seemed to need the cane since he kept it close beside his right leg as he walked.

"Hm," the man said as he stopped a polite distance away. "You must be Mr. Potter." His voice was deep and rolling.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, wondering if he should know this man.

After a pause the man said as though it were a point of information, "I am Alfred Freelander."

Harry froze but recovered quickly and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said honestly.

The man's grey eyes looked Harry over. "You look to be doing well, Mr. Potter."

A witch pushed her way behind Harry, nearly losing her hat. "I'm doing all right, sir," he acknowledged. Then thinking quickly, added, "I did appreciate your offer, sir."

Freelander smiled faintly at that. "I wonder . . . would you be willing to grace my table with your presence, on Boxing Day?"

Harry hesitated only an instant. "I'd be honored, sir."

"I'll have an invitation sent to you then. Do you have a card?"

"No," Harry admitted, laughing lightly at that notion. From his knapsack he pulled out a parchment and never-out quill. He wrote out his address and handed it over.

"Shrewsthorpe," Freelander read from it. "You are very close by, indeed. My estate is in Riverden, just two towns over." He gave Harry a polite smile. "I look forward to your visit," he said and gave Harry a small bow of the head.

"So do I, sir," Harry managed to remember to say.

Harry carried his haul back to the house and immediately took it to his room. He realized now that he was going to have to get more wrapping paper, but he had a few days to manage that. The evening felt very quiet in comparison to being at Hogwarts or even shopping. The fire in the dining room hearth made the room comfortable as they sat down to dinner.

"One term down," Harry commented, finding himself falling into this countdown.

Snape raised his head and pushed his hair back from one side. "Looking forward to finishing?"

"Yes and no," Harry replied honestly. He felt like he should, since every other student was, but he also resisted the thought of moving on, since it was all he knew.

"How did your examinations go?" Snape asked.

"Pretty good, I think. You haven't finished grading the Defense ones yet?"

"Not quite."

Harry frowned as he reconsidered. "Are you really grading me twice as hard as the other students?"

"Yes."

Flustered, Harry mumbled, "I might not have done so well, then."

A platter of roast mutton appeared, covered in sauce, it smelled wonderful. As he served himself, Harry complained, "Geesh, Greer is doing that too, I know, and the other day I suspected McGonagall of it as well. I think my grades are in trouble."

Snape smiled a little slyly as he accepted the serving spoons when Harry finished with them. Harry shook his head and sighed, prompting Snape to say, "All that matters at this point are your N.E.W.T.s."

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry breathed, not feeling much better about that.

An owl arrived late as they were enjoying a bit of chocolate cake. Harry accepted the creamy white envelope and the aged bird took off again.

"What is that?" Snape asked curiously.

"An invitation to dinner, I expect," Harry said. The card-shaped envelope was addressed to Harry Potter & Guest . He tugged the wax seal open and took out the card which had a message written upon it in gold flowing script. Boxing Day dinner at seven o'clock was the summary of its lengthy prose.

Snape was examining the seal on the envelope with a lowered brow. Harry handed him the card as well and retook his seat. "You knew this invitation was coming?" Snape asked.

Harry lifted a shoulder. "I ran into Lord Freelander in Diagon Alley yesterday," he replied casually.

Snape stared at him. "This is a rather highbrow event, Harry."

"So . . . dress robes, you are saying?"

"At the very least."

A few days later, Harry woke to a surprise breakfast guest. Sitting at the table looking mussed and casual as though she might have spent the night, was Candide. Harry hoped he covered his uncertainty quickly enough as he sat farther down the table than normal, across from an empty chair.

Breakfast arrived and she asked in a friendly tone, "How did your term go?"

"Well enough," Harry replied, grateful that he could occupy himself with eating rather than conversation.

He ate and listened to them talk about everything from Ministry politics to gossip about her officemates. When he finished, Harry rose from the table, picked up his cup of coffee, and mumbled that he wanted to get his holiday assignments out of the way. The pair nodded at him as he departed.

In his room Harry buried himself in his schoolwork, starting with his Potions assignment. At lunchtime he was called down to eat. Harry took his Transfiguration

textbook with him. It was his weakest subject, and looking over his essay grades from the previous term made him think McGonagall believed so too. At the table he opened the book before him like a suit of armor. He was aware of Snape's eyes passing over him, but his guardian didn't chastise him for being unsociably occupied.

During the afternoon, Harry spent an hour or two reading in the window of his room, sitting on his trunk. He found himself hoping the girl in the yellow slicker would walk by, although he couldn't decide whether he would run down and try to introduce himself or not. She would probably be wearing a different coat in the winter, but he thought he would still recognize her.

He didn't need to decide, as she didn't pass by while he was waiting.

Harry did not bring a book down to dinner because he simply could not study any longer. He found Snape and Candide playing a card game with Harry's wizard pack while they waited for Winky to serve. They were drinking something in little metal cups, and Candide was laughing much more than usual.

Dinner materialized. Harry, not feeling particularly hungry, picked at his plate in a desultory fashion. Candide tried gregariously to involve him in the conversation.

"So, Harry," she said, "How much longer do you think the Minister of Magic can ride the popularity he gained when Voldemort was defeated? He's waiting a long time to call an election."

Flatly, Harry replied, "I don't read the political items in the Prophet ."

In a slightly snide tone, Snape explained, "He doesn't like to read about himself–you must understand."

"Lucky for you," Harry said levelly, "nothing shows up in the Prophet about you."

Had Candide not been sitting across from them both, this comment would have garnered a very different reaction. As it was, Snape simply peered down his nose at him, shoulders stiff. Candide said, "There was that nice picture of you dancing with someone the other day. You didn't even see that?"

Harry shook his head.

At the conclusion of the meal, Harry tried to use the excuse of assignments to get away, but Candide urged him strongly to join in some three-person game she wished to play.

"I've never played card games with more than one person," Harry explained in an apologetic way.

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"Perhaps it is time you learned," Snape said in one of his more insistent on obedience tones.

Harry retook his seat, trying to not appear too much as though he were giving in. He listened politely to the rules of the game and the random strategy hints she proceeded to impart. After the deal, Harry picked up the nine cards before him and sorted them as instructed.

After several rounds and many corrections he finally had a basic sense of the strategy. He couldn't win a hand, though, but he did manage to prevent Candide from winning one with a lucky play. "Figures you two would gang up," she commented as she collected the cards to redeal.

At ten, when he could reasonably do so, Harry claimed he was too tired to continue and this got him out of a new game that was about to be introduced.

The following morning, only Snape was in the dining room, having a coffee. Harry sat across from him, glad to have a quiet breakfast. Breakfast failed to appear though, and Harry was forced by boredom to read some of the paper. As he was turning to page two, footsteps sounded behind him and Candide shuffled in, looking in dire need of coffee. Harry froze, then pulled the paper up before him to hide his reaction, which was more severe than expected.

When he had his expression under control, Harry lowered the paper and folded it casually beside his plate. "Good morning," he managed in return to her greeting. Not feeling social enough for this, he ate fast and left for his room.

Harry paced for a minute before pulling out a quill and parchment to write to Hermione. After the basic greetings and hopes that her holiday was going well, he stalled. Candide has moved in, he considered writing, but it sounded so odd. Candide has been visiting , he wrote instead. Whatever generosity he had felt toward her had dissipated utterly. He wondered at that, reminding himself that he had been determined not to allow it to slip away completely.

I've been learning to play cards, he added. Certainly Snape deserved someone, he thought, remembering the real regret he had expressed when she had broken it off. Snape had used him to make some kind of point with her, but Harry could only guess what the point had been, exactly.

He finished the letter with meaningless chatter, folded it up, and attached it to her present. Hedwig came to the window from the neighbor's pine when Harry opened it. She flew off again, willingly carrying the thick book and light letter.

Harry didn't sleep well that night, which was becoming a trend during this break. He woke several times with bad dreams but did not want to ask for potion, if only because it would mean interrupting both of their sleep, at the least. At worst Snape would want to know what he was dreaming about, and he wanted to keep to himself his queer dreams of being left behind.

The next afternoon, a Christmas tree appeared in the main hall. Not a large one; one that in fact had the look of the last chicken in the shop, but it was decorated with an array of interesting glittery spells, one of which made the branches themselves glow green intermittently. A few presents were under it already for him from Anita, Dobby, Gretta and Shazor. There was also one for Snape, presumably from Candide, as it was not signed. Harry thought of fetching his gifts, but realized that he had not bought anything for Candide, so he didn't. He had had no notion before that moment that he might need one and didn't, in any event, have any idea what he might get her.

Harry fetched his books instead and went to the library to study until dinner.

"It's really sweet," Candide said in a playful tone, leaning in the doorway of the drawing room where Snape sat making notes from a textbook.

"What is?" he asked in a very doubtful tone.

"Harry's fallen asleep over his book in the library," she said with a grin.

Snape stood suddenly and stalked past her with purpose. At the door to the library he stopped and surveyed the scene. Harry was slumped over the small desk, his head pillowed on what appeared to be his History of Magic textbook. Snape, with angry motions, stepped in and started to close the French doors, but paused to say, "If you'll excuse us for a moment." He shut the doors on Candide's concerned face.

Snape stepped over to the desk. "Potter," he said sharply. Harry jumped awake and rubbed his eyes. Snape demanded, "You are not sleeping properly?"

Harry frowned but didn't reply. He closed his textbook, the pages had become rippled from the moist heat of his face. Snape said, "Go up to your room. You have two hours before dinner to get a little sleep."

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Harry stacked his history book with the others and, scratching his head, left the room. In the hall he encountered Candide, who looked curiously at him. Tired, he turned away mutely and went up the stairs to his room.

In what felt like minutes after he put his head on the pillow, a sharp rap sounded on the door to his room. He assumed it meant dinner and forced himself with effort to sit up.

Dinner was very quiet and even a little tense. Harry waited after finishing his plate for tea to be served. He really needed to spend more time on his assignment for McGonagall. Before the holiday, he had had a notion of rereading the textbook carefully from start to finish, and he had not given up on doing so yet, but he would need some serious tea to even consider working on that this evening.

That night in his room, Harry read Transfiguration until he could not keep his eyes from falling closed at each new sentence. Eyes aching, he put the book aside and turned down the lamp before flopping onto his pillow.

At midnight, in the bedroom at the other end of the balcony, Snape sat up. "I should check on him," he said after exhaling loudly.

Carefully, Candide said, "You were a little harsh with him earlier . . . "

Snape huffed again. "Harry periodically has difficulty sleeping but I only find out when he becomes narcoleptic," he explained impatiently as he pulled on a pair of slippers and a dressing gown.

Harry rolled over when he heard the door latch click open. "Still awake?" Snape asked. When Harry didn't respond, Snape stepped over to the bed and stood beside it. "Are you having nightmares?" he asked factually. When Harry shrugged, Snape said, "Why didn't you say?"

All Harry could think of to do was to shrug again, so he did nothing.

"What is in your nightmares?" Snape asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied. After a pause he added, "There aren't any shadows or anything," in a slightly desperate tone. He really did not want to talk about it.

Snape stood silently for a while in thought before sitting on the edge of the bed. "You have had a nightmare already tonight?" At Harry's reluctant nod, he said, "What was in this dream?"

"I don't want to say," Harry repeated tiredly. "It's a stupid dream."

"If it is keeping you up for days at a time, it cannot be insignificant," Snape pointed out. "Where were you in the dream?" Snape asked in a quiet, yet demanding tone.

Harry sighed in frustration. He really wanted to be left alone to try to sleep. "In the ocean," he finally replied reluctantly.

" In the ocean; doing what?"

"Swimming. Treading water. I've fallen overboard," Harry admitted sadly.

They both sat still for a long moment before Harry continued, "No one notices. No one on the boat notices," he clarified. In his mind he could see the vision from the dream of Snape, Candide and formless others laughing and drinking, unable to hear his calls. He frowned. "It's a stupid dream," he repeated, finally turning to look at his guardian.

Snape eyed him a moment in surprise before bending over to rest his forehead on his palm. His hair fell around his face. "Harry, you are not being pushed aside, or abandoned," he stated forcefully.

"I know that," Harry retorted in a difficult tone. "I said it was dumb," Harry insisted, feeling an ache of uneasiness despite his assertion.

Snape rubbed his eyebrow. "Do you have potion?" he asked.

"I don't want any," Harry said stiffly.

"You wish to continue to fall asleep while studying? Shall we expect you to fall asleep during meals now as well?" Snape asked facetiously.

Stung, Harry rolled away, curling his legs up a bit and ducking his head. He wanted to just tell his guardian to go away, but he could not quite bring himself to do it. He ignored him instead.

Snape sat in silence for a long minute before standing to leave. Back in his room, Candide asked if everything was all right. "He is having nightmares," Snape said. "A not uncommon occurrence with him," he added as he turned the lamp down.

At three in the morning, Snape found himself still lying awake. He rose with cautious movements to check on the boy again. Harry actually seemed to be asleep this time, Snape discovered with relief. Although, the duvet was crooked on the bed, implying that he had not been sleeping undisturbed. Snape moved to straighten it and found that Harry's hand was clutching it. Pulling it free drew a noise of complaint from the sleeping form, so he hesitated straightening it farther. With a start Harry woke up

and immediately rolled away again onto his side, tugging the duvet around himself tightly.

At five in the morning, Snape again rose to check on him, strongly compelled to do so. Harry was sitting in the window this time, staring out of a pane that had the frost cleared from it. He was sitting on his trunk, wrapped in the duvet from the bed. The fire burned high in the hearth as though recently fed new wood.

Snape stepped over to him and stared out at the crystallized street light and snowy road. "Is there anything I can do, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He looked exhausted.

Back in Snape's room, Candide said in a mystified voice, "Checking again?"

"He is being difficult and obstinate," Snape commented.

She rolled over and peered at him in the dim light. "He's seventeen; he's supposed to be." When Snape didn't respond, she said a little impatiently, "Don't you remember being his age?"

"I try not to."

She laughed mirthlessly at that. "Well, that would be normal for his age, believe me. I think you're taking it too seriously."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed and mulled things over in silence. Candide broke into his thoughts by asking in honest curiosity, "Isn't he usually difficult?"

"No," Snape replied, "only when he's distressed." While Candide froze and considered that, Snape added, "Your presence is disturbing him more than I imagined it would." He went on, "Perhaps it would be best if you departed today."

"I can leave first thing," she said in an ambiguous tone.

"Perhaps after lunch and please make some external excuse, if you will. His capacity for nightmares is second only to his one for guilt. I do not want him suspecting."

She fluffed her pillow before plunking her head back on it. "My parents are wondering why I haven't made it to their house yet. They're hinting strongly that I should be bringing you."

Snape exhaled audibly. "That is as good an excuse as any," he said a bit forcefully.

Breakfast proceeded in silence until Candide finally said to Harry, "Severus told me that you're invited to the Freelander's for Boxing Day." At Harry's nod, she said, "Too bad it isn't summer, the estate is supposed to be beautiful. You'll probably get a tour of the house, though." When Harry shrugged again, she gave up.

After lunch, as Harry sat reading his Transfiguration textbook and drinking tea, Candide came back down with her satchel. Harry took this in with surprise.

"I have to get to my parent's house," she explained with reluctance. "They are about to send another owl, I'm sure," she added in a long-suffering tone. "Here is your present, though." She handed over a smallish yellow-wrapped box. Harry accepted it slowly.

"It's nothing much," she said, "compared to what you undoubtedly deserve."

Harry cradled it against his arm. "Thanks."

She smiled kindly at him before turning to Severus for a quick hug. Then she was gone in a flash of green in the hearth.

Harry frowned lightly at the gift. "I didn't realize she was leaving today," he said, thinking again that he would not have known what to get her.

"She has delayed visiting her family twice already," Snape commented. "There was some pressure in fact for my visiting with them as well," he added with honest dislike of that notion.

"Oh," Harry breathed. He stood to take the gift and put it under the tree and realized that tomorrow was Christmas Eve. He went up and fetched his presents for Snape and put them under as well. Hedwig had not returned from taking Neville his present, although she had returned with Harry's gift from Hermione, which was also under the tree now. Gifts for him definitely dominated.

Harry returned to rereading his Transfiguration text in the dining room, finding it much easier to concentrate now, which he credited to the tea.

In the middle of Chapter 6, Harry asked, "Do you know the theory of Holistic Hovering?"

Snape shook his head, looking like he might not have ever heard of it.

Harry frowned and sighed. "Of all the N.E.W.T.s I need to get at least an 'E' on, this one is the most in doubt."

"Have you asked Minerva for extra help?"

Harry shook his head. "She's sorta busy. Hermione helps when she has time."

"Ms. Granger's remarkable grasp of certain subjects, notwithstanding, especially for a Gryffindor–"

"Oh," Harry interrupted. "She did the same thing I did–talked the Sorting Hat out of putting her in Ravenclaw."

Snape looked disturbed by that. "That hat needs a spell rework, I think. Nevertheless, I believe you would find a teacher's assistance more useful. Do not be hesitant about seeking help from Professor McGonagall. I expect she would make time for you if you expressed a need for it."

A pair of owls arriving cut their conversation short. Harry opened the window and used a severing charm to cut the strings to the package they were jointly carrying. With grateful sweeps of their wings they took off again. Harry read the label as he brought it to the table. "All right!" he said in excitement. "I was afraid this wasn't going to make it in time." He tore the box open. There were two orange cloaks inside, which explained the weight. He snapped the first cloak out. It was signed to him. He stared at it in confusion.

"Goodness," Snape exclaimed snidely. "Where do you plan to wear that?"

"I don't." He pulled out the other one. "It's for Ron's present." This one wasn't signed quite as extravagantly, but it was still nicely done in a variety of ink colors.

Snape lifted the corner and read one or two. "Well, at least you are learning to use your influence for something ."

"You think I abused it?" Harry asked in concern.

"Did you send them two cloaks?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he said, "Then clearly the Canons do not feel that you are."

"I couldn't think of anything else to get him," Harry complained. "And Ron was jealous of the Bulgarian Quiddich bat I received from their national team."

"I expect he will be pleased," Snape commented unreadably.

Harry packed it up quickly and said, "I hope Hedwig returns soon."

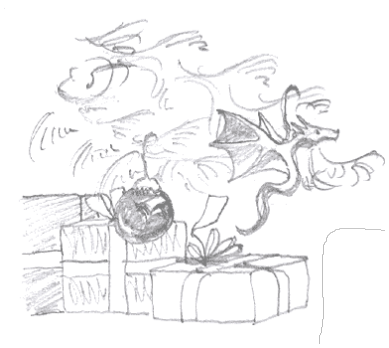
"You may use Franklin. He is a much larger owl and that isn't exactly light."

"Thanks," Harry said and took it to his room to wrap it. He stuffed the other cloak deep in a trunk with the thought that if Ron ever saw it, it would diminish his own cloak considerably, in his friend's eyes anyway. Once that present was away,

Harry relaxed and returned to his studies, making notes now of things he should ask McGonagall when he had the chance.

Author's Notes:
For the interesting plotline it brings up, I've taken Harry's Pippy Longstocking-style fortune away. Frankly the only evidence that we have that Harry has limitless funds is Harry himself as an eleven-year-old who has never had any money. I'm using this questionable judgment as the basis for his actually being able to run out. I am not arguing that this is how it will be in canon, just my universe. I'm trying to have Harry go through normal growing things and this is one I couldn't pass up.

Chapter 28.



A First Christmas

This evening at home seemed much quieter than the previous one. It occurred to Harry that if Snape enjoyed playing card games with Candide, he might like playing something else. "Do you like wizard chess?" Harry asked.

"I do not dislike it," came the even reply.

Harry went and fetched the set from his room and set it up on the small table in the library. He was promptly and utterly beaten two games in a row.

Harry shook his head as he set the board up again.

"You want to play another?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Sure. Why not?"

"You usually are not so sanguine about losing," Snape pointed out.

"I'm not?" Harry asked.

"You nearly killed yourself on the Quidditch pitch rather than lose to a younger, more skilled opponent."

"Yeah, but that's different. I lose at this to Ron all the time," he explained as he put the last pieces in place. He counted the moves this time. It only took seven to be beaten this game. Harry thought over the sequence before quickly resetting the board. "Can you replay that?" he asked.

Snape did so. Harry saw the trap point this time and sat a while before making another move that threatened one of Snape's pieces. It was a poor tradeoff though, which he resisted.

"Better," Snape said as he took Harry's piece. Harry took Snape's in exchange. Even so, he could not foresee anything other than a long slow death.

"I've lost, can we start again?" At Snape's nod, Harry reset the board again. After three rounds he finally managed to almost avoid the trap altogether but had sacrificed too many pieces.

"May I make a suggestion?" Snape asked.

"Sure."

Snape reset the board this time and then made the first few moves on both sides. "Move these two from the back row. That frees the rook to move here and defend this pawn. Then I cannot even set it up."

Harry looked the board over. "All right," he said, rubbing his eyes. It was late and he was tired. After putting the board aside, he went up to his room with a casual goodnight. He slept quite soundly that night.

The day before Christmas, Franklin returned with Ron's present to Harry and a card from Mrs. Weasley to them both. Dinner was duck, roasted until it had a dark crispy skin. Harry ate until he was groggy from it. As the dinner plates disappeared, he pulled out his Transfiguration text despite his heavy eyes and forced himself to read it.

Snape sat back with something thick in a little metal cup. "You are going to study on Christmas eve?" he asked in surprise.

Harry looked up from his text. "I was trying to reread this during break and I'm running out of time."

"You are taking your studies very seriously."

Harry frowned. "I feel like I'm letting McGonagall down, I'm doing so poorly. I think she thinks I'm really dumb."

Snape tilted his head at him with a look of disbelief. "I am quite certain she does not think that," he said reassuringly, a little amused even.

Chapter 28

"She has no patience with me," Harry commented.

"She is not known for that. Does she have patience with other students who are struggling?"

"Neville," Harry said after a moment's thought. "Somewhat."

Snape sighed lightly. "Yes, well."

"That's different," Harry guessed.

"In what way?" Snape probed.

Harry opened his mouth to reply then found he didn't have one. He and Neville were very similar. "I don't know." He closed his textbook and leaned his chin on his palms. "Certainly getting picked out for a mark wasn't in my best interest," he commented in annoyance. Although if he hadn't been, where would the wizarding world be now, he wondered before putting such thoughts aside.

"And that is the only difference that you see?"

Harry shrugged. He remembered getting ready for the ball and asked as he pushed his fringe back, "Do you think my scar's getting fainter?"

Snape appeared surprised by the question as he set his drink down and leaned forward across the table. He reached out and brushed his thumb over the jagged scar, making Harry jump as though a shock had gone through him. Harry rubbed it, decided it wasn't tingling, and muttered, "That was odd."

Snape looked at him uncertainly before saying, "It might be fading. You keep it obscured most of the time, so it is difficult to say."

Harry fidgeted with his hands before opening his textbook again. Snape's eyes remained on him for a long minute before he too went and fetched something to read.

Christmas morning, Harry put on his dressing gown and headed downstairs just after seven. He had gone to bed early and finally felt well rested and alert. He sat before the shining tree and looked over the presents. He imagined Ron was probably opening his right about now and he smiled to himself. Snape stepped over, carrying a cup of coffee. Harry held one of his gifts up to him. Snape placed his cup on the floor

and opened it. It wasn't a bad gift, except that Snape would have figured out that it existed easily enough in his own time.

"I didn't realize they were ever releasing a supplement," he said in a very pleased voice as he flipped open the Potions Compendym Update Voluum 1 . "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry replied. He shook the present from Hermione. "Books all around then," he quipped as he tore the wrapping. It was a Transfiguration study guide for the N.E.W.T. He sighed at the notion that everyone knew he was struggling. "Ever practical," he muttered of his friend.

Inside the present from Ron was a vast collection of Weasley Wizard Weezes experimental candies and novelties. "You didn't see those," Harry said, closing the lid quickly.

"I am endeavoring to forget," Snape said stiffly but with a vague humor.

Harry set that box aside and pulled out the present from Neville. This one was a little more mysterious. Inside was a half dome of crystal with something like an egg inside it. Harry peered at it curiously.

"You don't know what it is?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he went on, "Set it on the window sill for a few days."

A little worried, Harry set it on the book from Hermione. He handed Snape the other present from him. "It worked well the last time," Harry commented as Snape opened the wrap to reveal a canister of robusta shade-grown Polynesian coffee. His guardian actually smiled lightly in amusement. "Open yours," he prompted.

Harry pulled out the present from Snape. He gave the large box a light curious shake. It sounded like clothes. He opened it and pulled out a long black satin cloak with a red velvet lining. "Wow," Harry said, and stood up to swing it over his shoulders. The pewter clasp was in the shape of a snake. With a huff of false offense at that, he hooked it and turned around. "It's great. Thank you," he said honestly as he flicked the corner out to see the flash of red.

Harry sat cross-legged on the floor, still wearing the cloak, and reached for the next present. It was from Gretta and Shazor. Harry hadn't intentionally grabbed that one ahead of the one from Anita. He pretended he hadn't thought of any significance to that as he unwrapped it. Inside was a painted mask with a comic happy face. A little confused and intrigued he lifted it out and dropped it immediately back into the tissue when it distorted to an equally overdone look of surprise with a round mouth and brows steeply angled outwards.

"A wizard carnivale mask," Snape provided. "I assume you have never seen one, given your reaction."

"No," Harry breathed. He put the box lid underneath and set the in the box with the others to avoid touching it again. Snape reached over and lifted it out. The mask went neutral, with a flat mouth and brow. Harry watched him turn it over.

"It is from Rio De Janeiro," he said. "Gretta does like to travel," he went on as he put it back into the box. It held its neutral expression, even after he had released it.

Harry pulled his eyes away from it and over to the next gift on hand-printed paper. Inside was a handsewn book of quotes and a few poems, something they had put together at the coven. Harry flipped through and read a few words of wisdom, most a bit trite, before setting it with the others.

Candide's present he lifted up and, rather than risk breaking it by shaking it, opened the bright wrapping. Inside were handmade dark chocolates, each one just a little different from the next, all of them a little strangely shaped. Harry tried one and made a long noise of delight. Thickly, he said, "These are good." He lifted out another one, stripped with raspberry color, before he closed the box and stacked it on top of the one from Ron.

"Huh, no jumper," Harry commented.

"No what?"

"Uh, Mrs. Weasley always knits everyone jumpers with a big letter or picture on them," Harry explained.

"That . . . would explain a lot," Snape said carefully. At Harry's slightly challenging look, he added, "about your wardrobe."

"Hey, the thought that someone would actually make something for me, rather than give me some way oversized, badly dyed, hand-me-down was really touching," he explained. He carried the glass dome and Weezes up to his room and brought the study guide and chocolates to the dining room.

Snape stepped in a few minutes later and hovered near the hearth. "Do you have other holiday rituals you are accustomed to?" he finally asked.

"I don't have any at all–I don't think," Harry said. Snape took a seat across from him and eyed the chocolates. Harry pushed them over and Snape selected one with an odd daintiness. "Hm," he said appreciatively as he tasted it. Breakfast arrived on the table, distracting both of them.

A First Christmas

"Are you almost ready?" Snape called up from the main hall.

Harry checked himself in the mirror again. He was wearing his dress robes yet again– it had to be a record. His hair looked as good as it ever did. From the balcony, he said, "Right here."

Snape, looking much better groomed than usual, almost startlingly so, led him to the entryway and pulled down their cloaks. Harry watched as Snape pulled out and examined some thick white sheets from a pocket before re-stowing them.

"What are those?"

"Calling cards." He held one out; it was like a large Muggle business card but larger and more stylish. "Essential for a such an occasion."

"I don't have any," Harry said. After Freelander had asked for one earlier, he should have thought of this sooner himself.

"Go write up a few on nice parchment. Quickly," Snape said.

Harry dashed to the library. He cut up a few sheets of thick cream parchment and pulled out the peach quill Dumbledore had given him. Writing carefully, he put his name and address on each: his name in the middle and the address along the bottom, smaller. The only title he had ever been given, by the sweet company that made chocolate frogs, he did not relish using, so he stopped with that. He made up five of them before stashing the quill away.

In the entryway, Snape draped the new cloak over Harry's shoulders and opened the door. A horse-drawn carriage stood outside on the dark road, flickering lanterns hanging on its sides. "It is the appropriate way to arrive for an event like this," he explained at Harry's hesitation.

Harry climbed inside and closed the half door. He leaned out as they pulled away with a snap of a whip. The shod hooves on the road seemed too loud at first, but the sound fell into the background after the first mile. A few cars passed them, accelerating fast. A town went by; the pavements full of people milling in the warm glow from the shops.

Finally, they pulled through a pillared gate of white stone and up a cobbled drive. Harry glanced out and caught his breath at the massive building and organized grounds. Their carriage waited in a short line to be unloaded at the steps, where

a red carpet had been laid out, dusted with fresh snow. Harry wished he owned better dress robes, or even a Muggle coat with tails.

"Only you would get invited to such a thing, Potter," Snape commented. He sounded a little put-off, or even jealous.

Harry considered that he should have explained the whole story, but at that moment they pulled up before the grand entrance and the carriage door was opened by a footman. Harry stepped down and waited for his guardian before ascending to the bright light pouring from the doorway.

Inside was a marble floor and two-story hall with a gilt balcony all around. The plaster ceiling was sculpted elaborately with garlands. A dour man in tails bowed and took their cloaks as another stepped up to lead them to the threshold of the next room, which was even larger than the first. Harry could not fathom this as his own; how could all this belong to one person?

Before them a tall, lithe woman with her glasses on a jeweled stick stood with her arm through a stout man's. The man handed over a card and the butler read it out loudly. "Mr. and Mrs. Trout of the Devonshire Trouts." From across the room a small man with a pince-nez came over and greeted them warmly as old friends, otherwise there was no acknowledgment, which was surprising, considering the volume of the announcement and the number of people in the ballroom. Harry had had no sense of the scale of the event he had agreed to attend.

"There are Muggle lords here. Peers even," Snape observed under his breath.

As they stepped forward, Harry glanced at his guardian who looked haughty and alert. If he stuck with that, Harry could manage. Snape handed his card to the man who read it out without seeming to think it out of line. He handed it back. Harry handed him his after. The man had to squint at the oddly bright ink before he announced the name, causing most of the room to stop and turn. Harry fought the flush coming into his cheeks.

Harry waited a moment to receive his handwritten card back, but the man had stashed it in his inside suit pocket with a smile. Harry sighed. Freelander himself came over.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter. And . . . Snape, Professor. Correct?" he said, shaking Snape's hand. "Please come in."

A waiter swooped in with mugs of mulled mead that spoke profoundly of clove and cinnamon. Harry couldn't resist. He immediately had to switch hands as he was introduced to two Peers and some solicitor who seemed very self-assured. Harry

wondered who was Muggle and who was Witch or Wizard. This wasn't a problem he had expected to have. Everyone eyed him appraisingly the way Fudge had a habit of doing. After a minute or so of conversation, the looks wore off, thankfully.

They circled the room. Harry realized after the second group that he was being herded by Freelander or his wife or by the butler even. He was grateful when they sat down to dinner at a table that rivaled the house ones at Hogwarts. A man by the name of Ratslinger sat across from them with his young wife or mistress; Harry wasn't clear which. He was middle aged with closely spaced eyes. Harry hadn't understood quite what he did. The man's introduction had included Lord of Morals, but he hadn't caught the rest.

As the first course was set before them all by an army of staff, Harry leaned over to Snape and said, "This party is mostly Muggles, right?"

"Half and half, I would guess," Snape said.

"Why don't you think Fudge is here?"

"I expect he was invited. I expect he had several competing events this evening. Do you wish he were here?" Snape asked snidely.

"No. I was just trying to figure things out."

"It isn't worth it," Snape opined.

After dinner they joined the tour of the house and stables. They lagged behind the group to talk more easily. One garish baroque room flowed into the next, distinguishable only by wall color or a unique tapestry or painting.

Freelander came up to them as the bulk of the tour moved around a turn. He joined them as they stared at a scene of a knight bowing to a dragon who looked to be considering whether roasting or barbecuing would leave the man more tender. "So glad you could make it, Mr. Potter," he said sincerely. "I don't think we were quite introduced properly," he added, looking to Snape.

With a faint sense of doom Harry said, "This is my guardian, Lord Freelander. He teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts."

Freelander looked Snape over far differently this time. "Huh," he said, clearly mystified. He looked Harry up and down next. "You appear to be doing well. That is what matters," he added a little flatly.

They continued following the tour. Harry ignored Snape's questioning glance until Freelander had moved ahead to explain the origin of a large landscape painting in a

room at the end. Harry stopped and waited until the rest of the group had entirely gathered around for the story. He and Snape were stalling in the wide preceding corridor that seemed to serve no purpose but to hold paintings of other large manors.

"I'm sorry; I should have explained completely," Harry said quietly.

Snape stood examining a painting that showed a garish fountain of Neptune in the foreground and paths leading in all directions; the one up the center led to a yellow estate house in the distance. He turned and said in a slightly disinterested voice, "Explained what?"

"Freelander wanted to adopt me."

Snape blinked in surprise. He tilted his face to the ceiling as he took that in. "And you said 'no'?" he said in a disbelieving manner.

"Of course I said 'no'," Harry replied smartly.

In a bit of a sneer Snape said, "I cannot believe you would have chosen me over this," as he swept his hand to indicate the room.

Harry, annoyed with his guardian's tone, said, "It wasn't like that. I turned him down in May."

"You could have changed your mind. You most likely still could," Snape said with a harsh undertone that Harry hadn't heard in a long time. "The Wizard Family Council would jump at the chance to place you in a proper home."

Harry frowned. "Don't do this," he pleaded quietly. When Snape didn't respond, Harry said, "I don't need all this stuff. What would I do with it?"

Snape crossed his arms. "It isn't the 'stuff', Potter–it is the power. Something you have been utterly unable to grasp," he said condescendingly. "You, whose idea of influence is getting a Canon's cloak autographed."

Harry stared at a bright painting of a lake with a path beside it leading to an open domed building on a bit of a point. He wished he had turned Freelander's party invitation down. As though that thought might have summoned the man, he approached. "You have fallen far behind," he said in a gracious tone.

Harry looked to his guardian, who had masked his expression, fortunately. They followed through the next wing and out to the stables, which were connected by a covered walkway to the main house.

The stall doors each had a brass plaque with the horse's name. The first one said, "Studebaker." The massive brown animal turned and studied them a moment before turning back to the pile of hay in the corner.

"Steeplechase, this one," Freelander said with the same tone of voice Ron used to discuss Quidditch. "As is the next." They were given a little history and siring on each one as they went.

At the end of that row they turned and headed back. "What about these?" Harry asked of the next row of stalls. A beautiful black horse with a long white blaze peered out at them curiously from one of them.

"Those are just the riding horses," Freelander said dismissively.

The black horse whinnied as though insulted. Another farther down answered from inside its stall. Harry stood glued to that spot imagining that. When he looked up at Snape, his guardian had an expression that said figures . Harry shot him a sharp look in return before they followed Freelander back out the way they had entered.

Brooms were better than horses, Harry told himself. Except a broom didn't exude the raw power and borderline wildness the black horse had. He shook off the regret that tried to weasel its way into him.

The carriage ride home was silent until they passed the intervening town. Harry felt he needed to say something. He adjusted his cloak, grateful for it. "The cloak is warm. Thanks," he said.

"You are welcome," Snape said quietly, barely audible over the clopping of the hooves outside. He sounded uncertain. Harry didn't know what to say, feared saying the wrong thing. He closed his eyes and dozed off to the regular rocking of the carriage.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, they alighted and entered the unlit house. Harry hung up his cloak and stepped into the dim hall. He waved the chandelier up brighter and turned to wait for Snape to emerge from the entryway. When he did, he gave Harry a vaguely dark look. With an ache of frustration, Harry huffed at him, unable to find words to make the situation all right again.

"You prefer this?" Snape asked snidely with a wave of his arm to indicate the main hall.

"Yes," Harry insisted.

"You are a fool," Snape said as he turned to stalk off. Harry followed close behind, grasping for a retort. At the stairs, Snape turned on him and said, "They owe you everything, those wizards and Muggles tonight. You should have taken everything you could from them."

Harry considered that Snape saw the world very differently than he did. "I don't want what they have," he said firmly.

Snape shook his head disgustedly and continued up to his room.

Chapter 28

At breakfast Snape seemed to have calmed down. Harry was sitting at the table working on holiday assignments when his guardian came in. His first reaction to seeing him there appeared the opposite of the night before. Harry thought he almost looked grateful, but covered it so quickly, he couldn't be certain.

Harry sighed and bent back to writing about the formation of Goblin monetary law in the fifteen hundreds. A cup of black coffee appeared before Snape and he drank it in silence as Harry worked.

After long minutes, Snape said conversationally, "Getting everything finished?"

"Yep," Harry replied, glad Snape sounded normal.

Another long pause. "Need help with anything?"

Harry hesitated, then said with a grin, "You could look over my Potions essay. . . ."

Later in the day, the sun came out of the clouds. Harry went up to his room to exchange the textbooks he was working on and to put away his mail, including a letter from Ron that was incoherent with gratitude for the Canon's cloak. At first Harry didn't notice anything, but as he turned to the door he suddenly swung around again. The window was now nicely framed in a dark green ivy. Harry stepped over to it. It was emerging from the glass dome from Neville that he had placed on the sill and forgotten about. Tiny little buds were on the branches, hinting at a variety of colors between the green capsules around them.

He stepped back and admired it. The room did look much better that way, much less wintery.

Harry was asleep, calmly asleep, when a noise woke him. It was the noise of the logs in the hearth shifting. They made the hollow, high, rasping sound of the coal they had become. Dark and light flickered in his mind, flame and shadow. He rolled over upon recognizing the noise, and pulled the covers up a bit higher against the chill of the room. The noise repeated, sounding less natural. Harry raised his head and found Snape adding fresh wood to the fire.

Finally, his guardian stood and brushed off his hands. He turned and noticed Harry was awake.

"You're the house-elf tonight?" Harry teased.

"It is especially cold and she had not come around yet," Snape explained. He came over to the bed and stood above him. "You seem to be sleeping well," he commented.

"Really well." He couldn't remember any dreams at all, just restful darkness. "When are we going back to Hogwarts?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Harry nodded and mumbled, "All right." Fleetingly, he realized that this had been the first normal Christmas he had ever had. Gifts from grandparents, even, sort of. "Thank you for the nice Christmas," Harry said as Snape moved to the door.

The figure in the flickering dimness turned. "I am glad it turned out to be so. Good night, Harry."

"'Night," Harry said back just before the door clicked closed.

The Weasley household was still strewn here and there with the remains of presents being opened when Harry stepped out of the Floo. He had selfishly been enjoying his time at home, but Ron's third owl where he mentioned his mum inviting him over, brought him to the Weasley hearthstone. Harry kicked a half-burned strip of pink ribbon off his shoe and savored the fact that for the first time he needn't view the Burrow with deeply buried longing.

Mrs. Weasley came downstairs and gave him a firm hug. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Weasley," Harry greeted her.

"Happy Christmas, Harry dear. Did you get everything you wanted?" she asked, tweaking him on the chin.

Harry considered his lack of jealous pang upon arriving as good as he could have imagined. "Yes, but, uh, I didn't receive a jumper, I don't think," he teased.

"Didn't do any knitting this year, dear," she said.

"No?"

"Been trying out something different–would you like to see?"

More footsteps sounded on the stairs and Ron appeared. "Harry! Oh, Mum's showin' you her new craft, what?" He sounded a little pained. From a large wooden sewing box beside the rocking chair, Mrs. Weasley pulled out and proudly held up a set of colorfully decorated robes. "She's inta needlepoint now," Ron explained.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Weasley asked, shaking the garment flat. It was festooned with a bizarre array of shapes: flowers along the cuff and collar, but dragons on the breast and then–only partially filled in–gnomes along the hem. Even if muter colors had been selected, the design would still not hold out in even wizard public.

"That's . . ." Harry began, trying hard for words in the face of her proud expression. "Really . . . expertly sewn." Which was true; he hadn't imagined needlepoint gnomes looking quite so realistic. And ugly.

Ron leaned over. "Thank Merlin she's too slow to get at my dress robes yet," he whispered.

As he and Snape took the Floo back to Hogwarts castle before the next term, Harry wondered at how he was allowed to skip the train that everyone else was required to take. Not that he was the only student around in the days before classes restarted. Four other students had stayed over because of family schedules or problems. Harry joined them in the Great Hall the afternoon he arrived.

Pansy Parkinson gave him a dissuading look at he sat down, but she was the only Slytherin, so she remained silent. There was also a second-year Gryffindor named Desmond Hern and two fourth-years from Hufflepuff Harry didn't know the names of until they were introduced as Quinton Alden and Frobin Waxwing. All but Parkinson seemed surprised to have him sitting there.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" Desmond asked.

"Yes. Thanks," Harry replied as he took out his Transfiguration textbook.

"Professor Snape get you everything you wanted for Christmas?" Pansy asked in a rude tone. The other students stiffened.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't ask for anything. But I got some nice things anyway," he answered calmly.

"You really live with him now?" Desmond asked, sounding uncertain how he felt about that.

"Yes," Harry replied, sounding much more annoyed than he intended. Desmond visibly closed his mouth tightly and bent over his own school work.

A few minutes later the two Hufflepuffs were arguing in close whispers. Frobin finally shushed the other and asked Harry in a pained whisper, "There isn't any sign of You-Know-Who coming back, is there?"

Harry looked at her. She had short hair pulled nonetheless into two tight ponytails on the top of her head. Her truly worried brown eyes looked large in the cloudy light of the hall. With certainty, Harry replied, "No." She relaxed a little at this answer, but not entirely. "I would know," Harry insisted. "My scar tingled or burned when he was doing much of anything and it hasn't done anything at all. In fact it's fading," he added, rubbing it unconsciously.

"Really?" Frobin asked hopefully. All eyes at the table were staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Really," Harry replied with extra assurance, returning to his textbook in the hope that they would return to theirs.

Chapter 29.

Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered

The new term began as winter settled in hard around the castle. Harry had not imagined it possible, but Ron and Hermione seemed even more glued together than they had before break. He had expected some commiseration from Ginny on this, but found that she wasn't paying much attention to anything but Dean.

At first he felt merely mystified by all of it. That was until he noticed that he had faded into the background along with everything else, then he felt a little annoyed. The weather was definitely conducive to sitting close together, he considered, more than once. As the first few days passed, it began to grate on him more, making him feel unsettled and anxious. He started avoiding his friends when it was convenient to do so.

Friday evening, Harry stood in the common room with his bookbag over his shoulder, looking for someplace to settle in to talk or even study. The room, to his eye, seemed paired up into fixed sets. He didn't feel like interrupting anyone, so with a sigh he headed out the portrait hole, thinking of the library. He wandered instead to Snape's office. His guardian was researching something in stacks of books piled on the desk.

"Do you mind if I study here?" Harry asked.

Snape, his long finger holding his place in the text, looked up at him. "Not at all." As Harry sat in the visitor's chair and dropped his bag hard on the floor, Snape asked, "Is something wrong?"

Harry wrinkled his face up as he thought over an answer. "All of my friends are, I don't know, wrapped up in each other." He shook his head in light disgust. "Voldemort could Apparate into the common room right now and no one would notice." Harry cracked his Transfiguration text open and slouched over as he read.

"Hm," Snape murmured.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling a little annoyed.

"I am surprised you do not understand."

Harry frowned at him. "They've all lost their heads," he complained. "What's to understand?"

"You've never fallen for someone?" Snape asked.

Harry thought about Cho, how he had thought about her when she wasn't around, how he had been jealous of others around her. It seemed dumb in retrospect. With a hint of anger Harry said, "Not like that."

"Well, you will," Snape stated dryly.

"Yeah, right," Harry breathed. He tried to read the first paragraph of chapter ten yet again. His mind refused to take it in. Anger had built in him, generated by some source he wasn't aware of before. He glanced up at Snape to find his guardian considering him in silence. Snape closed the book before him and clasped his hands on the desk.

"What?" Harry asked sharply.

Snape didn't react, just continued to consider him. Harry closed his book as well, a little harder and with a huff of frustration. "You are doing one of those Dumbledore things, aren't you?" Harry asked. "Just waiting to see what I'll say."

"I am actually trying to determine what the problem likely is before venturing to ask anything," Snape said. "You are clearly jealous."

"I'm not," Harry returned smartly. "I have too much work to do to spend my time mooning over someone like they all are. Fat chance, anyway, given how hard it was to find a partner for the ball."

Snape reopened the book he had been reading and looked for his page. "I cannot believe it was that difficult," he opined.

Chapter 29

Harry stuffed his book away in his bag, disgusted and angry now. He was shaking a bit as he moved, he was so furious. "You think just anyone would go with some freakishly dangerous person . . . " With a jerk he stood up and hefted his bag. ". . . who has spent the last seven years as nothing but a puppet a dark wizard, as–what did McGonagall call it–a Vold-o-meter?"

As he turned to the door a spell flew over his shoulder and highlighted the doorframe for an instant. He tried the handle anyway, but it wouldn't budge.

"Sit down," Snape intoned.

Harry remained facing the door, but let his bookbag slide to the floor. His fury had peaked and ebbed quickly, leaving him achy, hurt and without purpose. Snape didn't speak as Harry gathered himself together before turning around. He didn't meet Snape's eyes as he abandoned his bag and returned to the chair. The twisty ache in his chest was only intensifying.

They sat in silence, he trying to imagine getting to know someone as closely as Ron and Hermione knew each other. It seemed impossible. "I can't imagine explaining it all," he breathed out in a pained way. "And who in the world would stick around for the whole story?" He wrapped his arms around himself as though he were cold.

"I am not unsympathetic to your dilemma," Snape stated. His chin rested on his bent fingers, thumb picking at the edges of his nails. "But there are twenty-seven girls in your year-"

"Please don't," Harry interrupted, willing him to stop. "I've been through them all with Hermione already. Sixth-year too. Thank you for trying," he added sarcastically. "I don't think you realize how many students are just plain scared of me. The others are disgustingly adoring or think I'm a freak."

"I believe you are exaggerating," Snape said.

"If I pull my wand out at dinner, care to lay a bet on how many people duck under a table?"

"You are mistaking awe for fear. But neither is conducive to getting to know someone," Snape admitted. "And trying that would not improve the situation."

"I have some sweets that will turn my eyes red. I could do that tomorrow. Imagine how many nightmares I could cause with that," he said provocatively.

"Harry," Snape chastised him in dismay.

"No one will ever understand," Harry said quietly, sounding bleak.

"May I offer some advice?" Snape asked. At Harry's annoyed shrug, Snape said, "You need to adjust your goals. If you set yourself exclusively to finding someone to be everything to you, you will almost certainly fail, after much frustration, I might add." Snape stood and came slowly around the desk. "Set yourself instead to looking for a friend of the opposite sex. It is much easier to get to know someone casually. If more is possible it will flow on its own from there."

Ignoring Snape's gaze, Harry stared out the window as his guardian spoke. "Okay, so where is this person?" he huffed.

"Perhaps not here at Hogwarts," Snape admitted.

"Maybe not even a witch," Harry mumbled.

Snape raised a brow. "If you are willing to open the field that wide your possibilities do increase considerably." With his knuckle he tweaked Harry's chin to bring his eyes back over. "Do not destroy yourself worrying about it in the interim. That is the worst you can do."

Harry frowned deeply and tapped his foot against the chair leg impatiently as he returned to staring out the window. Snape made sense, but it didn't improve his mood any to hear it.

Snape went on with yet another sigh. "I know it is not easy. Especially since your friends are most likely intimate at this point."

Harry turned to him in surprise. He thought a moment before rolling his eyes. "Yeah, probably," he mumbled. That thought really didn't help.

Snape frowned. "You may very well have to settle for never being fully understood."

"Did you tell Candy your whole past?" Harry asked bluntly.

With a shake of the head, Snape reluctantly replied, "No."

"That's setting a good example. You're saying I should live a lie?" When Snape didn't reply, even though he looked for a moment like he was going to, Harry said in frustration, "I can't imagine going over it all again. But, what's the point in being close to someone if they . . . don't understand?" His eyes were burning, making him blink.

Snape frowned and rubbed his forehead as he stepped back around the desk. "I do not know what to say to you, Harry, except perhaps that I don't believe anyone is fully understood by anyone else."

Harry rubbed his left eye under his glasses. "I really can't imagine explaining it all," he murmured, repeating himself. "It takes something out of me every time I have to."

"I have no answers for you," Snape repeated. "I will, however, point out that everyone is different. Do not make assumptions about someone until you know them very well. You clearly dislike others doing it to you."

Harry gazed sadly at the floor, thinking idly about that. He thought about the girls in the school, most of whom seemed giggly or fashion obsessed and really not worth getting to know. It was daunting to think of trying to get to know any of them better, especially since if he sat down beside them they would either giggle annoyingly or gape in surprise.

Snape's voice pulled him from his circling thoughts. "There was something I wanted to discuss with you, since you are here." When Harry looked up, he went on, "I saw your first term grades-"

" I haven't even seen them," Harry complained.

Ignoring the interruption, Snape said, "You received an 'A' in Potions."

"What?" Harry blurted. "Greer really hates me," he commented.

"Also in Transfiguration."

Harry did frown at that. "What about the rest? Did I get an 'O' in anything?"

"Hm," Snape replied. Harry kicked the chair leg with his heel in frustration. "You need to do better," Snape insisted.

This felt like the final blow. He put his head in his hand and sat hunched over. "I can't try any harder than I have been," he said. "I'm doing better than that in Potions," he insisted. "She's not grading me fairly."

"What is the basis for Frenkels Salve?"

"Isisin and Chamomile."

"What four potions use Uyrs Iodyn?"

"Uh, Draught of Isis, Venidyn, Smith's Semper, and . . ." He tugged his hair back as he thought. "Just a second, something else uses Venidyn as an ingredient. Uh, Hope's Harm Reducer." Harry waited as Snape considered him a long moment. Harry said defensively, "You said I did well on that big essay. Don't you think that was at least an 'E'?"

"Yes. I expect that is how I'd have graded it–if not higher."

"She only gave me an 'A' on it, you know."

"Perhaps your Potions grade is in error, then. But the Transfiguration one is not." When Harry groaned in frustration, Snape said, "I am certain Minerva would give you extra tutoring if you asked."

Harry pulled his book out again and flipped back to chapter ten, tired of talking about it when he could try to do something about it. "I'll think about it."

Harry sat in the library studying. Normally, he would have found his friends here, but he was starting to suspect that Hermione was catering to Ron's dislike of studying in a place where he was forced to be quiet. He joined Neville at a large table and took out his books. Snow fell heavily outside the nearby window in large flakes that floated and swirled mesmerizingly. Harry had to repeatedly force his gaze to return to his parchments.

Neville fidgeted a lot as he studied. Harry finally took a break from rereading his notes to ask him what he was working on. "Transfiguration," Neville replied. "My worst."

"Mine too." It felt good to share studying complaints with someone. Neville seemed like a safe person to revise with. There were fewer interruptions from others. "I have to get a good N.E.W.T. score," Harry breathed. "It's not looking good right now."

"You'll do all right, Harry," Neville said without looking up. "You always do."

"Doesn't feel like it this time."

Luna came by a few minutes later. "Want to go for a walk?" she asked.

Harry blinked at her in surprise until he realized she was asking Neville, who surprised him further by answering brightly, "Yeah!"

When they had gone, Harry frowned. It looked awfully cold outside to him. He really didn't get it, he thought.

An hour later, Suze wandered by. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She glanced around them as though to check if anyone were listening. "You have this club, the D.A., right?" At Harry's nod, she went on. "Can I join?"

"Sure," Harry said.

"Well, you don't have any Slytherins in it. I thought maybe they weren't allowed."

Harry's brow furrowed as he thought about that. "We don't keep them out. It's just that no one has ever asked." He reached into his pocket and took out his fake Galleon. Next Thursday at 7:30 had been scheduled. He showed her how to read the serial number.

She accepted it and asked, "Why the coin?" as she tossed it off her palm.

"Because we were illegal under Umbridge and we needed to vary the time to avoid her." And the Slytherins she had hunting us down, he almost added. "It'd be great if you could come."

She pocketed the coin and gave him a smile before walking away.

Harry was very grateful for his new cloak during astronomy class late one evening. The stars blazed in the night sky as they all huddled under their telescopes on the astronomy tower roof. The wind was low but the clear sky left the air bone-chillingly cold. Ron and Hermione were bundled under her cloak together, which was awkward, as they weren't allowed to share telescopes. Sinistra eyed them a few times but didn't comment. Harry kind of wished she would.

He sighed and moved two degrees right ascension with the dial. He pulled his hands inside his cloak as he stared at Arcturus. Inside his cloak he pulled out his pocket watch and used a charm to light the face of it. He preferred his own watch to the one Sinistra provided. He checked the telescope and his watch, back and forth. As the star passed the crosshairs he noted the time. He glanced around. Only Hermione also seemed to be noting the extra credit meridian passage of Acturus on the assignment sheet.

He rarely worked out the extra credit questions, especially since he could be packing up his lenses instead of shivering. The second part of the question, How does nutation affect the reliability of your answer? He thought hard and jotted down quickly that it could be off by nine minutes of angular distance but that the component of that in the right ascension was small. He didn't know by how much or how to compute it, so he stopped there. Rolling up his parchment quickly, Harry frowned as he noticed Hermione had her telescope put away already because Ron was helping.

In Defense they were doing curse breaking. Each of them came up and picked out a box from a widely varying collection on the front table. For the assignment one needed to retrieve what was inside. This explained why Snape had not wanted visitors the last two days. Harry waited and took the last one remaining, a burnished brass box with large hinges. Once closed magically, it didn't look likely that there was another way into it even with Muggle power tools.

Harry had grown in the habit of sitting in the far back of the room. His friends seemed confused by this, but they changed as well and sat nearby. Harry returned to the last desk in the middle row and stared at the box.

Malfoy let out a cry of surprise as his sleeve caught fire when he simply tried the latch on his inlaid wood box. Parkinson used a water charm on him, leaving him damp all over. Harry looked over his notes as he suppressed a laugh.

Harry rubbed his eyes as he read; he was tired from Astronomy last night, which had gone until one in the morning. Snape swished by, pausing behind him. After a moment, fingers rested on Harry's shoulder. He glanced up at his guardian and gave him a weak smile and then, a little nervously, looked around at his friends. At the desk beside his, Neville was chewing his lip, staring with concentration at his glass box. Hermione and Ron were bent over a parchment so close that their hair touched. Harry assumed they were plotting out how to proceed on their battered old jewelry boxes.

Harry took out his wand and used the curse detection charm Snape had used the night Malfoy and company had attacked. The blue lines zipped around the lid and turned red at the hinges. An obvious place to curse this particular box, really. He glanced again over his shoulder at Snape, who gave him a somewhat soft look, for him anyway.

As Snape moved on, Harry thought about what curse he might use to foul big hinges like these. There were a lot of possibilities. He started through them one at a time, beginning with a counter for a sticking charm.

The seventh attempt–an oil charm to counter a possible ancient aging charm–caused a flare of gold fire to blast out the sides. That wasn't what he had expected to happen and he worried what it meant.

Hermione looked over. "What was that?"

"Don't know." He ran the curse detection spell again and it remained blue all over now, but he was still very hesitant to try the lid.

"What spell was that you just used?"

"One we are going to do in D.A.," Harry answered distractedly, hoping she didn't ask to see it now, because he was busy thinking. It had taken him a week to work it out. It detected bad intention in the form of a curse. Harry carefully considered what else he should try, since he didn't want his robes ignited or his hair to turn green, as had happened with Padma. He avoided looking up at Snape; this was between him and the box only, as far as he was concerned.

As he sat thinking, the hinges flared gold again. On a hunch he repeated the curse detection and found the hinges back to red again. "Huh," he muttered and tried to think of what that might imply. Moments later, Ron leapt up, crying out in surprise and shaking his hand, which was surrounded by a flickering halo.

Snape stepped over and forced him back into his chair with a sharp admonishment that it was only an illusion. A flick of the teacher's wand canceled the octarine fire.

"I followed the suggestions from the lecture exactly," Ron complained as he looked his hand over in concern.

"You need to think a little more creatively than that," Snape sneered as he stalked away. In the front row he paused and observed Malfoy using a cutting spell to simply remove the lid of his box. A smoky haze floated from his desk.

"Got it!" The Slytherin said proudly as he produced the metal ball from inside the box.

"I did mention, didn't I, that you would be marked down for damage to the box?" Snape asked snidely.

Malfoy shrugged and tossed the ball into the air and caught it. The cuff of his sleeve was brown and shriveled. "I get extra credit for being first though, right?" he asked cockily.

Harry returned to contemplating his box. Some kind of timing charm or curse was on it, perhaps. He tried a few more simpler curse-detection spells and they were clear. It must be a charm then. Beside him, Hermione was pulling the ball from her box with a broad grin. Figures, Harry thought with a sigh. Ron's box was soon to follow, he considered, now that he would get full-time help.

As Harry lifted his wand to try one of the timer cancel charms he had seen Mrs. Weasley use for cakes, Hermione's box let out an ear splitting wail. She stared at it

in shock for many painful seconds before slamming the lid shut. It promptly popped open again and returned to full volume. Ron stood up and jumped on the lid, and for a moment there was silence. The lid however had other ideas and, despite appearing to be made of dilapidated, pink cloth-covered wood, it tossed him onto the floor when it popped open again.

The students returned to putting their hands over their ears. Hermione canceled the alarm on the second try and the room fell blessedly silent. Many students sighed in relief. "Drat," Hermione muttered. "Thought I'd managed full marks, too."

Harry savored that comment for a while as he tried the timing spells he knew. None of them worked. This wasn't an assignment where they could do more research so it must be something simpler or more common. He went through in his mind the spells that reinitiated themselves. The only common one he could think of was the filing charm for letters that returned them to their proper envelope. It had a white flare but maybe that was only on parchment or paper.

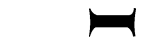
He did the cancel spell for the filing charm. Nothing appeared to happen. He did the oil charm again and this time the lid popped open. Hermione looked over sharply. Harry gave her a victorious look as he Accioed the ball out, just in case the lid had designs on eating his hand.

"Five points for Gryffindor, Mr. Potter," Snape said from the front of the room.

"That's not fair!" Malfoy complained.

With narrow eyes and a dark challenging tone, Snape asked the Slytherin, "What, precisely, is not fair about it?"

Malfoy, frowning, declined to respond.



A week later, Harry sat studying before D.A. on one of the fifth floor window seats, far from the usual active areas of the castle. He liked this spot; in the evening the sun shined in through the colored glass. As well, the owlery was nearby and the birds flitted past regularly, keeping him company.

He read through his Transfiguration essay for the third time and sighed. It didn't read like one he would have written for Potions or Defense where he really understood what he was writing about. Transfiguration had only grown harder. The assignments

seemed to have less and less to do with the book and lecture, leaving him frustrated, especially since Hermione didn't seem to have this problem. When Harry would ask her a question now to help clarify something, the answer would only generate more questions, since he had fallen too far behind to understand the immediate answer. Rereading the textbook from last year had helped some. Maybe he should order some alternative textbooks, he considered. That had helped with Potions a lot. Hermione had some catalogues, he would have to remember to ask her for them. At the last possible moment Harry headed down to D.A.

During this session they finished up curse detection from the previous meeting then the four of them stood off to the side talking about what to do next. Neville whispered, "I really want to do Animagia." He gave Harry a wince as he did so; Harry figured he worried that because of Sirius, this would be a sore topic. Neville's glanced nervously at the others. "We've been discussing it and . . . well . . ."

Hermione also gave Harry a pained smile. "I'd like to try it as well," she finished for Neville. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry rubbed his cheek in thought. "It's worth trying. I'm pretty sure it's against school rules so we can't have everyone working on it. Why don't we split the group as we have been talking about doing, into advanced and intermediate. Only people you trust to not mention it to a teacher get into the advanced group."

Hermione said slowly, "And you'll stick with the intermediate?"

"For now," Harry said, "I'll do both." He didn't have much hope for figuring out a transfiguration that advanced, but he couldn't stand to not try.

He watched Neville collect Luna with a shy smile and take her aside to talk to her. Harry watched them with an ache of jealousy before collecting up the newer members and leading them to the far side of the room.

"Good evening, Severus," McGonagall said as he stepped into the headmistress's office. It was late and she had on a long black dressing gown for warmth, apparently not willing to stoke the fire up so close to not needing it.

"You sent me for me . . . " he prompted.

She paced across the back wall, along the glass-fronted cabinets. "Yes," she breathed, clearly thinking how to proceed. "I don't wish to interfere with Harry . . ." she

began and looked over at him. When he didn't react, she went on, "but I have noticed he has withdrawn himself from his friends. Three times this week I have seen him studying alone on the fifth floor. I only note it because he seems unhappy, frankly, which is in great contrast to how he was at the end of summer. "

Snape crossed his arms and stepped slowly over to the celestial model on the corner of the desk. The breeze from his movement made the etched glass globe rock on its spindle. He touched it to make it turn slowly.

McGonagall prompted in the tense stillness, "Have you spoken with him?"

Snape nodded. "Yes."

"Hm," she prompted.

Reluctantly, but with a tone of being unburdened, he said, "I believe the immediate problem is that he is the only one of his friends without a love interest. Secondarily, he sees no hope for one in the immediate future. Thirdly, at no point does he feel he can expect to be understood by anyone."

"Ah."

Snape touched the glass sphere to halt its turning. "I had no good advice to offer him," he stated in frustration.

She came up to the other side of the desk and leaned on it. "This is a tough age anyway, and getting to know members of the opposite sex would be even harder for him."

"I do not see that," Snape said doubtfully.

She studied him closely. "Everyone thinks they already know him and they are certainly completely mistaken about him. He can't approach anyone without it seeming too significant for whomever he approaches." She sighed. "I assume the ball brought this on."

"That, his friends' close relationships, and other things," Snape commented, failing to mention Candide.

She fell silent with her brow furrowed. "So many lovely young ladies in this-"

"Do not mention that fact to him," Snape said sternly. "His friends have already walked through the list with him and he is adamant about the uselessness of it."

She shook her head with a sad smile. "All right. You clearly speak with him regularly, and intimately, so I am going to assume you are keeping an eye on him." She tossed

her robes back as she sat down. "There is something else I've been meaning to discuss with you."

Snape straightened his shoulders, clasped his hands behind his back, and gave her an attentive tilt of the head.

"I've been trying to convince Pomona to be my deputy headmistress, without luck, I must add. She insists she cannot lose the time from her research projects." She smiled wryly. "Not to drive home the point that you were not my first choice, because you usually handle things precisely the way I would, but would you consider being my deputy headmaster?"

Snape, not having ever considered this, did so now. When he had thought it over in silence for half a minute, McGonagall added, "You are already doing many of the duties, as you probably realize. But there would more paperwork, for example."

"You do not expect the board to complain?" Snape finally asked.

She tapped her finger on the desk. "I honestly don't know how much cachet I have with the board. This would be one way of finding out." She clasped her hands together. "Does this mean you are saying yes?"

Snape's eyes roved around the office as he stalled. "Would I be in charge of performance evaluations?"

"Why?"

"I wish to discuss grading criteria with Ms. Greer," he replied, his tone lower.

"Hmm. If it is grading involving Mr. Potter, you will have to leave it to me it in any event." She sighed lightly. "I wondered about that Potions grade."

"He is doing better work than that, I am quite certain."

"I'll speak with her then." She fell thoughtful a moment. "And with regard to Mr. Potter's other difficulties, perhaps there is something we can do . . . "

At Snape's curious look, she waved him off with a mischievous smile.

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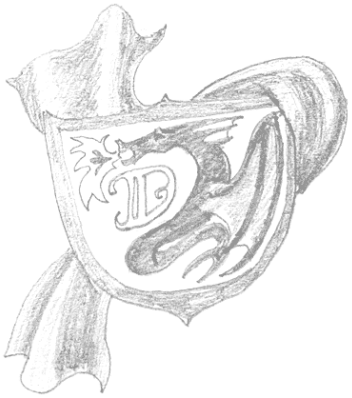
Chapter 30.



Transformations

"First session went well, don't you think?" Hermione said brightly as they studied in the common room after advanced D.A. Ron nodded energetically. He was actually, honestly reading the book Hermione had ordered. The original title Animagical had been charmed to read Remedial Potions . Harry had ordered some alternative Transfiguration textbooks at the same time. They might have helped if he could find the time to read them.

Hermione took the ring off her pinky and charmed it to the same time next week. She had issued plain silver rings to the ten students who wanted to work on becoming Animagi. The date and time were engraved on the inside. Harry had helped her with a parchment charm to make the date and time into a nice flourishing script that scrolled around the inside.

Harry suppressed a sigh at the memory of his own frustration at the session and pretended to be too involved in his own book to respond.

"Boy, I really want to know what animal I am. I think that is the most interesting part," Ron said quietly without lifting his nose from his book.

"You are most likely what your Patronus is, but that isn't always true," Hermione lectured.

"McGonagall's Patronus is a tiger but she's a house cat as an Animagus," Harry commented.

"When did you see Professor McGonagall's Patronus?" Hermione asked, then answered her own question quickly. "Oh yeah, the Dementor attack. How could I forget?"

"Snape have one?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. It bothered him to remember. The thought that it might not be possible for Snape to think of anything happy enough to generate one was hard to accept. He frowned and really tried to get into his reading to have something else to think about.

Harry continued to work hard in his classes, to the point where he was really looking forward to Easter holiday, even though it was still a month and a half away. The advanced D.A. group was starting to hang out more together outside of sessions, everyone except Suze. When she had asked Harry why some of the sixth and seventh-years weren't going to the regular meetings anymore, he had willingly told her. Without knowing her all that well, he found himself trusting her completely. When she had expressed keen interest in joining as well, he had asked Hermione to give her a ring.

They were sitting in the Great Hall when Hermione joined them. "Did you hear?" she asked in a whisper. Obviously, none of them had, so she said, "We are getting eleven Durmstrang students for the rest of the year. Seems they don't have much of an advanced Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts classes right now, so some of the students wanting to take those are coming here."

"When are they arriving?" Ginny asked with avid interest.

"In a week or so." Hermione looked sideways at Harry, who had the N.E.W.T. preparation study guide in front of his nose. "Did you hear that, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I heard you," he said in disinterest.

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed in frustration. The conversation soon returned to Animagia.

"You have a lot of scrolls to go through," Harry commented to Snape as he stopped in for a visit before dinner. They were all of odd, varying sizes, some with faded gold braid hanging off the wooden dowels.

"Policy documents," he explained. He considered Harry a moment. "The school's board approved my posting as deputy headmaster."

Harry's eyes went wide. "You're the deputy headmaster now?" he asked in wary surprise.

"Yes," Snape confirmed, a little snarkily. "Thinking about getting into trouble?"

"Uh, no," Harry replied quickly. "Better not, I guess."

"That was always true, but perhaps more so, now," he said, as he returned to reading.

Harry lifted one of the smaller scrolls and unwound a foot of it. It was a detailed description of scheduling procedure. He wondered how he could ask for one that would cover what spells were forbidden for students to work on. After rolling that one up neatly, he picked up another. This one was about grounds maintenance. Insomnia would not be a problem with one of these by one's bedside.

"Looking for something in particular?" Snape asked without raising his gaze.

"No. Just curious," Harry lied. "Guess I'll leave you to it."

When he reached the door, Snape said, "Minerva will most likely announce it at dinner tonight."

"Thanks for the warning. My friends will be thrilled."

Snape grinned lightly as he raised his eyes. Harry shook his head and smiled, giving up on his suffering mode.

McGonagall did announce it at dinner and Harry's friends did all turn to him with surprised and, at least one, impressed expression. He just shrugged in return and insisted that he could not have given them much warning.

"Boy," Ron muttered as he served himself roast. "Good thing this didn't all happen years ago, we'd have got both of you expelled."

The others laughed and Harry ducked his head to adjusting his napkin in his lap to hide the twinge; the last six years certainly would have gone differently. He remained withdrawn through the meal, listening to his housemates carry on a spirited discussion of the relative merits of two Wizard Wireless performers Bretagne Lancelot and Treegrove Simsdaughter. Idly, as he ate his pudding, he wondered that Snape didn't

have a Wireless set somewhere in the house. Maybe they did have one; a proper wizard household should.

He was mulling over what a Wireless set might look like, thinking over each of several objects in the house which had unclear purpose, so he didn't notice when the table around him fell quiet. Ron uttering, "Sir," a little formally, brought Harry's attention back and he looked up to find Snape standing behind and to the side of him.

"A bit brooding, aren't we, Mr. Potter?" he asked, although the tone didn't match the words, being too concerned.

Harry pushed his glasses on firmly and gave a slight shrug. He couldn't shake the what-ifs that were clawing at his mind right then.

"'e's just sad 'cause 'e can't cause trouble no more," Seamus commented with a snicker.

Harry managed to brighten up a bit, although it seemed to hit his pride to do so. He sensed that Snape saw through it, and that made him feel unexpectedly better.

"All right," Hermione said loudly to get everyone's attention during advanced D.A. "This is the spell. The incantation is Canarevelatio but you MUST have your animal in mind when you do it. If you can't visualize anything, you aren't supposed to be trying it. Foot is safer than hand, because if you have a wing or something, changing it over might cut off your limb, and that will take some explaining to Madam Pomfrey."

Everyone shuffled a little nervously. But most took out their wand and some also sat on the floor to remove a shoe. Harry sat off to the side watching, hoping no one got hurt doing this. Ginny had her shoe off already and was concentrating hard.

"I'll go first," Hermione said, seeing this. She sat in a chair and closed her eyes for a long minute. She opened them and tapped her foot while speaking the spell. Nothing happened. "Hm," she said. She tried again with no luck. After many attempts, she gave up with a huff. Harry felt a little amused at her expense. Neville tried next, also with no luck. Ginny, finally running out of patience, shouted the spell and whacked her arch hard with her wand. At first Harry thought she had also failed, but Ginny squealed in surprise. Everyone gathered around her. Ron said, "I don't see anything."

"It was there," Ginny insisted. "Feathers. Brown ones with little white stripes. Right about here." Due to the close crowding of students, Harry couldn't see where she indicated.

"Try it again," Ron urged excitedly.

Around the twentieth try, Ginny could reliably change her foot into a bird foot. It looked grotesque sticking off her leg and it faded quickly, morphing back to her own after a few seconds.

Neville said, "I have a bird book. We can look it up later." He was looking over Dean's shoulder at his sketch of what Ginny's foot had looked like.

"I'm next," Ron said brightly. Like the others, he couldn't produce anything.

Several more students tried with no success. Suze went last. "What is your Patronus?" Hermione asked her.

"I can't do one," she said defensively. "I haven't learned that yet. But I've been listening and I want to try."

"Go ahead, then," Hermione said. Harry could hear in her voice that his bright friend assumed nothing would come of it. She had been evenhanded with Suze but Harry suspected she had only agreed to let her in because Harry had asked. She had not been in the regular D.A. long enough, really.

Suze sat on the floor and bent her pale foot toward herself. She sat quietly for a long time before incanting the spell. Even from where Harry was, he could see her foot transform into a little white paw. The room broke out into awed noises.

"What is it?" Ron asked, leaning over to peer at it more closely. It stayed transformed a lot longer than Ginny's bird foot.

"A mink," she replied factually. "That was always my favorite." It finally faded.

"Wow," Hermione said, impressed. "Well you guys are going to have to help the rest of us out. But I think we are done for the night. I have an essay to finish."

General grumbling went around at the thought of uncompleted schoolwork. Hermione turned to Harry, still sitting off to the side. "What about-?" Ron started to say before he cut himself off.

Hermione came over to Harry and sat close beside him. "Don't even want to try?" she asked in a pained voice.

"I'm really rotten at this stuff," he said.

"Harry," she said admonishingly. "Listen to you. You're good at nearly everything. Don't get down on yourself."

Chapter 30

"I'm getting an 'A' in Transfiguration. That's all I'm going to get on the N.E.W.T., if I'm lucky. I'm not going to get into the Auror's program." The thought of that made his chest tighten up. He forced himself to breath deeply.

"They can't keep you out of the Auror's program, Harry," Ron said in a disbelieving tone.

Harry stood suddenly and said stridently to his face, "If I don't deserve to be in it, then I shouldn't be." He stalked off, leaving his friends frowning at each other.

The next day at dinner, Hermione said to Harry, "Why don't you ask McGonagall for help?"

"Like she has time," Harry said smartly.

"She'd make time for you," Hermione said in her talking to an idiot voice. "She now has an assistant, remember? Go ask her after dinner. Do you want me to ask her for you? I don't mind," she offered, sounding ready to jump up just then.

Harry looked defeated as he put his napkin in his lap. The food had not appeared yet, which was a little slow. He wished for it as a distraction.

The doors to the Great Hall opened and a tall young lady wearing Durmstrang student robes and very long black hair stepped in a little uncertainly. She was followed by an Indian girl in the same outfit who had her long hair in a thick braid wrapped around her head. McGonagall was heading down the center of the Hall with her long stride.

"Welcome," she said with broadly spread arms. Three more girls stepped in as the first held the door open.

"What? Are they all girls then?" Ron asked sarcastically.

Harry didn't see it but when he turned, Ron was rubbing his arm as if he had been struck hard on it, presumably by Hermione. McGonagall waved her wand to open both doors, revealing six more students.

"There are boys," Hermione said smartly of the three, stern looking, olive-complected young men standing at the back, two with crossed arms, one with eyebrows like Krum. If Harry had looked at his friend, he would have seen her keenly eyeing him to see where his interest seemed to fall. The first girl who had appeared had caught

his eye. He watched her as they stepped up the Hall, glancing at the ceiling and the students with equal interest.

"Please come in," McGonagall said in a very kind voice. She led them to the ends of the tables where the students were far less crowded due to the proximity of the staff table. "Have a seat at any table. I'm sure you're hungry from your journey."

She addressed the whole room. "Everyone, these are visiting students from Durmstrang Institute. They are here to take advanced classes for the rest of the year here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I expect you all to welcome them and make them feel at home as they settle in." Her eyes took in the room as though trying to pick out all the troublemakers. She turned and stepped around to the staff table, whose occupants looked as though they were trying to eye the new students without actually appearing to do so.

Food finally arrived after McGonagall returned to her seat. Ron whispered to Hermione and she shushed him sharply. He rolled his eyes in disgust and served himself from the bowl of potatoes that had appeared. Conversation in the Hall didn't return to its previous volume as everyone talked of the new arrivals in muted voices.

At one point the three newcomers sitting with the Gryffindors stood up to peer down the table in their direction. Hermione said to Harry, "You could wave."

"What?" Harry asked, looking up from his study guide, which he was now intent on simply memorizing cover to cover.

She laughed. "Too late." Ron had a smirk on his face. Harry shook his head at both of them in annoyance.

After dinner Hermione left the table quickly, then returned as they were all standing up. At the doors they glanced back at the newcomers gathered in the front being introduced to the staff.

Back in the tower they gathered their books for studying. Hermione came back down from her dormitory and said, "Three new trunks are in our room and more beds have been added."

"That's right," Ron said jealously. "It must have been awfully spacious in there with only three of you with a whole floor."

Hermione just shrugged. "Now it's normal, I think. But it does seem crowded," she admitted.

The portrait hole opened and Professor Sinistra stepped in followed by three of the new students. Everyone in the common room stopped what they were doing and

watched them enter. The two longhaired girls were there and a shorter one with a flat topped head of dusty brown hair. She stood like a Quidditch beater might, with a lot of physical confidence.

"Students, we have a few additions for the rest of the year. They will be living with the girls in the seventh-year dormitory." Sinistra gestured over her head for Hermione to step forward. Harry stepped up a riser to get a better view over Ron's shoulder. "Girls, this is Hermione Granger. She is Head Girl and is also in your dormitory. Please come to her with any questions you have." Hermione gave them a smile which was only returned very weakly.

"This is Penelope Tideweather," she said, introducing the tall girl who had led the way into the Great Hall. "Darsha Seth," she said, indicating the Indian girl, who did smile at the room. "And Frina Chuchinick." Frina nodded at the room, her light colored eyes taking everyone in with vague suspicion. "Hermione will show you up to your room. Your trunks are there already."

Harry stepped aside as the group approached. Frina spotted Ron's Prefect badge and shook his hand in what seemed an official way. "Ron Weasley," he said, in an oddly deep voice. Harry had a feeling he was imitating Percy and had to turn away to hide his near laugh.

Ginny and several other girls followed the newcomers up as well. Ron said with some glee, "Well that will put a damper on studying tonight." He turned to Harry and shook his head. "I can't believe . . ."

"What?" Harry asked when Ron had stopped suddenly.

"Uh, that Durmstrang can't teach a decent Defense class," he finished hurriedly. "Hope they like Snape. Seems like their type. No offense intended," he added, touching Harry on the shoulder.

"None taken. I would agree, really. Kind of a stoic bunch."

Ron picked up his bookbag from the floor by the stairs. "I'm sure they'll loosen up once they've been here a while," he said with an unexpected comic certainty. They took seats near the hearth and took out their books.

As predicted, the girls were a long time returning. Hermione and Ginny, when they finally reappeared, came over and sat with them. "They were tired from the train, so they're going to sleep," Hermione said. "They seem nice enough. A little stand-offish, maybe, but I'm sure they'll open up once they get to know people," she said reassuringly, oddly echoing Ron.

The next morning at breakfast, Ron and Harry grew tired of waiting for Hermione to appear and went down without her. Ginny was also apparently helping the new arrivals make their way around this morning because she didn't appear either.

"Girls," Ron breathed in dismay as they exited the portrait hole. "How good do they have to look for breakfast anyway?"

This was the first time in a long time that Harry had been alone with Ron. As they walked down the corridor to the staircases, he swallowed hard and said, "So things are going well with you and Hermione?"

Ron tilted his head from side to side. "Yeah," he answered noncommittally.

Harry frowned. He was really darn curious just how close they were but he had no idea how to ask. He would need an entire evening with Ron to even get near the topic. And maybe a jug of mead as well. With a quiet sigh he let it go for now.

In the Great Hall they took up their normal seats near the center of the table. Neville was already there. He gave them a smile as they sat down. "Where are the others?"

"Who knows?" Ron asked in disgust. "They're girls. It could be HOURS."

Neville laughed. "Luna's not like that."

"Consider yourself lucky," Ron commented as he took an apple out of the basket on the table and bit into it with a loud crunch.

As it turned out, it was just another five minutes. Hermione led the way to the bench across from the three of them and invited the new students to sit. They thanked Hermione politely and sat almost in unison, although it was clear they were not accustomed to stepping over the bench. Penelope had to lift her hair to the side to avoid sitting on it. They took up their serviettes and primly arranged them.

Frina, sitting across from Harry, looked over at him and froze. Harry had to fight a frown as their eyes locked. She nudged Penelope beside her, to no avail, since her friend was discussing the ceiling with Hermione in great detail.

"Hello," Harry said evenly.

"Hello," Frina returned in an accent he didn't recognize. She seemed to recover herself and tossed her head as though she realized she'd been silly. "Very pleased to meet you," she said as though quoting a phrase book.

Chapter 30

"Where are you from?" Harry asked.

"Split. That is in Croatia."

"Ah," Harry said, happy to have a geographic reference for the accent.

With a small smile, she nudged her companion, again to no avail.

"Where is your friend from?" Harry asked.

"Switzerland. The German part." She gave Harry a wink.

"Just asking," Harry returned defensively as food appeared before them.

"So much easier than the serving line at Durmstrang," she said. "The Prefects get to get in line first, behind the teachers. It is ridiculous," she complained. She picked up her fork and began eating with the same relish Ron did, slowing down only when her plate was empty and she had to pause to serve herself seconds. When she glanced up at him, she seemed surprised all over again to be across from him.

The conversation about the enchanted ceiling, its spells and history, finally completed. Frina yet again nudged Penelope and asked, "Did you meet my new friend?" Penelope dabbed her mouth and looked across where Frina indicated. With a quirky smile Frina said, "This is Harry Potter. I am pretty sure anyway. I am told he has this scar."

Harry frowned lightly at that and Penelope's shocked expression. She definitely fell into the he could get dangerous at any moment category. "Hello," he said.

"Hullo," she returned hesitantly as she stared at him. After a moment she too seemed to realize she was behaving oddly and pushed her shoulders back. "You are, uh, normal looking," she said in a light German accent.

"Thanks," Harry said with a little sarcasm. Beside him, Ron ducked his head.

"I haven't heard that one," he said with amusement. "And it probably isn't true."

Harry addressed his plate a bit more than the students around him.

"I am not intending to be rude," Penelope said evenly, sounding concerned.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, "I should have done introductions. These are my friends. Ginny Weasley. Across from her is Dean Thomas. This is Harry Potter." She ignored the gasp from Darsha on her left. "Ron Weasley, my boyfriend. Neville Longbottom. Over here are Dennis and Colin Creevey." The Creevey brothers gave cheerful waves.

"You are friends with the Destroyer of Voldemort?" Darsha quietly asked Hermione in her heavily accented English. It carried well down the table.

"Someone has to be," Ron quipped.

"Ron," Hermione said in such a darkly dangerous voice that Neville instinctively shifted away from his friend in case something bad were about to befall him.

Harry had to resist shooting the new Indian student a dangerous look just to see how she would react. He sighed faintly and pushed his scramble around with his fork, not the least bit hungry anymore. He pushed the plate away and it disappeared. His pumpkin juice sat untouched. He drank it, acutely aware that he was the center of immediate attention.

"I'll see you in class," he said as he stood up to leave. "Nice meeting you all," he said flatly.

At the head table McGonagall watched Harry depart with abnormally slumped shoulders. "Ten points from Gryffindor," she murmured. Snape, in the seat on her right, turned to her in surprise. She stared at her nails in thought as breakfast wound down.

Two rows of new desks had been added to the Defense classroom. By the time everyone arrived, it was rather crowded. Harry and his friends took the back right section of seats. Especially with the new students, Harry decided he liked being back here and able to watch them all without effort. Penelope and Frina mouthed hellos as they sat down. Hermione responded in a very friendly way. Harry gave them a weak smile. Ron frowned in apparent annoyance, which Harry wondered about.

Snape stepped up to the platform and said, "We may need to find a different room. We'll see how it goes today."

Snape lectured at length about advanced blocking and counter-cursing, much of which they had already covered. Hermione didn't even take many notes. Dean, beside Harry, seemed intent upon this review session as did some of the others who apparently felt weak in it.

"A demonstration then," Snape said, looking over the room. "Who is the strongest among you in this?" he asked the Durmstrang students.

The new students all turned to the tallest boy, who stood up slowly. He had a mop of curly dark hair and a roman nose below his prominent forehead. As he stepped up to the platform, he moved with easy confidence.

"You can do all of the spells I just reviewed, Mr. Opus?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," he responded in his very deep voice.

"Mr. Longbottom," Snape said. "Come up here."

Neville recovered from his surprise and came up. "Me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Longbottom." Snape directed him to stand at the other end, ignoring when he almost tripped over his own feet getting into position. "A Figuresempre, an Expellimarius, and a Mutushorum, in that order." He stepped back to get out of the way.

Neville ran through the attacks. Each was blocked easily. "This is the best you have?" Opus asked Snape.

"May I run through them again, sir?" Neville asked, seeming to try not to sound too eager.

"No. You may return to your seat."

Neville actually looked like he considered arguing, before he gave in. "I was trying to be polite," he complained as he sat down in the seat ahead of Harry's.

"You know those attacks, correct?" Snape asked Opus. He looked over the class. "Who wishes to block for Mr. Opus?"

Hermione stood up immediately and stepped to the front. Harry sat forward and watched with some nervousness until he noticed Ron didn't look concerned at all. As Hermione stood across from Opus, wand out, the new student said, "I cannot send curses at a lady. We are never required to do this."

"Good chance to get used to it then," Snape stated with false helpfulness. He gestured for him to begin.

Opus lowered his wand hand to his side. "I will not do this."

"What are you concerned about?" Snape asked with impatience. "I am quite certain Durmstrang does not tolerate arguing with the instructor."

Opus cringed and gestured in Hermione's direction. "That she will get injured. She is so small–imagine if her block fails." Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared back at him.

"Mr. Opus," Snape stated, "the two students you have faced, Ms. Granger and Mr. Longbottom, provided blocking for all nineteen students who attacked the Dark Lord

and his Death Eaters in the Entrance Hall of this castle. You truly need not worry about her block failing."

The Durmstrang students, especially the three living in Gryffindor, gaped at Hermione. Opus relented with a concerned ripple to his brow. He incanted a very weak Figuresempre which Hermione blocked, barely needing to move her wand.

Snape stepped in a little angrily. To the two other Durmstrang boys, he said, "Either of you willing give Ms. Granger a chance to demonstrate her blocks?" When they merely looked at each other and shrunk down in their seats, Snape huffed. "Mr. Potter, come up here."

Harry got to his feet. The Durmstrang students were whispering avidly amongst themselves as he stepped onto the platform. He followed Snape's gesture for him to take Opus' place and the tall boy stepped over to the wall and leaned against it, holding his wrist in his hand.

"Yes," Snape intoned while eyeing the visitors. " The Harry Potter." He stepped back again. "What is your strongest attacking spell?"

"Uh, blasting curse, I guess."

"That then. Full power, Mr. Potter."

At the other end Hermione took a deep breath and concentrated. Harry spelled her with about ninety percent of what he could do. It struck her Chrysanthemum block and scattered around the room, shaking the window panes and desks, even upsetting a stack of books on Snape's front table. She was forced to take a step back as it hit, and she grumbled to herself about that.

"You are light, Ms. Granger," Snape commented. "Even a good block will move the caster when it is hit hard. Now, Mr. Opus."

Harry retook his seat, disregarding the stunned expressions of the new students as he walked between their desks. Opus gave it a good show this time, although Hermione looked displeased. She returned to her seat looking dangerous.

A few more pairs went through the spells. The quality of the Durmstrang blocks dropped off after the first five demonstrators. Snape had asked for them to come up in order of skill. Frina was second followed by Penelope and two others. They were each paired at random with a Hogwarts student.

One of the Durmstrang girls Harry didn't know, raised her hand before the next pair was chosen. When Snape acknowledged her, she asked, "Are these all purebloods in this class? Because we are not . . . "

Snape rubbed his forehead and glanced at them all under his hand. They remained silent, waiting to see what Snape would say. "Ms. Travoli, such notions are not acceptable here. Although you may well hear them expressed on very rare occasion by one or two students." He glared at Malfoy sharply as he said this.

He stepped down to the floor of the classroom and stopped before her desk. "What you are seeing isn't breeding or even nurture; it is the end result of two years desperation against overwhelming odds. Eighty percent of what these students know, or most of them anyway, they taught themselves. I am not trying to demonstrate either school's superiority here, I simply need to know where you are to revise the syllabus for this course."

He returned to the platform. "I have every intention of bringing every one of you to the same level at the end of this year. It is going to require a great deal of work on your part, but I see no reason why it is not possible."

The Durmstrang students appeared relieved at that. The next student came up and was paired with Parkinson.

"Ms. Granger," A familiar voice said as Hermione and Ron walked to lunch. They turned to McGonagall, who stood down a side hallway. "A moment."

Hermione received a sympathetic look from Ron before she stepped over to the headmistress. McGonagall steered her down to Snape's office. As they entered, Snape shelved the book he had been holding and crossed his arms.

"What happened this morning?" McGonagall demanded. Hermione, faced with incriminating Ron, who had only made things more difficult, shrugged. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall prompted dangerously.

She frowned as she replied, "There were two, oh-Merlin-I-can't-believe-it's-him and one he-might-kill-anyone-at-any-moment. Should have warned them, I guess."

Snape's eyes narrowed in thought. McGonagall huffed. "These are some of Durmstrang's best students. They aren't lily-white by any measure."

"We didn't handle it well either," Hermione admitted, spreading the blame around.

"Then you deserved to lose the points you did," McGonagall breathed as an aside.

Hermione's jaw dropped open. She closed it without comment; McGonagall seemed too upset to risk arguing with.
"You will do better?" McGonagall asked with a threatening certainty.
"Yes, ma'am," she replied smartly. "And you are going to start tutoring him in Transfiguration then, right?" Hermione added, leaning forward in anger. Surprised at herself, she backed down immediately. "Sorry Professor, that was out of line." She glanced at Professor Snape and found him looking at her with positive regard.
"He hasn't asked," the headmistress pointed out.
"You're going to have to make him do it," Hermione said. "You know him. He thinks you're too busy, so he won't ask."
McGonagall drew herself up straight. "All right," she said. "I'll do that. And you will take care of the social direction?"
"Yes, ma'am," Hermione replied with confidence. "I think Harry won sympathy points, frankly, so it's probably all right from this morning." She glanced at Snape who had a neutral, thoughtful expression. He hadn't said a word, she realized, as she departed.

After the last class of the afternoon, they gathered in the Great Hall with the new Gryffindor boarders. The three young Durmstrang ladies settled in quickly and intently to their assignments. Harry found himself across from Penelope. She gave him the occasional considering look, which he ignored as he worked out his Astronomy assignment.
As students arrived for dinner, McGonagall strode in. She tapped Harry on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow her. He obeyed, stepping over the bench and down the aisle. When they were out of earshot, the headmistress said. "You have no D.A. tonight, correct?"
"Uh, correct," Harry replied. They had no official D.A., just Advanced, which he couldn't admit to.
"Bring your Transfiguration books to my office at eight," she said. "Ah, Pomona," she then said to the teacher walking past, turning away from Harry. He blinked at her in confusion as she stepped around the head table, intent upon another conversation. He sighed and returned to his friends.
"What was that about?" Ron asked. When Harry moved his silver ring to his other hand, the signal that he couldn't make the meeting, Ron said, "Oh."
They put their books and parchments away as dinner arrived.
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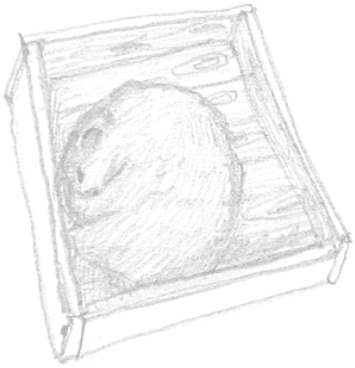
Chapter 31.



Fur and Snow

That evening, Harry gained admittance to the headmistress' office. Over his shoulder his bookbag was slung, full of his assigned and self-purchased alternative texts. It made a loud thud when he set it on the floor beside the visitor's chair. As he sat down, McGonagall waved the straight-backed old thing into an overstuffed armchair. He settled in comfortably and sighed. "Are you sure you have time for this, Professor?" Harry asked in concern.

"Tea?" she asked, rather than reply. At his nod, she tapped the teapot and it poured out two cups. As she handed one over, she said, "One of your most endearing qualities, Harry, is that you have never asked for, nor expected, anything in return for eliminating Voldemort." She smiled affectionately at him. "I will never forget the day after, when you insisted that you couldn't read your mail because you had assignments to finish."

Harry sipped his tea and wondered what she had expected. His furrowed brow must have given him away.

"As opposed," she explained, even more amused, "to insisting on, say, a week off from your studies. Or even a year, frankly."

It was true; he hadn't thought of that. Too late to ask for a by on his N.E.W.T.s probably too, he thought darkly. He shrugged instead of responding.

She took her chair and with bright eyes shook her head lightly. "You saved so many students' lives, Harry. And many of ours, as well. Most of us would have traded anything for that, and yet you asked for nothing." She put her teacup down and refilled it. "I am glad Albus insisted on giving you something anyway, although how he ever managed to arrange it is beyond me."

Harry sort of considered that to be between him and Snape, so he didn't comment.

She sipped her fresh cup with pleasure. "I promised you that I would see you through your N.E.W.T.s so that you could gain admittance to the Auror's program, and I intend to follow through with that. Now, where shall we begin? What was the last assignment you had difficulty with?"

"Protasmic Elastic Transformations," Harry stated slowly, as though the words themselves were hazardous.

"It was just a special form of Elastic, which we covered in fifth year," she offered in a helpful tone. His face must have given him away, because her tone dropped as she said, "You didn't understand it then, either."

Reluctantly, Harry shook his head. "And it didn't make more sense the second time around, last week."

In a commiserating tone she said, "That can happen at this level of coursework. You fall a little behind and it escalates until everything is simply too hard to understand."

Harry nodded and dropped his gaze. "And I feel stupid when I don't even know what to ask to get another explanation. I'm afraid I'm just going to waste your time here."

"Oh, my dear Harry," she said with pained affection. "Goodness, imagine my class of all things making you feel less than worthy." She stood up with a rustle of her robes and came around the desk. She stood before him and said, "In the forty years I have been at this school, you are the student who has amazed me the most. You have already passed the most important test of your life–the rest of this is just so many small details. And I will get you through them."

Exhausted and with a History of Magic essay unfinished, Harry made his way back to the common room. Hermione, Ginny, Dean, and Ron where studying in the corner. The new students weren't around.

"That took a while," Ron commented upon seeing him.

"Tell me about it," Harry breathed as he plunked down in a nearby seat. He rubbed his eyes as he pulled out his half-filled essay parchment. It felt like torture to have to complete it, but he had no choice. "How did Ani go tonight?"

"No one made much progress," Hermione whispered. "We read one of the Animagical chapters aloud and discussed it, mostly. What do you think of the visiting students?"

"They're all right," Harry answered as he reread the first part of his essay titled History of laws applying to Trolls and Giants . He remembered Binns discussing something about them being only allowed to carry weapons that were all wood with no charms. He hadn't mentioned that yet.

"Just all right?" Hermione asked brightly.

Harry shrugged and pulled out his notes.

"Penelope is very pretty," Hermione went on.

Ginny asked, "Does she use something on her face at night? She has the nicest skin."

"I haven't noticed. You could ask her, I'm sure," Hermione said chummily. Harry was writing fast now, desperate to finish, so Hermione dropped the topic.

During Care of Magical Creatures the next day, Hagrid pulled out the Blue Wombats. They had mated, apparently because there were nearly a dozen small blue creatures which even Harry had to admit were very cute as they slept in their wooden crates. The girls were oh ing excessively as they gathered around, their winter cloaks brushing together noisily.

"Yer going ter be assigned one teh take care o' until the end of term. So find a partner," Hagrid instructed. "Nah, tha' won' do," he said as they chose their normal partners. "Split up a bit and take one o' the Durmstrang students, each a yers."

Hermione bit her lip and hauled Ron over to where the six Durmstrang students in this class were gathered. "Ron, why don't you partner with Opus?" she suggested brightly.

Ron opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by Hermione saying. "Frina, do you want to be my partner?"

"Everyone says you are the smartest in the school . . ." Frina said, sounding eager.

"Great," Hermione said.

Harry wandered over at that moment. "Do you haf a partner?" Penelope asked him, making Hermione bite her bottom lip very hard.

Harry shrugged and said, "No."

"Vould you mind?"

Hagrid came by with small crates lined with shredded Prophets and Witch Weeklies . "That'd be fine," Harry replied levelly. Hagrid handed him a crate, and with one of his massive hands, lifted out a small blue ball of fur. Harry accepted it and placed it in the bedding. It curled up tighter and ignored them all. "What magical properties do these things have?" Harry asked as another was scooped out for Hermione. He watched with trepidation as Malfoy took one out of the big crate and handed it to Parkinson.

"Oh, ye'll find ou' soon enough," their teacher said happily.

Harry froze. Hermione giggled and leaned over to say, "They aren't dangerous, Harry."

"That's no fun," Frina complained, as she prodded theirs gently with her index finger. Her hair turned blue and everyone gasped. A few laughed. "What?" she asked curiously.

Harry heard Parkinson's annoying laugh and looked over at Malfoy whose blond mop had gone to the sapphire. Frina turned as well and her hand immediately went to her own head. "Aye," she breathed. Penelope doubled over in laughter, her delicate fingers half over her mouth. She had a much nicer laugh than Pansy, Harry thought.

After dinner, they all went up to the attic to check on their wombats. Each pairs' crate sat on the floor along one eve, charmed to prevent anyone else from opening it or even disturbing it. Harry stood aside and let Penelope open the crate. The small blue furball was absolutely still. She peered at it with a tilted head. "You don't think it likes to be touched?" she asked.

"Hermione?" Harry deferred.

"I don't know. The books referring to magic wombats have all been removed from the library." She sounded insulted. "I tried to look up more information with no luck. I think this assignment is about the process of figuring it out for ourselves." She and Frina stared down at theirs as well.

"Do you think it's hungry?" Ron asked. His and Opus' crate was two down from Hermione's. He stepped over to the supplies area where fresh bedding, dog's milk, dried blue corn, and a large mortar and pestle sat on an old heavy table. Hermione came over and the two of them mixed up a bottle with two tablespoons of ground corn as they had been instructed. Ron shook it as he took it back over to the crate and tried to get the wombat to accept it.

Opus crouched across from him. "You not ever lived on farm?"

"No," Ron replied, sounding as Malfoy might if asked the same question.

Opus took the bottle and with practiced motions, used his finger to get the wombat interested in it. It sucked eagerly at it after that. His hair didn't even change color.

"Wow," Penelope said. "It did not look hungry."

Ron looked proudly at his impromptu partner and gave Hermione a smile. The rest of them, with some instruction from Opus, gave all three of theirs bottles. After long minutes when they stopped drinking, they wouldn't give them up again. Harry shrugged and said, "Just leave it inside, I guess," as he picked up the lid and set it in place. He added an additional locking spell to their crate, just in case.

That night, Harry awoke with a start. He couldn't remember a dream or a shadow, so he wasn't sure why he was awake. He had been sleeping pretty well lately, so he was a little annoyed to be wide awake at three in the morning. As he lay on his back, staring into the darkness, he started worrying about their wombat. Maybe they shouldn't have left the bottle in the crate all this time, he thought. Although, what was the worst that could happen?

With a huff he rolled over and punched his pillow to fluff it, but he was now even more awake. Silently, he slid out of bed and down to his trunk. He hadn't taken out the Marauder's Map to actually use it in a long time. With his invisibility cloak and the Map, he crept out of the room.

The walk to the attic proved rather pleasant; the castle was dark and silent and he felt old comfort in its corridors and halls. Once in the attic, he turned up the oil lamp dangling from the ceiling. The crates in this light resembled coffins, which disturbed him. He stepped down to his, released the spells and lifted the lid before promptly dropping it and jumping back in horrified surprise. Instead of a cute, fuzzy, blue, bear-like thing, there was an oddly monkey-like, furry, blue, winged bat.

As Harry sat beside the crate, catching his breath, it moved its dark skin-covered wing to shade its fox-like head from the light. Harry's panic eased finally and he crouched to lean over the crate and take a better look. The bottle was still there, about half-full. He really needed to take it out, it almost certainly had gone sour. Because the chimneys ran up through the room, the attic was warm all the time, which would certainly have spoiled the milk. Bracing himself and wincing, he reached in with two fingers and plucked the bottle out without disturbing the occupant of the crate. He exhaled in relief and sat back to think. He and his partner now knew something none of the other groups knew, but what did it mean?

He decided that he needed to know what kind of bat it was. With the cloak and Map he nipped down to the library and brought back a book on flying mammals. Other than being blue, it looked an awful lot like a Livingstones fruit bat, which according to the entry could have a wingspan of six feet. Harry tried hard to imagine that and failed. This one was a lot smaller, but then it also was young.

He headed down the kitchens on a hunch and had Dobby put together a basket of fruit, including lots of blueberries, which he took back to the attic. He had left the crate open and had a bad moment before he found his bat hanging from the rafter above its crate. It blinked at him, turning its head this way and that to look him over. Harry dimmed the lamp and offered it different fruit, one kind at a time. It expressed some interest in the blueberries, but mostly it just dropped them on the floor. The orange it took up eagerly when Harry handed it a slice. Using the hooks on the bend in its wings as hands it quickly chewed down the wedge, sucking at the juice before dropping the remains. Harry gave it another.

It ate three-quarters of an entire orange before refusing the next slice. Harry tossed the peel and masticated wedges back in the basket along with every last stray blueberry. Lastly, he needed to put the wombat-bat back away. He looked at the crate in thought before emptying the bedding and putting just a little in one end. It took a little awkward coaxing but eventually he got the bat to hang on the inside of the crate, which he placed on the floor on its end before attaching the lid. He put on extra protective spells and took the basket away.

Chapter 31

Yawning, Harry went down to breakfast. He intentionally sat across from Penelope, who gave him a casual good morning. "We should check our wombats before class, so eat fast," Harry said and then winked at Penelope. She blinked at him in surprise before returning to her plate, befuddled.

Later in the attic, Harry moved in first to reset the crate before anyone saw it, then stalled a bit to let the others get involved in their wombats, changing bedding and bottles. Penelope gave him a concerned look as Harry held the lid just cracked and waited until no one was watching. He put his finger to his lips as he opened it.

Inside wasn't what he was expecting either. Penelope almost gasped, but clamped it off. Inside was a much larger wombat, one with orange tiger stripes. Harry nodded to the corner where spare crates were kept. Penelope went over and picked out a larger one, filled it with bedding and brought it back. Using his body to block the view, Harry moved the sleeping form from one to the other before covering the new one. In rapid, covert silence, they put together a bottle and gave it to the creature before re-closing the lid.

"I have to recheck my essay before class," Harry announced in general. Hermione made a noise of acknowledgment as she and Frina tried to get their wombat to take a bottle. Theirs and Ron's were exactly the same as they'd been the day before. With a wag of his eyebrows at Penelope, Harry left. After a moment, Penelope followed, saying a quick goodbye to her friends.

"What did you do?" she asked when they were on the stairs.

"It was kind of an accident. Not a bad one," he said quickly. "Last night I couldn't sleep so I came up to check on it and . . ." he waited for a cluster of third-years to pass, several of whom said hello to Harry. ". . . you wouldn't believe what I found." He patted his chest at the memory of his racing heart.

"Vat?" she whispered eagerly, accent thickening.

They were at the portrait hole and waited as students came out of it. "I have to get my books for class," Harry said as they stepped through. The common room had a few mingling students in it. "Come up to the boy's dormitory," he said, thinking they could talk freely since it would be empty.

She looked shocked.

"Or . . . not," Harry retracted, a little amused. "Boy's can't go up the girl's staircase, but the reverse doesn't apply. A bit suspicious, I think," he said. "We can talk after classes then. We'll find someplace," he said dismissively and started up.

"It is really okay?" she asked uncertainly from the base of the stairs.

"Hermione has to come up all the time to get Ron moving some mornings," Harry said.

With a glance at the other students in the room, who weren't paying any attention, she followed. Harry then hoped the room wasn't a total mess. He opened the first door and stepped in. It wasn't as bad as it could be.

She looked all around curiously, especially at Dean's football posters. "Dis is a Muggle poster," she commented.

"Dean is Muggle-born," Harry explained offhandedly as he tossed a pair of Neville's socks onto his closed trunk lid.

"Both of his parents?" she asked in surprise.

"Far as I know. Hermione's the same."

That surprised her even more. She stepped around the ends of the beds. "Dis one is yours?" she asked. Her eyes moved avidly over the stuff on the night stand, the poster on the wall. "Do you play Quidditch?"

"Seeker."

She looked at him doubtfully. "You are too tall."

"I didn't used to be. No one told me to change positions for this year."

"No, I don't suppose dey would," she commented. Beside he and Ron's shared window, Ron had pinned up a few Daily Prophet articles regarding the final battle. She leaned over to look at the photo of him in the entrance hall. "It is de same picture as de chocolate frog card," she observed.

Harry could barely stand to look at that picture now. "Blue wombats," he said to draw her away. When she turned with a curious look, he said, "What I found last night at three in the morning was a real bat in our crate. What looked like a Livingstones fruit bat, except blue."

"Hm," she said. "Guess you couldn't come and get me."

He shook his head. "On a hunch I went to the kitchens and brought back fruit for it. It ate most of an orange, hence the stripes, I think. And it's phenomenal growth, too, I suppose."

Chapter 31

"Wow. We should check again tonight. Three a.m. we meet in de common room?"

"Sure. We have to get to Potions, as much as I hate saying that." He turned to check the contents of his bookbag sitting beside the bed. Penelope headed out on her own. When she was gone, he unrolled the Auror's application that was slowly being crushed in the side pocket. He rolled it back up and stuffed it in the drawer of the night stand.

Harry and Penelope met up with the rest of their friends in the Entrance Hall. They headed down to the dungeon together. "Not your favorite?" Penelope asked Harry as she, Hermione, and Frina sat at a bench. Greer wasn't there yet but they were a little early.

"It never has been," Hermione said consolingly. "Though I don't know what Professor Greer has against you, Harry."

"I think I do," Harry said, remembering lunch the first day she arrived.

"You guys just didn't hit it off." Hermione commented.

"And we won't ever. She tried to get Severus fired," Harry said quietly.

"You didn't tell us that," Hermione said in a slightly blameful tone.

"You are referring to Professor Snape?" Frina asked in confusion. "You refer to your teachers by first name?" she asked in horror.

Harry shrugged. "The headmistress keeps telling me to call her 'Minerva'."

Hermione said, "Harry's special," with a broad grin. "And after the years of suffering in Snape's Potion class, he deserves it."

"Professor Snape used to teach Potions?" Penelope asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "In fact he graded your school's O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. tests this past year."

"Did he?" Hermione asked with keen interest. Harry nodded in confirmation.

"It is too bad he cannot teach both," Frina said stoutly. "I like Professor Snape. He treats girls and boys the same." Penelope gave her friend a distressed look.

"There's a reason to like him," Hermione quipped in disbelief, garnering a difficult look from Harry.

Greer stomped in at that moment and conversation stopped.

By the end of double Potions, Penelope and Frina were very concerned. In the corridor on the way out, with Darsha trailing behind, Penelope said, "She is totally unfair to you."

Harry shrugged it off. "I have too many other things to worry about. And my N.E.W.T. grade is all that matters."

"I hope she grades us fairly," Frina said worriedly. "What do you think?" she asked Darsha.

"I liked the lecture," she replied. "Her pomposity does not matter." She gave Harry a measuring look when their eyes met. He ignored it.

"Bring her a present or something. Get on her good side," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," Hermione confirmed.

"We will do that at lunch," Frina said. "We have a few things we brought to give as presents, but your headmistress did not seem to expect any so we still have them."

Late that night, Harry went down to the common room without his cloak or Map. Penelope was waiting before the fire. He stepped over, making her jump.

"Sorry," Harry said.

She patted her chest and caught her breath. "I didn't hear you." She stood up and put on her cloak. Harry thought she looked a little sad.

Outside the portrait hole, he asked, "Are you glad you came to Hogwarts?"

"Very. Durmstrang lost many staff last year, so even de end of last year's classes were cancelled or not taught well. You were very lucky here. In one way," she added quickly. "I keep forgetting who I am conversing with," she said, half to herself. As they rounded the first corner, she said, "You are not at all as one would expect you to be."

"No?" Harry prompted. He wasn't sure he wanted to cover this topic, but he was a little curious what she meant by that.

She thought a moment. "You are not as . . . grand, I suppose is de word. Quieter than I have expected."

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"Keeping low was important for staying alive," Harry pointed out.

"Very true," she agreed quietly. Harry sensed there was something there but didn't feel he could pry at it.

Up in the attic they opened the crate and found the same striped wombat as before, although it looked a little bigger than this afternoon.

"It is too cute to not pet," she said, reaching into the box to touch it on the head. Her long black hair turned blue striped with orange. She pulled her hair around and examined it with her other hand. "Goodness," she breathed, but continued to pat the creature on the head.

"If your skin changes, maybe you should stop," Harry suggested in concern, taking a seat on the floor nearby.

Silence descended for many minutes, until Penelope said in an odd voice, "What was it like, destroying Voldemort?"

Harry tilted his head to the side and didn't reply. He noticed the strips in her hair oscillating a bit when she spoke.

"You did kill him, right? That isn't just a story?" she asked a little stiffly.

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "I had a little help, of course. My friends kept his followers at bay long enough for me to do it."

She shook her head. "De news reports said you were fulfilling some prophecy. Is dat why you were trying? Otherwise you were merely insane to try. You don't look like someone who could defeat such a powerful wizard."

"It was insane," Harry admitted, feeling the honesty of that relaxing him. "I'm amazed I succeeded when I think back on it. But I couldn't not try. He was there to kill me."

She lifted the wombat out and cradled it on her arm. Harry held his breath, afraid something bad might happen. It seemed to be asleep. "Don't move much, do they," Harry observed.

"I think it is a lovely thing. Like a baby bear." She held her hand out to check it for color. Seeing it normal she petted the wombat more. "Were you taking revenge when you killed him?" she asked.

Harry looked her over. He couldn't shake the notion that she sounded hopeful. Her hair definitely rippled that time. "No. I would have died had I tried."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want to explain."

She looked up. "I'm sorry. I'm too curious. It is easy to talk to you, which is very strange. You are so ordinary."

Harry grinned at that. He stood up and with a sigh, said, "I'd like to be." He went to the supplies table and put together two bottles. He had kept an orange from breakfast in his pocket. "I want to try something," he commented. He squeezed the orange into one of the bottles and brought them both over. She lifted the wombat to put it back in the crate; it clung to her robes with a kind of desperation.

Harry reached over and unhooked its broad claws so she could put it down. It pawed the bedding when she released it. "It wants zomething to hold on to," she said, sounding very concerned. She stood up and took off her cloak.

As she wrapped it into a tight bundle, Harry said, "You're going to use that?"

"I zink it will like de fur collar." She put a few charms on it to keep it clean and untorn and stuffed it beside the wombat, down into the bedding. The creature grabbed the furry side and pulled itself over to it. "Zeems to like it." She looked up at him. "Harry?"

Harry had fallen into a trancelike state of memory. "Don't mind me," he said quietly, mentally shaking himself. He saw the bottles he had set beside the crate and picked up the orange-tinted one. "I want to see if it still wants some fruit." The two of them coaxed it to take the bottle and it happily went to it. "I assume it wouldn't eat it if it shouldn't," Harry said. "You think?" he asked her.

She lifted a shoulder. "Probably would just annoy it to zwitch back and forth to test."

By silent consensus they closed the lid again and left it there.

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Chapter 32.

Applying Oneself

It was a cold, windy day for the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match. Harry was very glad they weren't playing as he and his friends mounted the steps up to the stands. They emerged in a brisk breeze that froze his cheeks. He wrapped his new cloak tightly around himself as he sat between Ron and Penelope.

"For which side are you cheering?" Penelope asked.

"Oh . . ." Harry said and hesitated.

Ron's head snapped around at his indecision and he glared at Harry. "Don't tell me . . . " he breathed in annoyance.

"I like Suze. I wouldn't mind if she caught the Snitch," Harry explained calmly.

Ron grumbled but it sounded vaguely conciliatory.

The Gryffindor stands were backing Ravenclaw, so Harry kept his cheering for the Slytherin Seeker quiet. Roody, the Ravenclaw Seeker was around Harry's size and he was having a very hard time keeping up. Harry could see him deciding to just play his own game and ignore his pale, feather-light opposite.

The Slytherin Chasers, whom Harry had not had time to watch last game, were really very good. And very violent, rarely swerving out of the path of an opponent who tried to cut them off. Sometimes they would just take a bludger to the body rather than

lose an offensive setup. Quickly the score was fifty to ten. The green-clad Beaters then focused on Roody, who could not handle both the violent harassment and his agile opponent. He let himself be forced farther out of the pitch area, where it was not impossible the Snitch was hovering, but it was unlikely.

Forty-five minutes into the match, the crowd rose to its feet as Suze turned and dove for the snitch. Roody was too far away but he turned anyway and sped toward the center of the arena. The Snitch dodged twice, but Suze stayed right with it and snagged it easily out of the air.

The Slytherin stands erupted into cheers. Harry grinned. Ron gave him a disgusted look as the crowd drew in its breath and shouts of warning went up. Harry turned in time to see Roody careen into Suze, unable to slow in time from his mad dive. Harry stiffened at the sound of the collision of bodies and brooms. Without forethought he dashed for the stairs and took them three at a time. Other spectators were also pouring onto the pitch.

When Harry arrived where the teams were landing, Suze was trying to stand up and her teammates were urging her to stay put. Roody was rubbing his elbow with a pained frown. Harry grabbed the front of his jersey and demanded, "What did you bloody well think you were doing?"

Roody gaped at him in complete shock and Harry released him with a small shove. Everyone around them quieted, waiting to see what might develop. Snape arrived and ordered Suze to sit down on the frozen grass to await Madame Pomfrey. Ron grabbed Harry's arm and tugged him away from the Ravenclaw team. "Hey there, mate. No fighting," he said in a strangely amiable tone. Hermione was giving him a very soft look.

Harry tried to justify his reaction. "She's too small, Roody should have been more careful."

"Harry, it's Quidditch," Ron stated as if that covered it.

Harry glanced back. A witch and a wizard he did not recognize were crouching beside Suze, fussing over her despite her protestations. Harry studied Suze's very ordinary looking parents as the crowd pressed in, blocking the view.

They walked slowly back to the castle. "You were starting a fight?" Penelope asked Harry.

"Wasn't trying to," Harry replied.

Ron supplied with a crooked grin, "Harry was just standing up for his date from the Christmas Ball."

Penelope blinked at that. "She is so young, no?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was ordered to find a dance partner for the ball," he griped, trying to close the topic. "It wasn't a date."

Ron, still in a teasing mode, went on, "So he picked the girl that would make the teachers least happy with him."

"I had a nice time," Harry said defensively. "So did she."

Hermione found herself cornered on the way to Advanced D.A., of all times. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall intoned before opening her classroom door and inviting Hermione inside. Hermione followed and kept her face neutral as she waited for McGonagall to speak.

"How are things going?" the headmistress asked. "I had Harry to my office for tutoring just an hour ago, but I could not read him this evening."

"Pretty good, I think," Hermione said. "He is partnered with one of the new students on a Care of Magical Creatures project. Penelope. I get the sense that they've talked a little."

"Good," she breathed. "Harry, of all people, should not feel left out." She gestured that Hermione could leave.

Hermione hurried down to the Room of Requirement. She was now firmly determined to make Harry try the Canarevelatio spell today.

While the rest of the students worked on building what the book called membrane energy, Hermione cornered her friend. "Try for me, please," she pleaded. When he frowned, she pulled out the big guns. "Your father would be so proud of you, following in his footsteps." She held her breath. That was either going to work, or backfire badly.

Harry huffed and sat on the side bench to take off his shoe. Ron, seeing this, came over and sat beside him. Harry incanted the spell on his right foot. Nothing happened. When he shrugged, Hermione insisted chastisingly, "Try again." Harry did so, many times, still with no result.

Suze came over as well and stood beside Hermione, who said, "Maybe you are thinking of the wrong animal. What are you thinking of?"

"A stag, like my father and my Patronus," he said, a little annoyed despite them all trying to help.

Suze, in her lilting voice, said, "Just think of your spirit. That is what I did."

Harry's brow furrowed as he considered that. He scratched his head and thought a long time. Images of himself as various things flitted through his mind: Fawkes, a stag, a dog like Sirius. He tried to imagine himself as something else, though not anything in particular, as an essence, maybe, and spoke the spell.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry looked down at his foot, which was now a big paw except scarlet furred. Bright scarlet. He was afraid to touch it, just stared at it, waiting for it change back, fearful it might not.

"What is that?" Hermione said reverently as she crouched to look it over. When she reached out to touch his foot, he jerked it instinctively away. "I'm not going to hurt you, Harry," she chastised him.

"It just bothers me," he explained. His foot morphed back at that moment and he breathed out a deep sigh.

"Let's see it again," Dean said.

"No," Harry said. "I saw it enough."

Over the groans of disappointment, Hermione said, "Come over and start working on your membrane energy. Come on," she urged, tugging on his arm which forced him to follow.

McGonagall stepped into the Defense classroom between sessions. She held out a rolled parchment to Snape. "I took the liberty of checking with the Ministry if Mr. Potter had applied." She waited for him to unroll the blank form. "I apologize if I have overstepped my bounds but I have an old promise I feel obliged to uphold and the application period is only open one more week. I have hopes for his N.E.W.T. result, but perhaps he doesn't. I will leave it to you."

"Thank you, Minerva," Snape said. "Perhaps there is one thing more you could do . . ." he added, as she moved to the door.

Chapter 32

Harry inevitably stopped by, that evening in fact, as Snape worked in his office. "Sit down," Snape said to him.

Harry, caught a little off-guard by the tone which was more businesslike than expected, obeyed slowly as he tried to think of what he could be in trouble for. Snape waved the door closed and stepped before his desk, arms folded.

"Do you wish to apply for the Auror's program?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. "I still have time, right?"

"Yes. Not much, however," Snape pointed out. "May I inquire what the delay is caused by? Clearly you won't be certain of your N.E.W.T.s until months after the deadline."

Harry looked away as he thought up an answer. When he didn't reply right away, Snape said, "Is it caused by your inability to know for certain that you have rightfully earned a spot?"

"Maybe," Harry hedged. He hadn't given it a terrible amount of thought, just kept putting it off.

"I have taken the liberty of having Headmistress McGonagall contact Ms. Tonks regarding your concerns. We have been assured by her that your application will be treated with as ordinary regard as possible. Also, that should you qualify, your testing will be equally as rigorous as your peers'."

Harry considered that. At one level, their interference bothered him, but at another he felt relieved. Snape reached into his pocket and pulled the application out. "Why don't you fill it out right now?"

Harry accepted the rough brown parchment. He hadn't filled in anything on his own copy, so starting again was all right. With one hand he flattened out the sheet on his lap as he reached in his bag for a quill. Snape set a bottle of ink on the edge of the desk for him to use. After pulling his chair closer to use Snape's desk for writing, Harry considered the many blank boxes. The questions at the end had seemed as daunting as when he had first looked it over.

"Certainly the first line does not present a problem," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry shot him a slightly annoyed look and filled in his name. It felt like he was gaming it already just with that. He kept Snape's reassurances in mind as he filled in his basic contact information, including the address in Shrewsthorpe, and date of his N.E.W.T. testing. He left the score boxes blank since the date was in the future.

He willed those blanks to be filled in with the proper number of Os and Es when the time came.

Below the basic data were large, fancily-framed boxes. The first one said, Describe in 300 words or less why you wish to pursue a career as an Auror. Snape considered him as he thought this over. He stepped around to the back of the desk and sat in his chair. As he steepled his fingers before him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should answer the last question first. The answer to the first one may flow from that."

Harry uncurled the parchment to reveal the last blank space. Please include below any other details you would like considered with your application. Harry stared at that with a vaguely floating feeling that was not very conducive to writing.

Snape's voice interrupted his pointless musings. "When did you decide to become an Auror?"

"When I found out there was such a thing. Nothing else has seemed remotely interesting since then," Harry replied. "I met Tonks and the others. They enjoyed what they were doing. They were always involved in whatever was going on." Always knew what was going on, Harry thought wryly. "Whatever they are assigned, always has some kind of meaning."

"I would not go that far," Snape commented from his leaned back position in his chair. "But your point is a valid one, nonetheless. All good material for the first box."

Harry shifted the parchment up and forced himself to rephrase what he had just said. It looked pale to him, but he had to put something down. "Do you think I should be applying?" he asked, looking for reassurance.

"Harry, if I didn't think it utterly unfair to do so, I would talk you out of it."

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Why?"

Snape's hair had fallen half over his face as he stared over his steepled fingers. "Because it is a very hazardous occupation." He frowned inwardly and sighed.

"You don't think I'm used to that?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps too much so." Snape fell silent a long time before he said, "Promise me something, Harry."

"Of course."

"Never let your guard down," he said simply, then after a slight pause he went on in his earlier, generally helpful tone, "The second box asks about special skills, does it not?"

Harry made himself check the answer to this. "Yes," he said. He swallowed as he thought about that. "I'm resisting writing Parseltongue," he said. "As well as pointing out that I see Death Eaters in my vision at the edge of sleep."

"You have unique insight into the Dementors," Snape said.

"Don't you think they know that?"

"If you wish to be treated as an ordinary applicant, you must behave as one and assume they know nothing."

Harry managed to write something down to the effect that since he had temporarily been part of the Dementors' mind web, that he understood them rather better than the average wizard. He thought over his other skills. Seeker wasn't very meaningful, although his skill on a broom might be, in general. He wrote that down, trying to make it sound Quidditch-neutral.

After Harry paused again in thought, Snape commented, "Certainly you have more than two skills." At Harry's shrug he said, "Did you include your ability to teach spells to others?"

"Do you think they care?"

"It is rarer than you realize. Probably worth noting." As Harry added it, Snape said. "You are adept at Occlusion."

"Good one," Harry said, adding that with confidence.

"You pick up new spells quickly," Snape said.

Harry noted that, trying hard not to sound cocky in the phrasing. The list looked pretty good. "Last box," Harry said, considering his answer. "I suppose saying that I wouldn't know what else to do with myself wouldn't be the best thing."

"Do you have a backup plan?" Snape asked.

"No. Do you think I should?"

"For your own flexibility only. There is no chance they will turn you down for the program," Snape said evenly.

"I thought you said-" Harry said with ready offense.

Snape sat forward suddenly and interrupted him sharply. "You are consummately qualified, Potter–that is why you will not be turned down." Harry could hear plainly how Snape regretted that notion. His guardian went on, "If you are not qualified,

no one is." He sat back again and stared at the far corner of the ceiling. "Use the last box to list the dark wizards you have survived battling, captured, or outrightly killed."

Harry couldn't read the tone Snape had used to say that. "Do you think I'll get past the first stage if I don't?"

"Most likely."

"Maybe I won't then."

"Your fellow applicants certainly would."

Harry stared at the blank space. "It would take a while to work it out." At Snape's snarky expression, Harry said, "I didn't mean it that way."

"The result is the same. Start from the beginning, if you must."

"How about from the evilest down?" Harry quipped in his own snarkiness. At Snape's accented shrug, Harry frowned, he found he couldn't just write, I have fought the following dark wizards , followed by a list. "I can't just write them out."

"Why not?"

Quietly, Harry replied, "Because I wish none of it had happened."

Snape rubbed his forehead before tossing his hair back and staring at the ceiling. "Why are you applying for this apprenticeship again?"

Feeling more uncertain than he ever had about it, Harry admitted, "I'm not sure."

"You need to figure it out," Snape commented levelly.

After a long pause, Harry asked, "Can I sleep on it?"

Snape ignored this plea. "What does Nymphadora Tonks have that you do not?" he asked.

That was a good question, Harry thought. He pulled off his glasses to rub his eyes as he pictured her going about her duties. "Control of her destiny?" he finally suggested.

Snape considered that at length before he said, "We should all be so lucky, Potter."

Pleading ever so slightly, Harry said, "I'm doing this because I want to. Not to stay alive . . . or to preserve everything that matters," he finished grimly.

"I would not recommend writing that," Snape commented.

"It is the other side of 'what else would I do with myself?"' Harry added and laughed painfully. He looked down at the parchment and sighed. "I don't feel so bad now about not starting this sooner."

"I really think you should list who you have faced and be done with it; it speaks for itself," Snape said. He pulled out his wand to make tea as he spoke.

"If I didn't become an Auror, what do you think I could do?"

"Aside from follow the path Lockhart so clearly blazed for us all and sell books with yourself on the cover, perhaps teach, since you show promise for that."

Having never considered that, Harry gave it due consideration now. "But you have the job I'd want," he pointed out, amused. Snape poured tea for them both with a momentarily alarmed expression. Harry assumed it was a put-on and laughed lightly. As he accepted the cup he said, "I do want to get away from this place."

"You should. And I am not just saying that because of my lack of confidence in which of us McGonagall would choose for this position, if faced with the choice."

Harry watched him top up his tea. A surge of gratitude at having a guardian flowed through him. His friends were scheming their flight from this place, making it clear by their optimism that they would not look back, nor feel much consideration for others not so well set up with plans. At the end of the year, he would essentially be left entirely to himself were it not for the wizard sitting before him.

"Shall I list them for you?" Snape asked, breaking Harry's reverie.

"I can." Harry did as he said he couldn't stand to do, and began listing. "Quirrell, Voldemort, Tom Riddle, Peter Pettigrew, Barty Crouch Jr. . . ."

"Sirius Black," Snape suggested. At Harry's disapproving look, he added, "The Ministry would count him."

Harry shook his head and re-dipped his quill, surprised to find only a ghostly ache where there had once been a gaping wound. He blinked at the parchment and waited for a moment of regret to pass before he returned to his task. "The twelve at the Ministry, Voldemort again so I won't list it, especially since I'm certain I would have been toast if Dumbledore hadn't shown up. Malfoy and company, which is a subset of the Ministry . . ." Harry looked up as he thought about that. "Anything happened with the other two, Avery and Jugson?"

"The Ministry thinks they have gone to ground permanently, although they are still looking." Snape studied his fingernails as he added, "Next to Crabbe and Goyle, they were the least effective members of the Dark Lord's inner circle."

Harry had forgotten about them. He forced himself to list them too. It was a long list. He glanced back at the first box. "Should I add that I think I would be good at it?"

"No, because I think they will be spending the first year beating overconfidence out of you. That is only a guess, of course, based on interacting with many Aurors over the years. I certainly hope they will be doing so."

Harry left it off. He folded it up and took the envelope Snape offered. He copied the address from the top of the application onto the front and sealed it. Holding it in both hands, he said, "Is my detention over then?"

Snape raised an amused brow. "Yes."

Harry hesitated in the doorway as he considered how to thank Snape for putting his own inclinations aside. "Thank you, sir," he said simply.

Snape nodded as he returned to his earlier work.

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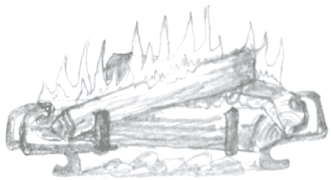
Chapter 33.



Old Wounds

A few weeks went by. Harry and Penelope had to change crates yet again as their wombat grew. It now ate fruit exclusively and it started resist returning to its crate. Dean accused them of using a larger crate just to make people wonder. They had to choose times to take care of it when others weren't coming up to check on their own projects. As they arrived one night during dinner time, Malfoy was just leaving. He looked angry and his whole hand was blue.

They went through the now-practiced procedure, using less bedding this time since they didn't have a larger crate, and it was crowded, which the creature didn't seem to mind. As they worked, Harry could not keep his mind off Malfoy's wombat. His eyes kept straying over to Malfoy and Parkinson's crate in the corner. He felt bad that he had forgotten his concern when he had first watched them take one.

As they closed the lid on their crate, Harry stepped over to the far one. "Want to check on it?" Penelope said from behind him.

"Yeah." He ran a long string of curse breaking spells on the crate, getting two flashes on random ones as the spells released. Then a series of unlock spells, which revealed nothing.

"Wow," Penelope breathed after the long series ceased.

Harry lifted the lid. Inside was something similar to a chrysalis. "What is that?" he asked aloud. The stiff skin of it rippled as something inside moved. Unnerved, Harry closed it and respelled it. "It's in some kind of defensive mode, I guess." He felt badly for it.

"What can we do?"

"Complain to Hagrid. I'll do that after class tomorrow."

Greer stalked around the classroom as they brewed. She paused beside their bench and peered into Frina's cauldron appraisingly. "More heat," she stated smartly.

Frina moved quickly to adjust the flame. Greer then eyed Harry's potion while he mostly ignored her. "And we are not allowed to say anything negative about Mr. Potter's potion," she said quite snidely.

Harry held off just barely on rolling his eyes or just snarling at her. His expectation that she'd grow bored of this theme had proved wrong. Clearly either his guardian or McGonagall had spoken with her at some point. He continued to ignore his teacher as he ground beetle wings into the finest powder that one could ever manage. Luckily, she had stopped asking him questions as well and he hoped it was because he almost never got them wrong. Padma fell under the teacher's unrelenting scrutiny next. She added too much rat brain powder and a cloud of noxious grey smoke mushroomed from her cauldron. The Slytherins jeered in whispered singsong and Padma looked as though she wanted to knock her setup onto the floor. Greer waved the contents away with a falsely sympathetic grin.

"Poor dear, perhaps next time," Greer said.

Padma bit her lip and took out her notes and sat down to review for the remainder of the session. The rest of them shared pained looks.

"She is too soft," Frina stated sadly.

"Greer is too–" Hermione began, sounding unusually vicious, but was cut off by the teacher asking her a question that was not in the reading, but she answered it correctly anyway. Under her breath after Greer turned to praise the Slytherin potions and assign them some points based on her praise, Hermione said, "If nothing else, we will ace our N.E.W.T.s if we survive this class."

"Don' worry, Harry," Hagrid said when he and the gamekeeper were in his cabin after class. "Can' really harm 'em. Yer weren' supposta look yeh know. Tha's cheating."

"We were worried about it," Harry explained.

"Ah, yer a softhearted one, Harry. Have time fer a spot o' tea?" Hagrid asked, lifting the big bucket off the fire to take it to the pump out back.

"Not really. I'm going to be late as it is for double Defense."

Harry ran to the Defense classroom and still arrived five minutes after the start, which Snape pointed out as he entered.

"You took five points from Slytherin last time I was late," Malfoy complained.

"You are correct," Snape said, "Five points from Gryffindor," he breathed and gave Harry a look that dared him to challenge it.

Harry frowned and sat down, but Penelope gave him a sympathetic smile which made it all right. The dark look she gave Snape after, made him a little uneasy.

After class Harry went to the front and said quietly, "I was talking to Hagrid about something important."

"You should have done it later. I have to be hard on you, or I could lose control of the class," Snape said.

"Or at least the Slytherin part of it," Harry commented with a sly grin.

"Perhaps you will do me a favor next session," Snape said as he flipped through the parchments that had been turned in.

"After that ?" Harry asked with false sharpness.

Snape touched him on the arm and said with a small smile, "Yes, after that. I want to split the room up to cover two different things next week during the double session. Can you and Ms. Granger cover the examination review for the regular students, while I cover curse detection for the Durmstrang students? The Durmstrang students are not taking end of term examinations and it is a good chance to catch them up."

"Sure," Harry conceded.

Snape reached into the drawer of the desk and took out a roll of parchments tied with black ribbon. "Here are my notes for the term. Please don't lose them. Starred topics will be tested. Don't show that to anyone but Ms. Granger."

Harry nodded and put it in his bookbag. He said goodbye and stepped away, surprised to find Penelope hovering by the door, apparently waiting for him. "Thank you, Harry," Snape said as Harry crossed to the door.

"No problem, sir," he replied over his shoulder. Penelope followed him out, looking concerned.

In the corridor, when they had almost reached the portrait hole, she said in a low voice, "Professor Snape was good friends with Headmaster Karkaroff, you know."

"I wouldn't have said, 'friends'," Harry returned. They walked in silence until Harry led the way into the common room where they joined Ron and Hermione. Penelope appeared to wish to say more. "Don't hold back because of them," Harry said to her.

"What's up?" Hermione asked in concern.

"She is trying to warn me about Professor Snape, insists he was friends with Igor Karkaroff."

"Oh," Hermione snipped. She gave Penelope a pained smile. "Don't wade into that," she suggested.

Penelope gave her a dark look before ranting, "He was evil. You don't how bad it was when he came back. It was a nightmare. He caused so many to die. And anyone who was with him, with Voldemort, well . . ." She looked them all over sharply, eyes bright. As she spun away to leave, Ron caught her with one of his long arms and dragged her back. "Let me go," she protested.

"Sit down," Ron said, exchanging places with her, so he was standing, holding her down in the chair by her arms.

Harry stared at Penelope's distressed face. She had her long hair pulled over her shoulder and ran her hands over it repeatedly in a form of self-comfort.

"Stay," Ron said before releasing her.

"It was terrible. Everyone took sides. Some took Karkaroff's because dey thought he would restore order. Dey foolishly beliefed him." A tear dropped out of her right eye. She rubbed it away angrily. "It is zo much nicer here. De place where Voldemort came himself. I don't understand."

"That was mostly Dumbledore's doing," Hermione said. "He worked hard to keep the outside world at bay." She glanced at Harry and they shared a frown.

Harry said, "Professor Snape is my adoptive father. He isn't a dark wizard. Even if he did know Karkaroff from way back."

She stared at him in surprise. "Dis is true?" she asked the assembled. When they nodded, she dabbed at her eye primly. "You would trust him? To be alone with him?" this she directed at Hermione.

"Harry lives with him," Hermione pointed out.

Harry nodded to confirm this and said, "If you need someone to talk to about what happened with Karkaroff, Professor Snape might be willing. I'll ask him if you want."

She looked alarmed at the notion, then relented slightly. "Perhaps I am keeping it too boxed up inside," she said dazedly. "But I would not have thought to talk to him."

"Or talk to any of us," Hermione offered.

Penelope looked over at her. "You faced twenty-two Death Eaters." She shook her head. "We only had to face each oder," she said sadly.

"Sounds worse," Ron said. "It helps to know who your enemy is."

The other students in the common room were quieting to listen in. Ginny came over and crouched beside the chair. "Discussing bad stuff over here?"

"I would have wanted revenge," Penelope said as she stared at the far wall.

"Surprised Harry didn't," Ginny said. "Why was that, Harry?"

"Let's not go into the Harry part of it," he said.

"Keeping it all boxed up too?" Ginny teased.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry snapped at her although it had a playful edge to it. Ginny laughed.

"It's almost the end of term," Ron said. "We're coming up on the bloody anniversary, you know."

Ginny teased in a falsely excited way, "That means the press will be here."

"Merlin," Harry breathed.

Penelope looked at him with sad eyes. "It is so unreal to be here with you all," she breathed. "Wit the Destroyer of Voldemort and his friends. I write home to my mum and dad and I don't think dey belief me."

"We would have taken out Karkaroff during the Tri-Wizard Tournament had we known," Ron said with feeling.

"Dumbledore would have kicked your arse," Ginny said to him.

"True," Ron said with a little alarm at the notion. His stomach growled at that moment. "It is dinner, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Why don't I take you to the girl's toilet to wash up," Hermione said to Penelope. "Ginny, can you get her kit? It is the purple one on the first night stand on the left." Ginny jumped up and went to the dormitory stairs.

In the toilet as Penelope washed her face, Hermione asked, "Did you lose someone?"

"My brother. My boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, choking up herself at the thought.

"It vas terrible. Every day or two dere vould be more bodies. You start to get used to it and just . . . check if dey are someone you know," Penelope said. Ginny came in and handed over her purple toiletry kit.

"Why didn't you leave?" Hermione asked.

"Durmstrang Institute, it is not like Hogwarts School. It is spelled in more ways to hide it and protect it. You cannot just leave. De headmaster controls dat."

Horrified, Hermione swallowed hard and helped Penelope put a bit of base under her eyes.

"I should just skip dinner," she said, looking at herself in the mirror.

"No. That isn't a good idea," Hermione insisted. "You have to stay around your friends. People who know what happened to you."

"Works for Harry," Ginny said as she crossed her arms and leaned against the next wash basin.

"Ginny," Hermione chastised her.

Ginny retorted, "Hey, thinking about how messed up Harry was always made me feel better. I never had Dementors in my head. Just Voldemort like he did."

Penelope froze as she put on a bit of blush. "He had Voldemort in his head?" she asked in a stunned voice. "You had . . . ?"

"Ginny, you are like Ron; I'm going to have to smack you to get you to shut up," Hermione said angrily. "If Harry feels like sharing stuff like that, he can do it himself. He has a hard enough time getting treated normally without you two reminding everyone of how messed up things have been."

"I tink he is very ordinary," Penelope opined carefully.

"Good," Hermione said forcefully. "Tell him that sometime, will you?"

"I did before." She started putting away her makeup. "He did zeem pleased to hear dis."

"I'm sure he was." Hermione said, moving to open the door. "It's a lifelong dream, I think."

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Dinner passed in self-absorbed, reflective quiet at their part of the table. Everyone moved on automatic as they served themselves and ate. Harry had a sense that this was obvious to others and that they were being watched because of it. He finally turned and challenged the gazes from the head table. McGonagall looked away a little guiltily. Snape narrowed his eyes at them and stood up.

"Oops," Harry said as he turned back. "We're about to have company."

Hermione turned and watched Harry's guardian approach. Snape stopped behind Harry and asked, "Everything all right here?"

Harry watched Penelope across from him, studying Snape in a pained, worried way. "Uh," Harry started, then noticed that much of the table, up and down from them, were listening. "I'll explain later, sir."

Snape's hand fell on his shoulder. "Yes," he confirmed simply before walking back to the front.

At the end of dinner, Snape waited beside the hearth where Harry joined him. Standing in silence, they let the rest of the students and staff file out. When the Great Hall was empty, Harry checked the doors and saw Penelope hovering there. She had a fondness for that, apparently.

"Come in if you want," Harry invited.

"And the topic is?" Snape prompted.

"Durmstrang. Karkaroff," Harry replied levelly.

"I see," Snape breathed. "By all means, Ms. Tideweather. Come in," he invited dryly.

She stepped in silently and came over to them. The lamps in the Hall had dimmed themselves and now the fire provided most of the light. "Karkaroff was a desperate man," Snape stated, his gaze sliding over to her. "That kind is always the most dangerous."

"How well did you know him?" she asked.

"Hm. Better than average, I suppose," he replied reluctantly.

Harry stepped back and sat on the nearest bench, facing the fire.

"You are saying that is why he did it?" Penelope challenged him.

"He did it because he was weak. Durmstrang and its spells were a tool and a kind of shield, a powerful one built up by centuries of respelling. Taking over the school bought him time."

Snape turned to look back at Harry sitting behind and to the side of him. He seemed to be deciding how best to proceed. "Only a weak man like Karkaroff would work so hard to take so many down with him when he fell."

"He took many down," Penelope agreed sadly. Her eyes darted around the Great Hall. "The risk here of de same?"

Snape replied, "The risk of that here is much lower–most of the magic left by the Hogwarts founders has been reduced to only the most passive spells."

Harry snorted quietly.

"Well, for the most part," Snape admitted. "Harry had the misfortune his second year to be led into a trap left by one of Hogwarts' founders."

"Who led you in?" she asked Harry, clearly distracted from her own dark musings. "The ghost of the founder?"

"Voldemort," Snape supplied.

"What?" she blurted in surprise.

"This school, for all its protections allowed Voldemort access many times. Isn't that right, Harry?" Snape prompted, seeming unwilling to let Harry sit out this conversation.

Harry, worried at Snape's tone, replied quietly, "A few, yeah."

"Your first year as I recall and your second."

"Voldemort was here–?" Penelope began in alarm.

Snape continued over her, "Your fourth he had to abduct you, since he could not access the castle, but yet again you prevailed."

"That was a draw at best," Harry pointed out.

"It made him mortal, therefore killable," Snape refuted in a hard tone. "Fifth, he certainly got the better of you . Sixth of course, we all know. Five times, Potter. My goodness."

"And your point is?" Harry asked in an annoyed tone. He didn't want to meet Penelope's gaze. The glimpse he had of it made it appear far too awed.

"That if you, with your penchant for feeling sorry for yourself, can persevere, then anyone can," he stated with his old rudeness.

"I had a lot of help. And I think having friends pitted against each other would be worse then facing clear evil."

"Hm," Snape replied noncommittally. To Penelope, he said flatly, "Healing and the blessing of failing memory take time. Be patient. Dwelling in the tragic past only keeps it alive."

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked between them with a strained expression. Harry gave her a soft frown, not finding anything useful to add. He didn't like the pained, wishful expression she was wearing now; he thought she was hoping for too much from him.

Snape crossed his arms and added, "It may help you to consider it an expensive lesson; next time you will see it coming. Such things do not happen because of only one person, especially when that person is a rather mediocre wizard at best."

She looked away with an unsatisfied wrinkle to her lips. When they had fallen silent a long time, she stepped away, her expression closed and inward. After the tall door closed behind her, Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "And you are doing how?"

"All right," Harry said with a doubtful tone. "You really think it works to make someone feel better by telling them how much worse someone else has it?"

"Yes."

Harry shook his head, but didn't argue.

The next morning, their wombat, now actually the size of a small bear, outrightly refused to go back in the crate. It clung to Penelope and made a sad screeching noise when they tried to unhook it. "I'll keep it," she said.

"All day?"

"Why not?" she countered, patting it on the head. "It will eat from de fruit bowl at breakfast. Let us take it down."

"Okay," Harry agreed doubtfully, although he would have felt very bad about forcing it back into its box, so he was glad from that perspective, but he thought she was a little optimistic.

They were early for breakfast. Penelope sat with the wombat on her lap feeding it orange sections. Harry commented, "Slowly. Otherwise it will get full before breakfast is over."

The other students who were studying or talking stopped and looked over curiously. Penelope's matching blue hair with orange stripes was something to see. Ron and Hermione came in and froze. Hermione ran over. "Is that your wombat?" she asked. "Ours has barely grown at all and it's all blue. How did you get it to eat anything solid? Wow."

Harry laughed at her pile of comments. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would!" she said sharply. "We are completely missing this assignment," she complained to Ron. They sat down, still gaping. Others came in and stopped by, amazed by the creature.

"Heh!" Hagrid said as he came in with McGonagall. "Look at tha', will ya? Harry, tha' yours?"

"Yes." Harry glanced at McGonagall who looked neutral on the topic of blue wombats.

Hagrid leaned down and patted the wombat on the top of the head. "Orange was a good choice," he said.

"I let it choose," Harry said.

"Interestin'," Hagrid drawled, then winked at Harry. As he passed by Hermione and her frustrated expression, he patted her on the head as well, though not as gently.

The day's classes went better than expected. The wombat mostly slept, although it insisted on being held. It turned out most anyone was more than eager to do this, so Harry and Penelope did not have much to do with it except keep track of its whereabouts.

By dinner its orange strips were bright and made of much longer fur, making it look a bit like a caterpillar. Hagrid stopped by again while Hermione was holding it. "Aye. She's a beaute. Mus' 'a had a lo' o' attention today."

"It did," Harry confirmed forcefully.

"Yer pret'y much done," Hagrid said, plucking at the long blue claws resting on Hermione's shoulder. "Can' grow much more en tha'." He put his sizable pinky against its mouth and it sniffed it before turning away. "Well tempered ta boot. Yer got a place to keep 'er for the nigh'?"

Hermione and Penelope nodded vigorously. "We've already set up a crate in the girl's dormitory," Hermione said as she patted it on the back and put her nose against the top of its head the way she did to Crookshanks.

Harry found himself starting to feel sorry for the thing.

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Exhausted after his tutoring with McGonagall, Harry made his way down from the headmistress' office. As he passed one of the unused classrooms along a darkened corridor he thought he heard something. He quietly backed up a few steps and listened. Giggling followed by Malfoy's voice speaking low, came from behind the closed door. Harry rolled his eyes and stepped more quietly away, fearful of being detected. He just got out of range as Parkinson sighed and said something he really didn't want to hear clearly.

Literally shutting down with tiredness, Harry used the handrail heavily down a set of staircases. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he really needed to work on his Potions essay. As he trudged down the next corridor, Hermione came up to him.

"Harry," she said nicely. "Could you please help us with our wombat?"

Harry grinned at her tone and amiably walked along with her. "If I knew what I did, I would. But it was kind of an accident."

"Well . . . what happened?" she asked impatiently.

"The first night I couldn't sleep so I went up to check on it. It was about three in the morning. I didn't find quite the same thing in the crate."

"Oh," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I'll have to check the moon phases, zodiac, cloud cover, Merlin what could have caused it? We've been up there at one or later and it has been the same." When Harry shrugged, she said, "Maybe Frina and I will just sleep up there with it. Or take turns."

Harry was still working on his essay in the common room when Hermione and Frina headed up to the attic. "Want company?"

"Sure," Frina said eagerly. "Since we're babysitting your project."

"I'll take it to our dormitory," Harry offered.

"You can't have it," Frina countered stiffly, then laughed gaily.

As they walked, Harry feared they would all hear some couple having a rendezvous, and he blushed warmly just thinking of facing that with these two. Fortunately the way was quiet this time. Up in the attic Hermione went to their crate, opened it, and took out their wombat. "Boy, that is small," Harry criticized, garnering a dark look from his friend.

"Hermione said you told her your one turned into something else," Frina said.

"I don't know why it did, though," Harry admitted.

"You are just very lucky," Frina stated matter-of-factly.

He pulled out his parchments and worked on his essay as the two of them sat talking. Harry looked up as Hermione handed the creature over to her partner, amused by the shifting hair color. Hermione looked better with brown hair than blue. As he worked and listened, he was amazed by the things they talked about: personal things about growing up, interesting people they knew, bizarre relatives, parental annoyances. He couldn't imagine sitting around with Opus and doing the same thing. . . . not a chance.

Harry finished his essay, finally. As he rolled it up, Hermione held her hand out for it. "Thanks," Harry said as he gave it up. He stood up to stretch and paced the length of the gable. At the window he remembered Malfoy's strange creature. He stood before it and described to them what he had seen. "Hagrid wasn't happy I'd looked."

"Let's look again," Hermione immediately said, setting Harry's essay on the floor to stand up. He stepped aside for her to run through the un-cursing spells herself, and the same ones were on it as before. Inside the box was now a hard-shelled blue chrysalis that was attached to the inside of the wood by an organic blue cord with root-like tendrils.

"Whoa," Hermione breathed. "What'd he do to it to make it do that?"

"I hate to think about it," Harry said, re-closing the lid. "At least it looks safe now."

Revising for end of term examinations and Quidditch practice occupied the next week. Harry did not think it possible for him to cram any more information into his brain, but somehow he seemed to manage, going from classes, to constant studying to quizzing by his friends without much rest in between.

Harry was taking a break, a nap really, on a window seat on the fifth floor. It was midday and McGonagall came by, stepping sprightly. "Everything all right, Harry?" she stopped and asked in concern upon seeing him there.

"Just tired, Professor." He bent his knees to move his feet out of the way for her to sit down, which she did. The sun lit her robes as it slanted through the glass beside her.

Harry commented, "If I try to learn anything else, I think my brain will explode." As she smiled in real humor at that, he marveled that he was sitting here so casually with the headmistress of all people. He shifted up the stone frame to sit up more.

"Looking forward to a holiday, then?" she asked nicely.

"Very much so."

"And you filed an application for the Auror's program?" she asked factually, sounding way too much like Dumbledore.

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. Harry thought of mentioning what Hermione had told him, that demonstrating an Animagus spell at the N.E.W.T. testing was worth thirty bonus points. He hadn't made any progress since revealing something of his form, but then again he also had not had much time. Then again, they were not supposed to be working on it at all; he was pretty certain.

"It will all be over soon," she said helpfully.

"I don't necessarily want it to be."

She smiled more at that. "Even you will look back on this time with fondness, I think." She patted him on the leg. "Why don't we skip your tutoring until you return from break."

Harry nodded that he thought that was a good idea.

"I'll let you get back to your nap," she said with a smile in her voice.

"You are playing today?" Penelope asked as Harry hurried through of the common room. He needed to get down to the pitch early for a strategy meeting with Ron and Ginny. Ron didn't want to discuss it in the school–he thought someone might be listening in. Harry had to admit that Extendable Ears had become unnervingly common during the school year and Filch had not caught on to start confiscating them.

Harry paused long enough to reply, "Yes."

"I vill be cheering for you," she said.

At the portrait hole, Harry said, "Thanks," with sincerity.

In the changing room they hurriedly suited up with pads. Ron said, "Overconfidence is our biggest enemy today." He paced before them, talking sternly. He went on in this vein for a while before going over a few plays he wanted to try out today before facing Ravenclaw later in the year. Harry considered pointing out that treating Hufflepuff as practice smacked of overconfidence, but he held back, mostly because he was feeling confident.

It was warmer today than the last game, although Harry still had one of his rabbit lined gloves on his left hand with which held the broom. His right he kept against his side, warm, until the whistle blew.

The match was long, although Gryffindor held the lead throughout. Harry paced Janet, the new Hufflepuff Seeker, for most of the match, confident that he could overtake her if she made a move. She didn't even try to fake him out, which Harry would have done in her place, frequently. In the end the snitch came up from behind. Harry caught sight of it in his peripheral vision, turned hard, and gave chase.

Janet followed, never managing to get position on him despite the rapidly dodging Snitch giving her a few openings. The crowd was on its feet and shouting as the chase went on, raising Harry's spirits as he gained on the elusive thing. It looped around him and he had to foot spin to catch it. He was still dizzy from the maneuver when he landed on the grass with the fluttering Snitch in hand. The team landed as well and thumped him hard, elated with the win even though it was not much of a contest. Hermione and Penelope came out as the team was moving to the changing room.

"You are very good," Penelope said, eyes bright. He had not seen quite that expression on her before, it was vaguely worshipful, but it didn't bother him for some reason.

"Thanks," Harry said with a broad smile, as the team moved off the pitch, slowing to wait for him. "I'll see you later–when I'm presentable," he added over his shoulder with a smile as he brushed his mussed hair back. He brought Hermione into that with a glance and found she had a far too pleased of a look on her face.

In the changing room Ginny said, "Well, that went all right." She sounded a little put out in contrast to the words.

"It went really well," Ron countered.

She shrugged and tossed her wrist guards haphazardly into a locker before bending and unsnapping her shin guards with quick, annoyed movements. Harry and Ron shared a perplexed look. Ron shrugged and ignored her. Harry figured Hermione would be better to talk to her than himself, so he didn't question her either.

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"You've got it, I think," Hermione said excitedly. "Try again and think of your form this time."

Ginny closed her eyes and stood still for long breaths. Colors rippled over her robe like sunlight through water. A long time passed before a warping sound started, startling all of them. A fluttering thing fell to the floor and scrambled at the stones. Hermione was the first to react. She stepped quickly but carefully over and tried to lift the hawk up by the feet.

"All right!" Ron exclaimed, stepping over too.

The bird was too awkward to balance even with Hermione helping and it fluttered back to the floor, wings and claws scraping.

"Ginny, you remember how to disrupt the energy to release the form, right?" Hermione asked the bird, a little loudly and in a very concerned way.

Harry, in his usual seat off to the side, watched things with growing worry. He huffed and stood up as Ginny reappeared, half-sprawled on the floor. The room erupted in cheers, making Ginny grin broadly through her blinking disorientation.

Harry stepped right up to her. "No flying," he said firmly.

"What?" she replied.

"No flying. That's final." No one said anything immediately.

"You're no fun," she snapped at him.

He followed closely as she turned away. "Ginny, I mean it. You don't know the first thing about it. And what if you change back a hundred feet off the ground."

"Actually . . . " Neville started to say, holding up one finger. When Harry turned his hard gaze to him, he fell silent.

"I kinda have to agree with Harry," Ron said reluctantly.

Ginny huffed in frustration. "All right, all right," she breathed. She took a seat on the side bench and put her chin on her hands. "I'm sure I can find a cage to perch myself in," she muttered.

"You did great, though," Ron added in a concessionary way. "Wish I could do it."

"Yeah, you are all just jealous," she commented with another huff.

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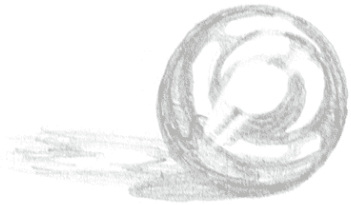
Chapter 34.



Round About the Cauldron Go

Author's Notes:
Starting with this chapter and running through until the Shakespeare three-witches chapter titles end there is a mini-whodunit in the story.

The morning of the train departing, they all shared a large breakfast. "Are you going back to Croatia?" Harry asked Frina.

"Yes. I miss my parents and they are worried about me. Oh, which reminds me. Opus!" she called to the Durmstrang students huddled in the doorway. "Do you mind?" she asked Harry.

"Mind what?" Harry responded.

Frina pushed the platter of bacon aside, climbed over the table agilely, and sat beside him. "Peni," she said as she reached around Harry and tugged on her friend's robe to get her attention. Opus had come over with a camera and now stood checking its settings on the other side of the table. Harry sighed and smiled as they leaned in close for the first picture. For the second one he relented and put his arms around both of them. A warm feeling started up in him as he did this; he could feel it responding to the sense of their shoulders and even their arms against his sides. He stretched his neck and forced it out of himself.

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"Oh good," Penelope said. "My parents will finally belief me."

"Why wouldn't they?" Harry asked in confusion.

She shrugged broadly with an expression that said he would not understand the explanation.

Harry went home that evening. Snape had to stay at Hogwarts a few days longer to finish up grading and paperwork, but he pointed out that he could then stay in Shrewsthorpe until late Sunday if he did so.

Harry stepped out of the hearth at home and started when he found himself face to face with a purple-haired witch. "Tonks?" he said in surprise.

"Hey, Harry," she greeted him casually and balled up the parchment in her hand. "I can skip the note since you're here," she said as she banished it with a toss. "One of the old spells we left from last summer was triggered, so I came to investigate. Only the outer one was touched, so I suspect it was a neighbor kid crossing through your back garden."

"Guess they don't do that often," Harry said, thinking it strange that it had not gone off before now.

"Your wall is pretty high and a little crumbly at the top. That would dissuade most people," she said casually. "Every other protection is still in place, so don't worry about it. If it hadn't been your place, I probably wouldn't have come right away." She gave him a wink as she said this.

"Want some tea?" Harry offered, kind of hoping she would stay a little while.

She sighed and replied sincerely, "I really don't have time, Harry, but thanks." She put her stuff in her hipsack and sealed it with a spell. "I saw your application come in," she said, sounding teasing.

Harry couldn't read her voice. "Did it look okay?"

She laughed lightly. "Of course. We received a lot of applications this year, good ones. Still trying to decide how best to handle them all. I think we should just make the admission tests harder. That would be to your advantage, anyway," she said with a wink.

Harry looked away, a little embarrassed by praise from this quarter. The post that had arrived in his and Snape's absence was scattered over the table; he organized the envelopes as a distraction.

Tonks stepped to the hearth, nearly knocking over the rack with the poker and ash shovel. She righted the thing and took out a leather drawstring sack of Floo Powder. "What are you doing Sunday night?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Care to hang out in London with me for the evening?" she asked. "I need to get out and I'd love to catch up with you."

Harry's heart sped up as he imagined that. His jealousy of Ron's freedom to explore London over last summer had not completely disappeared. "I'd love to."

"Clubbing all right with you? A little befuddlement charm will get you in past the bouncer at the places I like to go."

He blinked at that stretching of wizard law. "Sounds good," he replied.

"Want to meet me at Trafalgar or Soho?" she suggested. Upon seeing his reaction, she said, "I'll just come here and we'll go together."

"Great," Harry said.

"I really have to run," she said. "See ya." She stepped into the hearth and vanished in a column of green flame.

Harry fairly skipped up the stairs to his room with his bookbag. Sunday evening was going to take years to arrive, he thought.

Harry studied hard to pass the time and finished two long essays before Sunday lunch. An owl had arrived that morning from Snape saying that he would be delayed until Monday morning. Harry could not believe his luck; not only could Harry stay out late, he would not even have to explain his 'date' to his guardian. He wasn't sure at all what Snape would think, if anything at all, but he wasn't taking any chances with his first time out for an evening in London. With a woman. With someone he liked a lot and a woman. The thought was almost overwhelming.

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Sunday night, as he was dressing in Muggle clothes, he decided he should leave a note in case Snape came home earlier than expected. As he was folding the parchment over and writing Snape's name on it, the hearth flared. The first thing Harry thought upon seeing Tonks was that he was very underdressed. Tonks was wearing shiny pants and a fuzzy yellow top. She read his expression and hooked an arm through his. "You look fine. Guys never dress as well as women anyway at these places."

They took the Floo into an upstairs parlor in Soho. When Harry arrived, the two well-dressed couples sitting around a table on the other side of the room were greeting Tonks like an old friend. "Your date?" a woman's high-pitched, nasal voice said loudly. "Let's see him. Come on, he has to pass inspection since you clearly have no sense yourself." At this, Harry stepped over to them and stood beside Tonks. He got the notion they were paired by gender by the way they sat. The woman who had spoken had sharp yellow eyes and very short auburn hair. Her many large earrings clanked as she leaned forward to inspect him.

"What's that? Lightening scars aren't in fashion now are they?" she asked in dismay, rubbing her forehead as though considering what it might be like to have one.

"And no fashion sense at all," the taller man said with a grimace. "Early eighties schoolboy," he breathed in clear horror.

Harry looked down at his plain black trousers and crisp white shirt. Tonks put her arm around him. "Ignore them. We're leaving now," she announced melodically, pressing her fingers into Harry's shoulder to turn him.

"Wait, wait," the ear-ringed woman said. "He hasn't passed yet. What does he do?"

"He catches dark wizards," Tonks said. "Let's go," she said to Harry.

"He's an Auror then? Thought you guys weren't supposed to date each other?" the other woman commented. "Looks a little young, frankly."

"He's not an Auror, yet," Tonks insisted. "And this is just old friends out for an evening." She gave Harry a push toward a closed door on the other side of the room.

"Shoulda said. We wouldn't have wasted our time," the ear-ringed woman commented loudly.

"Or his ego," the other woman quipped.

"His ego is just fine," Tonks reassured them, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and let Tonks open the door since she moved to it first.

"Wait a minute!" the woman said, striding over to them. "You aren't really?"

"Really what?" Harry asked.

She peered at him closely. "This is just a Clandestine charm, right?" she asked Tonks. "You aren't really out for an eve with Harry Potter–are you?"

"She's what?" the taller man exclaimed, spilling the black liquid he was pouring as he spoke. "Sorry 'bout the fashion comments, mate," he said quickly giving a wave of dismissal. "Studious ones never know how to dress," he said in a stage whisper to his male companion.

"Or how to have fun either," his companion came back with a nudge. He held his glass out for a refill and nudged again when he didn't get any.

"Well," Earrings said as she took the door from Tonks and held it for them while leaning on it heavily. "Have a nice evening. We'll have a nice drink and discuss He-Who-Shall-Be-Not-Named when you come back through."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied.

She bit her lip and said uneasily, "Yeah. That bloke."

On the pavement outside, Harry adjusted his cloak and breathed out in relief. "Interesting friends."

They walked along a tree-lined street. Ahead, bar patrons spilled onto the walk from the restaurants. "Acquaintances really. They run that Floo node like a social parlor. Keeps them occupied and mostly out of trouble. Though who knows what they were drinking."

They had dinner in one of the small, cramped places along a side street. Tonks, with her matching fuzzy top and yellow spiked hair, attracted more attention than Harry, which was a nice change.

After eating, as the sun set behind the buildings, they walked a distance to a place Tonks liked to go to dance. It was below ground and very large. It was also relatively deserted on a Sunday. The bouncer at the door paid them no heed beyond giving Tonks a nice hello that sounded insinuating to Harry.

Inside, ten or so couples gyrated on the dark dance floor, outlined by the changing colored lights behind them. With a grin Tonks led him over and cajoled him into joining in. The song shifted to another one. Harry counted out a swing rhythm and took Tonk's hands.

Chapter 34

"Where did you learn to dance?" she asked as they moved around the floor.

"I hate to admit it, but McGonagall."

She laughed. "Poor Harry," she said in humor. "You're pretty good though."

"I had a lot of practice at the Christmas Ball."

They chatted about school. Harry asked about the apprenticeship, reluctantly, since he worried that if he got too tied up in it and was rejected, he would be really sunk.

The song shifted to a slow one and Tonks moved in close. This made it easier to talk over the music. "So, how is it having a dad after all this time?"

Harry shrugged to buy time. He had not been required to answer that question for a while. "I like it. I like knowing if I need something, he can't turn me away."

"That's what you like?" she asked in surprise. "You really haven't had anyone to rely on, have you?" she asked in a gentle tone.

"Guess not," Harry answered stiffly. She frowned and changed the topic.

During the fourth song, Tonks tensed and watched something over Harry's shoulder. Harry glanced that way, but didn't see anything or anyone in particular. Tonks huffed in annoyance and steered them to another part of the dance floor.

"Someone here you don't want to see?" Harry guessed.

"Ex-boyfriend," she said darkly. After dancing for a while longer in a manner that Harry was certain was designed to keep them from being recognized, she said, "Let's sit down. I'm thirsty."

She took his hand and led him to a high side table with permanent stools around it. The bartender came around immediately. "I'll have a scotch and he'll have a . . . an ale."

The bartender glanced closely at Harry before stepping away, but came back a few minutes later with their drinks. Harry sipped at his. He thought it could have stood to have been sweeter, but it wasn't bad. Tonks poured a dash of water into her tumbler of amber liquid before sipping it. "I have tomorrow off. First day in two weeks." After a minute of silence she added, "Being an Auror is too much work, Harry," as though warning him off from the whole notion.

Harry didn't reply; he was watching a man on the other side of the dance floor who was looking at Tonks' back. Her hair was still spiky yellow, which really gave her away. Harry thought then that she should have turned it black or some other normal

color. The man approached, leading a young woman by the hand. They were both very well dressed.

"Tonks," the man greeted unctuously when he reached their table. His dark hair was styled foppishly and it flipped down when he leaned over and rested his elbow on the table facing her. Harry disliked him instantly.

Tonks gave no indication she felt anything. "Hello Rick," she said evenly.

"How have you been?" he asked, then didn't wait for a reply as he said, "Have you met Tara?" He pulled the fair-haired, tight-skirted woman closer to the table. She looked as though she wanted to resist but gave in quickly and held out a hand in greeting. Tonks shook it with a touch of coldness. Rick was going on in the same smooth tone, "Tara is working at the bank. Father and her actually get along, can you imagine?"

Rick leaned over the table, even more pointedly ignoring Harry, who decided that this was just as well. He assumed the man would bore of this game and leave soon enough, although the topics of the bank and father seemed to supply a lot of potential material. Harry at first assumed they were Muggles, but a little magic was dropped through the conversation, changing that assumption.

Finally, as though just noticing Tonks had a companion, Rick turned to Harry. "Oh," he said in a kind of girlish way. "Name's Richard, by the way. Richard Rothschild."

With deliberately slow, calm movement, Harry accepted the pro-offered hand. "Harry Potter," he said, very evenly.

The man froze, which Harry resisted reacting to. "Goodness, you are," Rick said, sounding stunned. He turned to Tara and leaned close to her. She was standing with her lean arms crossed, looking like she wished she were elsewhere. "It's Harry Potter," he said to her, still surprised. She blinked and found Harry's eyes and presumably his scar. Tonks gave Harry a roll of the eyes.

"Well," Rick offered, "why don't we join you for a drink?" Harry thought of saying, why don't you not? as the man smoothly took one of the other stools and gestured for Tara to do the same, all while simultaneously waving to the bartender.

Harry shot Tonks an apologetic look and received a disbelieving one in return. "So," Rick said breathily if not a little hungrily, "you are the, what does the chocolate frog card say . . .?"

"Destroyer of Voldemort," Harry finished for him, wanting to rattle the man if possible. He definitely got the girlfriend with that one.

"Yes," Rick said with more than a hint of pleasure. "So what are you doing with yourself now?" he asked, then ordered drinks for himself and Tara when the bartender appeared.

"I'm in school," Harry said. "I've applied to the Auror's program."

"Ah, well, you are in good company here, then," he said with a glance at Tonks.

Harry looked at Tonks as well, with a look he hoped conveyed some of his feelings. "Tonks is the reason I want to be an Auror," he said honestly, his gaze not wavering. "She's my inspiration." Her lips curled into a true smile, making Harry very glad he had said it.

"That's very sweet," Tara said. The drinks arrived. Rick accepted his and immediately began clinking the ice in it.

Harry turned to the girlfriend. "What do you do?" he asked.

She smiled lightly. "I work in finance at Bennett's of London. We do a lot of cross Muggle-Wizard project financing." Harry nodded sagely in a way he hoped looked knowledgeable. He didn't want to ask how that differed from accounting.

"Do you like it?" Harry asked.

"It's interesting and sometimes a lot of work," she said, seeming surprised to be addressed again.

"We are working with Goodley and Stevens right now," Rick put in. Harry had no idea who they were. "Where do you live?" he asked Harry.

"Shrewsthorpe," Harry replied, wondering how to get rid of him. Maybe they needed to finish their drinks and claim another appointment, he thought. He took a big gulp of ale to that end. Tonks had already finished her drink and waved for another. She seemed to be trying for a different kind of exit.

"Oh, you are very close to Riverden," Rick said. "The Freelander Estate encompasses it; it is just lovely. I was there once as a boy," he added as though this fact were important to share.

"We were there for Boxing Day dinner," Harry said evenly. "It is a big place. The stables were bigger than our house," he quipped to Tonks.

Rick froze at that. "You were?" He reassessed Harry at this point, seeming conflicted with his clothes and that notion.

Tonks said, in the air of one forced to participate, "He has a lot of horses, then?"

"Freelander only introduced us to the first twelve or so, but there were a lot more for just riding." Harry decided to just pretend it was him and Tonks. "I'd thought they were like Thestrals but his steeplechasers are huge animals. And they aren't magical, so how one controls them . . ." He looked alarmed at the notion.

Tara laughed. "They are usually pretty easy-going," she said, then backed off on her humor with a worried expression.

"Really?" Harry asked her quickly, afraid she assumed she had insulted him.

Rick nursed his drink, standoffish and fidgety now.

Tara relaxed a little. "Depends on the breed. I wouldn't have ridden my brother's Arabian for anything . . . it was totally out of control. My Morgan was like a big kitten for personality."

"Huh," Harry said. "Does sound like fun. But not worth getting adopted for," he murmured to Tonks, whose eyes went wide at that, so he gave her a mischievous grin. Rick gave him a close one as though dearly wanting to know what he had said.

A slow song started up. Harry stood and held his hand out to Tonks. "I promised the next slow one, remember?"

She set her fresh drink down with a thud and jumped off her stool to join him. When they were out on the floor, she said, "You are better at socializing than I imagined. Sorry about him." She laughed then. "You really knocked him with that comment about Boxing Day."

"It was some big event. I didn't realize when I accepted the invitation," Harry complained a bit.

"You were serious?" she asked, amazed. "I thought you made that up."

"No," Harry said stridently. "I wouldn't make things up to impress Mr. Rothschild there. Are you kidding?" he felt vaguely disappointed in her assumption.

"I'm sorry," Tonks said, "Of course you wouldn't. One of the things I like about you. Of the many."

Harry smiled and dropped his gaze.

"That and your humbleness, which always astounds me. You are the opposite of him. Total opposite."

"I hope so," Harry said strongly, making her laugh. He noticed in relief that the other couple were finishing their drinks and departing from the table. "So, I'm not sure the best way to ask this but . . . "

"What did I see in him?" she finished for him. At Harry's nod, she replied with a strained expression, "I'm not sure. He impressed my parents. He impressed me at first, frankly, but that wore off. Once everyone around you keeps saying how great it is that you are on the right track finally, it gets hard to get off the train."

Harry tried to imagine that and his face must have revealed something because she added, "When he turned his charm on just the right way, I could overlook a lot. And surprisingly few see past it, even though you weren't fooled at all."

They danced another song, a faster one, without separating. Harry was deciding that he really preferred slow dancing better. He and Tonks were exactly the same height, so they moved with surprisingly little awkwardness around the floor.

Several songs later, Tonks was dancing even closer, which was starting to affect him. The room felt too warm and the gaps where they moved apart felt too long. He pulled her closer without thinking, which brought a sharp look from her, a surprised and calculating one. Harry dropped his arms and turned to walk back to the table since the song was winding down anyway. At the table, his ale was too warm. He drank a big gulp of it anyway, feeling the need for anything that might calm him down.

Tonks didn't comment, but she did have a very small smile on her face. They finished their drinks in silence.

"Another round? Or do you want to go?" she asked.

"Maybe go," Harry said. He checked his pocket watch; it was just before eleven.

As they passed the bar, Tonks waved to the bartender and tossed a Muggle note on the bar. The bartender nodded goodbye with a wink. Out on the street it felt fresh and quiet, letting Harry relax. It was chilly now, making him glad he had worn his warm cloak.

"It's still pretty early," she said, sounding reluctant to quit the evening. "How does tea and biscuits sound to you?"

"Pretty good," Harry conceded. "Somewhere quiet?"

"Sure."

They walked back to the parlor they had used to Floo in. No one was around this time for which Harry was very grateful; he was tired of verbal jousting. Tonks stepped into the Floo and gave a location followed by a password. When she was gone, Harry followed.

They landed in a small flat with shelves lining the walls with all kinds of things on them. An owl fluttered in a cage in the corner. "This your place?" Harry asked.

"Yep," she replied. "You said 'quiet'."

"I did, didn't I," Harry said, feeling a little nervous. He took a seat at the small table near the stove as she made tea.

She eventually placed the pot on the table and opened the biscuit tin. "Help yourself."

Harry, feeling hungry despite the big dinner he had had, accepted eagerly. The tea steeped and she poured out cups for each of them. Harry sipped his gratefully. The sudden silence was still ringing in his ears and the ale had made him groggy.

Two cups later, Tonks stood to clear things away. Harry had relaxed now, feeling less anxious about being at her place. She brought a few things back over from the shelves. One of them was a picture of her finishing the Auror's program. Harry looked at her glowing smile in the photo. As the photo moved, a middle-aged man put his hand around her shoulders proudly.

"Three years of training goes fast," she said wistfully.

"How many people apply normally?"

"Six or so take the tests. More apply but are rejected. I think you'll do fine on the tests." She held up the other thing. It looked like a large glass marble with swirling colors. It was a little dusty.

"What's that?" Harry asked. She handed it over. It had many balls inside one another each floating in a clear liquid. When shifted, it clunked inside as the spheres bumped.

She replied, "A promise ball, which it occurred to me that I could break now. Severus fulfilled it for me."

"What was it?" he asked, handing it back.

"A promise I made to myself to get you away from your aunt and uncle the first chance possible. I actually yelled at Dumbledore after the rescue, which stuns me even now to remember. He finally explained why you had to be there, which didn't help much." She tossed the ball in the air. "It bothered me a lot thinking of you there, so someone suggested using one of these to ease my mind. It worked. It magically binds you to take action when you can so you can relax and not obsess in the interim."

She stood and tossed it into the hearth where it smashed in a bright white flame. The glass crackled as the shards fell through the grate. As she stepped back to the table, she put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's good to see you doing so well." Her

hand shifted to trail through his hair. “Everyone says that, you know, comments on how well you are doing.”

Harry sighed in embarrassment and crossed his arms. She reached swiftly around him and forced them uncrossed, holding his wrists so he couldn’t lift them. Her cheek was pressed against his from behind as she held that position. When she did move, it was to bend down to kiss him on the neck lightly.

Harry couldn’t seem to draw a breath. Maybe that wasn’t too much of a surprise as his chest had turned to putty. His will had gone; he just held still and waited for something else to happen. Tonks pulled him to his feet and kissed him fiercely, pressing him back over the table. Harry found he did have will, at least to pull her tighter.

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Chapter 35.

Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog

Harry woke with a start. "What time is it?" he asked. As memory flooded back, he was glad for the darkness because if the burn in his cheeks was any indication, he was blushing pretty badly.

"Ten to four," came the groggy reply.

Harry forced his heart to slow down. Snape would probably not be in before breakfast, or much before, he figured. Tonks shifted closer and Harry started yet again at the feel of so much of someone else's skin. From the sound of her sigh, he assumed she intended to simply fall back to sleep. Harry had been tired earlier but now he was wide awake and almost in panic. He lay in the darkness listening to her breathe and dwelling in memory until grey dawn lit the flat's single window.

In the eye-straining light, Harry sat up, rousing Tonks from sleep. "I should go," he said. "I really don't know what Severus will think if I'm not there." Harry had left

a note, but it just seemed much simpler to avoid any conversation at all on the topic of his evening out.

She stretched and sat up, uncaring apparently about covers or not. "I can't imagine he'd care, but who knows," she said, yawning. "I couldn't imagine him as the father type, either." As she rubbed her eyes and pushed her rampantly blue hair back, Harry thought that she looked pretty nice. When she stood up with a mumble about making breakfast, he thought that even more so. He also thought that looking closely, in the long run, wasn't going to do him much good.

He sat down at the small table by the stove as she plunked down toast and hazelnut butter. She was only wearing a fuzzy pink robe. Harry, on the other hand, got completely dressed before daring to emerge.

She sat across from him and sipped a steaming hot cup of tea. She put her hand on her forehead and considered him in depth. "I keep trying to regret what I did, but I can't."

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He certainly didn't regret beyond the ongoing embarrassment that he could not shake. In this, he apparently could not avoid learning about himself without whomever he was with learning it too. That had not occurred to him before. Nor had it ever occurred to him that Tonks may have been named appropriately.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Good," Harry replied with certainty, making her laugh.

"I broke a few Ministry rules, I'm sure." She sighed. "Good thing your application hasn't been accepted yet. Once it has, I'm essentially your boss, or one of them."

She sipped her tea again. "We can't repeat this," she said, sounding like she was talking to herself more than to Harry.

Harry had a feeling, in a week or so, that was going to seem more cruel than it did at this moment. "Yup," he said in agreement.

Harry was sitting, studying diligently, at the dining room table when Snape appeared from the Floo around ten in the morning. Harry managed a casual greeting, although he was Occluding his mind when he lifted his gaze from his book.

Snape seemed distracted, so it probably did not matter. "I need to visit Diagon Alley for some supplies, if you would like to accompany me."

Eager for a break, Harry put his books aside and stood to fetch his cloak. As he returned and hooked it around his collar, he was amazed that there was not some blatantly obvious difference in him announcing what had happened to the world. Snape seemed completely oblivious, which wouldn't be like him at all. Fighting a blush, Harry grabbed a handful of Floo powder and ducked into the hearth to hide it.

They walked along Diagon Alley away from Gringott's, where Harry had withdrawn what now seemed like an exorbitant number of Galleons. Good thing he didn't go out for dinner at nice restaurants regularly, he thought with some stress.

"I need to get something from a shop down here," Snape said, indicating Knockturn Alley. When Harry hesitated, looking down the street with sharp eyes, Snape said, "Never been?"

"Uh, once . . . accidentally. Hagrid rescued me, fortunately." He still did not like the looks of the place.

"I truly do not think you will have a problem, O, Destroyer of Voldemort," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry frowned at him. "Well, go on then," Harry urged with stung pride while indicating that Snape should lead the way.

Far from having a problem, Harry seemed to be upsetting the economy of the place. Many grimy witches and wizards ducked out of the way or Disapparated when their startled gaze fell upon him. A few just gave him a measuring look as though wondering how much he really could do.

"Far less crowded than expected," Snape stated airily, when they reached a shop called Fiddlesticks and Sone . Snape stood outside and waited for the proprietor to appear. An extremely thin, old man with a hump and sparse straggly red hair eventually emerged from the dark interior. Snape handed him a list; the man squinted at it with a foul expression before approximately smiling and shuffling back inside. "It is best to remain on the street," Snape offered as they waited.

Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Late night?" Snape asked as a pair of hunched-over hags spotted Harry and promptly turned around and walked the other way.

"Loads of clubs in London, it turns out," Harry explained, avoiding Snape's gaze as he remembered the whole night yet again. This led to his limbs going tinglely

even through his tiredness. He leaned on a barrel of Black Cat syrup and closed his eyes to rest them. He opened them when he heard the voice of the shopkeeper. The shriveled old man handed over a worn basket and Snape handed him some coins. Harry watched this in a daze.

"Let's go," Snape said easily. He stepped past Harry who followed automatically.

As he turned with another yawn, Harry realized with a jolt that there was one dark shape in his mind ahead of him, and one behind. He grabbed a handful of the back of Snape's cloak and pulled. His heart was racing as he responded to Snape's questioning look. "Shadow," he breathed.

Snape went instantly on alert. He grabbed Harry's upper arms and demanded, "Where?"

"Behind me," Harry whispered.

Snape peered sharply over Harry's shoulder as he surreptitiously pulled out his wand. His eyes moved avidly back and forth along the alley. Harry turned slowly around as well, trying not to attract attention as he did it. He pulled his wand out of his pocket and into his sleeve, holding it where it wasn't visible. He didn't see anyone he recognized among the black robed figures standing in small clusters talking or moving with laden baskets and cauldrons among the shops.

"I assume you are certain about what you sense," Snape queried.

"Yes."

"Which one do you sense?"

"Did. I'm fully awake now. And I can't tell who it is anyway." He almost pointed out that all the shadows in his vision were alike, but censored it.

"Go inside," Snape said. "Call the Auror's office."

Harry obeyed. Inside the shop, he discovered that the bent-over man who had come out earlier was the son. An incredibly wizened old wizard sat at a counter logging the latest sale.

"I need to use your Floo," Harry said.

The son shuffled over to him, his eye twitching. "You are the Boy Who Lived?"

"Uh, yeah." Harry decided not to quibble about the term 'boy' just now.

A little peeved the man said, "Go on, then," as he gestured at the small hearth. "Who's to stop ya?"

Harry dashed over to the aged marble hearth and took out his pocket canister of Floo Powder and tossed some in. When he announced that he wanted the Ministry Auror office, the proprietor gagged in surprise behind him. Rogan's head appeared and Harry explained that he'd seen one of the remaining D.E. on Knockturn Alley.

By the time Harry stood up, four Aurors had Apparated into the shop. Tonks stepped over to Harry, who noticed that the shopkeepers had vanished along with half the contents of the shelves.

"Whom did you see?" she asked him. Nothing but professional focus showed in her posture, stabilizing Harry's heart rate. On the other hand, he resisted explaining his Voldemort inherited vision to her or anyone connected to the Ministry. Considering that a fifty-fifty chance was a pretty good one, he randomly said, "Jugson, I think. It was pretty quick though," he added to try to insure they considered either possibility.

The Aurors went out to the alley. Harry's gaze raised to Snape's just inside the doorway of the shop. He didn't react at all to Harry's lie. Harry approached him slowly, and when he came aside, Snape commanded, "Stay in here while they sweep the alley."

Presently, the Aurors returned and reentered the shop. The section of alley Harry could see through the grimy window was now utterly deserted. Rogan said, "I didn't like the answers Burke gave. Really didn't."

The others hadn't turned up anything. "We'll set up a stakeout then," one of the others said. Harry didn't know his name, he looked a lot older than the others. "You are certain you saw one of them, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, comfortable being certain with that answer.

No one argued with him or expressed any doubt.

Uneasiness haunted Harry that evening at the house. His emotions teetered between feeling euphoric and feeling cheated out of having his life to himself again.

During dinner, Snape stated, "I am quite certain you are safe here, now."

"It isn't that," Harry commented. He tore his bread into many small pieces as he collected his thoughts. "I don't want this vision anymore," he complained. "I'm tired of it." As he painstakingly buttered the many chunks of squashed bread he wondered

if that were really true. He didn't mind, really, occasionally sensing that Snape was nearby.

Snape put down his utensils and held his mug without drinking from it. In a low voice he said, "I don't believe anything can be done."

"I didn't think so. And I wasn't asking you to try, just . . . wish things were different," he said wryly. "I've been doing less of that lately," he added, "which is good."

Snape topped up his mug of mead from the bottle on the table and sat back, cradling it in his long hands. "You really wish none of it had happened?"

Harry poked at his roast ox and Yorkshire pudding with his fork. "I don't know. Mostly. Though I'd be someone else in that case, which might not be better."

"You would still be with your parents, presumably," Snape observed levelly.

The comment felt a bit like bait, since Harry didn't know what Snape was getting at. With honesty he said, "I can't imagine that anymore–haven't been able to for a long time." He felt a little guilty at that notion but couldn't resolve it with a daydream that had drifted too far into fantasy. "It's the killing and fighting I could have skipped."

Snape returned to eating, appearing more relaxed. "And becoming an Auror will certainly isolate you from more of that," he stated with his classic snarkiness.

"I'll be old enough to deal with it and trained to," Harry pointed out. "I expect that will make a difference."

Snape nodded sideways, his way of accepting a point.

After dinner they settled into the library. Harry had no desire to study so he pulled a book off the shelf on Muggle-safe illusion spells instead.

The library was silent beyond the turning of pages, the lamp flames still and tall. Harry's mind wandered back to last night. He wondered at how much he had learned, too much to absorb it all at once, apparently, because the knowledge would sneak up on him at random times, as it did now. He stood up and changed books even though he wasn't finished with the one he was reading, simply needed the distraction.

Snape sat at his desk in the drawing room. It was Wednesday, which meant half of the holiday was gone already. He sorted through his old files, tossing things he didn't need into the hearth and a summer fire he had started just for that purpose. The window was wide open and a nice breeze carried away the extra heat.

Harry knocked on the doorframe. "There's a picnic this afternoon at the Burrow. I told Ron I'd come. Did you want to go?"

Snape considered Harry as he stood in his doorway in old jeans and a Chudley Cannons t-shirt. While every Weasley offspring disliked him, Harry's presence would most likely negate that. "I am enjoying the quiet, thank you," he replied.

"That's true. It probably won't be quiet there. All right then," Harry said. His tone almost could have been considered disappointed. "I'll be back late, I think," he added over his shoulder as he departed.

Snape just barely heard the flare of the Floo Powder over the wind in the trees across the street. He pulled out another stack of files and sorted through them. In the last one he found the old letter from Dumbledore that had been left for him after the wizard's death. The flap was open now. He set it aside until he had finished sorting through the entire drawer and had closed it with a satisfying thud. He leaned back in his chair and reluctantly pulled out the missive. The yellowing on the envelope made him expect that the letter would contain old notions. Within the envelope was a note card, with writing only on the inside, although the text was small and cramped as though the words had been forced to make space for each other.

Dearest Severus,

I would firstly like to thank you for your years of service. Once you came to me, you were the most faithful of servants, in all ways. Perhaps because your choices were so clear to you, this was true. Secondly, I want to sincerely thank you for taking on my last unfinished task.

Snape stopped there and huffed as he changed his understanding of the letter. The old wizard had charmed the entire message, not just the envelope. The envelope might very well have been sealed ten years previous as the color indicated.

By now his presence is most likely a given. It has been a year, and that can seem a very long time.

Snape blinked at that. A year? he wondered, before he understood Dumbledore meant a year from rescuing the boy from the Forbidden Forest. He felt consternation that the old wizard would have made that so significant. On the other hand, it did

seem in retrospect, an incredibly long time; literally everything had changed in the interim.

Harry is incredibly special; although I suspect you still will not admit that. All the more reason to remind you once again. For him to be more than a vehicle of all our freedom, he needed more than he was getting. Understanding. Loyalty. Security. Consideration. By now you realize, I'm sure, how straightforward these things are to provide. You've already commented to me about his fierce loyalty and I know firsthand your own capacity for it. A good match, I'll always believe strongly, for that and other reasons. Learn how to receive these things in return, Severus, and I will truly feel I have tied up every loose end.

It was signed neatly below. Snape closed the card, feeling a little annoyed with the dead wizard, which even he could not be for long. He opened the card again to glance over it and noticed that a postscript had appeared at the bottom: " Loyalty" was always a safe euphemism to use with you. Snape slapped the card closed, now definitely annoyed. He re-filed it with his other old letters from the former headmaster and found something to read to force it out of his mind.

Harry did return very late. It was almost two, a whole twelve hours after he had left. Snape was reading with a pot of tea at the dining room table.

"You're still awake," Harry commented. "I didn't realize you were going to wait up for me."

"I wasn't precisely."

"Oh, good." Harry took a seat across from his guardian. His head pounded a bit, so he rubbed his temples. "It was a big party," he said. "A bunch of Ministry people and some from Gringott's, although no goblins. All the neighbors. Actually had enough for a real Quidditch match. You'll be pleased to hear I was at Chaser this time. Lots of younger kids wanted to play, so there were three Seekers per side."

"And you were the main attraction?" Snape prompted dryly.

"For a little while," he admitted with a frown, remembering autographing odd things people happened to have on hand, like Muggle money or even clothing. "And the kids were scared of me at first–I really hate that."

Snape put down his book. "They assume that since you did the impossible that you can do anything. Children are wary of that kind of power, for good reason, frankly."

Harry looked at him closely. "Have you been drinking some of the weird things they were serving tonight?"

"As someone who knows intimately what can go wrong with bad brewing, I usually avoid unknown concoctions." Snape squinted at him as Harry rubbed his temple again. "Were you not avoiding them?"

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "I tried a few. Nothing that was on fire permanently. That was my rule."

"Pity. All kinds of intoxicating things burn off very easily," Snape said a little snidely. He stood and leaned over the table to look closely into Harry eyes. "At least your pupils are equally dilated and not excessively so. Want something for that headache?"

"You have something?"

Snape looked insulted. "Of course."

"I guess I shouldn't doubt you."

"I should say not." Snape left the room. He returned a few minutes later with three bottles of liquid. He poured a splash of each of them into a teacup. The result fizzed bright pink. He pushed it over to Harry.

"Thanks." Harry drank it down, swallowing bubbles to do so. His head cleared instantly. "You really are very good at those," he said honestly. "If that could be made into a sweet, you could license it to Fred and George." He held the teacup up. " Professor Snape's Plain-thinking Pop-ups. "

"And clearly you spent far too much time speaking with those two this evening."

"About two hours. More. You wouldn't believe the stuff they have going on. Scares me . Doesn't scare Ron or Ginny though. They just come back with some idea even more frightening." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Really much better," he said. "What is Absinthe anyway?" he asked in distracted curiosity.

Snape actually laughed. "Perhaps I should accompany you next time," he said, shaking his head.

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Harry's sleep degraded that night making him decide that Snape's remedy hadn't completely cleared everything he had experimented with drinking. The next day the weather turned warmer still and Harry thought about sitting outside for the fresh air. There was a very old stone seat in the garden beside the door. He took his History of Magic textbook out there and set about clearing aside the ivy that had grown over the bench. As he did this, he noticed that roses grew beside it, nearly choked out. The yellow buds were very tiny as a result. With hands on hips, Harry surveyed the small area. At one point it had been laid out in a fairly organized manner.

With an eye toward putting off studying, Harry took his book inside and grabbed a pair of old dragonhide gloves that sat on the shelf above the coats. He also grabbed the orange Cannon's hat Ron had given him at the party the night before. It was a Muggle-safe hat that only showed a player on a broomstick when one was actually at a match, otherwise it was blank.

With his eyes and hands protected, Harry attacked the ivy, tossing the long yanked strands into the center of the bricked path from the gate. The dragonhide gloves made it easy to work around the roses and soon they were looking much happier and unencumbered.

Harry became so engrossed in the weeding that he didn't notice the door open. "What are you doing?" Snape asked.

Harry looked up from his kneeling position in the grass as he carefully pulled up something that was crowding out some bulbs that had emerged. He thought over his response. "Avoiding studying?" he replied.

Snape shot him a dubious look. "You are not a servant, Potter."

"I know that," Harry answered sharply. "I like doing this," he added as he pulled up a long runner root of a small linden that needed to come out. Indeed, yard chores were the few tasks the Dursleys had made him do that he hadn't abhorred. He had always thought it was because it let him spend time away from them, but it felt like more than that now. "You're not worried about what the neighbors'll think, are you?" Harry asked challengingly.

"Certainly not," Snape huffed and went back inside with a swish of his robe.

Harry grinned as he easily pulled up the linden now that its roots were exposed.

He weeded the house side of the garden before stepping back and reassessing. It occurred to him only now that there most likely were spells to accomplish this in a matter of minutes or seconds. Snape probably thought he was being the nutter

Muggle for doing it by hand. It felt more satisfying this way, and it passed more time he would otherwise be reading History of Magic.

Someone had rather carefully laid out the garden long ago. Surrounding the bench were roses and some other small-leafed shrub he didn't recognize and beside that was a low bed of bulbs and in the corner, ivy emerged, meant to cover just the stone wall. He tapped his finger on his leg–he needed mulch to really finish the job by covering the newly exposed ground.

As he wondered where he would get some, light footsteps came along the road and stopped beside the gate. Harry turned and found himself face to face with the girl he had been watching every day from his window over the previous summer. Bit of a shock really, seeing her so close, where she could see him too. "Hi," Harry said. She was not wearing the slicker today, but a short cloak.

"Hello," she replied with a hint of uncertainty. "Do you live here?" she asked, eyes glancing down to his clay-clumped gloves, then his green and brown stained knees.

"Yes," Harry replied as he stooped to toss some stray strands of ivy onto the main pile.

"Hm. I didn't realize there was anyone else in the Snape household," she commented, sounding concerned to not be up on this. "This is still Severus Snape's house, correct?"

"Yes," Harry replied. He was taking advantage of the close proximity to fill in his understanding of her looks. Her skin was almost too smooth, and transparent and her nose definitely too pert, especially in view of the very proper accent. He pulled his hand, still clean, out of his glove and offered it. "I'm Harry, by the way."

"Oh," she said as though realizing her manners had been set aside. "Elizabeth. Peterson. My house is down the road two hundred meters or so past the station."

"Yes, I've seen you walking by a few times."

This appeared to unnerve her a bit. She blinked and recovered with ease and said, "I go to my lessons every day, almost, over the holidays. Piano and harp from Mrs. Blithewell, just around the corner." She pointed as she said this.

Harry, wondering fiercely if she were a witch or not and, thinking that he had nothing to lose, said, "Would you like to come in for tea?"

"Oh," she said, as though taken by vaguely pleasant surprise. "My lesson is in five minutes, so I really can't. Perhaps another time," she said with practiced ease.

"Sure," Harry said with no expectation. She bade him a pleasant day and went on her way. He watched her back as it disappeared around the gentle bend in the road. He suspected he may have spent too much time wondering about her–she seemed downright ordinary, really. Or maybe he was comparing her to Tonks. The latter seemed more likely, as he warmed at thinking of the Auror. He really had to not make that a habit.

Just before noon, when Harry was finally settling in for a good long read of Astronomy, a knock sounded on the door. A little mystified, Harry went to open it. Ginny stood in the garden, looking rosy as though from a brisk walk. "'Ello," she said.

"Hi," Harry returned. "Come in," he invited, scratching his head idly. "Just wake up from the party?"

She hesitated. "Yeah," she admitted. "You left early, you know."

Harry shrugged, thinking he had been finished hours before he had actually left, and most of it was a blur.

"Did you get in trouble for being out so late?" she asked as she stepped in and eyed the entryway keenly.

"No." At her surprised look he shrugged as though not understanding her disbelief. He led her into the main hall and wondered if he should force her to say hello to Snape. His guardian saved him the decision as he stepped out of the library with a book under his arm. "Ms. Weasley," he said in a manner of greeting.

"Sir," she replied, straightening as she did so. She gave Harry an uncomfortable look when Snape disappeared into the drawing room.

Harry gestured toward the dining room. Once there, they sat down across from each other at the table. He assumed Winky would bring tea. "Enjoying the holiday?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she replied strongly. "One more term 'til summer," she added in a mantra-like way.

"Don't like school?"

"I dislike the hard work."

Winky came in with a tea set, startling Ginny severely. " You have a house-elf?" she asked in complete shock.

"Yes," Harry answered, intentionally in a tone that indicated he thought it the most normal thing in the world. He wanted to see how she reacted. She looked confused.

After Winky shifted everything from her tray, he thanked her and poured for Ginny. Winky gave them a little curtsy, which wasn't normal, and departed. Harry tried not to appear too mystified by that, since it dismayed Ginny more.

She sipped her tea. "So how is your holiday going?" she asked in a normal chummy voice.

I got shagged, so it is going pretty well, Harry considered saying, then almost laughed. "Good. Fun party last night," he said quickly to cover after a long throat clearing. "And I'm finally meeting the neighbors here a bit."

Ginny sipped her tea before setting it down on the saucer and straightening both with unusual precision. "Do you like me?" she asked suddenly.

"Uh, you're nice," Harry replied.

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. Harry avoided smiling with some effort. Ginny ate a biscuit and glanced around the room with interest. "Nice house," she said.

"Thanks. It's nice to have one."

"Oh yeah. I 'spose it would be. Hope I'm not keeping you from something by being here."

Harry shook his head. "I have studying to do. Take your time."

She chuckled at that. "You have been a bookworm. Don't know what happened to the fun Harry."

"I wasn't fun at the party?" Harry asked.

"I didn't get to talk to you much–you were always surrounded, either by the kids or my brothers." She took another biscuit. "Well, one term more," she said again, sounding glum.

As though mention of school had conjured him, Snape stepped in. He poured himself a cup and held it. "Studying hard this break, Ms. Weasley?"

"Trying to, sir. My brothers, who don't have school assignments, like to throw big parties."

"Poor dear," Snape said in a classically snide tone.

Harry gave him a warning look.

Looking uncomfortable in Snape's presence, Ginny drank her tea quickly. Harry poured her more and took another biscuit so that she would take another. She smiled, apparently noticing his urging her to stay a while.

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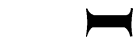
An awkward minute later, Snape set his cup down and rolled up one sleeve, presumably since it was warming up in the house. "Staying for lunch, Ms. Weasley?" he asked, making it sound less like an invitation than a point of interest.

"Uh, no. I don't think so." She swigged the last of her tea and stood up. "Nice to visit a bit, Harry," she said quickly.

Harry showed her to the door and waved her out of the garden. She gave him a fleeting glance over the shoulder that had more furrow to the brow than expected. Back in the drawing room, Harry said to Snape, "Did you chase her off on purpose?"

"No Weasley was ever chased off that easily," Snape replied as he looked for something in the little drawer of the desk.

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry agreed and stepped away.



When Harry slept badly the second night after the party, he wasn't so certain that his alcohol and potion consumption was the culprit. Saturday morning, after another poor night, he mentioned it at breakfast.

"The Ministry hasn't caught the D.E. you 'saw'. Are shadows involved in your dreams?" Snape asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably," he answered with a frown. He had grown very accustomed to not being harassed in his dreams and hated to imagine that was happening again. Plates with extra bacon appeared, spurring Harry to take up his fork.

"Need potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I have some."

After a moment Snape added, "You may wake me in the night, if you need someone to talk to."

"I appreciate that," Harry said, with a twinge of gratitude as he wrapped a long greasy strip around his fork.

That afternoon, Harry again grew bored of doing assignments. Thinking about the unfinished garden made him eager to continue on it. He decided to check the back garden where an old wardrobe, charmed to resist the rain, stood in for a shed. He found a claw shaped tool that would be good for loosening the hard soil and fertilizer

in the form of a large woven sack of dragon dung–so old, it smelled fresh–so old, it would stand in for mulch in a pinch.

Harry carried his haul back around to the front and arranged it all before starting in. He used the claw tool around the plants and pulled up stray weeds he had missed last time, after deciding that they weren't magically growing back that quickly. He considered that would be a rather amusing way to curse a garden.

Footsteps came along the brick walk. Harry sat back from crawling around the shrubs to use the claw along the edge of the wall. "I have a few errands on Diagon Alley," Snape said. "I assume you are safe to leave for an hour or so. I am certain you would render either Jugson or Avery helpless with laughter were they to approach while you're are doing that." Harry tried to give him a dark look, but failed. Snape went on, in the same tone of dry, airy disbelief, "Barring that, I am certain you could beat them off with that thing you are holding."

Chuckling, Harry said, "Too bad if you don't like it. I'm doing it anyway."

"Hm," Snape muttered before disappearing back into the house.

Harry was just finishing mulching and was pretty happy with the way it all looked, when he turned and eyed the other tangled half. He thought maybe he should have had Snape buy a book of gardening spells while he was out.

"Hello again," Elizabeth said from just the other side of the low wall by the road.

Harry spun around and adjusted his cap as he greeted her. He realized that because if it, she didn't know who he was. "How does it look?"

"Vastly improved," she stated.

"That's what I thought," Harry said happily, surveying it again.

"You must really dislike studying," she commented, looking around.

"History, yes," Harry said. "Boring as it gets."

"I like history," she said. "Classes at Malvern are always at least somewhat interesting."

"Where's that?" Harry asked, never having heard of it. It didn't sound magical.

"Worcestershire." She pulled off her white gloves and put them in her pocket. "Where do you go to school?"

Harry grinned as he thought of replying St. Brutus'. "A boarding school in Scotland," he said with a shrug.

"With a boring History class," she added for him.

Harry considered that if he explained that the it was boring because the professor was dead, that might not go over so well. "Yes," he replied simply. "Would you like tea?" he asked, sensing that she was impatient about something.

"Yes, please," she replied eagerly, taking Harry by surprise, mostly because he had not imagined he had pinned her motivations correctly.

He led the way inside, dropping his gloves just inside the door and intentionally forgetting to remove his cap. In the hall, while she looked around, he leaned down the steps to the kitchen and asked Winky for afternoon tea. Winky came over to the bottom of the steps and actually gave him a wink, which she had never done before.

Shaking off the confusion from that, Harry turned back to Elizabeth. "Dining room," he said gesturing at the nearby door. With a smile she followed his gesture, glancing at his cap as she passed him. Harry pretended not to notice.

"This is nice," she said of the wooden-walled room. She glanced down and studied the patterned rug. It was Harry's favorite room as well, so he smiled at that as he sat down across from her. "Is the rug Belgian?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

"You only know plants," she suggested in a level tone.

Harry, accustomed to harmless snideness, was nonetheless a little taken aback. "Actually, I don't know plants really, either," he replied. Winky arrived with the tea in that instant. She set the table and poured two cups.

"I wouldn't have expected a house-elf," Elizabeth said, clearly pleasantly surprised. She seemed to have a special tone of voice just for conveying that. "So you are Harry Snape? Or is your name something more formal, like Harold?"

Harry almost inhaled his tea. He cleared his throat as gently as possible. "No, just Harry," he managed hoarsely.

The Floo flared then and Elizabeth calmly put her cup down and watched as Snape bent under the mantel. Snape's eyes moved between them with a slightly suggestive expression. Elizabeth stood and held out her hand out. "Elizabeth Peterson, sir. We've met once, several years ago."

"Ah, yes," Snape said, shaking her hand.

"Rather surprised to find you have an addition to the household," she said pleasantly.

Snape swung his cloak off and draped it over his arm. "He is a recent addition," he stated helpfully.

"Surprising that no one knows," she went on insistently.

Snape seemed to search for a reply. As he did so, his eyes glanced over Harry's orange cap. "It didn't seem to warrant a formal announcement," he stated, matching her formal tone and almost matching her accent. Harry had to fight a grin. "I'll leave you two to your tea," he said politely, sounding very odd as a result. As he turned to the hall, Harry had the distinct impression that Snape was trying to tell him something. At the doorway, Snape glanced back one last time and Harry realized he was telling him he could remove the cap since his back was to the bright window.

As Elizabeth sat back down, Harry pulled of his cap and fluffed his fringe to hide his scar. She smiled when she saw he had removed it. They chatted for a half hour or so about the village; Harry learned a lot of things he had wondered about at one point before forgetting when he got used to the place, such as how long wizards had lived here in the relative open: 300 years, and what the resident Muggles thought of witches and wizards: they were mostly relatives of magical people who found it nice to easily have either kind of visitor.

Snape wandered back in after Winky had brought them a fresh pot. He poured himself a cup and stood sipping it. "Do you want to join us, sir?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head and took another sip.

Elizabeth said, "You should both come for dinner some evening. Mother would be most interested to meet you." For an instant, Harry thought she had recognized him without giving any indication, until she said, "Another Snape, how interesting," in a gossipy sort of way.

Snape gulped and jerked his cup away from himself. He looked like he may have burned his mouth. Harry cringed; he really should have corrected her immediately. His guardian looked about as amused as Harry had ever seen him. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he fought to keep from laughing.

Elizabeth, uninterrupted, went on blithely, "Really surprising, you adopting a Muggle and all."

"What?" Harry blurted. Snape lowered his hand to give him a very odd expression. "What makes you think I'm a Muggle?" Harry asked her, stunned by the notion.

"Well, you were doing the gardening by hand," she said, as though that covered it completely.

"Oh." Harry thought of saying that he didn't know how to do it any other way. Instead, he said, "I prefer doing it by hand. I was killing time."

"Oh," she said, sounding completely mystified. Harry decided she must be a witch.

"Why do you go to Malvern instead of Hogwarts?" he asked bluntly.

She sat back and crossed her legs. "Father doesn't believe in magical education. He's a Muggle. Mother tried to explain, but he insists I go to Oxford like himself." She ended with a shrug. "I prefer it now. Before, when I first started, I wasn't very happy about it. My mother has taught me some useful spells and she bought me a wand. I have it at home," she added proudly.

Harry stared at her, trying to take that in.

"So you probably know lots of spells," she said, apparently to fill the silence.

"Hundreds," Harry replied.

"Well," she waved her hand in the air, vaguely in Snape's direction. "You have a father for a teacher," she said dismissively.

Harry nodded, "True."

"Besides, things must have been simply dreadful last year with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named visiting and all."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied flatly. "But still true."

"Much better to be away from things. Safer that way," she asserted in a different, flatter, tone.

"Not everyone in Shrewsthorpe was safe," Snape stated in one of his talking-to-a-dim-student voices.

"They were safe-er," she came back firmly, sounding like she was quoting someone else.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Thrimbol would definitely agree and Horis Jourhart and Sora Dreamham," Snape stated, sounding a little relentless.

Elizabeth looked away. Harry did not recognize any of the names. "Who are they?" he asked.

Snape looked reluctant to explain. As he considered a response, Elizabeth said, "I was walking home the night the Mark floated over Trudy Thrimbol's house. What

the hell did they want with her anyway?" she snapped in frustration, then flushed, apparently at her language.

Harry dropped his gaze and took a deep breath. He listened as Snape said, "She worked in the records department at the Ministry part time even though she was retired. That made her extremely useful." After a pause, he said, "Harry?" a bit sharply.

Harry raised his eyes as he frowned.

Snape put down his cup and stridently said, "You did everything you could have possibly done. Sooner than anyone expected you to."

"What are you talking about?" Elizabeth asked.

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "His capacity for guilt is phenomenal," he snapped with a hint of anger. "I am attempting to persuade him to not take on any more. Especially any not his to bear."

She looked very confused. "Why would you be responsible?" she asked Harry.

Harry sighed. "Because killing Voldemort was my task. Maybe I could have done it sooner."

"What?" she breathed.

Snape scoffed. "Have you forgotten already how you did it?"

"No," Harry admitted in a difficult tone. The night in the abandoned manor had been key, Harry knew all too well. Only a month had passed after that. How much difference had that made? It probably made a difference to someone, another gnawing voice in his head commented. But he couldn't have hunted Voldemort down himself, hauled his friends off again somewhere unsafe, and he had needed them too, just as much. Snape was closely watching him think this over.

"Um . . ." Elizabeth interrupted his thoughts. She started to speak, then stopped, twice.

Snape put his hands down to lean over the table and said to her. "Yes, he is Harry Potter. Not Harry Snape," he barely managed the last, having to swallow a laugh to get it out. It bothered Harry rather a lot that his guardian was finding this so amusing, especially since he only ever found the darkest irony amusing. At Elizabeth's disbelieving look, Snape wanded the lamp up and came around behind Harry to pull his hair back. "See?"

"G'off," Harry protested, pushing his hand away.

"The Hero of Wizardry himself," Snape went on in an odd tone. Harry shot him a narrow look over his shoulder. Snape added, "Of course, he does not think that is a positive thing."

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked, sounding stunned in general.

"A very good question," Snape said, sounding too much like a teacher. He stepped back to the head of the table and crossed his arms. "Perhaps ask him. I'd be curious to hear the answer myself."

"Were you hiding?" she asked, amazed.

"No. I just–" he gestured at the cap. "Well, maybe," he conceded in a low tone. "It is hard to get to know someone that way."

"Really?" she asked doubtfully. "I would have talked to you longer the other day, had I known."

"Yes, but that wouldn't have been talking to me ," Harry insisted. "Just someone you thought you knew from the Prophet ."

"No," she insisted, "I would have been talking to a wizard–I thought you were a Muggle."

Harry sighed and gave up trying to explain.

She sat straighter. "In any event, you are very welcome to the village, hero or not," she said in a nicely prim tone. "I think I must be going, now," she added suddenly and stood up. Harry showed her to the door, where she shook his hand and gazed in amazement at his scar before stepping out. "Very nice to have met you," she turned and said in an almost comically proper voice. Harry waved her off, hoping he didn't wear too dismayed an expression.

When he returned to the dining room, Snape was in her chair, having another spot of tea.

"Now everyone will know I'm here–won't they?" he said dully as he sat down.

"Within minutes, I believe," Snape stated. After a long pause, he added, "You are who you are. There is no sense running from that."

Harry stared into his cold teacup. "She bothered me," he said.

"And why shouldn't she?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know," he replied in a annoyed tone, not wanting to voice the reasons for his disappointment.

Later, as he was finally reading a bit in in his Astronomy text, a post owl arrived, flitting straight in the open window. Harry accepted the letter and noticed the return address of Switzerland. He opened it as he nibbled on the last chocolate biscuit. There was a letter as well as a copy of the photo Opus took. The photo took him by surprise–his eyes were brighter and happier than he imagined they looked most of the time. He set it aside. When Snape raised his chin to look over at it, Harry pushed it around to his guardian, who lifted it to examine it more closely. Snape raised a brow and placed it back on the table.

Dear Harry, Hope you are having a fine holiday. Currently we are visiting my grandparents in Geneva. My mother and father were rather stunned by the photograph. They insist I invite you to come visit during the summer, so I am doing so, even though I am certain you are much too busy. I am looking forward to returning to Hogwarts and am very glad to be there rather than Durmstrang even though I miss many friends terribly. I have not been studying as much as I should be. I hope you are having this problem too so that it will not be as noticeable. See you very soon, Penelope.

That evening, many visitors came to the door to say hello as though they had just moved in or something. They were all very pleased to meet Harry. All wanted the two of them to come for dinner very soon. Harry was glad they were due to leave for Hogwarts too soon to accept any invitations. Elizabeth returned with her mother who actually patted Harry on the head with her white gloved hand, pushing the control of his annoyance to the limit. Elizabeth gave him a very apologetic wince that balanced some of it out.

As he closed the door when they had finally said goodbye for the last time, he exhaled in relief and leaned back against it. "Maybe we should leave in the morning tomorrow," he muttered.

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Chapter 36.

Wool of Bat and Tongue of Dog

Early Sunday evening, as he came down the stairs to depart for school, Harry considered that the house really did feel like it was equally his.

In the dining room, Snape asked, "Ready to go?"

Harry rechecked his bookbag for his texts and nodded. He stepped into the hearth and took a handful of the coarse powder Snape offered him.

The visiting Durmstrang students had returned, as well as the rest of the students, for Sunday dinner. Harry sat down with his friends; everyone chatted vigorously about their activities.

"How did your holiday go?" Penelope asked Harry with shy interest.

"Oh, good," Harry said, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable.

She seemed to sense his unease and turned to Frina with her next question.

"Don't mind him," Ron insisted to Penelope. "He had a rough break."

"What, your picnic qualified as 'rough'?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I meant being stalked by Death Eaters," Ron said.

"I told you about that?" Harry asked him in confusion, certain that Snape wouldn't have said anything. Frina and Penelope turned at those words and listened with trepidation.

"After the second kamikaze, yes," Ron replied, amused.

"Oh. Did I say anything else I didn't mean to?" Harry asked seriously.

Ron laughed. "I don't know. Why wouldn't you want us to know? No one else has seen those two."

"No one else sees Death Eaters with their eyes closed," Harry breathed very quietly to himself. When he fell silent in thought, Penelope gave him a sympathetic look.

Harry had studied only cursorily over Easter break, so when Greer asked him a question during the first Potions class, he did not know the answer, which was a first for months and a bad way to start the last term of his school years. Greer asked one of the Ravenclaws, who answered correctly. A moment later, Parkinson's annoying laugh rang out. Harry glanced over to see Malfoy leaning over and whispering to her. Harry looked away and ignored them for the rest of the class, which was harder than usual; Malfoy seemed to be making more snide comments today, keeping the students around him entertained. Although Harry could not actually hear the comments from the other side of the room, they were making him a bit aggravated, or maybe it was just that he had a few Hufflepuffs laughing.

Dean leaned over and elbowed Harry, he assumed to keep him from retorting and making more trouble. Harry gave him a weak smile and returned to his notes. Dean sighed and returned to his own notes. The sigh seemed too heartfelt for the current situation, making Harry wonder what was bothering him.

More snickering brought Harry's gaze up before he could stop himself. Malfoy sat smugly with his arms crossed, fingering the material of his uniform. Harry wondered if Pansy beside him was taking notes for both of them. He wished Greer would penalize them for the disruption they were causing, especially since it looked like

Chapter 36

Malfoy wasn't paying attention, but the teacher didn't seem to be noticing anything was amiss and pointing it out would certainly be a mistake.

Hagrid had taken care of Harry's and Penelope's wombat over break, so after Potions Harry went down to the gamekeeper's cabin to see if he should take it back. It was sleeping in a crate on the floor, still curled around Penelope's cloak. Fawkes' perch overlooked it and the two made for a brightly colored pair.

The wombat had not grown much and when he commented on that, Hagrid said, "It was done growing Harry. And in record time too. Yeh musta given i' everything it needed." It still looked small when Hagrid scooped it up with his large hand and gave it to him. "You kin turn i' in next class, ifn yer wan'. I'll see that i' ge's sen' to Australia and released."

"I'll have to talk to Penelope about that," Harry said, accepting the cloak as well.

He carried the wombat up to the castle, hitched on his hip. It looked around in interest as he walked into the main doors and along the entrance hall. He had half-expected it to be alarmed after Hagrid's small, quiet cabin, but it seemed a little curious about what everyone was doing. When he found Hermione, Ginny, and Penelope in the Great Hall, they jumped up to greet the wombat rather than him.

Returning to school did not help Harry's dreams. The second night, he awoke with a start and required a long minute to feel oriented and safe in a different bed than he had slept in over holiday.

"Harry?" Ron said in a faint whisper.

Harry pulled the drapes aside quietly. "Yeah?"

Ron's grey silhouette hovered beside his bed. "Need anything?"

"No."

"Wanna go for a walk around the castle?"

"Maybe not," Harry replied, although he could clearly remember their walks before Voldemort was destroyed.

Ron's shadow moved away. "Let me know if you change your mind," he whispered as he crawled back into his bed.

Harry lay awake for a while, grateful for his friend's attempts at helping. He tried in vain to catch the threads of the shadows in his dream. They made less sense than they had in the past, moving counter to each other somehow rather than just coming at him. He thought maybe he should owl Tonks and try to explain somehow that his dreams made him think something was happening, without explaining everything. Thoughts of her made him grin in the darkness and relax enough to sleep, which he finally did, in time to feel mostly rested in the morning.

The next day, Harry and Penelope agreed to turn in their wombat. Hagrid accepted it with a grin and put it in a pen behind his cabin before starting the lecture on electric walking sticks–long insects that zapped painfully if you touched them. Hagrid had them in a box. As they all leaned in to look, little lightening bolts flickered between the camouflaged things. Harry stepped back to let others see. As he did so, he noticed Malfoy had his hand right on Parkinson's bum as they stood waiting to take their turn at the crate. Malfoy gave Harry a snarky once-over at his expression. Surprised by this bold rudeness, Harry stepped around to the other side, closer to the pen where the wombat was rolling around holding its back foot as though to playfully attack it. Not the brightest animal, he thought.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Snape paired them up for a full practice session. "I have discovered that some of you are taking the liberty of dueling on your own time, which I might point out is strictly against school rules. I have decided that it would be best to just get it out of your systems during class."

Penelope and Hermione dueled first. Harry watched almost mystified at how polite they were about it, with their low power spells and long pauses between offense and defense. It was like watching a ping-pong match between two grandmothers. Opus and Neville went next. This was a little more interesting to watch since both of them looked like they felt they had something to prove. Neville lost, unfortunately, when his blasting curse was rebounded by some kind of flexible block Harry had never seen. Neville lost his balance and had to jump off the back of the platform to keep from falling on his head. Harry had not noticed until that moment, but Neville looked more athletic than he remembered.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said, inviting him up with a sweep of his fingers. "And . . ."

"Oh please, let it be me," Malfoy murmured.

"Despite the interruption, why not?" Snape drawled, indicating he should come up.

Harry pulled out his wand and moved to the center of the platform. As they stood back to back, Harry said, "You going to cheat again?"

The other boy scoffed. "I don't need to cheat to beat you."

"Good luck," Harry sneered as the count started.

On ten they both issued blasting curses which they both managed to block. Harry was first with the next one, a Figuresempre which was blocked easily. Harry decided that Malfoy had been practicing since their last 'draw'. Malfoy, grinning with almost disturbing pleasure, made Harry wait before he incanted a chain binding curse. Harry ducked under it and it wrapped up one of the wooden stands behind him with a loud clatter.

Malfoy was supposed to wait for Harry's next one, but instead he spelled at the same time Harry did and their curses met in the middle with a spectacular explosion of light. The other students oh ed in an impressed kind of way. Malfoy was faster than expected again, with a spell Harry did not know. In a panic he put up a Titan block since it was the first thing to pop into his head. When the strange spell hit, it jolted him to his knees and made him drop his wand.

As he grabbed up his wand and tried quickly to aim back, he discovered Snape had stepped in the middle. "No permanently damaging curses, Mr. Malfoy," he stated angrily.

In a bit of an overdone whine, Malfoy retorted, "It isn't if he counters it."

Harry got to his feet and shook his arms out, which were tingling painfully.

"Take your seat. Ten points from Slytherin for that, Mr. Malfoy." Snape turned to Harry; he seemed to want to ask if he was all right, but held back. "A Chrysanthemum block would have been a better option and generally is for an unknown attack," he said factually, although it had a layer of something under it, something seeking to soothe, perhaps.

Harry took his seat, still rubbing his tingling arms. Malfoy glanced over and grinned as he saw that. Harry dropped his arms and pretended they didn't hurt anymore as Ron and Dean were paired up on the platform.

More members of the Advanced D.A. were managing to achieve their Animagus forms. Hermione became an otter in the next session, to a long run of cheering. She actually came over and chewed on Harry's shoe, when he stayed off to the side while everyone else gathered around. Harry laughed despite himself, especially when she changed back and ended up on all fours.

"Maybe I should stand up some before changing back," she said, blushing fiercely.

"I'm glad I'm spared such embarrassment," Harry opined.

She slapped him on the leg. "Not for long," she chided.

Dean also managed his form late in the same session. He turned into a Moor pony. He turned back again quickly when the others began arguing over who got the first ride. Four students were now Animagi since Suze had managed her white mink form over holiday. In a buoyant mood, they broke up to return to their assignments for tomorrow.

On the way back from the Room of Requirement, the thing Harry had feared earlier did happen, but fortunately he was with Ron, Ginny, Dean and Hermione. As they passed a cupboard, voices could be heard talking low.

Hermione, closest to the door, actually giggled, utterly surprising Harry. They all moved on as quickly as they could while remaining silent. When they were out of range, Hermione said, "Boy, thought Malfoy was really attached to Parkinson."

"He does seem to be," Ginny commented.

"Why was he back there with someone else?" she asked, amused.

"How could you tell?" Ron asked doubtfully.

"I could hear them talking; couldn't you?"

"I wasn't listening that closely," Ron grumbled uncomfortably.

As they reached the stairs, Hermione said thoughtfully, "Sounded a bit like Eloise, actually, whom I thought was going with Moon. Ah well, anyone dumb enough to trust him, gets what they deserve," she said dismissively.

Harry was dreaming. Not a bad dream like he had been having, but a more pleasant one in which he was dancing in the Great Hall with Tonks, who was wearing a

rather extravagant fuzzy yellow ball gown that flared wide around her. The hall was decorated similarly to the way it had been for the Tri-Wizard Tournament except that the walls themselves glittered. And through the tall windows the stars winked brightly rather than ominously.

Tonks smiled at him with equally bright eyes and laughed as they spun intermittently fast and slow. Harry pulled her close but in the dream he could not feel her the way he expected to. She leaned forward with a sly grin and kissed him softly, timidly. Harry did not understand why she was kissing him so when she had done it much more aggressively before. He reached out dream hands toward her to try to make things right, painfully aware that this was not right somehow.

A pleasant sigh snapped Harry awake. Lips were on his and the transition from dream to reality hard to distinguish. "Wha?" Harry said, grabbing the figure above him. He could feel narrow shoulders under his hands.

"Harry," a familiar voice whispered.

Harry sat up and grabbed up his wand and used a Lumos charm. The light revealed that the drapes around his bed were closed tight and that Ginny knelt on the bed beside him. She had a very crooked smile and bright eyes.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded in a harsh whisper.

"You don't have to be quiet–I used a Silencio on the drapes," she said in a normal voice. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I wanted to see you," she said quietly despite her previous assertion.

"Ah . . . " Harry said as he rubbed his hair back to think. "You shouldn't be here," he finally said.

"Why not?" she asked smartly. "The dormitory steps don't keep girls out, even at night. Don't you want me here?"

"I was sleeping. And . . ." he trailed off as her hand brushed his upper arm with tantalizing lightness. He grabbed her hand in his and held it away. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Her face had fallen when he had restrained her. Harry set the wand aside, still glowing, and sat up straighter. "Really, Ginny, Ron is just in the next bed," he pointed out a little distressed. "What were you thinking?"

She frowned a bit and said, half to herself, "I see the way you look at her."

"What way?" he asked.

“ That way,” she said as though he were slow.

Harry became distant and thoughtful. “Do I really?” he asked a little eagerly.

With a grumbling huff, she tossed aside the drapes and departed. When Harry heard the dormitory door click closed, he breathed out in a deep sigh of relief, but he could not relax and it took over an hour to fall back to sleep.

The old, half-ruined, stone cabin faced the constant wind from the sea. Whoever had built it was either an idiot or really wanted a view. A figure approached along a grassy path, wand waving occasionally before him to ward off protective alarms. He approached quietly enough that the occupant did not detect him until he stepped into view.

“You!”

A sweet smile then. “I have something I need from you.”

Slight relaxation accompanied this statement although the man continued eyeing the other suspiciously. “Take whatever you want,” he said with a gesture at the drooping roof of the cabin behind him. He then laughed a little maniacally at his own sarcasm.

“It is true you only have one thing left. And you really have no choice but to give it to me.” The visitor fired a binding curse from his ready wand.

Harry stretched his neck as he stared at the glass sphere before him. A moment ago it had been an orange, so he was at least making progress. But any moment now it was going to switch back. He sighed; he was tired and not really in the mood to change things into other things. He had had a difficult time at breakfast pretending everything was normal; a much harder time than Ginny, who appeared to have forgotten it all. His forced casualness had attracted his friends’ attention, although they had not pressed him to explain. Harry took off his glasses to rub his sore eyes. At some point he had fallen again into the mode of being tired all the time. Too easily, he thought, although people interrupting his sleep certainly did not help.

When he put his glasses back on, he found McGonagall observing him. He sniffed and returned to the next phase of the transfiguration which was to turn the air in the

center of the sphere into smoke. Fortunately, even Hermione was having a tough time with this one; her sphere kept cracking open when she attempted that stage. Today, since Harry was stalling, she was the one using up all the oranges at their table in a bid to get it right as fast as possible.

McGonagall eventually stepped around to them. "We can go over it again this evening, Mr. Potter, if need be," she said in reference to his tutoring session.

"I really need to get this?" Harry asked.

She frowned. "It is commonly on the N.E.W.T., I'm afraid, since it tests all forms of multi-transformation at once. A little hint to you: if they give you just the end points for the transfiguration rather than the steps, assume that the steps are applied in order of easiest to hardest, because that is typical of the test design."

"Hm," Hermione muttered sounding like she were committing that to memory. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry, realizing that he could work on his spell again later, casually used the smoke transformation on his sphere out of boredom. It actually worked.

"Hey," Hermione said brightly, "nicely done." In a frowning voice she added, "So, what did you do?"

"If I could tell you, I would," Harry commented. "I doubt I can repeat it."

She set another orange before him, moving his smoky sphere gently to the side. "Do it quick while you still remember."

Harry tried, but could not work it correctly again, even when he made himself pretend he didn't care if it worked.

Harry left his friends studying in the library and took the long way around to the tower, to dump off his books, just for a chance to stretch his legs which were stiff from the hard chair he had been sitting in the last few hours. He was looking ahead to his tutoring session, so he was not paying too close attention to what was happening around him. As a result, when a figure burst out of a side corridor and looked around, it startled him more than he would have liked.

"Suze?" Harry asked in concern at the way she glanced around herself. She relaxed a bit upon seeing him there, giving Harry the notion that she feared he might be someone else. He stepped over to her. "What's going on?" he asked.

She composed herself and surreptitiously glanced around behind him. "Nothing," she replied; for a Slytherin it was a very poor lie. She straightened her ponytail efficiently and started to walk away.

Harry, worried, said, "No, really," as he reached out a hand to her shoulder to slow her down.

She jumped away from him and snarled, "Don't touch me!"

Stunned silly, Harry jumped back himself and stared at her. "I didn't–" he started, then stopped. "I'm sorry," he finally managed, holding his hands to the side and a little back. She turned again and walked away, but Harry followed. "Suze, what's wrong?" he asked in concern.

She stopped at the bend where the sunlight tried valiantly to light the corridor through thick clouds. "Who do you think you are, my big brother?" she accused him.

"Uh," Harry said, feeling like he had missed part of the conversation somehow. He knew she had no siblings, so he dove in as though he were following along. "If necessary," he said.

Her shoulders fell as though admitting defeat. Harry knew that feeling well: the one where your strength leaves you because someone says that they will help. "I can take care of myself," she insisted.

"If you won't talk to me, you should talk to Professor Snape," Harry insisted. "Whatever is wrong. . . . "

She gave him a glance as though he were an idiot and strode away again. Harry let her go this time. As she disappeared down a short set of steps where the wings connected, someone stepped up beside Harry. He turned as Malfoy, arms crossed, pert nose a little high, said, "Bit of a wench."

Anger poured into Harry as heat in his veins. His hands balled into tight fists at his sides. Malfoy gave him a glance that said, what is your problem ? In a low voice, Harry threatened, "Don't you ever . . . "

The blonde boy scoffed and walked away, shaking his head. Harry reached into his robe and put his hand around his wand but did not pull it out. So badly did he want to hit the other in the back with something jarring; something that would land him in the hospital wing or St. Mungo's for a week. With a quiet growl he let go of his wand and went around floor the other way.

Snape was in his office, grading as usual. His first glance at Harry seemed to tell him a lot. "What is it?" he asked, setting his quill down beside the stack of parchments.

Harry, too keyed up to sit, pushed the visitor's chair out of the way of his pacing route. He knew he had to say this just the right way, but as he thought it over, he realized that he did not know anything for certain. He swore lightly in frustration.

"I do hope you don't use that language around the other staff members," Snape said with a touch of snide.

"Huh? Oh, no. I don't." He stopped and gestured with his hands as he said, "Look, I think there's a problem with one of your students." Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and Occluded his mind; if Suze did not want to say anything herself, he could not by rights give her away. "Are you keeping a close watch on Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Not so much lately, I must admit," Snape said. His intent gaze made Harry suspect he had noticed that Harry had closed his mind. "There are other, far more problematic students to watch over."

Harry struggled for words. "I think he's getting . . . aggressive, maybe is the word, with some of the female students."

"That does not sound like Mr. Malfoy," Snape opined with certainty.

Harry thought back to the scene of minutes before. The events were coincidental, maybe?

"Whom are you protecting, by the way?" Snape asked.

His guardian's bluntness surprised Harry enough that he almost dropped his Occlusion. Gathering himself together, he replied in frustration, "The person who should be here talking to you."

Snape interlocked his fingers before himself and stared at them a long moment. "I will speak with him and a few others." He paused before saying, "Do not do anything stupid yourself."

"How did you know I was thinking that?"

Snape gave him a small smile and a raised brow in reply.

Harry noticed the clock. "I have to get to my Transfiguration tutoring," he said in a rush.

Carrying his full backpack, because he had not made it to the tower to drop it off, Harry headed for the gargoyles. As the stairs turned upward, he rested his forehead against the center stone post that turned with him. He almost dropped his bag from surprise at the shadows moving in his mind.

The steps stopped at the top and McGonagall said, "Are you all right, Harry?" Her door was open as usual and she stood reading something before the bookcase near the doorway.

"I think so," Harry said, hefting his heavy bag into the room by its straining straps.

"What was that just now?" she asked as he plopped into the visitor's chair.

With a frown he replied, "I've been seeing a lot of shadows lately."

The book she held hit the desk with a slap. Almost accusingly, she said, "You are still seeing that green vision from before?"

With a reluctant frown, he replied, "Yes."

"Does Severus know this?" she demanded.

"Yes." She relaxed marginally, so he added, "I owled Tonks as well." Although this was a bit of a lie, as he had only told the Auror he was having worrisome dreams. She had owled back saying they were very close to picking up at least one of the last two, but could not go into detail.

"Well, at least you are willing to tell someone you are in danger, unlike before."

A little peeved, Harry said, "I'm a little better able to take care of myself now, Professor."

"Nevertheless, it was Albus' intent that this place be safe for you and it is mine as well. My staff and I will review and renew the spelling that was set up to protect you last year."

Harry paused in pulling out his Transfiguration textbook. "The castle was spelled to protect me , specifically?" He felt a little touched by this notion, then thought more. "But it didn't work. Voldemort just walked in."

"Yes, well," she sighed. "It should not have been that easy," she stated offhandedly as she set an orange out on the desk. "His powers were still growing, it seems."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Good thing he's gone, then," he said as he found the right chapter in his book and placed that on the desk as well.

She smiled lightly at him. "Yes. It means we may devote our full attention to attenuated multi-tranformational charmed objects."

"That's what I was thinking," Harry agreed, trying to sound excited by that notion, but it came out as suffering instead.

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Chapter 37.

Adders Fork and Blind-Worms Sting

Professor Snape approached Draco Malfoy as he sat in the Slytherin common room, playing wizard chess with Fredericka Fredrick, a fifth year. "Mr. Malfoy," Snape said to get his attention before gesturing with his fingers that the boy should follow.

Malfoy looked up cockily at his professor. With a very casual shrug he stood and followed Snape to a dungeon classroom. As Snape shut the door, Malfoy strode casually over to a stool and hitched his hip upon it. He waited for his professor to speak with a tilted head expression of haughty impatience. Snape could not help but be glad to be getting rid of the boy in three short months.

"I have had a complaint about you, Mr. Malfoy."

"Yeah? Can't imagine who that would have been," he sneered. "You listening to Gryffindors now?"

"Only the ones I trust, I will admit," Snape said. "But nevertheless. You had slipped below my attention so it came as a surprise."

"He's made you weak," Malfoy said. "You wanted that?"

"What you think is of no matter. You are required to heed me, not the other way around." Snape paced to the high windows before turning suddenly back. "Are you guilty of what Mr. Potter accuses you of? It occurs to me that I have not ever seen you socializing with Ms. Fredrick before this."

Malfoy shrugged. "What's it to you? You my baby sitter now?"

"I am if you are crossing the line," he replied in a very hard tone. The blonde boy was adeptly Occluding his mind, making Snape suspect that Harry was correct. "If I see you again with a student below sixth year, I will make your life very miserable," he promised.

The boy grinned crookedly and shook his head in disgust. After a long pause Malfoy said, "You fooled everyone, you know." When Snape did not immediately respond, he suggested, "Or are you fooling them now, maybe? Potter doesn't seem that stupid, but maybe he is."

"None of that is any of your concern," Snape said dismissively.

"Really?" He slipped off the stool and stepped over to his teacher. "You betrayed . . . a lot of people."

"They deserved to be," Snape stated.

Malfoy gave him that sloppy grin again. "It's too bad Voldemort didn't catch you at it," he said with a hint of relish at the notion.

Snape grabbed up the front of the boy's robes and lifted him up to his toes. "Is there a particular reason you are taunting me? Or are you really that foolishly overconfident? Your father is not going to be able to do anything for you . . . ever ." He released him, angry that he had lost control. With a frown he headed for the door.

"That's what you think," Malfoy said quietly.

"Just remember what I said," Snape returned in his most threatening voice.

That weekend, Snape and four other teachers were assigned to respell the castle. Harry watched them very early Saturday morning before most students were awake. Hagrid and he stood at the bottom of the steps as McGonagall and Sprout formed a blue field around the main doors. When the glow stabilized, they stepped back and watched it fade to invisible.

McGonagall stepped over to Harry. "Looks like hard work, Professor," he opined.

She shook her head. "The castle is designed to hold magic so it takes much easier than an ordinary object would. Every last stone was selected for its metal and crystalline content, especially around the doors."

Chapter 37

Harry considered that if he had ever managed to get around to reading Hogwarts: A History , he undoubtedly would have known that.

Unexpectedly, Neville came out wearing very Muggle clothes, exercise clothes in fact. He looked surprised to find them all standing there. McGonagall gestured for him to head out. "Good morning, Mr. Longbottom," she said graciously.

"Morning, Professor," he said in a questioning tone.

Harry wondered what he was up to that the headmistress was so casual about.

"Just renewing the protective spells, my boy," McGonagall explained to Neville. At some point she had adopted Dumbledore's form of address for them; Harry kept intending to point out its inappropriateness, but could not bring himself to.

"Good idea, ma'am," Neville stated shyly, with a strange glance at Harry.

Harry wondered at the look and watched Neville as he moved off, went to the corner of the outer wall, and put one foot up on it and bent over his knee. Harry watched his friend rather than the teachers as the risers themselves were charmed. Neville changed feet a few times, then jogged off to the edge of the forest and started around the edge of the lawn. Harry tracked him as he fell into a smooth stride around the lawn edge.

Later, at breakfast, Harry said to Neville, "I didn't know you ran."

"I started over Christmas. A Muggle friend of mine got me started on it. It's really relaxing."

Harry gave him a doubtful look and returned to nibbling his bacon. Neville did look different now; better proportioned maybe, as though he might actually be muscular under his robes. Harry wondered if the running had done that.

"What were the teachers doing this morning?" Frina asked Harry. "I saw you outside with them."

Harry, noticing Penelope's gaze come up curiously, blushed. He was finding himself much more concerned about her opinion of things. "They were renewing the protective spells on the castle."

"Do any of the spells keep people in?" Penelope asked cautiously.

"Just out," Harry replied reassuringly with a kind smile, thinking that Ginny would not like this look either.

"Good," she breathed.

"What do I get, Mr. Potter, if I take today's potion, ice concentrate it, mix it with Dermanus powder and boil it for five days?" Greer sounded victorious by the end of the question.

"Calamnute," Harry replied confidently without looking up and without hesitating. The other four textbooks were bloody useful.

When Greer spun away with a huff, Frina asked curiously, "Doesn't the house usually get points for answering such a question?"

Greer spun back around. "What house are you in, young lady?"

"I do not have a house."

"You are at the Gryffindor table, are you not?" Greer sneered.

"We were not sorted, as you call it. We board in their tower, yes," Darsha explained calmly when Frina was at a loss for words.

"Ten points from Gryffindor then, for your cheek," she snapped at Frina.

When Greer had moved on out of immediate hearing range, Frina apologized in an angry, stressed whisper.

"It's not your fault," Harry assured her.

"Ron is very keen to win this house cup, right?" Frina insisted.

"I think he is going to have to do without it," Harry commented flatly.

Harry walked back from checking on Hermione and Frina's wombat for them while they finished up a difficult Arithmency assignment. The fifth floor corridor was quiet and empty, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls. He thought ahead to his half-finished History assignment; just the notion of it made his brain slow down.

His steps faltered when the hair on his arms prickled as though a draft had swept by him. Harry stopped and looked around. The corridor was empty, a half moon revealed through the dark windows on the end. Even so, he reached for his wand.

Nothing moved as he turned his head back and forth and began to feel a little silly for his paranoia.

He let his wand hand fall to his side and took a step along the corridor. The next instant, he was sprawled face down on the floor. He rolled over immediately, propped on one stinging hand, wand held out. No target appeared. He had heard no incantation and had seen no spell trail. Breathing heavily, he moved the aim of his wand around him. The corridor remained utterly still.

" Accio Cloak ," Harry incanted, thinking only then that someone might be standing close-by, invisible. Nothing happened. He repeated the spell in the other direction, also with no effect. He shifted to get up and found his legs befuddled somehow. He could move them, but they refused to get under him, so it was impossible to stand. Heart racing harder at his predicament, Harry pulled himself along the floor a few feet, slowly because he did not want to lower his wand and use both hands.

Harry needed help. He aimed his wand at the floor and began a Pravda Bird spell. As he spoke it and the bird emerged, his wand and the bird were blasted away from his hand. His wand clattered along the floor and stopped beside a marble statue of Corin Cornelius, who was carved giving a lesson on broom safety. The silver bird spiraled along the wall beyond the statue and vanished in a small cloud of silver sparks.

Harry looked frantically back along the path the spell must have taken, peering closely at the air for any sign of disturbance. No sound or movement could be detected. He considered yelling for help, wondered if anyone would even hear him, or if his pride could withstand it. At the sound of his wand scraping on the floor he whipped his head back around. His wand was lying halfway between himself and the statue now, tantalizingly close.

Wondering again with a stab of fear what was wrong with his legs, Harry pulled himself along the floor toward his wand. This time there was a spell flash from behind him and he was thrown forward by a blasting curse. Stabbing pain shot through his skull as his nose and teeth struck unyielding stone.

Harry carefully raised his head and put his hand over his nose, which bled freely. A fancy black boot appeared beside his wand, beneath an invisible hem, making him realize in surprise that it was a cloak. He swallowed blood and watched in horror as the boot rested on his wand on the uneven stones of the floor, clearly intending to break it.

Harry threw out his left hand, and with all his will, shouted " Accio wand! " In his mind thoughts of Dumbledore setting him up to get that wand mixed with the

emotion of the Final Battle, the most important time he had used it. The wand scraped harshly out from under the boot sole and hit his palm with a slap. He immediately cast his own blasting curse at the spot above where the boot had just revanished. The spell shattered against the wall and echoed up and down the corridor. His aim, left-handed, had not been very good and the figure undoubtedly had moved quickly away. Whatever the reason, the miss made him snarl in fury.

He rolled to a sitting position and switched the wand to his bloody right hand and cast a rapid succession of blasting curses in an arc, all of them shattering harmlessly on the wall. As he scanned the hallway again for any small sign, he rubbed his face painfully on his sleeve to keep more blood from his nose from streaming into his mouth.

A minute of silence passed beyond Harry's harsh breathing, until voices sounded from the adjoining corridor. Harry worried that whoever it was might get hurt as well. When the figures turned the corner and saw him on the floor, they hesitated before continuing.

Harry recognized the halo of white hair on the smallest figure. "Did you see anyone?" Harry asked loudly, his voice flattened by his plugged nose. The Slytherins approached faster now, all of them pulling out their wands and looking around themselves avidly.

"No," Suze said as they passed Cornelius. "What happened?"

Harry closed his eyes in a moment of extreme embarrassment. "Someone kicked my arse; someone under an invisibility cloak." He tried to stand up, which, if he had wanted to preserve the remainder of his dignity, he should not have tried.

Harry groaned and sat back down and pulled his robes aside. His feet were flipped in odd directions. Suze gasped and leaned down to look closer in disturbed fascination. Someone else made a distressed stomach noise. Calmly, Harry said, "I think someone took the bones out of my legs." Experimentally he moved his left leg and found that below the knee he had no control over it. His foot dragged behind as he moved it along the stones. With a huff of utter frustration, Harry sat back and said, "Suze, can you get Professor Snape or the headmistress? Please?"

Suze nodded and stood straight. "Portny," she ordered Wereporridge, "Take him to the dispensary."

Wereporridge shrugged his too broad shoulders and stooped down to pick Harry up. "Hey," Harry said in alarm, "Don't you know a Hover spell?"

"You don't want to see his Hover spell," Parkinson said dryly, "as much fun as it would be to see him use it on you."

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Harry kept quiet then. Suze ran swiftly ahead of them, light as a dancer and nearly soundless in her soft shoes.

Suze rushed down four corridors and one set of stairs. Snape didn't answer his office door and the classroom was dark. It was evening, but maybe they were holding a staff meeting. By the time she made it down the many long staircases to the entrance hall, she was out of breath and disgusted by it. She had guessed right, though; several teachers were meandering before the open door to the staff room, chatting. The four Heads of House were standing around McGonagall.

Breathless, Suze pounded over to them and tried to explain.

"Ms. Zepher?" McGonagall said in question, putting a hand on Suze's shoulder.

"Harry," Suze breathed and watched their expressions and demeanors shift starkly to alarm as she took a breath to continue. "Attacked on the fifth floor . . ."

"What?" two of them said together as Snape moved quickly by her.

"Team taking him to the hospital wing," she said urgently to his back. He turned his head an instant to glance back before he continued rapidly up the stairs. McGonagall followed behind with the others.

Harry, to his utter dismay, was dropped onto a bed in the hospital wing. To avoid messing the linens he yanked off his shoes, bending his legs disturbingly in the process. Pansy's loud voice rang out for Madam Pomfrey, grating on Harry's sore nerves. Pomfrey bustled over and waved the other students away. They backed off to the other side of the wing and stood there uneasily.

Pomfrey lifted Harry's chin and looked at his nose. "My, my, what happened, Mr. Potter?" she asked, and for once sounded genuinely sympathetic.

"My face hit the floor when someone hit me with a blasting curse." No sooner had he said this, than the double doors to the wing burst open and Snape came through them. Harry dropped his eyes, feeling furiously ashamed. Pomfrey lifted his head again and spelled his nose unbroken. It felt much better immediately, making him sigh in relief. He could even halfway breath through it now.

Snape came aside the bed as the headmistress entered the wing followed by Suze. "What happened?" Snape asked in alarm.

"Someone got the better of me. Obviously," Harry replied in disgust.

"Who?" McGonagall asked.

"Don't know," he said angrily, gesturing with his hands. "He or she was under an invisibility cloak."

Snape's eyes shifted to the Slytherin Quidditch players across the room. Preemptively, Harry said, "If they hadn't happened to come around the corner, I don't know what would have happened. I couldn't even manage to hold my own." Indeed, the notion that he had been expertly toyed with was grinding harder on his pride now that he had the luxury of thinking clearly.

Harry held still while Pomfrey made his broken tooth grow back in. She then handed him a warm wet towel to clean his face and hands followed by a sip of blood replenisher. "And this; your favorite," she said pleasantly as she poured out a cup from the distinctive Skele-gro bottle.

"Skele-gro?" Snape asked sharply.

Harry pulled his robe aside and moved a leg to demonstrate. Snape stiffened in surprise at the odd floppiness of his foot. McGonagall looked grimly thoughtful.

"Didn't want me running away, whoever it was," Harry commented darkly as he accepted the cup. He forced the liquid down past the stomach churning taste and handed the cup back.

"Bad night coming up, Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said sympathetically as she capped the bottle and set it on the side table.

"To go with my bad evening," he muttered and dropped back on the pillow.

"No idea at all who it was?" Snape asked, sounding frustrated as he leaned over the bed slightly.

Harry shook his head. "I only saw his or her boot. I didn't recognize it. It was a nice one, though." He pulled out his wand and sat back up to reach the towel to wipe the blood smears off of it. The wood had been badly gouged when he had compelled it to come to him. Maybe Ollivander could fix it, he thought, as he stashed it back in his pocket. At least it still worked.

"I'll have your friends bring your things for the night," McGonagall said before turning to leave. "And I'll speak with you," she said to the Slytherins, gesturing broadly for them to lead the way out of the wing. Harry gave Suze a small smile of thanks when she glanced back at him before the door closed.

Harry flopped back again with his hand over his eyes. "I was useless," he muttered. "I tried to Accio the cloak away, but that didn't work. I couldn't think of anyway else to reveal him . . . or her."

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"There are a few things you could have tried," Snape said evenly. "A Bolero spell for example."

"Can you show me?" Harry asked, desperate and eager.

"Tomorrow, certainly. When you can stand."

Harry moved one limp leg. "Yeah," he breathed. He shook his head and sighed. "Not really Auror material, I don't think."

Snape's hand moved to his shoulder. "Harry, truly your pride cannot be that fragile," he said in disbelief, sounding almost amused. At Harry's dark frown, he added, "We will arm you so it cannot happen again, all right?"

Harry looked away, biting his lips at the pain blossoming in his legs from the Skelegro. He nodded. Snape removed his hand. "I have grading to do, but I can bring it down here."

"That's all right," Harry said dismissively.

"You are certain?" He looked surprised but willing to give in.

Harry nodded, feeling his ineptness did not need an audience. As Snape stepped hesitantly away, the doors opened to reveal his friends. Snape nodded at them as they passed.

"Harry! What happened?" Hermione asked as she came over, sounding like it might be at least partially his fault. Ron carried Harry's pyjamas and kit, which he placed under the night stand. He looked too accustomed to doing that.

Harry growled, but he sat up a bit on the pillows to explain what happened.

Eventually, his friends were shooed from the room by Madame Pomfrey. Harry took out his things to change out of his school clothes, and buried in between his pyjama top and bottom he found the Marauder's Map. Grinning at his friends' foresight, he unfolded it and activated it after checking that Pomfrey was safely in her office.

On the Map the last students were heading for their respective House rooms. J. Finch-Fletchley was still in the library, moving around in the stacks. His friends were walking on the staircase. P. Tideweather was with the other Durmstrang students in the Gryffindor common room along with many others. He scanned all the names on the page. In the House rooms they were stacked up tight together. He did not see an Avery or Jugson among them, or any others he didn't recognize. Sighing, he folded it up and stashed it in the pocket of his robe and lay down to sleep, confident in the spells on the wing to not let in anyone with ill intent. Desperate for a good rest, he forcefully Occluded his mind as he relaxed into sleep.

"Bella, pst! " a harsh voice whispered.

Bellatrix Lestrange sat up on the thinly padded stone pallet and squinted into the darkness. She hesitated a long time before moving to the cell door. When she did move, it was in near total silence. The halo of blonde hair was unmistakable. "Lucius?" she breathed in confusion and extreme suspicion, "what are you doing out of your cell?"

Malfoy looked down the corridor in each direction before replying, "I need your help. I can't get past the outer guards without an assistant." He held up a sparkling silver-framed gem on a chain around his neck. "A friend finally came through with this." He fingered it lovingly. "Some betray while others are brilliantly loyal. One never seems to know," he whispered, as though speaking to himself. It could have been a pledge to revenge.

She gasped and grabbed the bars hard. "Is that an Ampliment?" she asked hungrily.

"Yes," Malfoy replied, the word drawn out in a hiss. He stashed the shining thing back inside his robe. "I can only assume you would like to depart this place as well?" he asked cockily.

She laughed quietly. "You always have such a way with words."

Harry was dreaming, a groggy, pain-filled dream that teased at being pleasant. He breathed out and breathed in another's warm breath. This jerked him fully into wakefulness just as soft lips found his.

" Ginny ," Harry admonished, very dismayed.

The figure above him stood straight with a gasp and moved off. Quickly, Harry painfully sat up and reached for the bedside lamp just as the door to the wing opened with a swoosh . All he saw was a silhouette with very long hair turning into the dim light of the corridor.

"Peni," Harry breathed in complete shock. "Ugh," he groaned. Compelled to follow, he put on his glasses and reached for the carved crutches sitting against the wall at the head of the bed.

Rushing, and with his mind still swimming in sleep, he clumsily hobbled across the room. He thunked unceremoniously through the double doors at the end and paused because his hands were shaking on the crutches with exhaustion from carrying nearly all his weight. The corridor was long empty and his strength wavered alarmingly. He stood swaying on the highly-polished, forked tree branches, trying to figure out what to do. The pain in his feet now overwhelmed his thoughts, making a decision impossible.

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor, billowing robes highlighted by the flickering sconces on the left side. "Harry?" Snape's voice sounded.

"Did you see anyone?" Harry asked.

Snape glanced around himself in alarm before replying, "No. And since we just finished thoroughly searching the castle, I would hope not."

He came aside as Harry mumbled, "Maybe I was dreaming, then."

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said as she strolled purposefully through the doors to the wing. "What are you doing out here?"

Harry's feet throbbed ominously almost making him choke on his reply. "I don't know." He must be insane to be upright on newly grown foot bones, he decided. Only a Crucio had ever been more painful than what he was experiencing right now.

Snape stepped closer and took one of the crutches away before slipping an arm under his. "Take these, Madam," he said, holding it out. Pomfrey took one than the other crutch in hand and Snape hefted Harry into his arms. The hospital witch held the door open for them. "You must have grown," Snape complained breathlessly as he carried his charge back into the dispensary.

Harry, stunned silly by the utter relief of being off his feet, did not reply. At his bed he expected to be dumped unceremoniously as Wereporridge had done earlier. Instead, he was lowered carefully to the mattress.

"What ever possessed you to get up?" Snape asked harshly, hand moving to Harry's shoulder as he released him.

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't want to get into it." Numb relief had given way to painful heat in his feet and ankles. Pomfrey's hands on them relieved some of it as she gently twisted his feet one way then the other. When she finished, she tossed the duvet up over his legs and stalked away.

Snape straightened the covers as he said, "Trouble sleeping?"

"It's strange sleeping here," Harry said, thinking past nocturnal visitors. "The respelling has made the dormitory easy to sleep in. It doesn't feel like that here." He thought that over more as rubbed his eyes. "It's like the shadows are blocked out some when I'm in the tower. Is that possible?"

"Perhaps," Snape replied, sounding concerned. "A number of night-calming spells were added to the Gryffindor tower with the intent of helping you sleep."

Harry tugged his glasses off and set them aside. He dropped his head back on the pillow and closed his tired eyes. "Could use one of those spells here right now," he mumbled.

"The castle has been thoroughly searched," he said. In a firmer tone, he added, "Do not get up again until morning, Harry."

"Yeah, all right," Harry murmured, half asleep already. His trepidation about nightmares did not hold sleep at bay.

Harry was in the Forbidden Forest at twilight. An aquamarine light shimmered in the cooling air as a breeze vibrated the leaves above him. A shadow floated by him. He stepped back in fear of it but it did not seem to notice him there. Other shadows flashed between the trees, hiding, watching.

Looking around him in a panic, Harry tried to find a place to hide himself, but the tall wide trunks shifted away from him when he approached them to obscure himself. He could not hide and he didn't seem to have his wand, since he was still in his pyjamas. He wrapped his arms around himself from the chill of the dew collecting on his thin clothes as he moved.

Harry froze in place as two shadows shifted into the open and clashed. A horrible screeching went up and the trees faded away, revealing a dull green world. Many dark forms converged and retreated. A bolt of pain shot through Harry, forcing him to his knees. He reached out a desperate hand toward the wavering shadow in the middle of the cluster as it flattened and shrank, drawing a burst of wind towards it as it popped into nothingness.

Harry snapped awake with a gasp. The hospital wing surrounded him with its odd peacefulness. At the last moment of the dream he had seen another shadow flicker into the open, full of malevolence. He wondered what was going to happen next but he could not recapture it, even by closing his eyes. His face was wet; he dried it with a swipe of his sleeve and hurriedly fumbled for his glasses. Panicking now as the meaning of the dream flooded through him, he swung his legs over the edge of the

bed and reached for the crutches. Memory of the earlier pain in his feet warred with his extreme need to check on his guardian.

"Mr. Potter!" Pomfrey said as she strode up the wing from her office.

"I have to . . . " Harry tried to explain.

"You have nothing you need to do at this hour, Mr. Potter," she stated, hands on hips. Her strict manner relaxed, however, when she looked over his face.

"I have to see Severus," Harry insisted, heart stopping panic filling him again as he said it.

"I will fetch him, then. YOU stay put." She stalked off.

Still holding the crutches in each hand as he sat on the edge of the bed, Harry tried to hold himself steady. It did not work all that well, though. The odd pain in the dream had unnerved him badly, and like a broken record it kept replaying itself in his head as he waited.

Finally, voices could be heard in the corridor. "I'm am sorry, Professor, for disturbing you," Pomfrey was saying.

The doors opened as Snape said, "It is no matter." The crutch from Harry's left hand hit the floor when Snape stepped into the dim light of the wing. Relief, like a spell of weakness, rendered Harry's arms useless and he could not retain his grip on it. Snape strode quickly over and scooped up the fallen crutch, gathered it up with the other Harry still held, and set them aside, his expression intently curious and concerned.

Pomfrey took them up and placed them a little farther away. "Only if the hospital wing is on fire, Mr. Potter," she chastised him before striding away.

"Harry, what is wrong?" Snape asked in concern.

Harry clasped his shaking hands together to quell them. Snape, apparently seeing this, grasped them and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. "Harry?" he prompted again more forcefully.

"I thought . . . " he started to reply before cutting himself off. He could not think it again. Realizing he needed to explain somehow, he said, "Shadows are killing each other." Snape sat straight and gripped Harry's hands tighter.

"How close by?" Snape asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied. "And I don't just see it, I can feel it too." Words failed him, so he fell silent, even though he truly wanted Snape to understand. He rubbed at his chest where the stab of pain had gone though him in the dream.

"What is he saying?" Pomfrey asked. She stood between the beds, hands clasped before her the way she held them when she was diagnosing something.

Snape put an arm around Harry and pulled him sideways to lean against him. "I believe he is saying that Voldemort's former servants are killing each other and that he feels them dying." Pomfrey took a step backward. Harry frowned and dropped his gaze so he didn't see Snape give the hospital witch a most displeased expression. Snape sighed and said, "You are safe here, Harry."

"I want to know what is happening, though," he murmured. Strength was returning to his limbs, so he sat straighter against the reassuring weight of Snape's arm.

"We should inform Minerva anyway. I can summon her," Snape said, as he reached into his robes for his wand.

"I'll fetch her," Pomfrey said, forestalling him. "A little less abrupt to be woken in person," she chastised. She spun on her toe and walked out.

Harry let his head fall to the side, onto Snape's shoulder. The warmth and solidity of him chased away the last of Harry's earlier panic and with the calm the rest of his strength flooded back as well, as though the vision had half paralyzed him somehow.

Eventually, the door opened again. McGonagall hesitated momentarily at the sight before her, until Pomfrey's passing her made her step forward. As she approached, she put up a hand to stop Snape from explaining. "Ministry contacted me just before Madam Pomfrey arrived. Seems there was an attempted breakout from Azkaban tonight. A bit of a battle ensued as a result and two former Death Eaters were killed."

"Who?" Snape asked.

"The Lestrange brothers," she replied. "It was apparently Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy who initiated the breakout. The Ministry assure me that they are all back in custody now."

It bothered Harry that he had felt such pain and regret at the death of one who had tortured Neville's parents. In the dream he had been reaching out to save him, which sickened him now. He was pulled back to the present by Snape's arm shifting so that just a hand rested against his back.

"He saw it in his mind," Snape explained quietly to McGonagall.

Harry looked away; he didn't want anyone to know that. McGonagall stepped closer and said, "I'm sorry, Harry. I wish I had a spell to cut you free of them." For a

moment it seemed she would say more, but she patted his shoulder instead. "Need anything?"

Harry shook his head, still not looking up at her.

"Will you be all right now?" Snape asked. "Do you want me to stay?"

Feeling renewed embarrassment, Harry shook his head with certainty. Snape stood up but hovered near the end of the bed. Harry put his glasses aside yet again and lay down. Exhaustion tugged at him despite his aching bones. His eyes fell closed on their own. Footsteps headed away, scuffing lightly on the stone floor. As the door creaked open, he heard McGonagall say, "I do apologize, Severus," before their voices faded out.

In the dim corridor leading to the staircase, Snape asked, "For what? I do not think even Albus could have severed him from these remnants of Voldemort's mind. They are a part of him, probably have been since he received that scar."

McGonagall clasped her hands before her as they stopped at the bottom of the stairs before parting. "That wasn't what I was referring to." She smiled slyly and said, "I was apologizing for ever doubting that you could take care of him."

Snape stiffened and put his hand on the handrail curling upward. "Hm," he huffed lightly while shooting her a dark look that lacked real conviction. He turned away and stepped up.

She grinned and shook her head. "Goodness, I hate admitting that Albus was right," she said to his back.

He paused midway up and turned, still holding the narrow eyed look from before. "Dare I ask about what?" he inquired with some snide.

McGonagall grinned more. "He must have been. Can't imagine you've changed that much," she commented playfully.

He jerked back around with an abrupt snarl before heading up and through the door to the next wing.

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Chapter 38.

Lizards Leg and Howlets Wing

Harry was released the next morning. The muscles in his ankles felt badly bruised but he took pride in his ability to force himself to walk normally out the door anyway. He wanted to get to the tower before his friends departed to come visit him.

"Harry!" Ginny greeted him warmly when he stepped through the portrait hole. She looked as though she was trying to finish up an assignment in a hurry before breakfast. Her eyes were a little puffy as though she had had a late night. "Sorry, Binns' essay," she explained as she bent back over her parchment and wrote furiously. "Glad you're better, though," she said sincerely as she scrawled.

Harry went up to his room where he received equally warm greetings from his dormitory mates. A little embarrassed by the attention, he changed his robes quickly and followed them down to breakfast. As they entered the Hall, many students turned to look at him and whispered to each other. Harry shook his head and took a seat, hoping food would come soon so everyone would stop talking about him and start eating instead. His friends all gave him sympathetic expressions. Penelope looked downright sorry. Harry, anxious to talk to her alone, ducked his head and rearranged his napkin. He had not felt this embarrassed by attention since the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Parkinson stopped by their table on the arm of Malfoy, who looked positively gleeful. He gave Harry a kind of kissy-face. "Too bad it wasn't Voldemort, Potter," Parkinson

said mockingly. "Didn't seem to have any trouble with him." She laughed gratingly as Harry turned away from them and rolled his eyes.

"Get lost," Ron threatened them.

"Hah," Parkinson laughed as they strolled to the front. "Carried to the hospital wing . . . by a Slytherin."

"Aye?" Ron asked when they were gone. "That true?"

Harry rubbed his forehead as he felt himself flush. The whole Great Hall would have heard her. "Yeah. Wereporridge."

Ron burst out with a laugh before quickly clamping a hand over his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbled in a sincerity belied by his inability to keep from laughing with his eyes.

"Bring it up in ten years when I can laugh too, all right?" Harry snipped at him, although he could not seem to dredge up any real anger.

"I wonder who it was?" Hermione said as she arranged her napkin in her lap. She picked up the copy of the Prophet beside her. To Harry she said, "You should read this."

"What is it?" Ron asked, mouth full of toast.

Hermione said in an imparting big news voice, "Malfoy and the Lestranges tried to escape from Azkaban last night."

"I knew that," Harry said. When she asked how he could know, he replied simply, "McGonagall."

"Came and woke you up to tell you that?" Hermione asked disbelievingly.

"Not exactly," Harry replied, not feeling like getting into it right there. "I'll explain later." He scanned the paper; the article heading Death Eaters' Grim Gaolbreak was at the top. When Ron prompted him, he started reading aloud. "Convicted Voldemort Lieutenants Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange attempted last night to break out of Azkaban. Mr. Malfoy had apparently come into possession of an Ampliment. Their plans–"

"What's that?" Ron interrupted to ask.

Harry looked up at Hermione for an explanation. "A magic amplifier. Only works on some kinds of spells though. Rare and strictly regulated."

"Figures he'd have one, then," Harry commented before continuing. "Their plans went awry when Mrs. Lestrange tried to release her husband Rodolphus who was

caged with his brother Rabastan. A fight apparently ensued in which Mrs. Lestrange, using a wand fashioned from a pear tree from the prison yard and strands of Kneazle fur, killed Rabastan with an Unforgivable Curse." Harry paused as the memory of the shadow shrinking to nothing played through his mind along with the quivery chilling feel of it.

Hermione took the paper back, saying informationally, "Rodolphus then attacked Bellatrix and she took him out as well. All right, there, Harry?"

"Yeah," he insisted, taking up his fork. He decided firmly that he didn't care what the lot of them all did to each other.

Their first class that day was double Herbology. As they walked to the greenhouses, Harry hung back slightly, tugging on Penelope's robe to slow her down as well. "I need to talk to you," Harry said quietly.

"Later, perhaps," she replied, glancing around shyly. There was no more time as they had arrived at the foggy glass door to the classroom.

Late that afternoon, Ron and Hermione dropped Harry off at the Defense classroom. McGonagall insisted that Harry not move around the school without at least two students or a teacher with him. Since he rarely went about alone, he thought he could tolerate that. He waved his friends off and closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked.

"Embarrassed," Harry muttered.

Snape used the edge of another book to prop open the one in front of him before stepping around the front table. "Let's take care of that, then, shall we?" Harry put his bookbag on a chair in the last row and pulled out his wand as he came to the front. "Cloaked opponent," Snape said as though announcing a class topic. "I assume you attempted to Accio it, as I have seen you do that previously."

"Yep. Didn't work."

"It is possible to charm objects to stay put against an Accio, of course. I would not recommend attempting to counter it in the heat of battle as it is tricky. Instead, I think it is easier to utilize spells that work on everything in the immediate vicinity, invisible or otherwise." Snape studied him as though to make sure he was paying full attention before he stepped briskly onto the platform. Snape spread out a series of wooden stands before backing up to the far end and aiming his wand. "Do duck down," he suggested.

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Harry, a little alarmed, backed up and squatted between two desks. Snape narrowed his eyes and said, " Bolarum! " while circling the wand over his head. The air filled suddenly with hundreds of spinning grey things which encircled anything upright. Snape immediately held his wand before him and used a Grand Flecture, causing the spinning blobs heading his way to flow around him. Harry ducked down farther as they whistled close over his own head.

The room fell silent. Semi-amorphous grey bindings were around all of the wooden stands and even the curtains. "You must be fast though with another spell once you locate your opponent–the bindings are easily tossed off." Snape canceled the spell on most of the bound objects, ignoring the curtains. "You try," he said, gesturing at the spot were he had been standing.

Harry, ankles painful from crouching, limped over to the indicated spot and waited for Snape to stand aside. He fingering the gouge in the handle of his wand and focused his mind.

They covered four other spells, repeating them until Snape was satisfied Harry had them down smoothly. Harry rubbed his eyes. Lack of sleep and his painful ankles were wearing him down.

"Feel better about your chances next time?" Snape asked.

"Yep. Thanks," he replied gratefully.

A knock sounded on the door before it opened and McGonagall leaned in. "May I have a word with Harry?" she asked.

Snape gestured that she could. "I will be in my office if you need me," he said as he departed.

When the door closed, McGonagall sighed. "Have you had other thoughts about what happened?"

"No," Harry admitted. "I don't know who it was. I don't even have a good guess beyond the obvious."

"I am considering questioning the Durmstrang students individually," she said thoughtfully.

"Don't do that, Professor," Harry said quickly.

She gave him a considering look. "Why not?" she asked with a bit of challenge.

Harry sighed. "They are all on edge after what Karkaroff pulled last year."

"You are saying that he and I are comparable?"

"Your position is," Harry insisted. "They don't know you that well." He could not bear to imagine Penelope getting questioned alone in the headmistress' office. He sighed and walked along the platform, slowly because his ankles complained immediately. "I don't think it was one of them anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't know any of them that well. Whoever it was, it was way more personal than that."

"Professor Snape has spoken to the students in his house who immediately leapt to mind. All of them were accounted for at the time."

"If you do question the visiting students, can you have Hermione or someone there?" Harry pleaded.

"That is an excellent idea, Mr. Potter, I shall do that. And please watch yourself since, as usual, we are unable to protect you," she added darkly.

"I will, ma'am," he insisted.

That evening in the common room, Harry, deciding he was not going to get a better opportunity, jerked his head to the side when Penelope looked up at him. He stood up, stepped away and waited. She hesitated with a pained face, their friends all glancing up now in curiosity. Finally she put her books aside and stood to join him. Harry led her over to the empty corner by the bookshelf under the staircase to the girls dormitory. She glanced nervously back at her friends.

"Look," Harry started. He was immediately cut off by her saying, "I'm sorry."

When they both hesitated, she prompted, "You first, I think."

The problem was, Harry was not sure what he wanted to say. "I apologize for thinking you were Ginny," he said quietly. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

"I assumed you expected or wished me to be," she said, sounding as though she were treading carefully.

"No," Harry insisted, surprised.

She relaxed with a silly grin. "I was zo worried about you getting attacked and hurt," she muttered quickly, sounding grateful for a chance to express herself. "I thought you might want company, but you were asleep and . . ." She flushed then, eyes darting away. "I should not have woken you zo, I think."

Harry could not hold back a grin. "It's all right, really."

They fell into an awkward silence. "Everyone is looking, are dey not?" she asked nervously.

"I expect so," Harry replied, scanning the edge of his vision. They certainly were quiet over there. "Maybe we should go back over," he suggested, hoping to be saved from trying to say anything more.

"Harry," Hermione said in a businesslike tone as they stood in the Room of Requirement before D.A. "This book is a little better, I think. I just ordered it from the library in Edinburgh. Or, should I say, I had Remus Lupin order it and send it, since I was afraid they might send a note to McGonagall if I had it sent here direct."

"You told Remus what we were working on?" Harry asked, feeling a little uneasy about that.

"I asked him for advice. He was pretty amused, really. Think about it–he isn't going to tell. And he watched his schoolmates struggle with exactly the same thing." She made him sit down and they read sections together that she had marked.

When they had discussed the section on Transmogrifying Formation, she stood up and said, "Come on let's try it."

Harry stood slowly. "I don't think this is going to work," he breathed.

"Harry, it isn't that hard once you get the hang of it."

"Transfiguration has always been easy for you," Harry pointed out sharply.

"That isn't all there is to it, though," she said, sounding a little sad. "You haven't even wanted to repeat your form revelation to figure out what it is."

Harry couldn't deny that. The large, oddly bright, dog-like foot had rendered him very reluctant about the whole thing.

"Hagrid would know what it is, why don't you go ask him? He wouldn't tell what we were up to, I'm sure." At Harry's doubtful look, she added, "He doesn't have the same loyalty to McGonagall."

"I'll think about it," Harry said to put her off.

"Let's work on this spell then. Come on." She tugged on his arm to give him no way out.

Harry almost hated Potions again. It was getting very close. Greer paced by their bench for the tenth time, nose high, which made it hard for her to look down and made her look a little silly. Harry ignored her. She had already taken fifteen points off Gryffindor for questions he, Dean, and Frina had been only partially correct on. Greer had finally, and unfortunately, discovered that she could assign house points however she wished.

"What base would I get if I added four centipede segments after the boil?" Greer asked of Justin.

Justin who was busy with a critical part of his brewing, did not answer beyond a drawn out, "Um," to stall.

Greer answered for him. "Dryer's Caraway is the answer," she said. "A common N.E.W.T. question, by the way," she added in a helpful tone.

Justin looked relieved as he hurried to mix powdered bull's horn into his cauldron. Greer gave Harry a dark grin as she circled around.

"We have to do something," Dean leaned over and said. "She didn't take anything off. She only takes points off of Gryffindor now."

"I noticed," Harry said quietly, ignoring the teacher. Penelope and Frina looked at them in concern.

"Shh," Hermione said, although she looked pained. Harry assumed she was thinking of Ron's reaction two days ago when he saw the totals after last Potions class. She had had a hard time explaining to Ron what had happened to their lead. Harry felt the effort for the cup wasn't going to be worth it, but he did not want to voice that to his friends. That and he really would not mind if the Great Hall were in Gryffindor colors for the Leaving Feast–his last Leaving Feast.

"How are you doing, by the way?" Snape asked as he handed over a cup of tea while they sat in his office Thursday morning when Snape had an open slot. Hagrid had escorted Harry up after Care of Magical Creatures.

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Harry thought of his failure at fending off his invisible attacker, his uncertainty over Penelope, his ongoing failure at generating enough magical energy to transform into whatever creature his Animagus form took, and his annoyance with Greer. He shrugged in lieu of a reply, and sipped steaming hot tea. After a long moment, he said in a sudden thought, "Do you think I could drop Potions and just take the N.E.W.T.?"

"What?" Snape asked in confusion.

"Our eighty point lead for the cup disappeared in three days," Harry said, just barely holding his anger at bay. He held up his hands. "And honestly, I don't actually think it's worth the trouble, but . . ." He stopped at Snape's very doubtful look. "Really, it's too much of a battle," he insisted, now sounding a bit angry. "But it just occurred to me that if I'm not in Potions class, then Greer won't take so many points off, or give so many away to the other houses."

"You truly think that your presence makes that much of a difference?" Snape asked. "And I did not realize you believed there was a problem."

"She stares at me every time she does it," Harry griped, eager to vent now that he had started. "That's why I think so. And yes, there's a problem." He remembered Ron's anguish at lunch yesterday when Hermione told him what had happened yet again. He had come within inches of sniping at Harry. "My friends are angry with me now, but I don't know what to do. You used to do this too, but not so perniciously," he added emphatically. This garnered a closed look from Snape. Harry sighed and started to put his books away. "Sorry, I told myself I wasn't going to complain about other teachers to you, and I should stop."

"You need not leave," Snape pointed out, sounding like he really wanted Harry to stay. "You truly believe there is a point problem?"

Harry pulled his History book back out. "It seems petty to give you a precise accounting of the points assigned in the last two class periods, but I can. And if you don't believe me, I'm sure Hermione remembers."

"I would trust your accounting, Harry," Snape insisted. "I will speak to Minerva."

"Oh good, Greer won't know where that came from."

"You have another suggestion?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry forced himself to relax. "No," he replied quietly. "I just think she'll come up with some other way to take revenge." Harry sighed and opened his textbook.

"Speaking of revenge, are you still having visions?" Snape asked before Harry could start reading.

"Occasionally," Harry admitted. "Though they've got a little better lately." This was somewhat true. When he had them, his dreams were less threatening but still shadowy in a strange way he wasn't used to.

"I wish we knew whom you sensed on Knockturn Alley for certain," Snape said. "Although, I cannot imagine either one managing to pierce the protections of this castle, or besting you, cloak or not."

"I looked at the Map that night, but I didn't see anyone on it who shouldn't have been."

Snape's eyes considered him. "How good is the Map?"

"It knew Moody was really Crouch," Harry explained. When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Harry went on. "I didn't realize it was his son though. I thought it was Crouch Senior in your office that night. And of course I didn't know it was actually Moody." Harry set his cup down on the edge of the desk before leaning back and staring upward. "Trusting him was such a mistake."

"More?" Snape asked, reaching for the teapot. When Harry shook his head, Snape commented dryly, "We were all fooled, Harry, in case you are still holding yourself solely responsible for that as well."

Harry studied the ceiling. "I guess not," he conceded.

Snape stood suddenly and went to the window. After a moment he muttered, "Hm," and went back to his desk. "Hawks rarely can be convinced to deliver post," he commented.

Harry froze. "What?" he asked, too sharply.

With an intent look, Snape said, "I've noticed a hawk around the castle. It delivered a letter a few mornings ago." As Harry growled and put his books away quickly, Snape asked suggestively, "Somewhere you need to be?"

Angry, Harry hefted his bag. "A red-tail, right?"

"Yes." Snape's eyes narrowed, but Harry did not feel any Legilimency. "Is that hawk something special?" Snape asked slowly.

Harry shrugged instead of replying, put his things together quickly, and departed.

He found Ron sitting alone in the common room since Hermione had Arithmancy at that hour. "Wha?" his friend greeted him. "You about without an escort?"

"Never mind that," Harry said harshly. "Come here–I need to talk to you." He dragged him out and down to an empty classroom.

"Your sister has been flying?"

"No!"

"You're certain?"

Ron thought a moment, staring at the bright window with a deep expression. "I really don't think so. She'd have told me–or bragged about it at least."

Harry exhaled harshly. "She better not be." He noticed the clock. "We have to get to class."

"And you have to have an escort," Ron said firmly, poking Harry painfully in the chest.

At breakfast the next morning, the room shifted as the post owls came in the upper windows. Harry watched the incoming birds closely, until Ginny sat across from Dean, two chairs down, complaining about some essay assignment Binns had given them. A little chagrined, Harry returned to buttering his toast.

Footsteps walked briskly up the hall and stopped beside him. He glanced up to find Snape holding out something for him; it was a copy of the Prophet . Snape's expression was a little different, unusually intent for just an instant. Harry took his eyes away from his guardian and unrolled the paper.

Jugson, Death Eater, Apprehended , the headline read. Harry blinked at it and quickly scanned the accompanying text. The man had been hiding out at Borgin & Burkes on Knockturn Alley, the shop Harry had accidentally Flooed into once. Ministry Aurors also arrested one of the shopkeepers, Illustrius Burke.

Harry was surprised that he had guessed right. He held the paper back out to Snape as Ron asked, "What's up?". Ron put his fork down and poured juice for himself. "Oh, hello, Professor," he added awkwardly upon seeing Snape there.

"They have captured Jugson," Snape explained.

Ron hit Harry on the shoulder. "And without your help this time," he teased.

"Not precisely," Snape said dryly. He rolled up the paper and stepped away with a swish of robe.

"They got him from your reporting the shadow?" Ron asked quietly as he took a thick slab of butter for his bread.

Ginny piped in, "What is this?"

Whispering, Harry explained, "Over holiday I sensed a shadow on Diagon Alley. Knockturn Alley, actually. Snape'd needed ingredients from a shop down there. The Aurors just arrested him."

"Good job, Harry," Ginny congratulated him.

"How was it down there, by the way?" Ron asked around a thickly buttered piece of toast.

Harry grinned. "Pretty funny. I scared nearly everyone away, so it was really quiet." He let his friends finish laughing before he said in a low voice, "But I lied to the Aurors–I didn't tell them that I could see a D.E. in my mind. I told them I'd actually seen one of them and I had to guess which it might have been."

"Why did you lie?" Hermione asked, concerned and a little chastising.

Harry frowned and tossed his toast onto his plate, half eaten. No one around them seemed to be listening in. "Because I was afraid if they knew I inherited that from Voldemort, they wouldn't let me into the Auror's program."

"Oh, probably a good thought," Ron commented, frowning as he considered things further. He gestured with his butter-coated knife while saying, "Ministry can be funny about things like that." He glanced worriedly across at Hermione before returning to eating. She refrained from comment with a frown of her own.

A letter dropped before Harry. In a fit of coincidence, it had the Ministry seal on it.

"Look, they're onto you already," Ron teased.

Harry opened the envelope and found a letter and a brochure about the Auror's program. Heart racing now, he scanned the letter. "They accepted my application," he said excitedly.

No one around him moved. Finally, Ron said in a Greer-like tone, "Of course they did, Harry."

"Tonks insisted they were going to treat it fairly," Harry said, suddenly miffed.

"I'm sure they did," Hermione said reassuringly, giving Ron a warning look.

"Harry, be reasonable," Ron said. "What did you write on your application anyway?"

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Harry finished reading the letter which was clearly a form letter and flipped open the brochure. "Uh, Severus made me list all of the dark wizards I'd caught or battled."

Hermione ducked her head. Ron rubbed the bridge of his nose. Harry couldn't tell if they were trying not to laugh or something else.

"Harry," Ron began in a tone to fill him in. He waved off Hermione as he said, "How could you honestly think that you wouldn't get accepted?"

"I suppose," Harry conceded, folding up the brochure and putting both away.

"Aye," Ron breathed and pounded his forehead with his fist. Harry glanced around at his friends. They were not amused; they actually looked a bit tired of him. He vowed not to bring it up again.

Later, when they were settled into the common room after classes, Harry again pulled out the brochure entitled So you've been accepted to a Ministry Apprenticeship and read it carefully. Most of it he could have guessed, but on the back, a list of qualifications to be covered during testing for the Auror's program had been penned into the box for this. Mentally he checked off that he was all right with: advanced spell mastery, potion identification and brewing, low tendency to panic, beneath these was one he hadn't considered: good physical condition a must . From a Muggle perspective, he did not qualify at all as athletic. Getting around on a broom during Quidditch was sometimes a workout, but probably not at the level they meant.

"Good reading?" Dean asked.

"I have to get into shape," Harry said a little worriedly.

Frina looked up from her parchment. "I am surprised Hogwarts has no workout rooms. Durmstrang has three."

Hermione chimed in, "I think English wizards are loath to appear to use their muscles for anything." She reached over and shook Ron's skinny arm to demonstrate. "Wha?" he blurted, since he had not been paying attention.

"I've been running to lose weight if you want to come along," Neville offered from the couch, where he was reading the Quibbler, sideways this time rather than the normal upside-down. "I don't go very fast, but I try for an hour every three days."

"That'd be great," Harry said, instantly relieved to have some help.

"Tomorrow before breakfast, then," Neville said before returning to his textbook.

"Aye," Harry breathed. "All right," he agreed, thinking he had no choice, really.

"Someone else has to go as well," Ron pointed out. When everyone turned to him expectantly, he said, "Ugh, before breakfast?"

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Chapter 39.

A Charm of Powrful Trouble

The weather warmed up, making their morning runs a lot more pleasant. By breakfast time, though, Harry found he wanted nothing more than to eat the way Ron usually did.

They piled onto the benches in the Great Hall after quick showers, their hair still damp. Despite the quick grooming, Penelope seemed to think he looked fine. Her considerate expression startled him when his eyes met hers, and reminded him that he had to manage to talk to her alone, which was bloody difficult when he needed escorting at all times.

When the food appeared, he and Ron actually battled over the spoon for the eggs. "Go on then," Harry said, giving it up. Ron immediately served Harry a large pile of scramble with a grin.

"Better this morning?" Hermione asked.

"Yep," Harry assured her. Neville had insisted the first two weeks were the worst before it got much easier. "Not too bad today; although I'm still ready to go back to bed."

He glanced around the Hall as he usually did at breakfast, looking at who was paying him special attention. Greer was, as usual. They had not caught Harry's attacker

and in his more annoyed moments, Harry wondered if it wasn't her. McGonagall seemed to think it was someone inside the castle due to the protective spells. Harry didn't quite have that much faith in the castle's spells, even if she insisted no one could have come in. McGonagall definitely had not liked his suggesting the Potions professor, so he had not pressed it. Given the way the points were going–they were now seventy behind Slytherin–he hoped it was her, and that she tried it again.

Pig dropped a letter before Ron, who flipped it open and read it with a worried expression. His face brightened halfway through. "Dad got a promotion," he said happily.

"That's great," Hermione said at about the same time Harry did.

He read more of the letter. "He's now Assistant Department Head. Mum says it's a nice rise and it can't possibly be any more hours." Ron looked up and down the table, then looked confused. "Wonder where Ginny is," he said.

Harry's chest froze and melted. He looked up and scanned the birds circling overhead. He listened to Hermione say, "I think he'll like working for Amelia Bones." There were too many birds to track easily what kind they were. Maybe she was just finishing an assignment at the last moment, Harry considered, when he didn't see any unusual species coasting overhead.

He had just given up and returned to his eggs when a whip-like sound and screech came from the front of the Hall. The whole large room quieted and everyone turned. Professor Snape had a large bird in a net. It fluttered on the head table futilely, knocking everything about.

"Shit," Harry breathed and immediately stood and strode toward the front. Halfway to the head table the fluttering abruptly ceased and Ginny, tangled in a net, was sprawled over the white linen and plates.

"Ms. Weasley," Snape greeted her darkly.

"Goodness," McGonagall said, sounding dismayed. Some of the other teachers stood up to better peer down the long table.

Gasps and giggling sounded from the around the Hall. Ginny was just managing to stand when Harry reached her. "I said no flying," Harry snapped angrily at her.

"Who are you, my mother?" she snarled back, her eyes darting to Ron and Hermione who had come up behind Harry.

"Everything that happens is my responsibility, or didn't you consider that?" he came right back.

"Hm," McGonagall murmured. With forced politeness, she addressed Harry. "Mr. Potter, just how many Animagi do we have?"

Harry stalled to think, surprised at how quickly she had put that together. "Seven," he reluctantly replied.

Her brows went up rather high. She stood and leaned over the table to address the Hall. "May I have your attention. I want all Animagi up here before the head table, please."

The avid whispering around the Hall, which had paused for the announcement, restarted fiercely. Students stood and came to the front, including three Slytherins. Harry looked over the two beside Suze in surprise.

"This is a few more than seven," McGonagall observed dryly.

"Not all of them are ours, Professor," Harry explained.

"Well, let's see them," she commanded. "Ms. Weasley, we know yours, obviously. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron, blushing, but also looking a bit like he had been given a rare chance to show off, stepped forward and closed his eyes. Long seconds he stood there before an Irish setter took his place. It looked up at the headmistress with its large eyes. The buzzing conversations of the Hall surged and Harry glanced around at the wide-eyed gazes of the rest of the students.

"Not surprising somehow, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall opined as Ron changed back, already mid-blush. "Ms. Granger . . ." she said next.

Hermione changed where she stood into a brown otter that slithered around in a circle once before transforming back.

"Fine. Mr. Longbottom?" She sounded surprised, although as well like she did not want to sound so.

Neville looked down at the floor before changing into a lion. The whole school ooh ed at this and more students stood up on the benches to see better. Neville's tail swished back and forth.

"Very nice, Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said in shock. Neville, when he changed back, blushed as well and scuffed his feet as he stepped back. "Mr. Thomas, can you top that?" the headmistress asked. She had completely lost her scorning tone and now sounded as though she might be enjoying herself.

"I can try, ma'am." He changed into a moor pony.

"I'd say that equals it, at least," she said as she leaned forward to look him over better.

"Mr. Pullman," she prompted the Hufflepuff Chaser, who had to scrunch his eyes up in deep concentration before turning into a billy goat.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry shook his head. At her questioning expression, he explained, "I can't do it." She looked disappointed, making him drop his gaze.

"Mr. Peranna?" she turned to the Slytherins instead.

The tallest of the Slytherins changed into a raven and immediately back. "I'm registered, ma'am," he stated in a very deep voice.

"So am I," Ginny interjected. At their surprised looks, she said, "Dad took me into the Ministry over holiday to file for it. I just don't have my card yet," she added less assertively.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron demanded.

"Why didn't you ask Dad?" she retorted. Ron looked as though that had not even occurred to him.

"Ms. Parkinson?" McGonagall prompted, ending their arguing.

Pansy sighed and transformed. At first it seemed that she had disappeared, but they all looked at the floor were a long red centipede slithered between the stones. Many students along the house tables shuffled to try to see as well. Pansy reappeared a blink later.

"And the youngest by far . . . Ms. Zepher," McGonagall prompted, sounding impressed. Snape as well, studied her intently. She changed into a white mink that stood on its hind legs and observed them. "Nicely done," the headmistress said, then added chastisingly, "Although, if you can manage that, there are no spells in my class that are beyond you."

Suze changed back, looking chagrined.

In an official headmistress voice McGonagall said, "I expect you all to register. I'll provide you with the forms." She turned to Harry, "And you, Mr. Potter. I will see you in my office." She stood and stepped quickly down the table. Harry wandered

to the end to meet her and followed her out. The whole school watched them depart, whispering fiercely.

Once in her office, Harry took the visitor's chair she gestured at. She went to a shelf and took down the teapot. He watched her make tea and set it to steep on the desk. She set out two cups and waited patiently with her hands clasped for it to steep enough. Eventually, she poured them each a cup and pushed one to Harry.

Harry, confused, accepted it. McGonagall sipped hers with a faraway expression and said, "I think ten minutes will seem appropriately stern, don't you?"

"Ma'am?"

"For your thorough chewing out. Ten minutes?"

"Uh, I'm not sure what you mean," he replied carefully.

She smiled faintly. "There must not have been any injuries. Pomfrey has always watched for them."

"There weren't as far as I know," Harry said.

"When did this start?"

"A few weeks after Christmas," Harry confessed, cradling the teacup in his hands to draw off its warmth.

"Seven, in that time?" she breathed, stunned.

Harry double-checked that in his mind. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, dropping his gaze.

"I do not know what to do with you, Mr. Potter."

Harry hoped he had not gotten Snape into equal trouble. "Severus didn't know," he thought to insist, hoping it was not too late to sound believable. When she remained silent, he raised his eyes to hers. Her expression looked strange, maybe even affectionate. He blinked in confusion.

She set her cup and saucer aside. "This school does not have a medal for students who inspire others to learn far beyond their year."

"Are you saying I'm not in trouble?" he asked in disbelief. He was tempted to point out that Hermione was the main inspiration, but decided that could come out as blame passing. It bothered him to stay silent on this point, but he did so with difficulty; he could always apologize to Hermione later.

She stood and came around the desk. As she passed him, she put a firm hand down on his right shoulder. "To everyone else's view, you are in serious trouble. But in

reality, you are not." Harry's shoulder relaxed under her long fingers. "But, I will have to take a hundred points from Gryffindor for it to be believable."

"Ugh," Harry groaned in pain at that thought.

"I will, however, reverse any other point changes Gertrude chooses to make for the remainder of the year." She gave him a twinkling eye. "I expect that will more than balance out."

Harry had to force down a wide grin. "I expect it will," he said with happy expectation.

After the proper time had passed, Harry headed back down to the Great Hall. Ron had just returned from checking the gems used for House scoring. He looked sad.

"We'll manage, Ron. Don't worry," Harry insisted as he stepped over the bench and warmed his plate with a heating charm.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said sincerely. Her eyes followed McGonagall as she strode to the front. When the headmistress returned to her breakfast, Hermione said, "You must have taken the blame."

Harry shrugged. "I could have stopped it so I have every right to it. Don't worry about it." He was worried though; Snape was giving him a very stern look. In the midst of all the new spell work and interesting discovery, Harry had somehow overlooked the potential to disappoint his guardian.

Frina and Penelope looked a bit like they had been run over by something. Hermione reassured them repeatedly that everything was all right, that they had been in much worse trouble in the past. Harry wondered if they were feeling left out, rather than worried as Hermione assumed.

Breakfast ended. The plates cleared themselves and the students filed out. Harry waved off his friends and stepped to the front where Snape sat eyeing him with a shuttered expression. McGonagall had started to depart with the others, but returned upon seeing the two of them remaining behind. She clasped her hands before her and waited for the other staff to leave.

When their half of the hall had cleared, the headmistress said, "I think we are even with Mr. Potter–we failed him as well recently." She patted Harry's shoulder as she turned away. "Go easy on him, Severus. I did."

Harry was grateful to see that Snape's posture eased at her comments, at least somewhat.

"We have class right now. We will discuss this later," his guardian stated as he stood up.

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed.

After a long day of classes, during which many students came up and congratulated him and his friends and only a few complained about the points, Harry trudged to the Defense office escorted by Ron, Hermione, Frina, and Penelope. The four of them stood behind Harry with almost comic formality as the office door opened.

Snape took in the scene before gesturing that Harry should enter. At the last instant, as the door was re-closing, Penelope stepped forward and halted it with her foot. Before she could speak, and it looked to be something deeply felt, Snape cut her off by saying, "Your forthrightness is admirable, Ms. Tideweather, but misplaced."

Harry said, "It's all right, Peni." As he stepped in, he waved them away with an expression that made it clear they were overreacting.

The door closed. Snape returned to his chair and steepled his fingers before him. "Peni?" he echoed.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively as he stood before the desk. "She thinks you were in with Karkaroff, of course she's worried."

Snape looked like he was resisting a retort he might regret. He clasped his hands tightly. "Minerva was ridiculously lenient with you," he stated darkly, making Harry swallow hard.

"I hadn't thought until after that I might get you in trouble," Harry said. "I certainly didn't mean to do that. Is that what's bothering you?"

His guardian's eyes narrowed in thought. "Partially," he admitted. "Your flaunting of the rules has always bothered me."

Harry frowned and took the visitor's chair by dropping into it. He glanced at the many fancy scrolls now filling a shelf off to the left. "Did you actually find the rule that we were breaking?" he asked, taking a chance.

Snape looked slightly taken aback. His focus went distant as he considered the question. "There is a general rule against students working on dangerous spells without supervision. I expect that would apply."

"It wasn't dangerous. No one got hurt. By that definition, my walking down a hallway alone violates the rules."

Snape rubbed his forehead hard with his fingertips. "Why did you not ask for supervision? It would have been provided."

"It wouldn't have been the same," Harry said.

"It would not have been following in the footsteps of the Marauders, you mean?" Snape challenged him fiercely.

Forcefully, because Snape had caught him off guard with this interpretation, Harry retorted, "It had nothing to do with that!" He leaned forward, hands propped on the arms of the chair, furious. "Don't you dare believe that," he added.

"So what was the purpose?" Snape sneered.

Harry breathed in and out to calm himself. "Thirty bonus points on the N.E.W.T." he replied. "And I don't mean to sound obnoxious, but there wasn't much else left to work on." Still angry, Harry stated darkly, "Not many footsteps to follow, given that they're nearly all dead." When Snape didn't comment, Harry went on, a spike of desperation driving his words. "Why would you even think that, or better yet, think it had anything to do with you?"

Snape still did not respond, although his expression lost some of its flatness.

Harry swore under his breath. "We ran out of things to do and it sounded interesting. That was it. I've been working on it for the points, but it isn't as though I've managed to get anywhere with it . . . it is Transfiguration after all."

"You truly have not mastered the spell?" Snape asked.

"NO," Harry nearly shouted. "So I'll get an 'A' on my N.E.W.T. Happy?"

Snape sat back suddenly. "I do not, in the least, wish you to fail your tests," he stated, sounding frustrated. He frowned deeply. "Perhaps I am overreacting. And as Minerva said, we have failed to protect you as well."

"I don't see the connection. But I'll take it," Harry said. "I really don't mean to make you angry."

Snape exhaled loudly. "Any other rules you are despicably flaunting at the moment?" When Harry shook his head, Snape challenged him. "None? You have not broken a single other rule this year?"

"Uh, I opened Malfoy's wombat crate because I was worried about how it was faring. But Hagrid already rebuked me for that. I'd told him I was worried about what it was turning into," he explained. "Uh . . ." Harry thought more. At Snape's expectant

expression, Harry quickly said, "I let Malfoy talk me into a duel. But I think I won, so I didn't bother mentioning it. I think that's why he was so tough during class the other day . . . he was trying to get even." Harry eventually shook his head. "I can't think of anything else."

Snape rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Rather boring year, then."

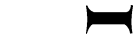
"Not really," Harry insisted. More lightly, he said, "Someone is still trying to kill me. That makes it feel normal."

Snape's hair fell into his face as his head lowered. "I do apologize for not finding out who it is." He stood and came around the desk, face still curtained. "I expected it only would require an interview or two with a few of my students to discover it. But surprisingly, no one knows anything. Even of the things they are unwilling to speak, nothing was useful."

Harry, not really comfortable with Legilimency being used like that on his behalf, fidgeted with his feet.

"Well, continue to not go about alone," Snape said in a dismissive voice. As Harry stood, he added, "And please, no more severe rules violations."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He thought of pointing out how little time there was left to make that much trouble, but decided against it.



During Quidditch practice, Harry hovered, waiting, while Ron re-explained a play he wanted the Chasers to practice. Harry and the Beaters were pretending to be opponents, but at the moment they weren't doing anything. Normally, Harry would not have minded hanging out in midair on a broom on a nice day, but today, for the very first time ever, he thought maybe he should be studying instead. Realizing he was thinking this made him rub his head, hard.

Harry flew a lap on his broom to distract himself while Ron and Ginny debated how the play should run, but he could not shake the vague angst that he would be better off right that moment with a book open in front of him, or his notes. He needed to write up quiz sheets for their revising for an Astronomy examination two days away. He needed to take a look at the bookmarked sections of the supplemental texts for the Potions N.E.W.T. He needed . . . Harry sloth rolled and hung upside down to distract himself further.

From his upside-down viewpoint, he noticed the Durmstrang students sitting in the stands, books open in front of them. Other students were here and there on the benches, talking or reading. With his hand Harry tweaked the broom handle and turned himself to better look at the Durmstrang students. Penelope sat bent over a small book, her dark hair shining in the sunlight. The angle of her shoulder was kind of pleasing, he thought idly.

"Bored?" Ron asked from where he and Ginny hovered. When Harry turned upright and shrugged, Ron said, "Well, let's run it again, before Harry decides to try flying without his broom."

Harry positioned himself with Sloper and Carren on either side and prepared to make appropriate defensive maneuvers when the Chasers came down the pitch. When Ginny came at him he swerved away slightly before aiming back at her, smooth on his old familiar broom and feeling aggressively strong, which he attributed to running since nothing else could account for it. The certainty of his movements made her pass the Quaffle off earlier than Hickory was expecting it and the other Chaser had to dive to get it.

"Sorry, let's do that again," she said in a disgusted tone. She sped around to her fellow Chaser to pick up the Quaffle and return to the starting position. The others reset without comment. Ginny gave Harry a narrow, challenging look before she said, "Go."

Harry repeated the same thing and this time she held her course despite his cutting her off. In the end Harry dodged away to avoid the foul, and their robes brushed at high-speed. Harry turned and gave Chase as Ginny passed the Quaffle upward as Hickory rotated around. Sloper swung between them aiming his broom straight at the center post. Hickory threw the Quaffle hard to him, which he ducked rather than caught. Ginny caught it instead, flying beyond him and tossed it through the left-hand goal.

Ron cheered from his position as opposition keeper. "All right! Let's repeat it with a Bludger in play."

Harry rode the turning stone staircase for his next tutoring session with some unease, a little worried McGonagall would change her mind about letting him off. He stepped into the office at her invitation and took the overstuffed chair already facing the desk.

As he unpacked his bookbag, she came around and held out a book. "I've already read that one," he pointed out upon reading the title Animagical . He placed his other books on the edge of the desk.

She withdrew it and turned it around to flip through it. "Have you tried a Canarevelatio?" she asked.

Harry set down the quill he had just taken out for note taking. It sounded suspiciously as though she were trying to help him become an Animagus. This possibility had not occurred to him. "Yes, ma'am."

She considered him in silence. "And it didn't work? You should be able to predict your form, in any event, I'd expect."

Feeling reluctant now, Harry replied, "No, the revelation did work."

A little befuddled, she said, "That is half the difficulty of the Animagia. Have you been working on the various energies? This book does a rather remarkable job of explaining them all."

"Yes, ma'am."

"A stag is a grazer. They are usually easier to attain. Unlike Mr. Longbottom's rather predatorial hunter."

"What's that?" Harry blurted. He had not known there was a difference.

"Prey forms are easier to attain than predator. I expect your stag form is easier than you realize. As your godfather used to tell it, it took him much longer to work out the Animagia energies and your father never let Sirius live down how slow he was in achieving his form."

Harry shook his head. "It's not a stag. . . . I don't know what it is." His father had been prey, he thought with a queer, cold shiver.

Her brow furrowed. She put the book down on the desk and rested her hand beside it. "Let's see the Canarevelatio."

Harry reached for an excuse. "Are you sure you want to cover this instead of last week's class session?"

"It is worth thirty points on the N.E.W.T., as I'm certain you are aware. It would most certainly push you over the top to the grade you need. Go on."

Harry pulled off his shoe and sock. After a deep breath he incanted the spell. On the first try the same bright paw appeared. With a sudden movement, McGonagall leaned in close and reached for it. Harry tried to pull away, but she was faster.

"Hold still," she said distractedly.

Harry had to bite his lower lip to keep from jerking his foot away again. The nerves on his paw were in some different arrangement and her touch felt very odd. She pressed on his toe, causing a vicious long black claw to protrude. Harry was gaping at it when his foot changed back.

She stood straight, deep in thought. "It would make sense, actually, for you to be something predatorial, Harry. No offense."

"What is it?" Harry breathed.

She considered him in silence. "You are very uncomfortable with your form, aren't you?"

"I don't even know what it is," he pointed out defensively.

She crouched before him and put a hand on his bare human foot. "Harry," she began soothingly, then stopped. "Repeat the spell one more time," she said easily.

Harry sighed and obliged her. She looked over the rough paw pads and pushed out each of four long claws. If he had seen claws like that on something in the Forbidden Forest, he would have run the other way.

"Not precisely a cat, but not a canine either," she said in thought. "I don't know quite what you are, Harry." She continued to hold his foot again after it had normalized. Eventually, she said, "We all have the potential in us to become something unexpected. It doesn't make us less ourselves. It doesn't make us dangerous, unless we let it." She stood then, with apparently stiff knees. "I'm not sure what you are uneasy about, exactly, but I expect that you of all people will not become something you despise, no matter how much power you may attain."

He took in her words with a little confusion, but they were finding a hearing inside him somewhere. He felt much calmer as he considered them.

McGonagall was speaking again. "Next time you can, go down to Hagrid and ask him what that is. He will most certainly know," she said as she stepped back to her chair. "Now, where were we. . . .?"

Harry was still thoughtful when he returned to the common room, escorted by Professor Sinistra, and joined his friends working on various assignments.

"Is everything okay?" Penelope asked him. Everyone else looked up to see the answer to this.

"Yeah, it's fine," Harry replied. "No worries," he added with a small smile.

"Your headmistress is very nice," Frina commented.

Harry studied her. McGonagall must have questioned them, he realized. His eyes went to Hermione, who nodded with a wry smile.

"I told her not to bother," Harry pointed out.

"She has to consider every possibility, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

Harry flipped open one of his alternative Potions texts to look for more essay material about blood-based brewing techniques. "She hasn't considered the right one yet, apparently," he commented.

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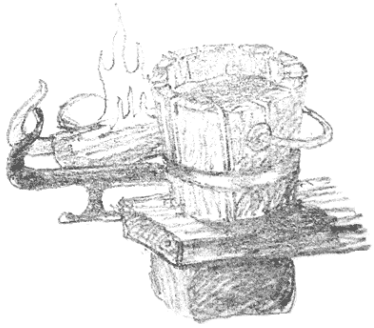
Chapter 40.



Boil Thou First i the Charmed Pot

It was a fine sunny day for Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff. Spring seemed eager to give way to summer. The lawn fairly glowed in lush greens as they all trouped down to the pitch. Overhead, the banners snapped in a steady wind and they found seats in the second row from the front. The other stands were also crowded; apparently everyone thought it a fine day for Quidditch.

The old leather-covered crate with the balls was carried out and placed on the pitch. Madam Hooch stood beside it, waiting. Ron leaned close. "Still cheering for Slytherin?" he asked Harry.

Harry gave him a smiling glance to which Ron rolled his eyes hopelessly. "Janet doesn't have a chance," Harry asserted quietly. Except it is sunny, he thought and wondered if the Hufflepuff Seeker would realize how sensitive Suze's eyes were to the light.

The teams flew out, looking eager and energized. They hovered impatiently in formation while Madam Hooch gave them the usual warnings about what she was going to be watching for.

For a Hufflepuff match it was a rough game and much closer than expected, until Suze finally caught the snitch. Harry had watched her circling high in order to look

down while searching. Even so, she squinted a lot in the bright light. Janet, if she had tried to take advantage, did not do so successfully.

As they left the stands, Ron muttered, "That's a one hundred ten point difference, so that puts Slytherin up by . . . uff, I can't even think it."

"We have another match," Harry pointed out.

"Don't catch the Snitch until we are two hundred points ahead then, okay?" Ron said sarcastically.

When they reached the lawn, Harry said, "It really means that much to you? The cup?" Harry did not want it to mean so much that losing it would ruin the end of their school days.

Ron scuffed his big feet through the grass. "It'd be nice to win it," he insisted glumly.

Harry looked up from his book in the library as a silver bird shot up through the table. Frina and Penelope looked up sharply as well. Harry gave a tug on the bird's beak and it unfurled into a scrap of silver parchment that he just managed to read before it sparked out of existence.

"I'm late," he realized, glancing at the clock. The message had asked if he was going to make it to advanced D.A.

As he collected his books, Penelope asked, "Can we come?"

Harry looked them over, down the line to Darsha, who blatantly returned to her Potions textbook. "As long as no one says anything," Harry said, feeling that he would like them to come along, especially Penelope.

Frina and Penelope shook their heads and they all turned to Darsha. "She is already an Animagus: A Squirrel," Frina commented. "In her part of India they teach them Animagia as young children."

Harry gestured with his head, "Come on, then–saves me from finding an escort." He glanced back at Darsha who continued to ignore them. He disregarded his concern of what she might say on the basis that she had not reported to the headmistress when all Animagi were called up. Out in the empty corridor, he said, "Strictly speaking, this is still against the rules."

"Why are you still working on it then?" Penelope asked.

"Sinistra is available to help and has to be present when anyone tries to change form, so we aren't breaking as many rules. McGonagall just wants the school at large to think we've been punished and stopped. Mostly we are doing it because some of our friends haven't managed it yet, like Seamus, Luna, and Justin."

"And you," Frina pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry muttered. He did not miss Penelope elbowing her friend on the arm as they turned a corner. "It's all right," he assured her. "Headmistress is helping me with it now," he added.

"You do get special treatment," Frina stated.

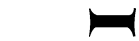
As Harry opened his mouth to defensively say, "Not all the time," Penelope rather forcefully said, "He deserves to."

"I don't know about that," Harry insisted, surprised by her level of emotion.

"You do," she repeated, making Harry hesitate in opening the meeting room door where they had stopped. Her fierce assertion made him uneasy as well as touched.

Inside the Room of Requirement, Hermione looked surprised to see the two Durmstrang students. "I needed an escort," Harry explained with an innocent shrug.

Hermione frowned and stepped away from Justin and the other Ravenclaws in the group. "There probably isn't time to get you all the way through it," she stated. Her eyes met Harry's and he could see her give in. "But you can get started, anyway."



At the end of a particularly long tutoring session, McGonagall said, "Just a moment."

Harry had about four hours of assignments yet to complete that night, but he put his bookbag back down and retook his seat. She had her hands clasped before her on the desk. "Have you spoken to Hagrid?" When Harry shook his head she stood up and took down her cloak from the hat rack in the corner. "Come then," she said brightly.

"We're going right now?" Harry asked in surprise.

"You are running out of time, my boy. Come along."

The grounds were dark from a new moon. The torches beside the door cast misleading light over the steps as they exited.

At Hagrid's cabin, the headmistress knocked loudly. Hagrid opened the door and greeted them with surprise. "Come in. Come in," he invited genially, reminding Harry with a twinge that he had not visited in a while. "Tea?" he asked, holding up his big bucket.

"Yes, thank you," McGonagall replied politely.

Hagrid went out back and returned presently. He poured water from the bucket into a cauldron which he swung over the fire. Harry sat on a footstool near the grate, enjoying the heat from the flames. Fawkes was enjoying the fire as well, sleeping with his head under one wing.

"Ta wha' do I owe this visit?" Hagrid asked, as he lowered his great frame into his regular chair.

"Harry needs some assistance from you, but has been too shy to request it," McGonagall supplied.

"'Harry!" Hagrid chastised him. "You ken come ter me anytime. You know tho'."

"It's complicated," Harry insisted, wishing he were elsewhere even though he liked seeing Hagrid.

Hagrid poured hot water from the cauldron into his massive unglazed teapot and set it on the hearthstone to steep. "Well, wha' can I do fer you, Harry?" he asked.

Reluctantly, Harry explained, "I've been working on becoming an Animagus, but I don't know what animal I'm supposed to become. I can make a foot of it, but it's something really odd." He looked over at McGonagall; she was studying her clasped hands rather intently.

Hagrid sat straight. "Hm. Well, le's have a look, then."

Harry, concentrating on the thirty bonus points, pulled off his shoe and sock. He did the spell and stared at the strange paw. Even after this much repetition, he still was not comfortable with the looks of it.

"Hmmmm," Hagrid murmured. Harry again was forced to withstand having his claws pushed out, one by one. It didn't hurt, but it made him very uneasy and possessive of his foot.

"Can' do anything quite average, eh, Harry?" Hagrid teased.

Harry searched for a retort, surprised to find he did not just wish that he were a stag, even though that would have made things much simpler. "Guess not," he muttered. What did he want to be? he wondered and started to feel curious for the first time about what this thing was.

Hagrid hefted himself to his feet and went over to a low, rough bookshelf. He murmured aloud as he flipped through one book before selecting another. "Retractable, non-retic'lated, ash grey pads . . ." Harry squinted at the book title in the firelight, Exotic Creatures of the Urals and Surrounds, Care & Feeding . Uneasiness flowed all the way into Harry's fingertips it so filled him.

"Please don't find it in there," Harry whispered when the wait stretched too long. He was starting to wish Snape were here, he was so anxious.

"Huh?" Hagrid said, distracted from the book. He returned to it with a disapproving glance at Harry. Presently, he said, "I think this is i'." He whistled in an impressed way as he brought the book over. "I'd love ter see one," he said reverently, which made Harry's insides flip.

With weak hands, Harry accepted the heavy book presented to him. McGonagall came over and read over his shoulder. Harry blinked at the hand-painted woodcut, grateful for the stabilizing feel of McGonagall's hand on his shoulder.

"Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis," McGonagall read aloud. "Scarlet is certainly accurate."

Harry looked at the image: it was of a winged creature that looked vaguely like a Hippogriff except thin and wirey. Parts of the drawing were vague, like the transition from feather to fur, which the artist had apparently been unclear on. He hoped the artist had been unclear on the disproportionately long rear legs. They almost looked like a stag's. It did not have a bird tail, but a lion one it looked like, so he suspected it did not fly well. The head was catlike with a longish snout and long canine teeth. Long feathers stood out behind its ears in a haphazard fashion, sort of like a peacock's might, giving it a foppish look.

Harry swallowed hard. He felt numb as he handed the book back.

"Have a good vision of it in your mind?" McGonagall asked helpfully.

Harry nodded emphatically. He would not be forgetting that image.

"Some o' the details on these ol' woodcuts can be wrong," Hagrid pointed out. "Not all are from, uh, firs' hand observation," he added, then cleared his throat and put the book away. Harry imagined gibbering mountain dwellers trying to explain what had killed all the sheep. He felt vaguely unwell.

McGonagall poured some tea into a large ceramic mug and pressed it into his hands. She patted his shoulder. "It doesn't change who you are, Harry," she said gently. "And you are finding out that the danger of learning Animagia isn't all physical. Were any of your friends distressed by what they became?"

Harry shook his head, then said, "Neville always seemed embarrassed, but I think he was really pleased, inside." He swallowed and wondered why he did not feel the same. "Why can't I just be something normal?" he griped.

"Aye," Hagrid said as he refilled his own tankard with tea. "Tha's a beautiful an' rare creature the Scarlet is. Don' be bad mouthin' it now. Unlike other Griffin species, the males sometimes have wings."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Only female Griffins ha' wings, normally," Hagrid said as he tossed another massive log on the fire and sat back. "N.E.W.T. question, Harry," he added chastisingly. "O.W.L. for that matter," he added in a mutter.

Hagrid and the headmistress made small talk for a while while Harry stared into the flames. His unfinished assignments loomed ahead of him and he was grateful for the mundanity of that notion.

At the base of the front steps, McGonagall slowed and tugged Harry to a stop by his shoulder. Her eyes held more concern than he was used to seeing as she said, "You have the potential for great power, Harry, and by choosing to be an Auror, you are virtually guaranteeing that you will realize that power." She squeezed his shoulder harder. "If you are truly uncomfortable with that, then maybe you should rethink your plans."

Harry frowned as he stared out at the blackness of the lake in the distance. "You think that's what's bothering me?"

She grinned. "If your Animagus form were a rabbit, what would you be thinking right now?"

Harry could not hold in his dismayed reaction to that thought. "I'd wonder what was wrong with me, I guess," he replied with a laugh in his voice.

"You've never been like everyone else, Harry. Nor can I imagine why you would wish to be," she added, her thoughts sounding distant.

The castle door opened and a figure stepped halfway out of it. In the tricky light, Harry had to fall back on recognizing Snape's distinctive profile. Harry forced his mind to settle and walked that way.

Chapter 40

"Everything all right?" Snape asked.

"Everything is just fine, Severus. We were visiting with Hagrid," McGonagall said in her usual matter-of-fact tone.

Harry managed a small smile for his guardian. He wanted to talk to him, but he wanted time to sort things out himself a bit first.

Harry was up very late finishing his assignments. Hermione and Penelope had tried to stay up with him but they eventually had to give up. Tomorrow was going to be a pepper-up day, Harry considered with a frown. He stood to toss another log on the fire and a blast of heat came out as the coals were disturbed. The room didn't need the warmth–he just needed the company. He sat back on the couch and reviewed last week's History notes for anything else he should add to his essay about Wizard criminal law in the seventeenth century. Relaxed, he leaned his head back as he scanned his own handwriting. The tower felt very safe since the respelling. Harry was rarely bothered by odd notions, even late at night and alone as he was.

Finally, at three in the morning, after wrestling his wandering thoughts from a certain female student, Harry wrote out the last line of the essay. He packed everything up and crept up to his dormitory room as quietly as possible.

The very next day, as Transfiguration was ending, McGonagall strode over as they packed up their books. "A word, if you have a moment, Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry wondered what she had to say already after last night. He had managed to hold his yawning to a minimum during class, he had thought, so hopefully it wasn't that. As the classroom door closed, his friends gestured that they would be waiting in the corridor.

"I meant to discuss this last night, but it did not come up," McGonagall said. "The week after next is the anniversary of your destroying Voldemort. In case you had not remembered," she added in her most professorish tone.

"I couldn't exactly forget, ma'am."

"Hm, no I suppose not," she replied amiably. She urged the last few rats into their cages and hovered them to a shelf. Then she considered Harry in silence before saying, "Would you like another party like the last one?"

Harry, taken aback by being handed such decisionmaking, hesitated. He had not really enjoyed the last one, nor remembered it all that clearly, but it sounded like fun now. "Do I have to give a speech?"

She breathed in audibly. "Yes."

"Is there an alternative to a big party?" Harry asked whinging slightly.

McGonagall gave him a light smile. "I have been considering alternatives only because we have not found your attacker. I am thinking that it should be kept small, in any event, just major dignitaries and the students."

"A speech?" Harry confirmed.

"I'll help you write it, if you wish."

"I'll need the help," he admitted, feeling nervous already.

During Care of Magical Creatures, Harry noticed the toe of Malfoy's boot as he crouched to assemble cages for the Brinkenpops that Hagrid was going to catch that night for the next class session. The pens had to be made of green bamboo woven with strands of wild grape vine. Brinkenpops would easily escape a cage that was not made of living material. The Slytherin was working quietly and diligently on the weaving and tying as though he might be enjoying it. He also appeared to be wearing very nice boots.

Harry stepped around to the blonde boy. "Let me see your boot," he said.

Malfoy gave him such a look of derision that Harry thought he should have picked a different tack. "Shoe shopping, Potter?" Draco asked with full snide.

"In a sense," Harry replied in the hardest tone he could manage.

The other boy rolled his eyes and stuck his foot out while pulling up his robes. They were nice boots, but they had unfamiliar bright silver clasps and lower heels than the ones Harry remembered.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled as he shirked away. He should have just sneaked a look, but he had been too confident to think that deviously.

"Yeah, anytime, Mr. Harry Cobbler," Malfoy sneered.

Chapter 40

Harry sat in Snape's office while he worked on his Potions essay. He found this worked well for getting the best grade, no matter how tough Greer felt like grading him. Since Easter holiday, he had not spent much time here things had been so busy.

He finished rereading the chapter in the assigned text and read over what he had written so far. They were repeating fungus-based potions, which was fine with him, even though Snape intimated that they should be covering other topics before the end of the year. Harry's alternative texts had bookmarks now with sections Snape believed would be covered on the N.E.W.T. Harry had not yet found the time to go over them carefully. The way things were going, he would end up reading them the night before the examination.

With some care Harry wrote out several paragraphs explaining the ingredient conversions possible with different fungi. Since the fungi were not magical, this was a fairly straightforward topic and not difficult. It appealed to his Muggle sense of the world, he decided as he wrote.

Finally, he finished the essay and held it out. "Would you mind?" Harry asked his guardian. Snape looked up from the stack of parchments before him and reached out to take it.

While Snape read, Harry tried not to fidget too much. He let his mind wander to other things, like the fact that he had not yet explained to Snape that he knew what his Animagus form was. The night they had visited Hagrid, McGonagall had left it to him, and he had not let go of that momentum. He was certain that Snape would insist upon working out exactly what was bothering Harry, and he did not feel like doing that. He had not decided yet if McGonagall was right.

"You are missing two uses for lungwort. Other than that it looks fine." He handed the rolled parchment back.

Harry spread it out and opened his class notes to check what he had written. When he found the missing items, he amended his essay and rolled it up with satisfaction.

"Ready for the party on Friday?" Snape asked.

"I'm not too thrilled with the speech I'm supposed to give." It was only Monday and Harry was determined to improve it by the end of the week, at least into something he would not gag at.

Snape fought a twisted grin. "You are giving a prepared speech. How quaint."

"I wasn't given a choice."

"Your influence must be wearing off," Snape commented. "You need another dark wizard to destroy to boost it up again."

"Guess this mystery attacker's reputation isn't high enough."

"I suspect not. But one never knows. It could be Salazar himself, back from the dead."

Harry considered the stack of parchments on Snape's desk. "Are you a little overworked?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps. Why do you ask?"

"You're being . . . flippant, or something," Harry observed.

Snape bent his head forward to make a note on a sheet before him. "Oh? Have I insulted you?"

"No," Harry reassured him.

"I must be slipping."

"Like that," Harry said with a little force.

Snape studied him through a curtain of hair as he rubbed his forehead. "I will be grateful for this year ending. I will not have the Potions master duties next year; although, presumably, I will still have those of the deputy headmaster." He sighed and said, "Although next year you will not be here."

That was an odd notion, Harry thought. Snape here, himself . . . at home, doing something, hopefully his apprenticeship. "Just a month and a bit left," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Ready for your N.E.W.T.s?"

Harry thought about his Animagus form. "Not quite. But I haven't given up on it."

Snape spun his chair and pulled two books from the shelf behind him. "There are a few other Defense spells I think you should know, just in case they are included." He flipped the top book open and ran his long finger down the page.

"You aren't going to cover them in class?" Harry asked in confusion.

Without looking up Snape replied, "I am already covering more than any Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor ever has at this institution; I do not have the energy

to teach exceptionally complicated, past extra-credit standardized examination spells to that many remedially competent students."

Harry felt he should defend his fellows. "They aren't that bad."

"Still," Snape insisted, now flipping open the second book and marking a page before paging rapidly ahead. "These aren't generally useful spells, just historically on the examination. Teaching them to you is remarkably little effort."

Harry sat back and dropped his shoulders at that unexpected compliment.

"Here we are," Snape said before standing up. "Get out your wand."

Standing slowly as he reached into his pocket, Harry said, "You don't want to move to the classroom?" He had visions of burned books and smashed potion bottles, since that is what surrounded them at the moment.

"A lesson in attenuation as well would not be out-of-line," Snape drolled.

"My attenuation is really good," Harry insisted. "How many students do you want injured during your class?" he asked with a touch of snideness.

Snape gave him a silent doubtful look. "We will go over that after," he finally said. "First the Macedonum." He moved to stand beside the desk and gestured for Harry to push the visitor's seat aside. Harry obeyed, then stood still while the spell was cast in his direction. The stone floor warped beneath his feet and he was forced to put out a hand, oddly now sideways to the floor, to keep from falling over as he sank into a deep dip forming around him. The dip did not hold still; as his chin reached normal floor height, it surged upward into a peak, which rolled him aside. He stopped himself tumbling just before he reached a case of glass bottles full of dark viscous liquids.

Rubbing a bruised spot on his shoulder, Harry stepped back to the center of the now-flat floor, while giving his guardian a challenging look. "That's an interesting one," he commented in a low voice. "Might even work on a cloaked opponent."

"Only if you can put enough power into it." Snape set the visitor's chair into the center of the open office floor before the desk, stepped back, and said, "You try."

"What, I don't get to try it on you?" Harry asked levelly, trying for a disappointed tone. He aimed the wand and said the incantation but the only effect was a faint ripple in the floor like a stone falling into water. He tried it again to the same paltry result. A glance at his guardian revealed Snape standing with his arms crossed looking reserved.

"More power?" Harry asked. When Snape merely raised a brow as though this were a test, Harry incanted it again, shouting this time and pouring a lot into it. The room shivered, stones and all. Snape grabbed his arm, presumably to cut him off.

"This is not an ordinary spell," Snape said, losing his momentarily alarmed expression after a glance around the room. "Power only helps if you are focussing properly. The spell is a wave and more random power is as likely to interfere as to build up." He stood beside Harry. "Watch again." Snape aimed his wand and lifted a small peak in the floor before it reversed to a valley then flattened out.

"How do you get one or the other?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately, you do not have control over that. But you must have coherent power, that is critical."

Determined, Harry aimed his wand again, turning it slowly in his fingers as he thought about focussing magic. After long seconds he dropped his arm. "How do I do that?"

With a small grin Snape said, "You practice it–it is something you must get a feel for." He repeated the spell, again creating a small peak. "For myself, I imagine I am pushing the spell in my mind through something as small as the wand. But I expect everyone is different." He stepped back again to give Harry a clear space.

Harry narrowed his eyes, and his thoughts, as he raised his wand again. When he spoke the spell a ripple again formed, though the ripples seemed taller this time. Determined to not get impatient with himself, he repeated it again and again.

"Think about it differently," Snape suggested, almost gently, considering how his normal suggestions sounded.

Harry imagined his magic as a funnel, as a laser, and as a snitch even, because when it darted it looked like a line. Imagining it as the narrow stab of pain from his scar when Voldemort was near worked best, although the resulting peak was not very high and was still surrounded by ripples.

"Must better," Snape said. "How were you focusing?"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered.

Snape looked mystified, but did not ask. "Practice that one. Care to learn another?" his guardian said instead.

Harry glanced at the time. "One more."

"Will you come up with us to check our wombat?" Hermione asked Harry late the next night as he worked on his Astronomy assignment. Frina and Penelope stood by

the portrait hole, waiting. "I'll help you with that," his friend offered to entice him as she pointed at his essay.

Harry grinned. "Sure."

The girls all took out their wands as they walked, which Harry found a little over careful. He left his in his pocket. When they reached the attic, Parkinson was just respelling hers and Malfoy's crate.

"How's your wombat?" Harry asked, wishing they had arrived just a minute earlier.

"Fine."

"Working on it alone now?" Harry asked.

"Draco wasn't very useful anyway," she complained with a very miffed tone. She stepped by them all a little quickly. Harry had not meant to upset her, but apparently he had anyhow. Hermione gave him a wry grin and a shrug.

"A tangle of webs weaved," Frina stated philosophically as she watched Parkinson disappear down the rickety steps.

"Pretty much," Hermione agreed. She unspelled their crate and lifted out the occupant. It was a little bigger and they had eventually convinced it to eat a few blueberries, so it had grown tufts of brighter blue fur on its back. These spots made Hermione's appearance all the stranger as she carried the animal over to the supply table.

Harry followed her over and ran a finger over the top of its small head. "Never got it to change into a bat like yours did," Hermione said.

"Maybe you need to dream about it for that to work," Harry commented idly, thinking back to that night when he had woken in concern for their animal.

Hermione dropped the can of dog milk, splashing the contents across the wood roof beams. The wombat crawled up her arm in a panic. Harry plucked it off and carried it to Frina, who was coming over quickly to help. "What did you say?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Uh, I think I may have been dreaming about the wombat that night." More defensively, he said, "I don't know. I have so many strange dreams," he shrugged.

Hermione fell into deep thought. "We have tried just about everything," she said smartly. "Wonder how we'd get that to work? Maybe a dream potion. They're easy. Can you get me a few supplies, Harry?"

"Is the potion a forbidden one?" he asked carefully.

"I don't think so," Hermione replied, returning to the here and now.

"It's just that Severus was more than a little upset about the unsupervised Animagi club." Harry really did not want to tempt that again, even for the sake of her assignment. He suggested, "Give me the ingredient list, I'll just ask him for them. That's safest."

Hermione took the parchment scrap Frina offered and wrote out five things. "I have everything else. We'll use the usual brewing location since it takes most of a day," she added with a smile. "Just bring the stuff there."

Harry took the list and tried to read her expression. "I don't mean to sound unhelpful."

"Harry," she said. "It's all right. Believe me; I understand that you don't want to get into trouble. It's a new thing for you," she teased, "but I understand."

On the walk back Penelope stayed beside Harry. "What are your plans after school?" she asked.

"I have my Auror's testing but other than that I'm free."

"Would you like to visit me in Bern?" she asked eagerly.

"I think I'd like that. The testing schedule isn't set, though; I'd have to let you know later."

She smiled broadly despite his uncertain answer. "My parents would be very excited to have you visit. The whole city would."

"Uh," Harry began.

"Or a quiet visit, of course," she amended quickly while grabbing his arm, apparently to reinforce her insistence.

"That might be better," Harry stated.

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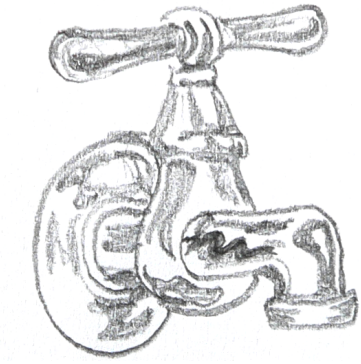

Swelterd Venom Sleeping Got

Since Hermione was eager to get started on the potion, Harry headed down to Snape's office very early, well over an hour before breakfast, using Dobby as an escort when he had finished straightening the common room. When he arrived, his guardian was going through what appeared to be the same large stack of parchments. Harry asked the broadly grinning house-elf to wait before stepping inside.

"I need some stuff," Harry said. "None of it's restricted, but it isn't in the usual student supplies."

Snape stood and accepted the list. With a doubtful glance at Harry, he went to his personal supplies cabinet. "May I ask why you now are trying to have dreams–usually it is the opposite." He handed out pollen essence and pickled worm skin.

"I'm not the one drinking it. It will have to be Hermione or Frina."

Snape glanced up as he handed him gold-leafed scarab wings.

Harry explained, "The explanation really isn't very interesting; they want to test a theory about the wombat assignment–"

"Ah," Snape said, sounding like everything made sense.

"So that is it?" Harry asked.

"I am not supposed to assist. None of the staff are, but I am surprised it took Ms. Granger that long to think of that." He handed Harry a leather pouch full of dyed bezel leaves and a tiny vial of concentrated black coat ash.

"She didn't," Harry could not resist saying, then followed it with a grin to make the point.

"She must be slipping."

"Thanks," Harry snipped at him. "You do need a break," he commented as he balanced the variety of containers against his arm. "Or a stiff drink."

"I am . . . looking forward to the party on that regard." Snape watched him juggling things before saying a little snidely, "Would you like something to carry that all in?"

Harry found the three of them in the girls' toilet and waved Dobby off with thanks. With his oversized eyes, the elf glanced doubtfully at the sign on the door, but did not comment about Harry's entrance into the wrong toilet, just bowed and said, "Good day, Master Harry." Harry put the ingredient sack down beside Hermione who was firing up a cauldron in the middle of the floor.

"Doesn't bother you to be in here, does it?" Hermione asked. Harry's eyes were on the washbasin tap, the one with the serpent.

"No."

Frina and Penelope were giving him curious looks. "Couldn't get Ron to come down?" he asked Hermione.

"He refused to get up early for an assignment."

"Well!" Myrtle said as she floated out of a stall. Frina and Penelope jumped back in surprise, one grabbing the other.

"Hi, Myrtle," Harry said congenially.

"WHO . . . is this?" Myrtle asked, floating nose to nose with one, than the other of the Durmstrang students. "And THIS?"

"Yet another ghost?" Frina asked. "No one purges them?"

Myrtle's face crinkled up before she burst into tears, covered her face and dove into the nearest toilet. Hermione had her wand out with an umbrella charm long before the water splashed into her work area.

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"Try to be nice to her," Harry said quietly. "She used to be a student."

"What happened to her?" Penelope asked. "How long has she been here?"

"A long time," Hermione said as she adjusted the flame below the cauldron, "About fifty years."

"She was Voldemort's first victim," Harry said.

"What?" Penelope and Frina blurted in unison.

"That was back when he still went by his given name, Tom Riddle," Harry explained. He sat on the floor beside Hermione and helped her grind the beetle wings into powder. "He was the heir of Salazar Slytherin," Harry went on, "one of the school's founders. He opened the supposedly mythical Chamber of Secrets the founder left behind, and released the Basilisk, which did in poor Myrtle there."

They stood staring at him in shock.

"The entrance is just there," Harry added, pointing at the sinks.

"Right there?" Frina asked fearfully.

"Don't worry, the Basilisk is dead," Harry said reassuringly.

"Who killed it?" Penelope asked.

With her silver stirring stick Hermione pointed at Harry.

" You did?" Penelope said, "Is this what Professor Snape was referring to?"

"Yep. Want this now?" Harry asked Hermione in reference to the powder.

"Dump it in," she said, stirring rapidly as he did so.

"Figuring out how to kill Riddle was harder than sticking a sword through the Basilisk's head," Harry commented. "I can roast the skins if you want."

"Not quite yet. They might dry out," Hermione said, glancing at the recipe.

"You killed Riddle, er, Voldemort that time too?" Frina asked in confusion.

Harry took over stirring while Hermione opened more jars. "That was the third time I'd did essentially kill him," he said casually. "Too evil to die," he added flippantly.

Hermione added more ingredients and stirred thoroughly before saying, "It needs to simmer for an hour." She stood up to stretch her legs and wandered around the sinks. "Can you still open the Chamber?" she asked curiously.

Harry followed Hermione over as Penelope said, "Open the . . .?"

They stood before the faucet with the snake. "I don't know," he said. "The tunnel caved in some back then–it may be completely blocked now."

"I want to see," Hermione said. "I had a chance to see it. Do you want to see it again?" she asked hopefully.

Harry considered that. It was a very long time ago. A glance at the clock showed that they still had forty-five minutes before breakfast. He could still sense his younger instinct to explore without regard to risk and felt nostalgic about it. "Sure."

"Won't you get into trouble?" Penelope said quickly, stepping close.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I'm the only one in the world who can open it, I think." He turned to Hermione.

"I expect you are. I'd really like a look before we leave for good," she said, wheedling slightly.

Harry grinned at her. "I remember when you wouldn't do anything even slightly out of line. Used to make us bonkers."

Hermione laughed. "Go on then."

"It's probably sealed up," he muttered. Harry narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the snake figure. "Open the Chamber," he said. He knew he had spoken Parseltongue only because the visiting students tripped over each other stepping backward. Harry pulled Hermione back as the porcelain unit moved and folded in on itself, leaving a square gap in the floor. He and Hermione stared down into the dark hole.

"We've got a bit of time this morning or do you want to wait for another time?" Harry asked his friend.

"You're a Parselmouth?" Penelope said in utter shock.

"Yeah," Harry replied with extra casualness. He let her hang there, feeling as though she should learn to deal with it on her own, and if she couldn't, well . . .

"We have almost an hour and a half before class," Hermione said. "Time for a little exploring followed by a quick shower."

"We should go get Ron," Harry said.

Hermione used a bird spell to summon him. "He shouldn't be so lazy," she commented before bending down to squint into the darkness again. "How's the landing?" When Harry shrugged, she jumped in.

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Looking into the hole after Hermione in concern, Frina asked "How far down is it?"

"It isn't too bad down here," Hermione shouted before Harry could respond. "A little obliterate spell and it's pretty clear."

"It occurs to me," Harry said to no one in particular, "that we got out last time by riding on the tail of a Phoenix."

Penelope and Frina gave him wide looks as though he had lost it. "My silver message spell isn't as good as hers; can one of you go down to Hagrid's cabin and ask him to send Fawkes to the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Sure," Frina said in a tone one might use to calm someone who had lost his head.

Enjoying their surprised dismay too much, he added, "Really, we will need Fawkes. You remember the bird Hagrid had in class a few weeks ago?" When they nodded, but still looked doubtful, Harry shouted, "I'm coming down," as he stepped into the hole.

At the bottom, he brushed himself off. "You have cleared it out. But boy does it stink."

"Didn't last time?"

"No. Not like this."

Harry led the way to the sealed chamber latch where he again had to ask in Parseltongue for it to open.

"Interesting locking mechanism," Hermione said. "I detect a theme."

Harry shook his head with a crooked grin and they stepped inside. Water still covered most of the floor and they held up their robes while they splashed through it. Rats scurried away from their approach. At the front, the source of the smell was clear. Face wrinkled in disgust, Harry approached the twisted Basilisk skeleton. Its skin hung in tatters like old cloth over most of the grey-stained protruding spinal bones.

"They never took the Basilisk away," Harry said. "I'm surprised."

"The sword is gone, though," Hermione observed.

"As is the diary. Dumbledore had them," Harry supplied.

"Hey!" a voice made them jump severely. It was Ron, entering from the hatchway. "Didn't imagine you'd come down here. . . yeech."

"Morning, Ron," Harry greeted his friend, who splashed over to them while holding his robes bunched at his waist. Harry slowly circled the long creature. In a shallow

pool lay a long, bleached tooth. After examining it for a moment, he tossed it aside with a splash. He could remember the extreme pain of being bitten by it too much to want to keep it.

"Don't want it?" Ron asked, fetching it and slipping it into his pocket.

"You can have it," Harry said, stepping over to the large carvings on the wall. This place felt empty, dead. Maybe that was why Dumbledore had left it as a tomb.

They explored the sculpture and the perimeter of the room until a cry rent the air and Fawkes flew toward them low across the water. The bird fluttered to a perch on a high protruding bone and cocked its head at them.

"What's he doing here?" Hermione asked.

"That's our ride out," Ron teased. "Am I right?" he asked Harry. They all looked at each other with grins of shared experience and emotion.

"Goodness, I'm going to miss this place," Harry said with more than a hint of sarcasm. They all laughed uproariously.

"Bloody lucky to be alive," Ron teased him.

Harry removed his glasses to wipe his eyes free of tears of laughter.

"You outlived Voldemort, though; few thought you would manage that," Hermione said, squeezing Harry's hand after he had replaced his glasses. "Couldn't hope for more, though I think you got it anyway."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Only a father, silly," she pointed out.

Harry, having difficulty balancing out the memories of this place with what she said, turned his gaze back to the long grim skeleton before them. Fawkes had his head tilted oddly as though listening in. He met the bird's tiny eyes and considered how very much Fawkes had seen through the years. A rush of odd thoughts flickered through his mind then as though he had accidentally Legilimized the bird. Visions of stone arches being constructed and books being collected and read, late candlelight discussions and arguments with two witches, one who always seemed to be smiling and a wizard, who always seemed to be scowling.

Harry staggered, bringing his friends near. Ron took his arm and held him up by it. "You all right?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked up at Fawkes again, stunned. The bird let out the loudest cry Harry had ever heard from it. "Nothing," Harry said as he shook them off. "Just too many memories."

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"We should go," Hermione said, nervous now. More lightly, she said, "I want to finish the potion before class so it can simmer during the day."

Fawkes easily carried them back up through the floor of the girls' toilet. Frina and Penelope were stirring the potion when they arrived, announced by a loud Phoenix cry. The girls jumped to their feet and stood against the wall, even though they were already out of the way.

"Thank you, Fawkes," Harry said. The bird circled once, nearly colliding with Harry, before it vanished, leaving a feather fluttering downward. Harry caught it out of the air.

"When you said to send die Phoenix, I didn't belief you," Penelope said. "Fortunately, Frina did ."

Harry held out the feather to her. She accepted it hesitantly. "That is a very rare thing."

"Have it anyway," Harry insisted, teasing. "Fawkes has more, I'm sure."

Hermione sat before the potion, stirred and examined it. "Maybe I'll skip breakfast and finish this up. Then it can brew until evening." She reached for the pollen and added a dusting to the bubbling surface.

"I will stay and help," Frina said, sitting beside her.

"Did you make enough for Opus and I?" Ron asked.

Hermione added more beetle wings and stirred slowly. "Enough for one of you, but let me try it tonight first since we aren't certain this is going to get us anywhere."

"Actually, we are sure," Harry said.

She looked way up at him from her low position. "We are?"

Harry nodded, then added a wink.

Hermione clapped her Arithmancy book closed and stashed it in her bookbag as they all sat studying late in the common room that evening. "We have a fruit basket, torches . . . everything hopefully. Just have to go take my potion."

"I will take it as well, if you wish," Frina suggested.

"I didn't make enough for all four of us. You gave Opus his bottle, right?" she asked Ron.

He nodded, not lifting his gaze from his History textbook. She did not bother him further, presumably since he was actually working through the N.E.W.T. revision tables she had drawn up for him. He had not even noticed that Crookshanks was curled up around his feet, asleep.

Eventually they all headed up to bed after stretching out the kinks from sitting too long.

Harry was sound asleep when a commotion woke him. Frightened voices sounded from beyond the drapes of his bed. "This one," someone said and the drapes parted, letting in flickering torch light.

"Harry!" Penelope's voice called. Frina was rousing Ron, Harry noticed, as he put on his glasses and squinted at the next bed. "Hermione is sick. Come, please!" Penelope said, desperately grasping his pyjama-covered wrist.

Harry stumbled out of the room, just grabbing his dressing gown from the corner bedpost. "Did you call Madam Pomfrey?" he asked. Ron, who awoke faster at the news, stomped down the staircase ahead of him, and turned to head up the other which instantly turned to a slide.

"Parvati went to get Professor Sinistra," Frina stated calmly as she followed them down. "What is this?" she asked regarding the now nonexistent stairs.

Harry pulled out his wand and Accioed his broom from his trunk. "Ron! Here," he said as he mounted it. Ron gave up on climbing the polished slope and jumped on the back of Harry's broom and barely held on to his shoulder as they zipped up the passageway. At the landing they jumped off and stepped inside.

Hermione was on the floor, Lavender, Ginny and some other house girls were kneeling around her. Harry and Ron moved in beside. Hermione was clutching the edge of a long piece of torn bed drape and muttering something. She had apparently been sick as soiled damp rags were piled to the side.

"Hermione?" Ron prompted, shaking her.

"Ginny," Harry said, "Please go down to the Slytherin dungeon and make sure Opus is all right."

"What?" she blurted, disbelievingly.

Ron was lifting Hermione off the floor, trying to get her to release the drape from the death grip she had on it.

"He took the same potion," Harry explained. Ginny looked at him in shock, he assumed at the notion of the Slytherin dungeon at night. "Take Neville with you, or Dean," he suggested smartly when she stood reluctantly. Finally, still wide-eyed at the suggestion, she departed. He turned back to Hermione. She was completely nonsensical and Ron was trying to get through to her with verbal reassurances. "Just a second," Harry said to quiet him.

" . . . trapped, so dark, so alone . . . help, help," she muttered almost imperceptibly.

"Just take her to the hospital wing, I think," Harry said firmly to Ron, who appeared to pull himself together at having instructions to follow. Harry stood with Ron as he hefted the much smaller Hermione into his arms, her long hair tangling around her face.

"Hospital wing, yes," Ron muttered in a similar way to Hermione. "Pomfrey will know what to do."

Sinistra came in as they reached the dormitory door. "What are you doing in here?" she asked the boys, very surprised to see them.

"Herme's sick," Ron explained, voice breaking.

"Oh, dear. Well, come along then." She ushered them down the stairs and across the common room, opening the portrait with a wave before they arrived so they didn't have to slow down.

In the hospital wing Ron gently put her down on the last bed. She spasmed strangely and muttered something about darkness and fear again. Harry had never seen such a tragic look on Ron's face as he reached out to pull her hair aside; it made him very sorry he had mentioned anything about dreaming. Pomfrey shooed them aside brusquely. Ron grudgingly stepped back just a half step and moved back close as soon as the hospital witch shuffled around to the other side.

Ginny and Dean came in as they watched Pomfrey work. "Opus is fine, said he hadn't had any troubles at all even though he took the potion hours ago, just before sleeping," Ginny supplied.

Harry's brow furrowed as he took that in. Penelope's worried gaze caught his own, which was not reassuring. Hermione's mutterings replayed in Harry's mind. "What if?" he started to say. He stepped closer to Penelope and Frina. "I have an idea," he said, leading them away from the group around the bed. Quietly, he said, "What if she is dreaming someone else's wombat?"

"All of you: scram, scram," Pomfrey finally ordered, prompted by Ron and Ginny hovering directly in the way. Reluctantly they moved completely aside. Harry gestured adamantly for them to follow.

"I have an idea," he repeated. On the way to the attic, he explained what he was thinking.

"You think it's Malfoy and Parkinson's wombat she's dreaming of?" Ron asked, aghast.

"One way to find out," Harry said. He strode purposefully to the last crate on the end and ran through the un-spelling of it. It didn't open. He knelt hurriedly beside it. "Is there something to pry with?"

Frina transformed a stray pine crate slat into metal and handed it to him. "Thanks," Harry said. He inserted the end under the edge of the cover and pried hard because the adrenaline in his blood would not have allowed for less. The cover popped open easily, knocking him over, off-balance.

Flailing and screeching filled Harry's vision and ears. He managed to throw an arm over his eyes as needle-like claws descended on his face. Pain spiked along Harry's arm as he threw himself aside, trying to escape the blue and black, madly flapping thing that had latched onto his arm. The others around him were shouting.

Something web-like shot at Harry and the creature was gone, trapped in white netting that tangled its membranous wings up in odd directions. It hit the floor and skidding to the center of the attic where Penelope crouched with her wand out. Harry rolled over, clutching his arm which blossomed with streaks of pain. Blood soaked his pyjama sleeve where he pressed it tight to dull the searing.

"The hell," Ron muttered, stepping over to the trapped thing. It screeched at him and tried to hop away, on four feet, Harry noticed. Frina handed Harry a clean rag from the supplies table. He pressed it against the deep cuts on his arm with a wince. The creature had quieted and now moved oddly. On his knees Harry moved closer to it, checking the netting to be sure it was secure. The taut ends of the web pressed into the wood beam of the floor where Penelope held her wand point.

"Thanks," Harry said to her.

"You're welcome," she said, looking pleased and a little embarrassed.

"What's it doing?" Ron asked in disgust.

Harry squinted at it; it appeared to be cleaning its feet and the edges of its wings. It looked a little purplish to Harry now. Its tiny pointed head looked up at him, clearly sniffing him. Harry backed off a little.

"It likes you," Ron teased. "Imagine that."

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"It wants the blood," Frina observed.

Harry, moving slowly because he was stunned by that notion, pulled the rag away from his arm. Dark streaks marred it where his arm still bled freely. The creature strained forward against the webbing with sad, hungry noises. "Can you get me another rag?" Harry asked.

Frina handed Harry another cloth which he traded for the soiled one on his arm. The bloody one he tossed within range of the transformed wombat, which eagerly picked it up with its dexterous front feet and gnawed on the darkest parts of it.

"I think I'm going to be ill," Ron murmured.

"Maybe check the others," Harry suggested. "Don't be surprised to find any normal bats."

The others went about opening the remaining crates. Many teams had turned theirs in already, essentially giving up. Only six in total remained. Ron gave a cry of victory when he opened his. "It's a bat now," he announced proudly.

"See if it will eat any fruit," Harry said tiredly, still watching the netted creature. His arm wasn't throbbing nearly as much as before. He pulled the rag aside to reassess the damage. The streaks had almost stopped bleeding. He blinked at his arm in confusion when one of the streaks disappeared as he was looking at it.

"Wha?" Harry muttered. The others were busy and did not take note. Harry looked up at the creature, watched it gnaw contentedly on the rag in one spot, before shifting to another damper section. Another cut disappeared. "Merlin," Harry said. "Come look at this."

Ron left his bat hanging with an Asian pear clutched in its feet. Frina and Penelope loosely replaced the lids on the crates they had just opened and stepped over as well.

"Your arm does not look so bad," Frina commented.

" Now it doesn't." He reached over and jerked the rag from the creature, which hissed at him as it lost possession. "Watch." Using the cleaner rag, Harry pressed a corner over the deepest of the remaining gashes before holding it out to the creature, which grabbed it up and began gnawing on it eagerly to recover the fresh blood there. "Look," Harry said, indicating his arm. The wound was narrowing and finally vanished.

"Bloody amazing," Ron said.

"It's like the powder of sympathy," Harry observed.

After a few minutes of careful feeding, all of Harry's wounds were healed, including the ones on his face, which Penelope wiped blood from for him. The creature was calm now and nearly riotously violet in color; the kind of color only Tonks would find appealing as hair. It finally dropped the rag and began grooming itself awkwardly through the webbing.

"Now what?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Put it back in its crate?"

"Then let's check on Hermione," Ron said, thinking ahead.

"Go now, Ron. We'll clean up," Harry insisted.

"You'll escort him then?" Ron confirmed with Frina and Penelope using unusual seriousness. At their nods he dashed off.

They put each of the wombats away, including Hermione's and Frina's small sleeping one and Ron's and Opus' now greenish yellow swirled one which had to go into a larger crate. Harry was glad that Ron's grade had just gone up, if nothing else. The strange violet one of Malfoy's, they closed in, still netted, and canceled the webbing spell only after the lid was secure.

"I owe you one for catching that thing," Harry said to Penelope.

She tossed aside the rag she was wiping her hands on. "No. You cannot."

"Let me try, at least," Harry insisted, feeling this point was broadly important. Frina had moved to the other side of the attic, near the stairs where she waited with her head turned downward.

Penelope tilted her head to the side as though maybe accepting that.

"Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Penelope replied eagerly.

Chapter 42.

Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione appeared with a chagrined expression. Ron jumped up and eagerly led her to their part of the table, strongly reminding Harry of his Animagus form.

"Hey, Hermione. How are you feeling?" Harry asked her.

"Not bad." She took her place between Ron and Ginny. "Can't complain about one night of bad dreams, can I? Not with how many you've had." This last she directed at Harry.

"We'll let you complain," Ron insisted. "Won't we?" he confirmed with his friend.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile.

She rolled her eyes in embarrassment and accepted the pumpkin juice Ron handed her solicitously.

Breakfast passed uneventfully. Post arrived, causing some to tease Ginny until she snapped at them, seeming truly tired of it. Most of the students left to get ready for class, but the six of them stayed on because Hermione was eating slowly, clearly lacking appetite.

Snape strode along to their section the table on his way out. "Bit of an exciting night, I hear," he said, eyes darting between them. All Harry could think was his guardian

did not know quite how exciting. "Did you of all people mis-brew a dream-inducing potion, Ms. Granger?" Snape asked, curiously.

"No, sir–worked too well, I think." She glanced from him to the clock. "We should get to class," she said to her friends.

"Did you get enough to eat?" Ron asked in concern.

When she swallowed hard and nodded with a frown, they all stood up. Snape stepped back to give them room. Harry was just considering how exactly to explain to his guardian what had happened when a screech interrupted their departure. The remaining students in the Hall all froze as a something violet, a blurred bullet, dashed around the open door to the Hall and headed straight at Harry.

Everyone moved. Snape had his wand out, but missed with whatever spell he had incanted because the thing dodged it. Ron went up for the block but only got his fingers scratched for his trouble. Harry got a chest full of fuzzy critter that somehow managed to not actually puncture him with its numerous needle-like claws.

Seeing Snape aiming his wand, Harry backed away with his hand up. "It's all right!" he insisted. He carefully plucked the creature off his chest, but it squirmed out of his grip and scrambled up to his shoulder, where it clung hard to his robes. Everyone stared. Snape glared intently, but lowered his wand. Harry sighed and said to him, "Last night was more interesting than you know."

Malfoy charged through the door, wand out and when his eyes found Harry and the creature, he stalked over in pure anger. As he bore down on Harry, Malfoy pulled up short with a glance at the teacher, and forced himself calm. "Pansy thinks you messed with our assignment," he said, voice shaking in anger. Claw scratches marred his cheek, Harry saw.

"It's a long story," Harry said. The creature was actually burying its head in his hair and collar, to hide. Malfoy's face twisted at the sight of this.

"You should take points off Gryffindor for his ruining our assignment," Malfoy demanded of Snape, his face reddening.

"That is for your Care of Magical Creatures professor to decide, Mr. Malfoy."

"We didn't ruin it anyway," Harry said. "Why didn't you finish it yourself? Clearly you were going for this transformation from the beginning," he added, thinking aloud.

Malfoy dropped his arms and backed off warily. His eyes darted between Harry and Snape before he spun on his heel and stalked off. Harry plucked the transformed

wombat off his neck again only to have it insist on climbing his arm to reach his shoulder again. "What am I going to do with this?"

Snape reached for it, only to have its vicious shrieking fill the Hall. He jerked his hand back . . . just in time. "Perhaps go down to Hagrid and ask," he said flatly, brows raised in worry as Harry petted it to calm it down.

"All right if I'm late for class, then?" Harry teased.

"I suppose," Snape sighed with false suffering. "If you can avoid bringing that . . . it would be better."

But Harry could not avoid bringing the creature; Hagrid insisted that it needed to stay with him. When Harry asked for how long, Hagrid had only mumbled something and insisted that it was Harry's fault he was paired with it. It had taken a long time for Harry to explain exactly what had happened the night before. Finally the argument that Malfoy had been leaving it there to suffer, as Hermione had seen in her dream, got him back in Hagrid's good favor so he could leave for Defense class.

As he stepped into class, he gave Snape an apologetic shrug for still having the creature. Everyone turned and stared at him in curiosity, except Malfoy and Parkinson, who sent him daggers with their eyes.

At the end of class Harry's friends gathered around. "How's he doing?" Ron asked.

"She actually, according to Hagrid," Harry said.

"It is cute." Penelope reached out to pet it, but it screeched and viciously tried to nip her.

"I hope all women aren't like that," Harry commented.

"They are," Dean breathed, while Neville nodded sagely along with him. The girls looked insulted as the rest of them laughed.

Harry still had the wombat bat at dinner time, since removing it from his person involved risking losing a finger. Left alone it seemed to have a livable disposition.

"You're goin' to have to name it," Ron commented teasingly.

Harry turned to the creature on his shoulder and peered at it. It raised its head from sniffing the aromas wafting up from the table to look at him as well. Ron tore off a hunk of roast beef and held it up for the beast. "Wah!" Ron shouted and jumped back when it snatched the meat out of his fingers in an eye blink. It proceeded to chew happily upon it.

"She get you?" Harry asked.

Ron reluctantly examined his hand as though expecting the worst. "No," he replied in relief. "Name her Killer, maybe," he said smartly.

"Looking for a name? Are you keeping that?" Ginny asked.

"It's keeping me. I don't seem to have any say," Harry complained.

"How about Fly Paper?" Ginny suggested as the creature crawled down Harry's front to take a closer look at his plate.

Harry lifted the wiry creature back to his shoulder, where she hissed until he handed her another piece of meat.

"Kali," Hermione stated with certainty, "goddess of destruction."

"I like that one," Harry said with a grin and tore off another chunk of the bloodiest part of his roast and set it aside for when "Kali" wanted it.

"Well, I think we may have to manage our grade just from the essay," Hermione said to Frina in an apologetic tone. They were putting their very blue, still small wombat back in its crate. Only two other project crates still on the attic floor had been changed for larger ones.

"I will take the potion if you wish to make more," Frina offered.

"No," Hermione stated in a tone of finality. "It isn't worth it–believe me. Maybe just set an alarm for every two hours and if you think you were dreaming, come up and check." She shrugged, apparently not caring about the grade much anymore.

Ron held up his and Opus' project. It had beard-like fur around its chin in bright green and a yellow swirl on its back.

"You might just keep it out," Harry suggested. His own unintentional second project was asleep, locked in a crate in his dormitory. Hermione had suggested a Quiescent Charm, since it was a gentle one and Kali very small. It had worked, leaving him creature-free for the evening.

"What? Carry it around all day?" Ron asked in disbelief. When Harry and Penelope nodded knowledgeably, he slumped, "Oy."

"We might need to speed it along," Opus said, taking the animal expertly from Ron. It clung to the tall young man willingly.

"Yeah," Ron said carefully, "I think it likes you better. Maybe you can take it tonight?"

Opus grinned. "If you wish. If you clean up, ya? I have that big essay to complete. It takes me longer in English than you, I think."

"No problem," Ron insisted.

Frina and Penelope looked antsy as Opus departed. "Go on," Harry said to them with a grin. With relieved glances they followed Opus out. When everything was put away, they also tromped down the rickety wooden staircase out of the attic.

The three of them strolled down the quiet fourth floor corridor in a relaxed mood. "Your membrane energy was good today, Harry," Hermione said, recalling their earlier advanced D.A. session. She sounded unusually reassuring and encouraging.

"McGonagall's been helping me with it, you know," Harry pointed out.

"Well, but still," she insisted. She started to say more, but stopped.

"What she is trying to say," Ron interjected, "is that you should be able to try your full form. . . . Anytime."

Harry stared straight ahead as they walked. His friends were right, as usual. He let his curiosity war with the unknown of becoming something he did not fully understand and walked in silence.

More excited, Ron said, "Hey, then we can all go for a late-night stroll in the forest, you know. That would be great." Harry looked doubtful, but didn't reply in the face of Ron's enthusiasm. Not long ago he would have relished the idea, perhaps as much, mainly because both Sirius and his dad would have jumped at the chance.

"Why don't we just take 'mione down for a swim in the lake," Harry suggested without seriousness. "You can retrieve her if the giant squid comes along."

"Excellent idea!" Ron said boisterously.

"Oh, please," she said. "Though I could swim in the lake easily, couldn't I?"

"You honestly didn't think of that?" Harry asked in surprise. "What, the big tub in the prefect's bathroom is good enough?" he teased.

"Well . . . yes," she admitted with a major blush.

"Secret's out," Ron teased as he put an arm around her playfully, slowing her pace.

Harry bent over in laughter, since he had only been joking by suggesting it. He took a few steps ahead of them before turning when they did not catch up. He turned slowly because he really expected them to be snogging or something given the delay. Instead he found them still, frozen like mannequins, Ron's arm crooked oddly in the air around Hermione's shoulder.

Harry whipped his wand out of his pocket and spun back around. He waved it around his head and shouted " Bolerum! " just as a blasting curse struck him. It took every ounce of strength to stay upright and in front of his friends as he followed with a Grand Flecture, hoping it would protect the two behind him.

A mummy-like form emerged in the swirls, although the grey things were falling away from it quickly as it struggled. " Gravesco! " Harry incanted with anger. The few clinging grey strands indicated the figure had collapsed suddenly and was trying to move sideways. Panting from the pain of the blasting curse, Harry shifted to keep between the attacker and his friends.

A muffled voice incanted something and Harry put up a Chrysanthemum block, a wide one to protect him and the others. Unfortunately, it did not hold well spread out so thing, so the curse knocked him back and made his body vibrate like a gong. He held onto his wand through it, but just barely. Immediately he returned an Unjackardum, aimed at the few remaining quivering grey strands, just as the Bolerum spell faded out, returning his opponent to invisibility.

A grunt sounded, followed by a ripping sound as the invisibility cloak tore, its weft weakened by the hex. A jagged figure appeared, trying to stand against the extreme weight Harry had cursed it with. Now that his assailant was nearly visible and he could aim carefully, Harry spelled the hardest blasting curse he could produce. His opponent flew backward, skidded on the stone floor and lay still.

Harry spun around to his friends, who still stood like wax figures, apparently untouched. Afraid to try anything to animate them without understanding how they were frozen, Harry staggered over to his opponent. Doubled over and coughing, he fell to his knees beside the supine figure and yanked the visible remains of the cloak aside.

"Malfoy," Harry whispered. The next thing Harry knew, he was flying backward. He hit the pillar between two windows with his back and shoulder as his foot arched behind him and smashed the colored panes of thick glass. His foot caught in the heavy leading of the window as he fell, turning him in the air and making him strike his back hard on the unforgiving floor.

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As he drew a desperate, difficult breath into resisting lungs, he looked up and found Draco Malfoy standing over him, dissolved cloak and dilapidated robe clasped around him, wand aimed steadily. Shadows danced in Harry's mind, one very close.

"When did you become a Death Eater?" Harry gasped, mystified. The pale gaze and wand wavered in surprise. Harry latched desperately onto that advantage. He laughed. "Who do you think inherited Voldemort's power to see his servants?" he asked with as threatening an expression as he could manage.

The wand wavered a moment more as Harry slowly moved his hand to look for his wand beside him. His leg throbbed where it had caught in the window and his trouser leg clung wetly to his skin.

Malfoy's wand stabilized and his confused look receded as anger retook him. "You should die now, I think," he said, "Voldemort inheritor or not."

"I'd go with an Avada Kedavra, if I were you," Harry stated helpfully, preparing himself to launch at the boy's feet if he did so.

"Why?"

"It works so well on me," Harry stated amiably. He had found his wand–he was lying on it. "Go on then," Harry urged as his fingers closed around familiar warm wood.

"You aren't lying," Malfoy said, confused again. It was not a good mode for him; in fact he was looking rather unbalanced now and his eyes vibrated occasionally in his skull.

In one smooth movement Harry brought his wand around and put up a Chrysanthemum block, which was exactly the right thing for the bright, deadly, narrow, cutting curse that flared from Malfoy's wand. The block was strong enough that it expanded and knocked the other's wand away. As Malfoy dived to retrieve it, Harry sat up and waved a chain binding curse at him, collapsing him. He added a second, just for good measure.

Harry tried to catch his breath while he watched for any sign of the curses loosening. He made it to his knees with extreme effort just as running feet approached. Harry glanced half backward, not removing his wand's aim from his fallen opponent. Snape came around the corner, followed close behind by Neville and Dean.

"Harry," Snape exhaled in relief upon taking in the scene. He came up behind Harry and grasped his shoulders. Harry leaned gratefully backward into the support for his dizziness.

"What's with them?" Dean asked of Hermione and Ron.

"Do not touch them!" Snape warned, putting a hand up. "I'll take care of them." He turned back to Harry and squeezed his shoulders. "Draco Malfoy," he breathed. "I would not have believed it."

"I don't," Harry said, eyeing the apparently unconscious figure. "Check him for potions."

"What?" Snape asked, moving to comply. "A Polyjuice?"

"No," Harry said. He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out the Map. With slow, effort-filled movements, he unfolded it. Snape glanced up from his search of Malfoy's clothes to watch Harry activate it. He rolled his eyes at the incantation before returning to his task. "He doesn't need that much help. See," Harry said, holding out the parchment. Snape had found a small bottle in Malfoy's trouser pocket; he held it to the light momentarily before turning to the parchment Harry held out.

Snape stiffened severely. "L. Malfoy?" he breathed and with a quick, jerking motion pulled his wand back out and aimed it at the fallen, chained figure.

Malfoy's grey-blue eyes snapped open in that instant. Breathing heavily in anger, Snape stepped closer to stand fully over the other man. He waved the small bottle over him. "Elixir of Youth, I presume?" he snarled.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Malfoy stated with pure malevolence. His face fell, resigned and disgusted. "Trouble was, I was enjoying my freedom a little too much."

With a start Harry thought of Suze. Suze and all the other little things.

"How long have you been here, Lucius?" Snape demanded.

"Since Easter Holiday," Harry answered. "I've been seeing his shadow, just didn't know it. And it must have been Draco trying to get out of Azkaban, probably a little tired of being there. I'm sure he isn't too happy with you," Harry said the last to Malfoy Senior. "Severus, can you wake them?" he nodded at his still-frozen friends.

Snape gestured fiercely for Neville and Dean to help guard Malfoy as he stepped over to Ron and Hermione. He looked them each over closely before tapping one then the other while saying something rather long and complicated. Ron swooned limp followed by Hermione, although they both immediately struggled to get up. Snape pulled Hermione to her feet first before helping Ron.

"Harry!" they said in alarm and came over.

"Blimey!" Ron muttered, pulling out his wand and standing beside Dean and Neville.

"You all right, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"No," he replied honestly since about six major parts of him were extraordinarily unhappy with him. His throbbing shoulder and his bloody leg were arguing for first place in the battle for most painful.

Snape stepped over to him and pulled him to his feet with an arm over his shoulder. "Pomfrey, now ," he said. Harry gasped but managed to take his own weight.

Malfoy raised his head, the only thing he could have moved. "You disgust me, Severus, you bloody traitor. You should be dead."

Harry pulled his wand out and stalled Snape's retreat as he aimed it at Lucius Malfoy. "Don't you dare threaten him," Harry hissed.

"Don't bother, Harry. Come on," Snape said in a remarkably easy tone.

Harry relented and let himself be led away. McGonagall and the other teachers were coming down the corridor breathlessly. "Oh dear! Harry," she said in deep concern upon seeing him.

Snape tossed his head behind him. "Contact the Aurors. It is Lucius Malfoy, disguised as Draco."

Her eyes spread extraordinarily wide, and she gestured to Flitwick to go back the way they had come.

"Sure you want to walk?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry insisted. He was very tired of being carried and hovered.

As they turned the corner, Hermione and Ron following at Harry's plodding pace, Snape said, "You fared much better this time." He glanced behind them. "Even given that you had to protect your friends."

Through the haze of pain Harry's lips twitched into a smile at the tone of pride he heard. "Could have done better–should have used the chain binding right away," he said as they managed the stairs. He was regretting that mistake more and more as they walked.

Harry was leaning quite heavily on his guardian and Ron by the time they arrived at the hospital wing. The three of them helped him onto a bed and he very relieved to lay back on it.

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said in disbelief as she came beside the bed. "Again?"

Harry closed his eyes and let his exhausted self go.

The waking world returned reluctantly. Harry shifted and felt the distinctive semi-reclined position of a hospital bed. Memory flooded him and his arms jerked with an instinct to take action. A hand brushed the hair off his forehead, sending a bolt like electrical static through his scar and waking him completely.

"It's all right, Harry," Snape said from beside the bed. His gaze looked uncertain, though, when Harry found it with his blurry vision. His guardian held out his glasses which he accepted gratefully. Snape straightened in his chair. "Pomfrey said you may leave when you feel up to it." When Harry squinted at the clock in the dimness, Snape provided, "It is just after three in the morning."

"Maybe not worth waking my dormitory mates," he whispered. Experimentally, he moved his injured leg. It felt bandaged still. He pulled the covers aside to look and found his shin to his foot bound firmly in white cloth bandages.

"You had quite a bit of glass in your leg," Snape stated.

"It felt like it," Harry commented, stretching his shoulders and neck, glad to find only stiffness there. He tossed the covers back and sighed. "Any news?" he asked, thinking that the Aurors must have come and taken Malfoy away.

"The Ministry Aurors do wish to speak with you. They will probably come at lunchtime tomorrow to do so. Also, Minerva is rather pleased that this situation has been straightened out."

"Especially with the party coming up," Harry added, half-teasing.

"I think, more likely," Snape said with forced patience, "that she is happy to not have to worry so much about you . . . and the other students."

Harry grinned before his face fell. "I'm remembering all the things Malfoy has been up to."

"You are not alone in that," Snape stated forcefully. "I did not even suspect. I just assumed he was growing more obnoxious, which did not seem surprising, as well as better skilled at Occlumency. As you suspected, Draco switched places with his father during a visit to the prison over Easter Holiday."

"On Monday?" Harry asked, thinking of Knockturn Alley.

Snape replied, "Sunday, but it was he on Knockturn Alley Monday, according to Malfoy himself. He divulged some of what happened during the Veritaserum treatment they gave him before taking him away."

"Sorry to have missed that," Harry commented. "What about Jugson?"

"A plant, for the Aurors to capture. Put there after Lucius' hiding place was revealed. Lucius fetched him to be caught in his stead when Burke told him it was he who the Aurors were searching for." Snape ended with a wry expression.

Harry froze. "Oh," he muttered.

Snape stood. "You should rest," he said, patting Harry on the arm. "Now that you should be able to do so."

Harry sighed again as he relaxed against the pillow. The door to the wing fell closed. Harry was not very tired, but eventually he fell back into a calm sleep anyway.

Harry's friends came in early the next morning, as he was putting on his shoes. "Morning, Harry," Hermione and Ron greeted cheerfully as they came in the door followed by a troop of others.

"You end up here frequently," Penelope commented.

"Er, yeah," Harry agreed, a bit embarrassed. He shook out his robe prior to slipping it on. As he was straightening his robes around him, he heard an odd sound from behind Ron. "What's that?"

"Ah, well, this thing drove everyone nuts last night, 'til we silencioed it. But 'Mione thought it might really need to get out and see you." He brought the crate containing Kali from behind his back.

"Oh," Harry said, remembering the creature. Its tiny paw reached between the slats and clawed at empty air in his direction. He took the crate and set it on the bed to release it. With an unearthly shriek it clamored up to his shoulder and circled his neck several times. It seemed nearly frantic.

"They're empathetic, I'm pretty sure," Hermione said. "And this one maybe the most because of the blood you gave it."

Harry patted Kali when she finally sat still and mewed piteously.

"Poor thing," Hermione said.

"Poor thing?" Ron echoed in disbelief. "That thing would take off your nose just as well as look at you! Poor thing," he repeated with a scoff.

Harry took his wand from the night stand, momentarily studying the flattened, unpolished edge of it. He was not going to get to Ollivander's until the school year was over, he realized, putting it into his pocket. Kali mewled while sniffing his ear, which tickled. "'S all right," he insisted, patting it again.

The doors opened and Snape strode in, just as Ron was complaining about his empty stomach and how they should be heading down to breakfast. Harry's guardian stepped into their group and looked him over. "You still have that?" he asked in dismay. Kali stretched toward Snape to sniff him.

"I don't have any choice," Harry said easily. "I'm starting to like her," he added.

Ron commented, "We should get her something to eat before she takes someone's hand off."

"What's McGonagall going to say?" Ron asked on the way to class after breakfast, nodding at Kali, who was crouching comfortably on Harry's shoulder.

"Guess we're about to find out," Harry breathed as they stepped through the classroom door.

They took their seats. McGonagall's gaze swept past them, alighting briefly on the creature then away.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said, loud enough to be heard at the front of the room.

A little stiffly, she said, "It is an immature Chimrian, Mr. Potter. I do understand what that means."

Harry, out of the corner of his eye, could see Hermione pull out a quill and quickly jot that down. When McGonagall had gone over to speak with a Hufflepuff who had asked a question, Hermione said, "Guess we don't know everything for that essay yet."

After class, McGonagall stepped over as they packed up their books. "My office, Mr. Potter–the Aurors should be here shortly."

Harry nodded. His friends patted him on the arm as they departed, as though he might be the one in trouble. He waved them off a bit impatiently and followed McGonagall, who asked how he was feeling in a way which made him think she felt

partially responsible. He reassured her as they walked that he was fine and hinted that he was happy to have had the chance to get even.

In her office Harry warmly greeted Tonks and Rogan. Seeing this, the headmistress said, "I will be down in the Great Hall, should you need me." Harry took a seat as the door closed behind her, lifting Kali from his shoulder to his lap.

"You have a new pet?" Rogan asked.

"A class assignment," Harry explained. "Well, someone else's class assignment. It's a long story." He thought some more. "Malfoy's actually."

"Seems to like you," Tonks said, watching Kali snuffle around Harry's hands. "Nice color too," she added, making Harry grinned. She went on, "Well, let's get started. Would have liked to have talked to you last night, but there were too many indignant teachers and hospital witches in the way." Harry tried to imagine that scene and was glad he had been unconscious for it. Tonks rearranged some parchments in front of her. "You really got hammered both incidents, didn't you?"

"Did better the second time," Harry insisted, worried that they might think less of him because of what happened. "Maybe," he hemmed, rethinking the two times.

Tonks sported a silly grin as she said, "Just one Death Eater, Harry," in a disappointed tone. She winked at Rogan, but Harry did not see it.

"I know," Harry admitted, self-recriminating.

"Harry," she said chastisingly. "I'm only teasing."

"Oh."

She dipped her quill in McGonagall's inkwell. "Let's start at the beginning." When Harry hesitated, she prompted, "Harry?"

With sweating palms Harry said, "I lied at the very beginning. I'm sorry."

She froze an instant before setting the loaded quill down on the blotter. With a befuddled expression she said, "Let's go over it first, then write it down after we have it straight." She looked honestly confused.

"It was Malfoy on Knockturn Alley that day, he said so himself," Harry explained.

She rubbed her lips thoughtfully. "And you told us Jugson. Why?"

"I didn't know who it was–I was guessing."

Both of their brows furrowed. Tonks said, "You called us down there, told us you saw one of the remaining Death Eaters."

"I did see one," he insisted. With a frown he added, "Just not the way you think." He rubbed his forehead and eyes, feeling a little unwell at having to confess this. "I was afraid I wouldn't be allowed to be an Auror if the Ministry found out . . . found out I still have visions I inherited from Voldemort." He studied Tonks for a reaction. She did not respond, just considered him closely. "I see his followers as shadows in my dreams," Harry confessed. "And I was a little tired that day and resting my eyes while I was waiting, and suddenly there were two shadows in my mind."

"Two?" she asked sharply.

"Well, yes–Severus and the unknown one."

Her face fell away into an odd stillness. "You see Severus as a shadow, as one of Voldemort's followers?" When Harry nodded, she asked quietly, "Doesn't that bother you?"

"No," Harry replied honestly. "I don't mind somehow." He didn't think he could explain how protective it felt at the house, when he knew the shadow was Snape, when he would come to check on him at night, as no one had ever done before.

She seemed alarmed and doubtful as she considered that, but eventually moved on. "And we know the rest of what happened in Knockturn Alley. What happened here at Hogwarts?"

Harry explained about his sleep becoming disturbed, about the respelling of the tower, the first attack, and Malfoy's change in behavior. He covered the second attack in more detail because he felt he had done better that time and his pride twisted uneasy around the two of them.

Tonks fiddled with the quill as she listened. When Harry finished, she looked over at Rogan. "What do you think? No one has commented on the discrepancy."

"Whitley is the one who would have, and you are right, he didn't," Rogan returned thoughtfully.

Tonks explained, "Whitley was the older gentlemen you met that day in Knockturn Alley. Came out of retirement to help us while we are shorthanded." She flicked the quill over the backs of her fingers. "I would hate to think the Ministry wouldn't trust you, Harry, no matter what. But anything surrounding or even hinting at Voldemort makes them irrationally paranoid." She fell silent.

"Leave the earlier report the way it was," Rogan suggested in a low voice. "They've been strutting about getting Jugson. Skip to the dreams for this interview."

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Harry looked between them and wondered suddenly which of them was in charge.

"I hate to make exceptions," Tonks said as she started to write, the quill scritching loudly on the rough parchment. "It is the kind of thing that let everything get out of control in the first place when Voldemort first returned." She paused and excessively dipped the quill she was using. "But for you, Harry . . . " She glanced up at him with a small smile and kept writing.

Author's Notes:
The Gravesco Spell is an invention of kraeg001 who graciously offered it.
I changed the functionality of the Mauraders Map just slightly to make it more likely Harry would miss Malfoy's different first initial in the crowded Slytherin common room the night of the first attack.

Chapter 43.

Silverd in the Moons Eclipse

Friday evening and the one-year anniversary party arrived. Harry pulled out his dress robes and held them up. They really were not anything special; in fact, they were stained and crumpled, although he could probably work out a spell to tidy them quickly.

"Do you want to borrow my new ones?" Dean asked. "My mum just sent them but she wouldn't mind, I'm sure." At Harry's indecisive glance, Dean quickly pulled them out of his trunk, still in the Muggle cardboard box. They were a beautiful dark maroon with an accent of gold at the collar, cuff and pockets.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

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"I think they'd fit you," Dean said. Ron and Neville stepped in as Dean was holding the robes up to Harry's shoulders for size. "A little broad," his friend said, "but workable."

"New robes, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Dean's offering me his new ones, actually." He turned to Dean. "Do you have something else to wear?"

"I have my old ones, which are just fine."

"Wear those, Harry," Ron said. "You'll look like Godric himself up there."

He would be wearing peach, Harry wanted to joke, but held back since he thought he really shouldn't even hint at what he suspected. "You really don't mind?" Harry asked his friend.

"No, please. Makes a great statement for the house. And since we aren't winning the cup . . . " He shrugged.

The boys passed a pair of Ministry wizards on guard at the end of the corridor as they went down toward to the Great Hall. They nodded them through, but McGonagall waylaid them before they reached the grand stairs. "I think an entrance is in order again, Mr. Potter."

Harry grumbled. "Then it should be all the D.A., Professor."

She hesitated then bowed her head. "Go fetch them from the Hall," she instructed his friends. She gestured for Harry to step into the nearest classroom and closed the door. "Speech all ready?"

"I made a few changes, but yes." He waited for her to ask what changes.

"It is your speech–you may say what you wish," she stated as though reading his thoughts.

A few short minutes later, the D.A. returned, all twenty-one of them, including those who had been kept back from joining in the fight directly. Even a year later, they still looked too young to Harry, and he was glad he had thought of holding them back during the chaos that day; he was certain it was saving him now from deep regrets at the memory of that day.

Trebor, now a Second Year, said upon seeing Harry's expression, "Ron said we should come."

Harry forced his face to relax. "Yes, of course." He added a smile for good measure, which made Trebor look away with a blush.

McGonagall led the way down, and stopped before the large doors, reminding Harry vividly of his first sorting, so long ago. "Mr. Potter, you last," she said with a wink before she pulled open the doors and led them in.

The conversation in the Hall hushed as the students filed in, walking roughly in lines of two along the aisle open in the center of the large round tables. Harry followed last, taking the door from Ron ahead of him and letting it close behind him. The room shuffled to its feet as they passed. It felt more natural this time, Harry found, even when everyone began clapping. At the front the students split off to their tables, leaving Harry and the headmistress alone. She turned him to the filled hall and patted him on the shoulder. The clapping grew louder, punctuated by cheering that sounded Weasley in origin.

The crowd quieted. "Thank you all for coming," McGonagall said to the assembled. As she made more welcoming remarks, Harry looked around the room. The students were allocated to the last rows of tables with the front two rows for various Ministry people, reporters, and near the windows, members of the Order. He gave them a smile which they returned. With a pat on Harry's back, which he hoped wasn't to capture his wandering attention, McGonagall said, "With that, let's eat."

McGonagall led him onto the platform to stand beside Fudge's chair. Harry looked around at the other ministers at the table, giving Obolensky an extra nod.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said graciously.

Harry grinned. "Good to see you too, sir. It's been a while."

"Ah, yes. Well, time is what it is." He sat back and shifted his gaze to Harry's left. Harry turned to McGonagall as well and found her waiting for him.

"Perhaps a few introductions," she said.

They went around the table, starting with Conor Mallory, the Irish Minister of Magic and ending with Juba Oni, Priestess of the tribes of the Niger Bend, whose colorful garb made everyone else at the large table look positively staid. Everyone was in a party mood it seemed, based on their easy-going greetings. The other table on the platform contained yet more ministers and the four Heads of House. Introductions were made there as well, before Harry and the headmistress finally sat down.

Through dinner Harry managed small talk with the various people at the table. In between interruptions from Fudge, that is. Harry was surprised at the deferential attitude they all used with him.

"Mr. Potter, I hear you will be finishing school soon," Ms. Oni intoned formally in a rich accent. "Rumor has it you are becoming an Auror."

"Accepted him already," Fudge cut in proudly, then put a large bite of meat in his mouth.

"I've been accepted for the admittance examinations," Harry clarified in his Best Boy voice.

Oni went on in her deep melodic speech, "You honor us, young man, by continuing your pursuit of those engaged in the darker magicks."

Harry would have shrugged before a different audience, but he felt obliged to rise to their deference. "I, uh, I have just always wanted to be one," he explained soberly.

At a pause Obolensky said with a sly look, "Speaking of rumors, I hearl you haw a family now."

"What is this?" Fudge blurted in surprise, bordering on indignant.

"I'm living with Professor Snape now, sir," Harry said calmly, wondering which rumor had leapt to the minister's mind.

"Oh, well. I see," Fudge hedged before dabbing his mouth with his napkin.

The main meal concluded and the Hall began to hum more loudly with general conversation. McGonagall nudged Harry. "Ready, my boy?"

Harry almost corrected her. "Yes, ma'am."

She stood, which brought the Hall to a hush. "Mr. Potter is going to say a few words to mark the occasion before we enjoy dessert." Harry took that as his cue to join her at the edge of the platform and to his dismay, sporadic clapping actually broke out. McGonagall turned and tapped Harry's throat with her wand before returning to her seat. Harry experimentally cleared his throat–the sound of it rumbled in his ears.

"Thank you all for coming," he started.

"Oy, we've had this marked on our calendar since last year," Fred or George commented from the Weasley table.

"So has the headmistress, I think," Harry rejoined quietly. Many of the assembled chuckled. "It does seem a long time ago, doesn't it?" Harry continued as he scanned the bright faces at the many round tables, all attentively turned to him. "A nice contrast to the preceding year, I think, which is a bit of blur at this point," he added thoughtfully. He remembered the parchment in his pocket and reached for it. As he unfolded it, he said in an apologetic tone, "I actually have something prepared. . . . " He scanned the top of it. "Oh, yeah. Welcome the ministers, it says," he read

out loud with a bit of chagrin. The Hall laughed lightly again. Harry half-turned to his table, then the other beside it, and used a sweep of his arm to take them in. "Welcome honored guests," he said formally. Several of them bowed their heads graciously, nearly all of them smiled in amusement.

Harry turned back to the Hall and glanced at his speech. It didn't seem quite right now but he tried to follow it anyway. He felt much more confident than he had expected to, buoyed perhaps by the general good mood. "Hard to believe it has been a year," he said, which was the next line in the speech.

"Oy, and Voldie hasn't come back yet," one of the twins said loudly. "Think ya got it right this time?"

The crowd shifted nervously while Harry fought a grin. He could see that the Weasley parents looked about to get up to go around the table to where their twins sat. Mrs. Weasley did actually get up. "Good thing I'm not keen on this speech anyway," Harry said. When he saw she had a hold of her son. "Molly, it's all right, really," he insisted.

Mrs. Weasley froze, suddenly the center of attention of a very large room full of people. Harry held up his parchment. "I do address that point later," he said in bit of a suffering tone. Mrs. Weasley slunk back to her chair, sending warning looks at the twins from her seat. "You have to understand," Harry said to everyone. "They are the closest thing to brothers I have. Don't hold it against them. We wouldn't be here now if it weren't for all of them," Harry stated with feeling, more grateful for the chance to say it than he would have thought possible. Most of the redheads bowed them in embarrassment. Harry heard George or Fred defensively say, "See mum."

"There are a lot of people whom, if not for them we wouldn't be here today." He glanced at the Order table, which had the most intent expressions in the room. When he found Lupin's gaze he held it a long moment. "So even though I'm the one up here making this speech, don't think this anniversary has that much to do with me." Harry had wanted to include something to this effect in the written speech, but McGonagall had resisted. There were a few drunken mutterings of denial. He glanced back at McGonagall to see her expression, and found it serene and patient.

Another glance at his parchment and he said, while again taking in those behind him with an arm gesture, "As the presence of all of the assembled magical leaders attests to, this is an important event to mark. It is important to remember that we have to remain vigilant and cooperative when evil emerges. Otherwise we risk failing to overcome it."

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The crowd fell silent or thoughtful, Harry hoped. He took in the head tables again and found Snape's intent gaze. The look startled him and he hesitated as he forgot what came next. Quickly, he ducked his head to his notes, shaking a bit at his own reaction to Snape's intense look of pride. He had no previous notion how much that could affect him.

He found his place with effort, because continuing with the speech meant shedding the warm emotion that had overtaken him. "The hard struggle against Voldemort should have taught us that every last one of us has an important part to play in resisting evil's spread. Something Dumbledore always reminded us of." Harry remembered the many times he was not believed and spoke the next line with feeling. "But especially important is the role of those in power, as their complacency is the most damaging to spreading the truth." Harry fell silent, as did the room. His notes looked like too much more of the same. He raised his eyes. "Fred, George," Harry quipped, "Care to lighten this up a bit?"

The room laughed, relieved. One of the twins said sheepishly, "We, uh, would like ta not be disowned. But thanks for thinking of us."

Harry folded the parchment away. The Hall waited with amazing patience while he thought. Finally, he said, "Maybe we should remember Voldemort for what he did not manage to destroy, since that is obviously what we most hold most dear: our friends and families. We should hold onto the new ties that were forged out of necessity." He resisted turning to Snape. "Then Voldemort will have failed utterly." He scratched his head and said, "I shouldn't be talking off the top of my head. That means it's time for pudding, I think." Initial noises of denial turned to happier ones. "Enjoy the rest of the evening," he concluded before stepping back.

The Weasleys started the clapping, Harry saw, before he turned to McGonagall to have the charm removed from his throat. She gave him a soft smile as he stepped by her and returned to his seat. The clapping at his table faded quickly, fortunately.

Fudge leaned in close and said, "You, uh, wouldn't be considering a career in politics, now would you?"

Harry was sorely tempted to lie and say yes. Only the thought of what the headline in the Prophet might read if he did, kept him in line. "No, sir."

"Ah, well. Doesn't seem your type of thing, really," the man said dismissively. Fresh plates and cutlery appeared, distracting him.

Harry was feeling too good to be bothered by this man. He disregarded him and looked for his friends in the far tables. Ron waved which Harry returned. Ron then gave him a thumbs-up which let him relax about his awkward speech.

Their distance communication ceased as the Hall fell silent and the lights dimmed. The center doors opened and the most enormous cake Harry had ever imagined was wheeled in by Dobby, who pulled it across the floor on wheels by a long wooden handle. Seven layers of luscious frosting and hundreds of sizzling sparklers creaked its way to the front of the Hall.

Dobby bowed and pointed at the cake. A flash and bang! followed and confetti rained down on the room in pink and silver. Harry at first feared that the entire thing had exploded, but it was just the top layer, which now sprouted the burning image of a phoenix. More house-elves appeared and began serving pieces by hand. Dobby took the first and second layers down with a snap of his fingers and carried it to the head table. Another snap and pieces appeared on each plate. With a wink and a bow he returned to assist in cutting up the rest. The glowing phoenix now served as a centerpiece.

"Thank you, Dobby!" Harry shouted over the excited crowd. Dobby turned with an exceptional grin and gave him another bow.

Harry took up a fork and paused. The cake was shifting between colors and he assumed flavors. When it was rich brown, he stuck his fork in it and took a bite. It was deliciously rich chocolate with light fluffy frosting. Halfway through his huge serving of cake, Harry turned to his table mates. They all appeared amused again. He gave Obolensky a questioning glance, since he was most likely to explain.

"We arle all reminded of who you arle, Mr. Potter, by youl voracious cake eating."

Harry narrowed his eyes a bit as he puzzled that. Now that he had stopped eating, the remaining cake chunk was cycling through its flavors again. Distracted by stabbing his fork into the cake while it was bright green made Harry slow in responding.

"You are just a boy," Oni commented in the kind of tone Trelawney used when she pretended to prognosticate.

"Uh, little older than that," he said with a hint of defensiveness.

Oni grinned faintly. "A little." As he thought over a reply, she said, "Do not resist the cake because of us, please."

Harry glanced at his plate. He did wonder what flavor that could be. With a sideways glance at them all, he took a bite. It was sweet lime, strange but good. At least it wasn't spinach or something. They were grinning again, most of them. Harry shook his head and decided he was feeling good enough that he didn't care what they thought, even as important as they all were.

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McGonagall patted Harry's arm when he finally gave up on his dessert. She stood and attracted the Hall's attention. "The fireworks will be starting shortly," she announced. "If everyone can make their way to the lawn. . . ."

The Great Hall began to empty, with people moving in animated groups to the three sets of doors. Those at the head tables stood as well. Obolensky stepped around Fudge, who looked a little food-groggy as he moved away.

"Werly nice speech. Not too long, but the important things said."

This sentiment was repeated by some of the other ministers. Harry chatted amiably with a few of those from the other table until the Hall was nearly empty and McGonagall urged them to move on. They followed her slowly out of the Hall, the Heads of House falling in behind. In the Entrance Hall Harry glanced back at Snape in his flowing emerald dress robes. Snape still fixed him with that intense gaze. Harry slowed and waved the others through the main doors to the outside.

"Severus," Harry said, forestalling Snape's stepping through as well. He turned to Harry with a questioning expression. Harry waited for Sinistra and Flitwick to depart and for the doors to boom closed, locking out the lively crowd sounds. "I, uh . . ." He began but didn't know where to start. He dropped his gaze and thought fiercely about what he wanted to say.

"Everything all right?" Snape asked, eyes flicking down to where Harry still had a hold of his sleeve.

"Yes. Really all right, actually," he said with a grin.

In a low voice Snape commented, "You did very well up there."

Harry tilted his head to the side as that overwhelming feeling returned, bringing a painful grin with it. Before he could reconsider himself out of it, he stepped forward and hugged his guardian, who stiffened in surprise. "Thank you. For everything," Harry said with firm sincerity.

Snape's shoulders fell as he relaxed. He patted Harry's shoulders and said, "You are quite welcome," just a little unsteadily.

Harry tightened his arms momentarily before stepping back, at least as far as Snape's hold on his shoulders would allow. He rested his hands on Snape's arms. Their eyes met an instant before Harry looked away. "Tonight has been easier than I thought it would be."

"You did make it look easy."

"Did I?" Harry asked, running his fingertips nervously over the soft fabric of Snape's sleeve. Something inside of him was straining to be acknowledged, unsettling him.

Snape pulled Harry's chin up to look him in the eye. After a breath he said, "Any parent would be very proud of you right now." A bit drier and with a touch of snideness, he added, "You who refuses to take credit for anything." Harry could not hold back a smile as Snape went on, "On this day, at least, you should be willing to admit that in the end it was you, and only you, who mattered."

Harry started to protest.

"Ah," Snape said sharply to cut him off. "I watched you do it, remember?"

The right-hand main door opened and Obolensky leaned in, saw them and stepped in quickly before pushing the door closed behind him. Harry stepped back and dropped his arms. "I must apologize," the Bulgarian minister said honestly. "Headmistress McGonagall sent me to see what the delay was." His eyes moved between them several times. "I did not mean to interrupt."

"It's all right," Harry said, heading for the doors. "I wasn't thinking about her waiting for us."

"You," Snape stated as he followed. "She is most certainly waiting for you ."

Harry stepped out and down the steps. Overstuffed chairs and couches were arrayed on the lawn for the special guests to sit on. The grounds were full of meandering people and students, all creating a warm din of happy sound.

Snape watched Harry lean over to McGonagall and presumably apologize before taking a seat beside her. As Snape let the door to the castle close, Obolensky put a restraining hand on his arm. The Bulgarian leaned close as the first rockets lit the sky and asked, "Am I seeing how it is he is doing so well?"

Snape shook his head, but didn't explain further. The white streamers erupted into blue and silver flowers high above the lawn. Obolensky had not released him and Snape did not feel like tussling to free himself.

"I am curious," the man said in a low voice, barely audible over the crowd. His tone reminded Snape of Malfoy somehow, perhaps because it was loaded with a challenge while his face showed a friendly smile.

Snape reached down and casually peeled the Bulgarian's fingers from his arm. "What are you curious about?" he asked easily.

Obolensky waited for the booming explosions and echoes of the next set of fireworks to pass before he said, "You werle tormenting Mr. Potter a yearl ago, werle you not?"

"I was pointing out the obvious a year ago," Snape returned levelly. Harry had turned around to look back at them. Snape saw his eyes narrow as he noticed them still standing there. "Is there some point you are trying to get to?" Snape asked the Bulgarian as he nodded to Harry that everything was all right. Harry was resisting though; Snape could feel his questioning whether he should return. As with many things surrounding Potter, Snape felt both dismayed and touched simultaneously by his concern. He sent a firm no to the boy and Harry finally turned around to face the lawn with a quick glance at McGonagall.

"That was interlesting," Obolensky stated with a hint of darkness.

"He is my son now, Minister Obolensky," Snape stated, warming in anger inside his plush robes. "If I wish to teach and practice Legilimency with him, that is my concern. Trust that I taught him Occlusion first; he is free to block me out as he wishes. Now that he is nearly eighteen, he has been doing that quite a lot."

Obolensky grinned an instant before his serious expression returned. "Tlust that I am only concerned for him."

A yellow and red explosion lit the castle and them both. "Do not be." Snape insisted. "His few needs are easily met."

Obolensky gave him a strange look. "I cannot imagine his needs being simple or few. How is that possible?" he challenged.

Snape considered that Dumbledore always regarded the Bulgarian minister highly and imagined that given the past, his honest concern deserved addressing, especially since he was well aware of Snape's own history. He watched the colorful crowd and thought back to the boy he had brought home the previous summer, still dangerously headstrong and independent, but also in total contradiction, emotionally fragile, a veritable minefield of unexpected and unforeseeable weaknesses. Once they emerged though, he had managed to deal with them, one at a time, though some had re-emerged again in altered form. The afterimage of spiraling streamers burned in Snape's retinas as he said, "Perhaps they would not seem simple to anyone else. As difficult as it may be for you to believe, Mr. Potter and I are very similar and have little difficulty understanding one another."

Obolensky looked doubtful at this. "You have been charged with his carle on this notion?"

"By Albus Dumbledore," Snape stated.

"Interesting," he said, sounding like he was honestly trying to accept that.

Dryly, Snape stated, "Albus was always a bit eccentric and his motives rarely clear." He crossed his arms and turned in close to the Bulgarian. In a low tone he said, "But in this, they were clear. Harry required someone who understood what it was like to be marked by the Dark Lord. Marked and punished to do his bidding or suffer his evil whims." Obolensky leaned back slightly, Snape leaned in farther. "He needed someone for whom the Dark Lord's death meant the beginning of life, a total rethinking of who one is. To one who did not understand these things, he would have been a disturbing mystery, a burden even." He backed off from the minister and wishing to end the conversation, said, "Accept it or not."

When Snape turned back to the lawn, he found Harry's eyes on him again. Harry whispered to McGonagall and stood up quickly. Snape clasped his hands behind his back and affected a casual pose. Obolensky looked to still be considering things, and his dark brown eyes tracked Harry's approach thoughtfully. "You called him here?" he whispered.

"By no means," Snape growled back, also in a whisper.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, his eyes studying each of them in turn.

"Just discussing things, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said in a patent politician voice.

Harry clearly did not buy the tone. He looked to Snape instead, clearly hoping for an explanation. "It is no matter, Harry," Snape insisted. He nodded at the couches. "Minerva undoubtedly wishes you to remain with the special guests."

Harry's eyes darted between them. "Don't be long, then," he insisted before retreating.

"He is very loyal to you," the Bulgarian commented.

Quietly, Snape said, "That is not something I taught him." With a nod he stepped away from the minister and headed down the lawn. Harry eagerly made space beside himself on the bright flower print couch.

"What did he want?" Harry asked curiously.

Snape glanced back to see Obolensky joining a group a distance away. "Nothing worth explaining. Quite a set of robes," Snape commented levelly, looking Harry up and down.

"Dean loaned them to me," Harry said.

"That explains the pretentiousness."

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"You think they're pretentious?" Harry asked in disbelief, glancing down at the rich fabric and sparkling cuffs.

"In those colors, they cannot be anything but," Snape opined.

McGonagall patted Harry's arm. "They are lovely robes, Harry," she assured him.

They sat in silence as the fireworks continued. Harry wished he could join his friends now, but thought it expected he would stay with the dignitaries longer. Lupin passed by a few rows away, carrying several mugs of mead. Harry waved at him. His former teacher grinned and veered their way. "Are those spoken for?" Harry asked.

"Not if you're asking," Lupin teased, holding a mug out to him when he reached them.

He still had two. "Can Severus have the other?"

Lupin smiled and shook his head as he gave up another mug. Harry thought Snape looked like he could use one. "You are doing well, Harry," Lupin said after a long swig of mead. "It's very good to see."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Harry complained. "Was I that messed up before?"

McGonagall looked away, apparently wary of replying. Lupin nodded while Snape remained neutral.

"Guess so," Harry said with a sigh.

"All that matters is how you are doing now," Lupin insisted. He held out his mug to toast it with Harry's. When Harry raised his, Lupin said, "To you, Harry," as he clunk ed their mugs together.

Harry's shoulders fell. "I can't take much more of this," he breathed.

McGonagall said, "Drink up, my boy, it will help."

Harry took a big swig, nearly wiped his mouth on his sleeve until he remembered that these were not his robes, wiped his lips with his fingers instead and said, "About this 'boy' thing . . ."

Lupin laughed heartily. Harry glanced up at him and did a double take, as Lupin had his hand out to Snape. "Congratulations, Severus," Lupin said soberly. A tense moment passed before Snape accepted the offered hand. "You should get the lion's share of the credit, I think," he went on.

Snape retrieved his hand and shifted uneasily. "You underestimate Potter's resiliency, Remus."

Harry looked between them, reassessing yet again their apparent view of his change over the last year. "I am sitting right here," he pointed out a little sharply.

"I realize that, Harry," Lupin said apologetically. "Just didn't think I was going to get another chance. I should probably be apologizing to Severus as well as congratulating him."

"That is most certainly unnecessary," Snape stated quietly, eyes straight ahead and distant.

Another tense moment passed. Harry swigged another gulp of mead and insisted, peeved, "Can we drop all discussions of Harry's state of mind for the rest of the evening? Please?"

"If you wish," Snape said.

"You don't realize, Harry," Lupin said, a little tipsy, "how your obvious good health has relieved the wizarding world's collective guilt."

"What?" Harry blurted.

"Ah uh, Remus," McGonagall said to cut him off. "I agree with Harry that the topic should be closed." She conjured another chair, a yellow tulip-patterned one. "Please have a seat and enjoy the rest of the fireworks."

Remus accepted the chair and gave Harry a smile over his shoulder.

Silently, Harry mouthed, "Collective guilt?" at him in question.

Lupin tipped his head to the side and turned away to face the lawn.

"Aye," Harry breathed before leaning back and drinking another swig of mead.

Chapter 44.

More than the Wars of Our Fathers

Harry slept in late the morning after the party. So did most of his dormitory mates, except Neville, who apparently went alone for their usual run. It was Kali who woke Harry by clawing the inside of her crate. It took a long, sleep-hazy minute to determine the source of the little scritch scritch scritch noises. Harry reached under the drapes to unlatch her crate and lift her out. She scrambled over his chest, sniffing his clothes and fingers avidly with her tiny fox-like snout. Rubbing his eyes, Harry reviewed the party from the night before. It had gone all right, he decided. That notion gave him the energy to sit up and get out of bed.

The eyes of his fellow students had gone a little reverent again, he noticed, as he made his way down to the Great Hall with only Kali as an escort on his shoulder. She took her job seriously though, hissing at Parkinson and Wereporridge when Harry passed them on the staircase. Harry tried not to grin too broadly as he patted her head.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said brightly when he reached the Grand Staircase.

He returned her greeting and stepped into the Hall, which was flooded with bright, late-morning light. Hermione and Ron were already deep in conversation over a letter when he sat down.

"Hallo, Harry," Ron said without looking up.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Hermione sat straight and said with a twinkle of excitement in her eye, "I've an offer for an internship at a solicitor's in London. It's a firm run by two Squibs who do work for both Wizards and Muggles. They sound very excited at the prospect of having an actual witch on staff." She looked over the letter again. "I have to find some courses in policy, but this is a good start."

"Sounds like fun," Harry said, thinking it sounded actually a little boring. Ron was silently doubtful as well, but they both hid it when their friend looked up from her letter to smile at them.

Classes were a little slow on Monday, even Defense, as though everyone was still groggy from the mead that many days later. Or maybe it was just the reminder that things weren't quite as critical as they used to be.

"Harry," Snape said as they all stood to leave class when the bell rang. Harry dropped his bag into his chair and waited beside his desk while his friends hovered nearby. Snape approached, giving Harry's companions an impatient gesture as though to brush them off. Ron took the hint, tugging Hermione toward the door by the crook of her arm. "A word, if you have a moment," Snape said.

"Sure," Harry replied. He stood casually beside his chair and waited for the room to empty out.

Snape stepped away to pace and clean up the large marble blocks they had been using to practice anti-cursing charms. Even after they were alone, he was slow in speaking. He hovered a second block into the corner, stacking it on the first. "Minerva mentioned something to me, offhandedly, that made me suspect that she is helping you become an Animagus."

"She is," Harry replied.

Snape's dark eyes came around to him, but Harry could not read what was behind them. "She also implied that you are having difficulty, still." Harry dropped his gaze and thought about a response. Snape strode over in that sudden manner of his and said sternly, "This difficulty stems from where?"

"It's complicated," he hedged.

Snape hesitated, but finally said, "I am . . . concerned that it stems from my earlier rebuking of you."

"I don't . . . maybe," Harry said, when he decided that was feeling truer than expected. He ran his hand over the worn, thickly refinished wood of the chair back

beside him. "Mostly it is just that I don't really understand what I'm supposed to become."

"You don't know what animal it is?"

"I know what it is, kind of." Harry's tone took an annoyed turn. "From an old woodcut in a book Hagrid has."

Snape's brow went from furrowed to raised. "Ah."

Harry ran his hand over his head, tugging on the longer hair at the back.

Snape filled in the silence. "Not something normal then."

"No," Harry replied. "Something bizarre with claws like this . . ." He demonstrated with his fingers. "And long teeth, and too nasty to get a photograph of, apparently." He tried to read what Snape was thinking; he looked to be balancing between amusement and chagrin.

"Hm," Snape muttered, appearing to change tacks.

Quietly, but needing to explain to his guardian, Harry said, "Professor McGonagall thinks I'm uncomfortable with the notion of that much power. She thinks if I can't accept that, I shouldn't be an Auror."

Snape fell more thoughtful and rubbed his brow. Finally, he said, "I think, Harry, that I would find that heartening."

"What do you mean?"

"Until now, acquiring power for you has been a matter of survival. I think now you are realizing that you have the luxury of getting by without it. Great magical power is not something to be acquired without purpose. Power for the sake of itself does tend to corrupt even the least corruptible." He studied Harry while Harry thought that over. Snape interrupted his circular musings by saying, "But I must admit, Harry, that of all the wizards I know, power, even great power, worries me least in your hands."

Harry's jaw worked a moment. "Why?"

"Because you understand being the underling. Perhaps the second major reason Albus left you with your aunt and uncle, if not the first. I am beginning to suspect that he was more often than not thinking farther ahead than the defeat of Voldemort."

Seconds passed where Harry considered that without drawing a breath. When he finally did breathe in deeply, Snape asked, "So, what is your Animagus form?"

A little embarrassed, Harry said, "A Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis."

Snape raised his eyes to the ceiling and lightly sneered, "Somehow, not utterly inappropriate."

"Thanks," Harry said darkly. He moved his hand to his bag, and adjusted the straps for something to do. "It's the difference between an O and an E on the N.E.W.T."

"Minerva thinks you are going to do all right on the examination."

With a light frown Harry hefted his bag. "It's all easy for her–that's why she thinks that."

Snape held up a restraining hand. "There is something else." Harry lowered his bag back down and listened as Snape said, "The Elders of the Wizengamot met this morning to consider Draco Malfoy's situation."

When Snape paused, Harry prompted with a sense of doom, "And?"

"They have scheduled his full hearing for after he finishes school and takes his N.E.W.T.s." Harry made a sound of dismay. "It was argued that an immediate hearing had the potential to seriously limit his future."

Harry grimly considered Snape's words. His face must have given him away because Snape said, "I understand your dismay, because I am equally so. But Minerva cannot override the Wizengamot on this." Snape sighed. "It is less than a month and he is not his father. Yet, anyway," he added darkly.

Harry lifted his bookbag yet again. Flatly, he asked, "If he does something stupid and I put him in the hospital wing, how many points does Gryffindor lose?"

"I expect there will be a line ahead of you. He will be on a very short leash."

Harry felt too mixed up to get furiously angry. "Thanks for warning me. When does he get back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Harry turned for the door. "Can I warn everyone?"

"If you wish."

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Harry stomped into the common room. The portrait hole felt much too small to easily step through, he expected he should be happy about that. Maybe it was just that his bookbag was too heavy, rather than him being too tall. His friends were in the far corner near the windows, chatting amiably. As he dropped his bag beside Ron's, Hermione said, "What's up?" in a concerned way.

"Oh, only that Draco Malfoy is coming back to school tomorrow morning."

"What!?" their corner of the room exploded.

Harry explained what Snape had told him. Ron was incensed but Hermione was more understanding. "It is better in the long run if he's been able to take his N.E.W.T.s. Then at least he can do something useful with himself."

Harry plunked into a nearby chair. "That's an optimistic way to think of it," he criticized as he pulled out his wand, his thumb as usual, finding the flat spot that was starting to wear smooth. Hermione frowned in his direction, but didn't argue further. Harry Accioed Kali's crate down from his dormitory to let her out. She climbed madly over him before settling on his shoulder and hissing at Hermione, apparently for good measure.

"You that angry?" she asked quietly.

"No," Harry insisted. "Just annoyed at you for trying to be right, even for a Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes flickered over Kali expectantly, but the creature remained silent and eventually started grooming itself.

At breakfast Harry fed Kali bacon from his plate. Fatty food seemed to leave her groggy, making it easier to put her away for the day.

"Look who's here," Neville said grimly.

They all turned and watched McGonagall leading Draco in the main doors closest to the Slytherin table. A glance at the head table showed Snape eyeing the boy very darkly. The whole hall had fallen silent and turned to watch him walk to his usual place near Parkinson. He did not seem to appreciate the attention. Harry hated himself for it, but he felt just a tiny bit sorry for him.

As they departed at the end of breakfast, Ron looked like he was considering heading Malfoy off. Harry grabbed his robes and tugged him in the direction of the doors. "It's only a month. Just let it go."

"His dad kicked your arse. Twice."

"His dad," Harry reiterated. "Draco tries anything . . ." He quieted as the blonde boy crossed their path walking quickly to the Grand Staircase, looking like he wished he were invisible. Penelope and Frina both eyed Malfoy suspiciously with deep frowns.

Double potions was quieter than normal as everyone spent more than the usual amount of time eyeing Draco, who concentrated very hard on his brewing and ignored everyone in the room. Greer made her usual rounds and eventually stopped at the Slytherin table.

"You brew exactly the way your father does," she marveled. Harry's table all froze in various positions of pouring, reading, and stirring to turn their attention across the room.

"So?" Draco snapped at her.

"Well, it means your grades would be all the same anyway, does it not?" Greer asked in a forced matter-of-fact manner.

"That's it," Hermione breathed. Her stirring stick twanged as it struck the tabletop when she slammed it flat.

"Hermione," Harry said in a warning tone.

"Uh oh," Penelope said.

"Let her go, I want to see this," Dean said in a darkly curious way.

Harry, thinking of the new points rule McGonagall had informed him of, grinned slightly. "Go on, then," he urged his friend.

"No," she breathed harshly as she hesitated, though she looked a little ill from the effort.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Imagine how much you'll regret later not saying–"

Hermione slapped her hand on the table before she yanked out her wand and waved her potion away. Neville peered into her empty cauldron in amazement. Greer, her attention drawn over by the sudden noise, strode their way. "Problem with your potion, Ms. Granger?"

"No," Hermione replied firmly. "Just a problem with you."

Greer noticed her empty cauldron and put her hands on her hips. "And how many points is your cheekiness worth, dear?"

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"Don't call me that," Hermione threatened as she slid off her stool and stepped purposefully around the bench to face the teacher directly, rocking up on her toes to match her diminutive height. Neville made a small noise of discomfort or fear.

"You get a zero for the day, Ms. Granger," Greer said, leaning over Hermione slightly.

"I don't care; your grades are no more than a useless exercise in stroking your sorry pride anyway."

Everyone stiffened. Greer went a little purple around the edges of her face. "How dare you? Twenty points from Gryffindor."

Hermione swung her arm and balled her fist. Harry for a moment feared she was considering going for her wand, instead she poked the teacher with her finger. Half shouting, she asked, "What have you got against us all? Do you miss Voldemort or something?"

Greer's eyes narrowed to slits. "You, of all people, accuse me of consorting with dark wizards? You who are friends with that?" She pointed at Harry.

Hermione actually took a step backward, she was so surprised. "You think Harry is a dark wizard?" she blurted, nearly laughing.

Greer stalked to the other side of their bench, leaning forward in a vain attempt at looking menacing. "I've been watching you, Mr. Potter. Currying favor with those in power. Manipulating the rules to have things your way." Harry actually leaned back from the force of her barely controlled fury. "I know what you are. I know you can speak to the vilest of creatures."

Hermione interrupted her with a snarl. "The only dark wizard we've had in this class was Lucius Malfoy, and you treated him the best of all. You're still treating his son the best of all!"

Swinging to lean over Hermione, Greer sneered, "There has never been a Parselmouth who was not a dark wizard, Ms. Granger, who struts her pretty little over-read self around this school." When Hermione folded her lips into her mouth, Greer prompted viciously, "Am I right, Ms. Bookworm?"

"That doesn't mean anything," Hermione said, although it was too quiet.

"How can that not mean anything?" Greer mocked.

"You're a nutter," Dean said quietly.

"Another twenty points from Gryffindor," Greer stridently said.

Harry suppressed a grin, he couldn't feel bad, because he hadn't said anything about the ongoing change in point allocation. Nevertheless, they did have three weeks of classes to survive. "Hermione," he said gently.

His friend swung on him. "This doesn't bother you?" When he shrugged, she huffed in frustration.

"It isn't worth it," he explained. The whole class was watching, although a few were trying to brew at the same time. Oddly, Malfoy did not look on triumphantly, just exhaustedly. Harry addressed him, "So Draco, am I a dark wizard? You've probably seen more in the last month than everyone else here."

The whole class spun their heads around. Draco hesitated, tilted his head to the side, then glanced at the ceiling in a fidgety way that reminded Harry very strongly of Sirius. "No. Hardly," he finally scoffed. "Mr. Everybody-Loves-Me cannot possibly be a dark wizard." When Greer narrowed her eyes at him, he added. "You'd know already if he were because he's too chicken to take the Dark Lord's place." Draco turned to Harry with a piercing gaze. "Too chicken to control his followers, though I'm sure he could," he added quietly in a knowing tone.

The room had fallen silent and no one worked on their potion while they waited for Harry's response. Harry said, "I inherited more from Voldemort than anyone could want, but not that much." The room shifted uneasily, reminding him that he could unsettle his fellow students back to the way they used to treat him, which he really did not want.

Draco smiled crookedly, glancing around the room to check the effect of his words. "I think have it and you're just scared of it."

Harry forced his shoulders to relax and his face to neutral. "It had to work out that I was part of him," Harry said calmly. "Otherwise I couldn't have destroyed Voldemort and he would still be here. You wouldn't want that, would you, Draco?"

Draco laughed lightly, though it sounded forced. "No, of course not."

The room relaxed some with some glances of consternation at Harry. A few people returned to their notes for the potion. Greer clicked her wooden heels hard on the stone floor as she strode away from them. "Claim what you will, Mr. Potter," she insinuated darkly.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his copy of the potion instructions. Hermione grudgingly returned to her seat. As the legs of her stool shifted loudly on the stone floor, Greer turned and said, "And fifty points for your abominable behavior, Ms. Granger. And a week's detention."

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Hermione seemed to not hear this as she opened her textbook to the next chapter and began taking notes. A minute later, she said, "Ron is going to kill me."

"No he won't," Harry replied easily. He gave her a flash of a knowing grin which left her puzzled.

At lunch they met Ron and Ginny in the Entrance Hall. Harry leaned over to Hermione and said, "Don't say anything."

"About what?" she whispered back.

"Anything. You'll see."

"Hey," Ron said in cheerful greeting. "Potions must not have been so bad today."

Hermione opened her mouth, but then forcibly closed it again. She glanced at the scoring gems, puzzled. "Guess it did go okay," she agreed. As Penelope and Frina arrived along with Neville, she shot Harry a look of confusion.

"I told you he wouldn't mind," Harry teased her as they walked in the Great Hall.

"So what is going on?" she asked in a whisper.

"My undo evil influence with those in charge," Harry said with a wide grin. Leaning into her ear, he explained, "McGonagall is reversing every point assignment she does."

Hermione's mouth fell open and Ron said, "What?" from across the table.

"Nothing." She waved him off and fell thoughtful. "Good thing you didn't say anything sooner," she said quietly. "Goodness, is that tempting."

No one else noticed the slight gain from the bottom Gryffindor had managed that morning. Harry watched his friend's face as it went more thoughtful and strategic as lunch progressed.

Harry, sleeping well and feeling more fit than he ever had, was looking forward to his last ever Quidditch match. He listened with only half an ear to Ron's pep talk before they flew out. The day was trying to be sunny, though at the moment the clouds were winning, but at least it was warm. Harry circled, eyeing Roody, the opposing Seeker. The black boy was considering him as well, but with a look of resignation. Harry wished he would just be determined and not look like Harry had beaten him already.

Ron gave them a thumbs-up as the crate of balls was opened. "Clean game–don't really need to tell you that," Harry heard Hooch say before the Snitch zipped free and he stopped following anything else. Roody watched it zigzag away as well and their eyes almost met, except Roody dropped his to stare at his broom handle.

The whistle sounded. Harry headed in the direction the Snitch had gone and began circling. Roody came up beside and paced him, dark eyes scanning all around them. Harry decided he better not underestimate him, even as defeated as he appeared, especially since he had been given the tricky task of stalling the game's conclusion as long as he could without actually losing the Snitch.

Meanwhile, Ginny, Hickory, and Quinn were playing harder than Harry had ever seen them, flying repeatedly and heedlessly at the goals; so much so that the Ravenclaw Beaters seemed hard-pressed to aim. The new plays helped Harry as well, because they distracted Roody as the score marched upward. At forty to zero Harry spotted the Snitch, or he thought he did out of the corner of his eye, even heard the crowd murmuring in that direction, but he pretended he didn't. Instead, he lazily changed course to circle the other way and Roody distractedly followed.

Harry, when Roody looked his way, took care to appear intent on his Snitch searching. At sixty to ten, which would be enough points, along with the one hundred-fifty for the Snitch, to get them out of last place for the cup, Roody turned suddenly. Instinctively, Harry followed, kicking his broom to top speed and aiming to cut the other Seeker off. The Snitch was feeling generous toward Ravenclaw though and dodged in Roody's favor. Harry veered sharply to try to get between the other Seeker and the golden ball. Roody had his hand out, straining, following the Snitch in a wide arc, slowly gaining on it with a painfully hopeful expression. But Harry had a better broom and at top speed he just managed a body block in time to jar Roody's arm off course.

The whistle blew. Harry braked his broom sharply and turned to see Madame Hooch signally a foul. At first he was certain it could not possibly be for him. Ron zipped over to argue with her, expressing disbelief. "Blatching, Mr. Weasley. I said a clean game. Free shot, Ravenclaw."

As they waited, Ginny steered over to Harry. "Tsk, tsk," she teased. Roody circled away, rubbing his upper arm and looking glum and frustrated.

"How many points does Ron want?" Harry asked her, feeling a little dark. Ron rushed up to defend the goals for the penalty throw.

She scoffed. "How far behind Slytherin are we?"

"Three hundred twenty, or something."

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"Well?"

"I can't avoid the Snitch that long," Harry pointed out as Ardent tossed the Quaffle at the left post after a successful feint to the right, making the score sixty to twenty. "Well, dragging out my last ever game isn't the worst way to spend an afternoon," he muttered and steered his broom around to find the opposing Seeker.

Roody began avoiding Harry, which only made sense when one considered it. Fortunately, in working to avoid Harry, he did less looking around for the Snitch, so again when Harry spotted it, Roody failed to. And when Harry changed course languidly toward it, Roody went the other way as Harry had hoped.

At hundred to thirty the crowd was even getting restless and the Slytherins were revitalizing some old songs that had fallen out of favor.

Gryffindors 'r's dumb as an ox

Can't fly their way out of a box

Their Chasers are facing a Bludgering macing

Their Seeker is meeker than toads in a beaker

Roody came alongside then, much closer than before. "You are being meek, aren't you?"

Harry sighed as they circled. "I'm trying to delay catching the Snitch. We need the points."

"That's sorry," Roody complained. "Just play the game."

"I wouldn't mind, but it means a lot to my house. You won it last year," he pointed out at Roody's rolling his eyes.

"I thought I was just lucky that you hadn't come up with it yet, that you didn't just take it away when you blocked me. I was so close."

"You were," Harry agreed. He slowed and turned his head to listen to a chant starting in the Slytherin section. It was only being carried on by a handful of voices, he was heartened to hear.

Potter's a rotter

Kissed a hag's daughter

Slept with eels, slugs, snakes and an otter

so did his mater

Roody cocked his head as well, brow furrowing as he listened to the repeat, which was more coherent. "Whoa, what is Professor Snape going to say to that?" he asked.

Harry shrugged but couldn't help grinning. He didn't get a chance to see what his guardian's reaction might be because the Snitch chose that moment to zip between them where they hovered. Both of them looked at each other and gave chase. As they swerved and bumped, Roody grunted, "Make me look good for my parents, that's all I ask."

The Snitch remained at its most elusive as they followed it across the pitch. Harry got a fleeting sense of the crowd rising up. The Snitch passed through the Gryffindor goal area and they each diverted in different directions to avoid the foul. Harry had guessed badly where the Snitch would reemerge; it headed almost directly for his opponent. Ron shouted something strident at Harry as he cranked his broom up and around the zone, thinking there was no way Roody would fail to catch the Snitch–he was right beside it.

Roody looked up at him bearing down, gave a smile, and took the golden ball out of the air before him. Harry veered right, which was actually up from the world view, to avoid colliding. The crowd groaned as the Ravenclaw stands erupted.

Harry flew over to where Ron hovered in stunned dismay. "I passed it up so many times," Harry said to him. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Ron muttered.

"Trying too hard, I think," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron repeated emptily.

Ginny came alongside. The Ravenclaws were landing and leaping on one another; they looked exceedingly happy with themselves. The Gryffindors watched the celebration a moment before Ginny said, "Well, that game plan didn't quite work."

"Sorry," Harry repeated. "You guys looked great. I should have held up my end." He wanted to point out how uncooperative the Snitch had been, but didn't want to make excuses.

"Yeah," Ron repeated yet again.

Harry frowned as he watched Ron land and walk across the pitch dragging his broom. He followed with the others in silence. At the door to the changing rooms, Harry turned back to the crowd. He could see Roody in the center of the pitch, showing the Snitch off to a couple who were almost certainly his parents. They were all glowing rather radiantly with elation. Harry sighed again and stepped inside.

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They removed their equipment in silence. Harry took off his wrist guards and stowed them in the basket rather than the locker, so they could be cleaned for next year. Feeling heavy and tired, he dropped onto a bench and watched Ron's sad motions as he unstrapped himself.

"I should have ended it sooner," Harry said, breaking the long silence. "I pushed it too far."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny insisted. "We should have had a fixed score to go for so you didn't have to wonder or wait for some kind of signal."

Harry thought that over. "I had him easily–I just guessed wrong when it really mattered."

Ron tossed his stuff toward the basket, missing with most of it, and walked out.

"Don't worry 'bout him," Ginny said. "Big dinner and he'll forget all about it."

Harry chuckled. "I hope so."

At dinner Ron was more amiable, despite staring for a full minute at the paltry pile of red rubies in their hopper before entering the Hall. "We were trying too hard," he agreed, breaking his silence.

Harry, vastly relieved, said, "Doesn't mean it wouldn't have been nice to win."

Frina joined them, jostling Penelope and Darsha. "We joined the wrong house, no?" she said with a smile at the rest of them.

"Sorry," Harry apologized for what may have been the hundredth time. "I was trying to win it all or have a remote chance of winning it all, at least." Roody's annoyance at their strategy was seeming more reasonable now.

"You did not play your best," Penelope said, chastising him.

Harry frowned and thought of the excessively tall cylinder of emeralds. "It would be nice not to lose to Slytherin, though."

"Really?" Hermione prodded, "O honorary Slytherin."

"Heh, that's right," Ron said accusingly with his mouth full.

"It's not the same, believe me," Harry insisted. "There must be something–"

Snape strode over at that moment, hands on hips, looking a bit too pleased. "Well," he began airily. "It wasn't as though Gryffindor was any threat to Slytherin's dominance, but I did expect a better showing from this house, nonetheless."

Ron swallowed a big chunk of his second serving of roast and sounding worryingly like he might be winding up, said, "You know, sir . . ." Ron gestured with his fork. "There are advantages to last place." He smiled. "One just has to be willing to, uh, take advantage of them." He gave their professor a nice smile.

"Oh, dear," Snape muttered before turning to leave.

"What was that?" Harry asked his friend, but Ron just continued to smile.

Exhaustion felt routine as Harry rode the staircase down from the headmistress' office. This endless cycle of revising, classes, D.A., and tutoring had now gone on long enough that he was forgetting what free time felt like. He rubbed his eyes, adjusted his bag, and crossed the gargoyle's path, heard it move back into place before the doorway as he reached the center of the floor.

Another movement behind him caught his attention. Harry turned, feeling for his wand. Draco stepped into the large torch-lit alcove from the shadowy corridor. He stood haughtily with his bookbag slung over one shoulder. "Are you actually getting tutoring? From the headmistress?" he asked snidely.

Harry dropped his hand from his wand pocket when he noticed the other boy wasn't holding his. "What's it to you?" he retorted.

"That's pathetic. If you can't cut it, you should just fail like everyone else would. Why do you deserve special help?" he sneered rudely, disgustedly looking Harry up and down from his taller height.

Harry started to turn away and ignore the other boy. Draco took a hold of Harry's robe and forcefully pulled him back. Harry got an inkling as he disengaged Draco's hand that Azkaban had hardened something about the Slytherin. "You're one to be talking," Harry snarled, finding anger in him still from the memory of his own experience, "Mr. Delayed-Wizengamot-Hearing."

Draco, mouth twisted sourly, said, "I'll still manage better grades than you, without constant babying from the headmistress and a Head of House." He shoved Harry back and used a childish voice to say, "Poor little Potter, we have to help him set up for a nice little future." Harry, knocked off-balance, let his heavy bookbag fall to the floor. Draco was continuing in the same grating baby-tone, "Even the headmistress has to help him with such easy-weasy spells otherwise he might fail his N.E.W.T.s."

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Stung much more than he would have preferred to be, Harry again resisted reaching for his wand.

"What?" Draco obnoxiously asked in a overdone disbelieving tone. "No argument from the hero of wizardry?"

"Bugger off, Malfoy," Harry breathed and leaned down to catch the straps of his bag.

"What? That the best you can do?" Draco asked breathily, sounding much too much like his father.

Harry released the straps of his bag and vaguely heard the sound of it resettling on the stone floor. Something inside himself was hardening as well, channeling fury into determination. Magical energy shifted his robes around him. He recognized it, smiled slightly, and relaxed himself in the way Hermione had repeated so many times: relaxed and thought fancifully of paws, claws and feathers. His view of Draco was twisting oddly, accentuated by the blonde boy stepping back suddenly and falling as he tripped on the hem of his robe.

Harry was above him now, much too far above him. He moved a foot and felt it levered on claws scraping the stones and catching on the mortar. Draco made a noise of fear which sounded almost musical; Harry felt the oddness of ears turning forward to listen. He lifted a hand, but really a brightly colored furry leg with a huge paw. The world tried to ripple downward again; he forced more membrane energy into the spell and Malfoy's terrified expression re-solidified below him.

With care Harry placed hand, or paw, down on Draco's chest. A tightening just there, like stretching his fingers made a row of four black claws appear and press their points into Draco's white shirt. Draco whimpered again. Harry sniffed now, noticing the sharp scents coming off the body below him. Strong sweat, ammonia, and the smell of cooked chicken skin battled for Harry's attention. The last was the most disturbing, as it implied Draco might be edible.

"Help," Draco yelped. Harry noticed his blue eyes were looking off to the side. Pulling himself to his internal sense, Harry stepped awkwardly back, lost his balance, and was utterly startled to find excessive limbs tossing themselves instinctively to the sides to right him. A sharp breeze accompanied this odd motion. Merlin, he had wings! He stepped back again and rested on his haunches since that was easiest and it still left him taller than everything around.

Draco scrambled away, pointing and trying to explain something to another figure. Harry turned his head and found Snape looking up at him, quite a ways up at him,

one brow raised in a considerate expression. "Most impressive, Harry," Snape stated in a droll tone. When Draco moved to stand behind him, Snape asked in a falsely confused voice, "Problem, Mr. Malfoy?"

With a snarl Malfoy retreated, making a wide path around Harry before stepping rapidly down the corridor. Harry felt a little dizzy watching him retreat; he seemed to be seeing too much of both directions of corridor at once. He was ready to return to himself, especially since even Snape with the cacophonous overtones of pungent potion and wet charcoal ink clinging to his robes, also hinted at the scent of chicken. He remembered Hermione's concerned loud instructions to Ginny and relaxed again as he released the energy. The world twisted disturbingly before he could close his eyes on it. His knees hitting the floor jolted him back to himself.

Snape's hand closed around his upper arm and hauled him to his feet.

"You were there all this time?" Harry asked, finding his balance on two oddly round and clumsy, shod feet.

"It did not seem like intervening would do your battered ego any good. Had he pulled his wand, it would have been different." Snape looked him over as Harry brushed off his knees. "Was that the first time you have managed that?"

"Yes," Harry said, heart racing as he thought about it.

"I am certain Minerva would like to see it, in that case."

"Yeah, next session, maybe," Harry said, thinking he would feel silly running back up there now. "Strange really–everything seems a little different: brighter and stronger smelling. And shorter," he added with a grin. Snape handed him his bookbag, which he hefted as they walked. Waving his arms, he said thoughtfully, "I don't know how to manage both arms and wings, though. That's too many limbs."

"There are no athletic requirements as part of the Animagus bonus section of the N.E.W.T." Snape stated reassuringly.

"Good," Harry said happily.

They walked to the staircases where they would split up. After a group of Third Years went by, Harry asked excitedly, "Do you think I can fly?"

Snape hesitated replying as though having an internal struggle with the question. "Hagrid would know, I presume," he finally said.

Harry, thinking now he had been wrong to put such restrictions on Ginny and that he should apologize, said, "I bet I can, at least short distances."

Snape still appeared to be struggling. "Consider that you cannot take your N.E.W.T.s from the hospital wing."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said dismissively before heading along the balcony towards the corridor to the Gryffindor tower. He glanced back once to find that his guardian wore a familiar expression, but only familiar from long ago. Thinking maybe he should not have been so offhanded about things, he almost went back, but Snape was already heading down the staircase.

In the common room Harry leaned over between Ron and Hermione, which was difficult given how close together their heads hung over their assignments. "Guess what?" Harry said. When they both turned curious faces up to him, he said, "I managed my form."

"Harry! That's great!" Hermione exploded. "During your tutoring?"

Most of the common room had turned their way. More quietly, Harry said, "After, when Draco was harassing me. I don't think he'll do that again," he added with a cruel grin.

"Ha!" Ron said. "Well, let's see, come on."

Harry balked, glancing around at the crowded room. "Not here."

His friends quickly put their books aside. "We can go somewhere else like the Room of Requirement," Hermione said eagerly. "Neville," she said across the room, "have a minute?"

"No, but I'm assuming it's something I don't want to miss?"

"I'd say," Ron replied and gave Harry a shove toward the portrait hole.

"How about the lawn?" Harry suggested instead, thinking of trying a running start with some serious flapping.

"Really?" Hermione confirmed. She glanced at her watch. "It's twenty to ten, but why not? Just make it quick."

"And we've already lost the cup," Ron pointed out as they turned down one staircase after another. "Might as well make the most of that."

Hermione's expression made Harry wonder what she had come up with to try and win it despite their firm last place position. She bit her lips as they continued on. Seeing a familiar redhead on another staircase that was shifting from one place to another, Ron shouted, "Ginny, come with us! Harry's going to show us his form."

Many students started following after that. Harry caught up to his tall friend. "I don't need that much of an audience," he complained.

"Why not?" Ron retorted and gave him a big grin.

"Oh, sure, why not," Harry, feeling buoyant, gave in.

The large doors to the outside creaked open, letting in a breath of mild night air. "Beautiful night," Ron opined grandly as they stepped down to the lawn. A knot of students surrounded the three of them as they stopped.

Gesturing with his hands, Harry said, "Clear a path to the lake."

Glancing between each other, they backed up. Ron said, "What are you turning into, a whale?"

"Just give me some room," Harry said, thinking that if he didn't get airborne, the water would be a soft landing. He dropped his arms to his sides and tried to generate the same rippling energy he had managed before. Breaths passed with just a slight movement of his robes.

"Any year now," Parkinson sneered from behind him.

Harry turned and gave her a broad grin. "Thank you, Pansy," he said sincerely. Anger again forged the energy just the right way and the world twisted below him. He hoped he did not always need an insulting Slytherin around to manage this.

Expressions of surprise and fear echoed around him. Again he was not balancing all that well, or perhaps didn't know where the strength was in his limbs, and had to step backward to steady himself. His friends stepped in close before him.

"Wow, Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "Merlin, that's really something."

Harry moved his head around and tried to get used to the wide-angle view he had on the world. Stunned faces loomed in the corners of his vision. He twitched his nose; this many bodies around smelled like the Quidditch changing rooms at the end of a hot season. He tried his wings, bumping a few students aside.

Ginny said with a grin, "Try a flight over the lake where crashing isn't painful. It's not as hard as you think."

Harry leaned forward a bit and found his wings again, which felt like a second set of arms.

"Harry," Hermione said in deep concern and a touch on his leg, "you aren't really ?"

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Harry leaned forward down the lawn to lose the need to step backward when he lost his balance. He was grateful that he could not talk, since it meant he could not bother to argue with her. A few experimental steps forward went pretty well. He leaned more and picked up the pace, learning when he clawed his front foot with his back that he had to change his gait when he began to run. His wings threw themselves out level on their own and his feet felt lighter. A pump of his second arms and he did not touch down on his hands as expected. When he did touch them down it was much too hard, jolting through his shoulders. His back legs came forward to help and he managed to regain his pace.

The lake was approaching. Maybe he should slow to a stop and try again, he thought. A full moon lit the water, transforming the surface into mercury. He flapped harder; this time just as he pushed off with his stronger back legs. His feet did not touch before he flapped again. Cheers followed behind him. He kept flapping, glad to find the motion easy even with his full weight off the ground. His legs felt useless, so he pulled them up as he passed the lake edge. This was how he discovered that they were essential for weight balance. Just over the lake edge, he nearly stalled. Madly throwing his head down and his legs forward, he barely managed to keep flying. He pawed into the lake surface as he regained an acceptable flying speed again. A little altitude would give him some margin for error, he thought, flapping harder, and just slightly lifting his chin. That worked remarkably well, and the sudden easy lift made him try to shout his glee; it came out as a very strange call that echoed off the hills.

He was most of the way over the lake and needed to turn. Not knowing any better, he leaned like he would on a broom. The world slid around neatly, although it took some mad flapping at the end since he had lost too much speed doing it. There seemed to be a lot more people at the edge of the lake now. Harry hoped they had the sense to get out of the way, as he did not have much faith in a landing.

Something caught the corner of Harry's vision. A bird flew along beside him, diving and turning to keep pace. Harry grinned as he recognized the red-tail hawk. When he returned his attention forward, the lake edge and lawn were coming up startlingly fast. Concerned about slowing enough, Harry lifted his head too early and dragged his feet over the water's surface, sending plumes of lake water alongside before his paws found the mucky lake edge and his legs managed to make a running landing.

The students were cheering and Ron actually ran up and hugged him in glee. An otter came up beside him, shook itself before transforming into Hermione, who also put her hands around him as much as possible. Their eager touch took away the uneasiness that still lingered at transforming into something so strange.

Harry glanced up and found the teachers beyond his friends, their expressions unclear in the twilight. He must have tried to speak because something vaguely like "Uh oh" came out of his animal throat, making nearly everyone laugh forcefully. McGonagall stepped forward, followed closely by Greer, who was making comments that implied they should all be tossed out that very night.

McGonagall turned to the Potions professor. "Gertrude, do back off or I may have you make the appropriate point assignments." Greer, clearly confused by this, stepped back warily. Looking up at Harry, the headmistress said, "Looks like you managed, my boy."

Harry shifted his feet, mud was drying on his paws uncomfortably and pebbles were stuck between his toes, or pads he supposed they were. Hagrid stepped over, strangely at eye level. "Well, look a' you." He brushed the feathers on Harry's head back with an affectionate expression, then immediately pulled Harry into a bear hug. Harry put more membrane energy into the spell, afraid that if he transformed back now, he might be crushed.

Hagrid finally released him, sniffling and muttering how proud he was. Harry relaxed and let himself transform back to normal. His friends patted his arms and congratulated him. His hands were coated in mud, so he stood still until Hermione cleaned them with a spell. Her hair was wet from swimming, he noticed in amusement, although her robes were dry.

As they trouped past the teachers toward the main doors, followed by a circling hawk, Harry said to the headmistress, "Just wanted to make sure you didn't miss us, Professor." He then winked at Snape, who stood beside her.

She smiled faintly, still looking serious. "I do appreciate that, Mr. Potter," she stated formally.

When the students were out of earshot, laughing and jostling as they stepped up to the main doors, McGonagall said to Snape, "I'll leave their punishment to you, Severus."

Snape drew himself up, spared a glance at Greer, and asked airily, "Punishment for what?" Greer's eyes popped out slightly as she started to fume. Directly to her, he added, "Having read every one of this school's regulations, I do not know of one that was violated this evening."

Greer put her hands on her hips. "Curfew?" she snarled.

McGonagall interceded, "Ah, yes, well, all houses were represented out here this evening. No point in knocking them all down," she stated easily before turning to

head up the lawn. Greer grumbled as they all walked back at a sedate pace, enjoying the warm evening air. McGonagall finally said in admonishment, "Gertrude, they will be gone soon enough . . . just a few short weeks. Of course, others will take their place, as always happens." She fell thoughtful and turned to Snape. "Although, I do not think they will have equals for quite a while."

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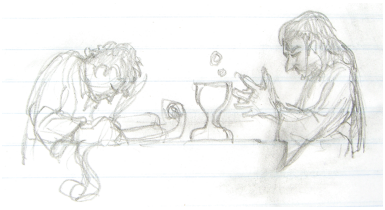

Knock Down the Walls

In the common room it was a long time before everyone quieted down after their little Animagus romp. Harry accepted all of the congratulations and expressions of glee at his animal form. The younger house students began scheming how to become Animagi to find the next Griffin among them, since it was believed that one of them must be and it would be rather nice to have an ongoing mascot for the house. Harry shook his head in amusement as he half-listened to this. He had pulled out his unfinished assignments and was looking them over with a bit of dread; he was rather exhausted, and it was late.

As Harry stared with wavering focus at the parchment before him, the room gradually cleared out. Ron and Neville remained behind although they seemed to be revising rather than working on assignments. Harry was a little touched that they were giving up this much sleep for him. He reviewed his notes and sipped the hot cocoa Ron had fetched from the castle kitchen. Maybe if he just rested his eyes for a few minutes, he thought, then he might be refreshed enough to continue.

"Is he asleep?" Neville asked. Harry's head rested on his crooked arm, which rested in turn on the worn arm of the overstuffed couch. He wasn't moving much at all.

Ron leaned over to take a closer look. Quietly, he said, "Looks like it." With care Ron pulled the parchment out of Harry's loose fingers. "What's he working on?" he muttered. "Oh, Potions essay." He held it out to Neville. "Can you finish it for him? I know a Skiving Note charm that will make your writing look like his."

Neville accepted the long parchment with reluctance. "I don't know . . . "

"You do all right in Potions," Ron insisted.

"I don't get graded as hard as he does." Neville read the half essay in silence for a long minute. "Harry takes these assignments as a personal battle, I don't know if he'd even want me to finish it for him, but I will if you really think I should."

"Maybe not then," said Ron, taking the long curling sheet back again. "What should we do with him? I can't stand to wake him–he's really out."

"I need to get to sleep as well," Neville admitted, glancing at his watch while rubbing one eye. "Think I'll skip running in the morning at this point."

"Well, there's an upside to late-night revising," Ron quipped. He stacked his books together and hefted them under his arm before standing up and considering Harry.

"Should we just leave him?" Neville asked casually, sounding like he was thinking ahead to being asleep himself.

Ron sighed and set his books back on the low table. "You know, he's the only student in this whole bloody school whose dad is also here." He pulled out his wand and thought a moment before casting a silver bird through the floor. Hefting his books again quickly, he muttered tiredly, "Let Snape finish his essay for him–I'm going to bed."

Neville hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, but then followed when Ron held the door open for him.

Harry felt something bump the fabric of his robe at the shoulder. This contrasted strangely with the dream he was having about playing Quidditch in the middle of a blizzard and trying in vain to catch the Snitch while wearing oversized, hand knitted, scarlet mittens.

"Harry," a familiar voice prompted him.

Sitting up sent painful kinks through Harry's neck, so he stretched his head in the other direction and tiredly considered his guardian. "I must have fallen asleep," he murmured, gazing bleary-eyed at the disarrayed and empty common room.

"Apparently," Snape said and held out a stone cup. "Drink this."

Inside the cup thick yellow and white liquids swirled in globs, but didn't mix. Harry sipped it and discovered it didn't taste anything like lemon as expected, but like musty curtains. His head cleared startlingly, so he drank the rest down while holding his nose. "What was that?" he asked as he handed the cup back.

Snape set the empty cup on the table and sat in the chair Ron had been studying in. "Farnsworth's Faffery, also called Slumber in a Jar. Feeling better?"

Harry felt like he had had a full night's sleep. "Much," he replied in amazement, expecting to feel the euphoric effect wearing off at any moment. His wakefulness held firm, however. "Is that potion restricted?" he asked, wishing he had known about it a long time ago.

Snape sat back, relaxed. "No. Nor is it difficult to brew. However, the key ingredient is hard to obtain."

"Which is?"

"Mummy powder."

Harry frowned at that disturbing thought. "Powdered mummy?"

"Powder of a unique fungus that only grows on undisturbed Egyptian mummies," Snape explained in a pedantic tone. Harry forcefully ignored his now churning stomach and turned to his parchments which someone had laid out on the table before him. Snape said, "Have enough energy to finish that now?"

"Yes." Harry picked up his quill and set to work. Snape leaned back in his chair and gazed at his steepled fingers before him. He looked to be settling in until Harry was finished.

Finally, after having to look up the Latin for wormwood, Harry wrote out the last line and held the parchment out before his guardian. Snape, who had until then been sitting in quiet contemplation, accepted it and started reading. Minutes later, he handed it back. "Well done," he said.

Harry rolled it up and put it in his bag. It was only three and he was rather wide-awake. His alternative Potions texts, with the marked pages, sat in a neat row in the bottom of his bookbag. He pulled them out.

Snape's eyes followed him doing this. "All set, Harry?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

Snape hefted his tall frame out of the sagging chair and shook his robes straight. "I shall see you later in the morning then," he said before departing.

Harry again thanked him and leaned back with Potent Potions and Porridges.

Morning light came through the room slowly enough that Harry did not notice it until the glare on the lamp base across from him made his eyes water. Warm orange light also glinted on the uneven glass in the windows on the far side of the room. Harry warmed Ron's unfinished cocoa and continued reading.

Chapter 45

An hour later a voice disturbed his journey through useful moor plants. "You are still awake?" Penelope asked in concern.

Harry shrugged. "You're up early."

"I sometimes wake and cannot return to sleep," she said, adjusting her dressing gown.

To Harry's ear it sounded as though she did not like admitting that. He moved his books out of the way so she could sit on the couch. He looked into the stained mugs before him. "Sorry, I finished all the cocoa."

She grinned. "Dat is all right," she insisted. "Aren't you going to be too tired today?"

"I think I'll be all right," he said easily. She put down her toiletry kit, picked up one of the texts he had already finished, and flipped it open. He watched her do this, his eyes taking in her un-made-up, smooth skin and long lashes. A sleepy scent clung to her, reminding him of the night he spent with Tonks. Without conscious thought, he had leaned closer to her, something he realized only when she turned to him in question. He was busy sorting through the impulses coursing within him and really would not have kissed her, but it didn't matter, because she kissed him.

Harry leaned into her harder and put his arms around her almost desperately. He felt a bit like he had not eaten in a week, as he returned a rather devouring kiss. After a long minute she turned aside out of reach and said, "Maybe not in the common room . . . "

Harry froze, then quickly looked around the empty room. "Yeah, good point," he agreed, swallowing hard. It was much harder to let go of her and sit back than it should have been.

At breakfast Harry found his face heating up a lot, as in, every time he glanced at Penelope. She in turn spent a lot of time staring at her plate with a small grin on her lips. Harry forced himself to listen in to Hermione's and Ginny's conversation about test-taking strategies. The strange antsy excitement in his stomach lingered through the meal though, even when he started to worry about his N.E.W.T.s at the same time.

Harry handed in his Potions assignment with confidence, ignoring Greer's dark look as she accepted it. Malfoy turned in his right behind him. "Get help on that?" Draco asked in a falsely friendly tone.

"Professor always grades them like I do, so it wouldn't matter if I did," stated Harry even though the teacher in question was just feet away. Her eyes narrowed. Adopting

an innocent tone, Harry asked, "Did you get Potion tutoring from Bellatrix while you had the chance?"

The other nearby students turned their way. Hermione, Frina, and Penelope came in at that moment, gossiping happily. Flatly, Draco said, "She isn't any good at Potions. Curses, though . . . " The last had a threatening ring to it.

"I could use some more practice before the N.E.W.T.s," Harry returned. "Let me know when you want to try them out."

"You should be so lucky to get a warning," said Draco in a very quiet voice.

Harry finally got a chance to pull Penelope aside on Sunday evening. They had all been studying in the Great Hall early in the evening but one by one the rest of them had drifted away, Ginny last, saying she had to meet another study group for a project. Free now to look across the table, Harry did so for nearly a minute, wishing there was no one else in the Hall. Thinking fiercely, he wondered where they could go to be alone that was not a broom cupboard.

She finally noticed his attention and looked up with that shy smile. Harry said, just as it popped into his head, "Want to go for a walk in the Rose Garden?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

She glanced down at her textbook and considered it before shutting it and saying, "Sure."

Harry grinned and they both quickly packed up their things and left. They dropped their bags just on the edge of the bailey and walked to the rose archway before the fountain. Harry watched for anyone else who might be around. With relief he decided that the garden was empty and took Penelope's warm hand. Maybe it was the torch light, but her eyes looked a little sadder than he expected to find them when she glanced up at him.

They walked slowly around the roughly circular path. There was a stone alcove with a bench on the far side, Harry knew, so he kept a lookout for it. "Here," he said, when he found it. He pulled out his wand and tapped one of the red roses on the corner of the path to turn it yellow, a signal that that area was occupied.

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"You've been here many times, clearly," Penelope said.

"No," he insisted. "Everyone knows about the rose. Really." He sat down and brushed off her half of the bench. "Really, I've never been here with anyone," he said, worried she would not believe him.

She grinned at him. "I know that," she admitted. "Ginny said you had a girlfriend Cho, who finished school already, but that is all she knows about."

Harry scratched his brow. "It is really hard for us when you girls talk so much."

"I thought she would know."

"Ah," Harry said, feeling the mood slipping away into one of vague annoyance. His eyes had adjusted to the dim moonlight and he could see her grinning mischievously. Clusters of white roses glowed blue behind her.

After a pause she observed, "You never behave as I expect."

"No?" Harry returned, feeling at a loss for conversation as well.

"You are shy vit girls. Well, except Hermione. I would not have expected dat."

"Really?" Harry asked, just to say something. A haloed wisp of cloud was moving over the moon making it appear that the waning disk was sailing through the sky.

"And you are trying to goad Malfoy into a fight."

Harry thought about that one. "Hm," he muttered. "Maybe." Imagining a good duel with Malfoy did fill him with an eager raw anticipation. He pondered that pleasant thought as they sat in silence. Penelope sat back and sighed, seeming relaxed. It was nice just to get away from everyone and be in the quiet, Harry had to admit, for a little while anyway.

When her hand took hold of his, he jumped lightly he was so wrapped up in other, darker thoughts. She leaned closer, making him realize he needed to put his arm around her. Dark thoughts of dueling flittered away when she turned inward for a kiss.

It was getting on to real night, Harry thought much later, although he was reluctant to head back inside. It must be past curfew, he considered, then tossed that thought away. They couldn't give him detention for longer than the two weeks remaining in the school year. Or, maybe Snape could, but Harry suspected he wouldn't. Harry dabbed his lips, which were raw from being wet. Penelope snuggled against him with a sigh, also seeming reluctant to move.

"So you will come visit me in Bern?" she asked, breaking the lengthy silence.

Harry lifted his chin and felt anxious as he realized, somehow for the first time, that shortly she would be returning to somewhere much farther away than England. "I'd like to, when I know my testing schedule. I've never been out of the country."

"No?" she asked in surprise. "You will like Switzerland–the mountains are beautiful."

Too bad it wasn't somewhere near Scotland, he thought wryly. What he said was, "We should head in. We may need a Disillusionment charm to get past Filch. He likes to hang around the doors catching people coming in late." They need not have worried, since Filch was rather occupied elsewhere.

They didn't meet anyone until the Grand Staircase, although in the corridor there was a strange set of green footprints on the floor going the other way. The Grand Staircase had many sloppy footprints on it in blue, yellow, and green. Students were gathered in the Entrance Hall in large clusters talking furiously. Justin, face red, stomped down the staircase, trailing yellow. At the bottom of the stairs he bent to look at the perfectly ordinary bottoms of his shoes and huffed in frustration. He seemed to be in Head Boy mode.

"Has anyone seen the headmistress?" he asked a group of Fifth Years. They shook their heads. Justin gave the Hall an annoyed once-over and caught sight of Harry. "Going out with a bang, eh, Potter?"

"What?" Harry returned, thoroughly confused.

Justin, sounding more fed up than Harry thought he could, said, "You will notice that no Gryffindors are trailing red."

It was true that Harry did not see any red footprints. "What's going on?" he asked. When Justin scoffed and walked away, Harry muttered, "Uh oh."

Malfoy strode passed, coming to a sharp halt when he spotted Harry. "Think you're funny don't you, Potter?" He shoved Harry, leaving a green hand-print on Harry robes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry insisted, examining the stuff on his shirt. It looked like glowing paint, but it didn't smear or look likely to come off.

He headed down to the Great Hall with Penelope following, looking both bemused and amused. Behind him, he could hear Justin bemoan, "Cor! It's on your hands now too?"

Harry spotted Ginny, the Creevey brothers, and Frina sitting and reading, apparently unaffected by goings on. "Where's Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked. "What's happening?"

Ginny gave a great shrug. "Don' know," she breathed, clearly acting. Beside her the Creevey brothers looked innocent, maybe too much so, and across from them Frina flashed him a grin like a cat.

"Ron and Hermione?" Harry prompted again.

"The library," Ginny answered as though it were perfectly normal for them to be there, which it actually had not been lately.

McGonagall strode in just then and the room quieted. She stepped over to Harry, looking very stern. Her eyes flickered down to the green hand-print on his front as she said, "A word, Mr. Potter."

Harry moved to follow her quick departure, glancing back in time to see Ginny looking worried; he shot her an annoyed look in return. In the Entrance Hall they swept by Snape who stood grimly and actually growled lightly at Harry as he followed alongside. He was not trailing green, Harry was very relieved to see. There were many, many trails everywhere along the corridors and the door handles and moulding were spotted with finger-shaped blobs. Near a painting of a bog, were two small fingerprints that caused Harry to wonder if there were a hidden passage there that he didn't know about. He would have to come back later and check.

In the headmistress' office he was ordered to sit, which he did. Harry was beginning to feel a little bothered that they automatically assumed this was his doing, when he actually knew absolutely nothing. He was also feeling a little miffed at his friends because the hadn't said anything, assuming this prank was Ron and Hermione's, but at the moment it was his only defense so he squashed that reaction. "Professor," Harry said evenly, normally, but this was a mistake, as it made her gaze darken.

"A mere two weeks, Mr. Potter. That is all we have left." Professor McGonagall steepled her fingers with fidgety movements as she leaned forward in her chair. Snape stood beside the desk, arms crossed, brow low, eyes flinty. Harry would have considered him dangerously angry in a previous time. McGonagall went on, "Clearly Severus was correct–we were much too lenient on you earlier and you've taken liberties as a result, even with such short a time with in which to do it." She pulled out a file from a pile beside her, making Harry's palms sweat a little. He thought of denying knowing anything, but he had a sense that his delaying the two of them might help his friends cover their tracks, so he sat silent. The green paint substance on his robes had not faded, and he had a panicky feeling it might be permanent, which even he thought would be rather bad.

"Terribly childish of you all," McGonagall commented, but not so much to Harry as to the room. "Couldn't win the cup so you take it out on everyone else."

Harry bit his lip, thinking that she was digging herself a bit of a hole that might be useful later.

She went on, "I am reminded at the end of every year how maturity and age do not go hand-in-hand. Even for those who should have learned some sense of responsibility by now. Especially you," McGonagall added pointedly.

Flatly, letting a little anger show, he asked, "Why do you assume that I had anything to do with this?"

He knew he had caught her unawares, because she straightened suddenly in her chair and gazed at him uncertainly. She glanced at Snape in question before asking outright, "Did you do this, Mr. Potter?"

"No," he replied stiffly, anger churned in him as though looking for an outlet. "And I don't know who did it. Nor do I know what charm or compound this is." He poked at his robes again. When he looked up at his guardian, he had his thoughts un-Occluded. Snape, who had a look of consternation before, dropped his arms in surprise.

"He does not know," Snape said.

"So where have you been these last two hours, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding unconvinced.

Harry re-closed his mind and felt himself flush warmly. "Not any of your concern, really, Professor," he said. "I wasn't planning any pranks at the time."

"It is mine, though," Snape pointed out sternly.

Harry looked away from them both, annoyed at this position he had been forced into. Jaw tight, he said, "I was in the Rose Garden with someone." He was beginning to wish he had been part of the prank, because he was starting to feel maybe the teachers deserved it. He began hoping his friends were planning another, in fact. Standing up, Harry said, sounding hard even to his own ears, "May I go now, Professor?"

"No, Harry, sit down," McGonagall said more gently. Harry did so, slowly. His anger solidified at her new conciliatory mode. She said, "I apologize for falsely accusing you."

Realizing a response was expected, Harry said, "Yes, ma'am," sounding unconvinced and a bit like Draco to his own ears.

She frowned, eyes a little sad. "I am sorry, Harry. The disruption this is going to cause for the last week of classes is enormous and we are a little testy as a result."

She evaluated his closed expression. "Well, I don't suppose there is anything I can say." She sighed. "Haven't seen that temper of yours in rather a long while, though I see it just below the surface now." She frowned at Snape apologetically as well. "Go on then, Harry. Tell your friends that if I can come up with any proof, they will be in serious, serious trouble."

Harry stood up with a quick motion, gave his guardian a dark glance and departed. On the staircase down, he felt anger at Snape as well, maybe because he expected more loyalty from him. Sirius would have defended him whether he knew Harry had been involved or not.

By the time he reached the tower, Harry's anger had shifted, so that when he entered the common room and found his friends whispering and giggling, he gave them a dark frown. Hermione came over to him. "Did you get blamed?" she asked.

"Oh, I would say so," Harry snapped at her. His friends' faces fell worried from gleeful. "Couldn't tell me about it beforehand?" he asked, changing tacks.

"We didn't want you to get into trouble," Hermione explained.

Harry gave her a derisive laugh. "That worked."

"It is pretty funny though," Ron said with a broad grin. "The Slytherins are the only ones who got the hands because of how their door works." He laughed. "We put the Invisible Stoolie Goo on each house's entrance. The Slytherins have to push their door open."

Harry glanced around at the other grinning Gryffindors in the room. Clearly everyone was in the know. "I do have a message from McGonagall. She says that if she can prove it, you will be in serious, serious trouble."

"Only two weeks' worth," Seamus retorted, while beside him, Neville nodded.

"I wouldn't underestimate her. Or the Deputy headmaster," Harry added with meaning.

Ron said, "She can't prove it unless she raids the experimental brewing room at Fred and George's place. They were more than happy to make the Goo in colors for us, and they promise not to sell it for at least a year."

Harry, feeling inordinately tired, waved them off and went up to the dormitory. Kali had only been out once that day and she reached through the cage bars a bit frantically when he entered. He let her out and she scampered and flapped madly around the fortunately empty room. Finally exhausting herself, she dropped onto the bed,

fanning her wings slowly and breathing fast. "I know how you feel," Harry said, lying back to stare at the inside of his drapes. He eventually roused himself to get into his pyjamas and set the alarm for early, since he was feeling wound up and looked forward to a run the next morning.

Bright and early, it was just he and Neville for the run. "Still mad?" Neville asked when they were out of earshot of the castle.

"I don't know," Harry replied. He had brought Kali along this morning, thinking she might like more flying, and she flitted along beside them over the lake, swooping and diving to catch dragonflies in her mouth or feet depending on the size of insect.

"That's an odd pet, Harry," Neville commented when they rounded the path by the train station.

"Hey, when I first met you, you were looking for a lost toad."

"True. My gran remembered that as the best pet, which it was in her day, and insisted that was what my uncle buy me."

They ran in silence until the last leg when they were approaching the castle again. Harry, feeling the need to talk, said breathlessly because of their fast pace, "I think I expected more loyalty from Severus, at least the benefit of the doubt."

"Really?" Neville said immediately, sounding as though that would have been an odd thing to expect.

Harry frowned, feeling not well understood and as though he should drop the topic. A minute later Neville said, "I would think he has a lot of loyalty to Hogwarts, since it protected him for so long." Harry had not thought of that. Neville went on, "It was just a prank, and the paint will fade in two weeks. It was timed to the school year by the Weasley twins."

"Does every Gryffindor know about this?" Harry asked in annoyance as they slowed on the lawn and finally stopped.

Neville swung his arms side to side before bending to stretch his legs. "Pretty much." He looked up. "Someone wants to talk to you, I think."

Harry turned to the castle steps and found Snape standing there, arms crossed, looking as though he had been waiting patiently for a while. "Gee," he muttered, "am I in trouble for morning runs now too?"

"Harry," Neville chastised him. Harry turned back to his roommate in surprise. Neville scratched his head and gave him a wry smile. "No wonder you were running so fast, you must still be miffed. Go on, then."

Chapter 45

Drenched in sweat and relishing the cool breeze off the lawn, Harry walked up to the steps alone. When Harry arrived, Snape said, "A little talk, I think."

Harry would have snapped back at him, could feel his jaw wanting to move even, but Neville's comment made him hold himself in check. They had run fast, he realized by the clock as they stepped through the still empty Entrance Hall.

In Snape's office Harry took a seat and dried his face on the front of his t-shirt while Snape poured him a cup of tea and sat down at his desk. After a long pause he prompted, "Something you need to say?"

Harry set the teacup down without drinking any. His palms were sweating and he had to rub them on his exercise shorts repeatedly to dry them. "I thought you'd be more loyal to me," he said, feeling stung just saying it.

Harry didn't think Snape could have reacted more had Harry actually struck him. With a jerk Snape turned his head away, then stared at the ceiling and rubbed his hand through his hair. "It is more complicated than that."

"Not to me." Harry considered adding that Sirius would not have assumed he was guilty, and even if he knew he were guilty, would have stood by him anyway. But Harry sensed there was a bridge there that, once burned, would be difficult to rebuild. He left it at that.

"The school is a mess," Snape said.

"The school is still standing," Harry pointed out between sips of the good tea. The scent reminded him of too many things. He wondered idly about Candide, but decided it was not the right time to ask. "I'd assume the pranksters are smart enough not to do permanent damage."

"We are hoping that is so, since we have not been able to obliterate it or even render it invisible. It implies that other outside parties are involved."

Harry just shrugged, having no interest in being generous right now.

"This is the kind of trouble I would expect from my own house, especially given that Mr. Nott has returned and he and Mr. Malfoy have resumed their previous close confidence. I had been keeping an eye on them with little thought to potentially more troublesome Gryffindors." After a lengthy pause Snape, while running his knuckles over his chin, conceded, "I perhaps should have taken your side or a neutral position, but I had no imagining that such an elaborate scheme could have occurred without at least your knowledge. I am surprised at your friends."

So am I, Harry thought. He finished his tea and pushed his cup away, eyes fixed on the front of the desk. "Well, it did," Harry stated and wondered idly if his friends had not told him because they had believed he might let something slip to Snape. He shook his head in frustration.

Quietly, Snape said, "This school is important to me, Harry."

Thinking back to Neville's observation, Harry said, "I know." It was, after all, important to Harry as well. After a pause he said, "Something else you wanted?"

"I was hoping . . . that we could reach some kind of understanding," Snape reluctantly stated, as if those words were foreign and required dredging up from somewhere.

"We have," Harry said. "It goes something like, you don't trust me, the school is of primary importance . . ."

"Harry," Snape said to cut him off during his hesitation. "This is best discussed when the school year is over."

"Can I go to Switzerland?" Harry tossed out, interrupting.

Snape blinked as he took that in. "If you wish. I presume you will keep your testing schedule in mind when making plans."

"Yep."

Snape gestured that it was up to Harry. He looked tired, Harry realized, then wondered how much sleep he had managed to get last night. Feeling like he should help a little, Harry said, "If I tell you something, will you not tell McGonagall where you learned it?"

Snape nodded, actually looking regretful.

Harry said, "The paint will go away on its own when the school year is over."

Snape raised a brow and tilted his head in acknowledgment. Harry stood and went to the door but Snape's voice made him pause with his hand on the latch. "Do try to stay out of trouble."

Harry looked back and returned, "Does it earn me anything?"

"You are thinking like a Slytherin," Snape accused him.

"Hm," Harry muttered with a frown before going out.

Chapter 45

During the next day, the other students were annoyed enough with Gryffindor House that Harry felt things were pretty even all around. The school floors were ubiquitously colorful, at least in the centers of the corridors and green hand-prints were on nearly every desk, door, handrail, and the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. Some Slytherins had taken to leaving nasty messages, drawn with just a plain fingertip, on walls and tables. Ironically enough, there was no easy way to remove them or cover them over, though one message on the wall about someone's choice of boyfriend had yellow footprints across it by the next class break. Harry wore an older robe, one without a big green hand-print on it, though it was tight around the shoulders.

As they waited for Snape to arrive for Defense, Harry listened to Hermione whisper to Ron something about maybe it might have been better to have set the cancellation on the Stoolie Goo to something shorter. "Too late," was Ron's reply.

Hermione's face brightened, "Know what . . ." she began in an excited whisper, just as Snape entered. She swallowed whatever she was going to say and took up her quill.

"Well," Snape said, as he spun on his heel on the platform at the front. His patience sounded very short. "I was thinking of another review session today since your examinations are so close, BUT," he added, pacing a bit. "I think, perhaps a workshop on curse neutralization would be more interesting." Harry's friends turned to him in question, requiring that he shrug at them, since he did not know where this was leading. Snape went on. "Let's see, the desks perhaps. Everyone up, push all but . . ." He appeared to count. "You three," he said, pointing at the Durmstrang girls near Harry, "consider yourselves Gryffindor?"

Frina and Penelope nodded after a second's hesitation. Darsha shook her head.

"Smart girl," Snape said. "Over there." He pointed at the wall to the left. "Everyone except the Gryffindors, over on that side."

"Uh oh," Neville muttered.

Everyone leapt up eagerly, their new trails on the floor barely noticeable additions. Malfoy had a rather pleased grin on his face. Snape said, "The rest of you, pull eight desks to the side." He pointed off to the right. They all obeyed in worrisome silence. "Now, off with you." He pointed at Harry and his friends. "For twenty minutes, no more," he commanded them.

Harry and his friends looked at each other before collecting up their books and shuffling out with glances back at their classmates. When the classroom door boomed

closed behind them, Seamus said, "You mentioned something about underestimating the deputy headmaster?"

"Twenty minutes," Hermione reminded them all.

"It'll be practice for the N.E.W.T. Come on," Ron urged. "Cocoa sounds good again." He headed off down the corridor and after a moment they all followed him down toward the kitchens.

Exactly nineteen and a half minutes later they stood before the Defense classroom door again. "Sorry 'bout this," Harry said to Penelope.

She smiled nicely and shrugged. Ron, spotting this, elbowed Harry hard on the arm. "Something you haven't told us?" he asked.

"What?" Harry returned too forcefully. Everyone turned to him then, but fortunately, the door opened.

Snape gestured abruptly for them to enter. Their classmates were sitting along the platform edge looking gleeful. Eight desks sat in the center of the floor, the other's pushed and piled against the left wall. Harry led the way in with some trepidation. He put his bag on the floor by the door as the others were doing behind him.

Back at the front of the room, Snape said, "All of the desks are cursed in different ways. All in a way that we covered, or . . . at least in a way related to something in your reading. You have ten minutes before you must all take a seat."

They all took that in before pulling out their wands and shuffling around to reach a desk. "Can we help each other?" Harry asked, eyeing Penelope looking under and around at the desk beside her.

"Since that will probably be more entertaining, certainly," Snape said. He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow as he took in the scene.

Harry bit his lip and tried to concentrate. How would one curse a desk, he thought to himself. There were too many possibilities. On the far side from him, Neville had removed a sticking curse and gave a shout before moving to sit. "One curse per desk?" Harry quickly asked Snape.

"I did not say that," Snape replied smoothly.

Neville froze, half sitting, and slowly moved away from the desk. He looked a little defeated to hear that. Harry ran through the basic un-cursing charms he knew to no avail. Beside him Hermione was going through a longer list. Harry stopped them all. "Everyone copy Hermione," he said.

They all quieted and Hermione started over. After a long string of incantations four of the desks had two curses removed each and grumbles from the watching students made Harry think they were making good progress. "Anyone have any others?" Harry asked them all.

Neville knew three more counter-curses, which released one more curse. Frina had a few strange suggestions, which, if the desks each had two curses, freed up one more desk. Three minutes remained. Into the game now Harry had them split into groups to each tackle a remaining desk. He, Frina, and Penelope worked on the one that still had two unknown curses on it. As time ticked down, they made no progress on theirs, although Hermione and Ron finished un-cursing one other desk, which Hermione sat in proudly. Ron took a previously un-cursed seat beside her, both raising their hands at their success.

"Time," Snape intoned firmly. "You all should be sitting, I believe."

Everyone shuffled towards a seat, except Penelope who said to Harry, "You shouldn't take that one," indicating the doubly cursed desk.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, blocking her with his arm from sitting down. He pointed at a safe desk off to the side. "Take that one." Ron was standing up to come over, concern in his gaze. Harry, feeling the weight of fate like he hadn't in long while, and refusing to let himself glance at his guardian, sat at the desk. He promptly passed out.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered. "Everyone should be sitting."

Ron looked up from the hunched over, long, grey-haired figure of his friend with an appalled expression.

"It isn't permanent, Mr. Weasley," Snape commented tiredly.

Ron backed off slowly, giving Snape a baleful look. He sat down only because Hermione pulled him down. They looked around for the other cursed desk; Dean was sitting at it., but he shrugged, indicating nothing had happened.

"Well," Snape breathed, stepping down from the platform. "Not as satisfying an exercise as had been hoped. Should have listened to Mr. Malfoy and made it three curses per desk."

"What's wrong with Harry?" Hermione insisted.

"Sleeping curse," Snape replied. When Hermione slapped her hand on her desk in disappointment, he added snidely, "Too obvious, Ms. Granger?" He snapped his

fingers before Harry, who lifted his head groggily before it fell back onto his arms with a thud. "Probably needs the sleep anyway," he quipped. "As well as an aging curse, both will cancel when he is removed from the desk. Mr. Thomas on the other hand will be inflicted all day." Snape said this last with an airy dismissal as he spun back to the front of the classroom.

"Thiw Tahw?" Dean said, then put his hand over his mouth.

"Dean?" Ron prompted in confusion as he slid out of his desk now that Snape's back was turned.

"Oh, a backwards curse," Hermione muttered. "Didn't think of that one either." She got up and followed Ron along with the rest of the students.

Ron lifted Harry up by his collar and examined his aged, sleeping face. "Cor, how old is he?"

The other students were gathering around as well. Snape replied, "About a hundred." He turned and studied Harry as well with a curious look.

Ron dragged his alarming looking friend from the desk and placed him on the floor. Harry's long grey hair shrunk away as did his wrinkles. He rubbed his eyes and looked up at everyone crowded around. "What happened?" he asked sharply

"You were zonked by a sleeping spell," Ron said, giving him a hand up. "Right after you aged a hundred years."

Harry looked doubtful about that before stretching his arms and saying, "That would explain why I'm so creaky."

The room was rearranged to the muttered complaints of the other students, who clearly had hoped for a more interesting show.

After dinner, which was colorful and full of gossip about what Snape had done to them, the Gryffindors trouped up to the solitude of their tower. Penelope took a seat right beside Harry to study. Harry, not used to having someone insist on being so close all the time had to conjure a smile for her. He didn't mind, really, but it did feel odd.

Days later, Harry, feeling knotted up over several things, was walking aimlessly around the darkened castle rather than returning to his revising and his friends. When he

reached the corridor with the Defense classroom, he couldn't fail to notice the light streaming from under the heavy door. He lifted the latch, pushed the door open, and leaned in. Snape stood in the far corner, wand out, facing the darkened windows. He held a book in his open palm near the light from one of the smoking lamps. When his dark gaze came up, he looked pensive and slightly wary.

"Hi," Harry said, stepping inside and re-latching the door. Snape stiffly returned the greeting and continued to stand as he was. Curious, Harry approached.

One-handed, Snape closed the book he held and dropped it to his side. With a shuttered expression, he said, "Something I can do for you?"

Harry shrugged and tried not show his increased curiosity. "I was taking a walk to think. Saw your light," he added, gesturing back at the door. Snape turned and set the book with two others on the table behind him. His slump-shouldered posture reminded Harry of the old Snape just a little too much. "What are you working on?" Harry asked casually, his thoughts beginning to feel disturbingly suspicious rather than just curious.

Snape slowly turned back around, biting his lip. He looked reluctant to answer and Harry assumed he wouldn't. With his gaze focused beyond the far wall, Snape explained, "Something I should have worked out sooner. Especially since I have set myself out to be an exemplary teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"You are," Harry confirmed.

With a wry grin Snape looked down at his wand, running his fingers over it. "I have been relying on your teaching, Harry. In this, anyway." He studied Harry a moment as though looking for something in his gaze. "But it is unacceptable."

"What are we discussing?" Harry asked, concerned by Snape's dark tone.

Snape sighed before replying with yet another frown, "The Patronus charm. It will be tested on the N.E.W.T. and I have not covered it."

"Nearly every Seventh Year knows it already. Those that want to learn it."

"Because of you ."

"And Hermione, Ron, Neville, and others." Harry scoffed. "You make it sound like I taught all of them myself." Snape returned to thoughtfully examining his wand. It still bothered Harry rather a lot that Snape apparently could not produce a Patronus; it implied that he could not think of anything happy enough to. It felt risky to do so, but Harry asked, "Do you want help with it?"

Snape laughed mirthlessly and turned to stare out the darkened window. "It is late– you should be in your dormitory," he said flatly.

Frowning, Harry said, "Is there a Bogart around the castle anywhere?"

"Why?" Snape asked without turning from the window.

"Because, before, one would turn into a Dementor when I faced it. Although that might not be true anymore," he added, thinking about it some more. This made him wonder what a Bogart would turn into for him, now. Maybe he would rather wonder than know for certain.

Snape shifted, rubbed his hair back. "I have a Lethifold. I had not considered actually having something to practice on; it had not seemed feasible." He turned around, fortunately looking less dark and more generally thoughtful. "I will fetch it from my office."

Harry opened the top book on the table, Damageless Defense , the one Snape had been holding when Harry came in. It had a pretty good description of the Patronus, he thought as he scanned it. The sound of something metal scraping on stone made Harry turn. Snape had just placed a small trunk on the floor. It had a row of heavy silver latches all around the lid. Snape looked around the room with his hands on his hips before sliding the trunk into the far corner and backing away from it. With repeated Alohamora spells he released the latches. They both watched a little tensely, but nothing happened.

"Maybe it died," Harry suggested.

"Only fire can kill it: A hot one of dried conifer logs."

They watched the unmoving trunk another minute. Harry glanced at the book again and asked, "How far have you got into this?" Snape didn't reply, but his gaze hardened visibly. Harry wished this were easier, but he was determined now.

Snape took the book and glanced over it as though to stall. He paced away and said, "I can get only vapor, not any sort of form."

"You're almost there, then," Harry said brightly, relieved Snape was doing that well. Falling into D.A. mode, he added, "You just need to think of something a little happier."

Snape did not react to that. Harry pulled out his wand and turned the long way down the room. He cleared his throat, and said, " Expecto Patronum ." Vapor poured from his wand as glowing fog and solidified into a stag, which was nearly blinding so close. The stag started to turn and Harry canceled the spell.

Chapter 45

"What were you thinking of?" Snape asked.

Harry paused, caught off-guard by the question. In the past he had thought of his parents, but now that felt too remote. "I . . . was thinking about the future, I think." It was true, he had not been thinking of anything in particular, just allowing himself to feel a fundamental optimism.

"Hm," Snape muttered and paced once. Harry was jarred from his own musings by Snape's outburst of dismay. He turned and saw what had caused it; the trunk was open and empty, and Snape was pacing the edge of the room with purpose. Harry joined him in searching for the Lethifold under the tables and desks.

As Harry looked under the table at the front, he found himself laughing. "This would be embarrassing to have to explain," he said.

"Most definitely," Snape agreed as he opened the door and checked the corridor before stuffing his robe under the door and spelling it into place. "The only consolation would be that because it involved both of us, Minerva could not simply hire you immediately upon firing me ." Harry laughed again, even though he was uncertain the situation warranted humor. Snape shook out the first curtain on the end, saying, "You need a holiday if you are finding this that amusing."

Harry shook out the curtain nearest him. "I won't deny I need a holiday," he said forcefully.

When Snape shook the next curtain a dark form resembling a discarded cloak fell out of it. He jumped back and aimed his wand at it instinctively before dropping his wand hand, apparently disgusted with his own jumpiness. Harry made a noise of deep relief and stepped over beside his guardian. "Only dangerous if you are asleep," Snape sneered at himself. "I will not deny that I could use a holiday as well."

Harry gestured at the unmoving dark form on the floor. "Think of pouring hope out of your wand . . . that works for me. Give it a go," he urged.

Snape sighed in a defeated way, but he backed up and aimed his wand . . . and just stood there, eyes moving around the floor and the wall. He glanced sharply at Harry, who waited with infinite patience beside the first row of desks. With a frown Snape finally spoke the spell and a vapor curled out of his wand before fading out. Snape dropped his wand hand and rubbed his forehead harder than usual.

Harry crossed his arms and waited in a relaxed pose, not showing any of the distress he felt. "Maybe you are trying too hard?" he suggested. He wanted to turn away, but it felt important to show he had faith in this. Snape drew his lips in and raised his

wand again, perhaps because the Lethifold had shifted ever so slightly, as though an unfelt breeze had ruffled it. With half-closed eyes Snape spoke the incantation again. This time the vapor curled around itself several times and twisted away. Harry at first thought it was drifting and dissipating yet again, but it actually had coalesced into an asp. The viper swam through the air and struck at the Lethifold.

An unearthly squeal somewhere between a swine and sea bird went up as the Patronus struck. Dark cloth and coiling, glowing snake tumbled together along the edge of the wall. The snake struck repeatedly, long teeth flashing as they battled.

Harry shook off his mesmerization. "If you want your Lethifold back you better cancel the spell."

Snape hesitated just an instant before he waved the charm away. He looked a little stunned. Eventually, he exhaled and stated, "An Egyptian cobra."

Harry shrugged, trying to seem like that was an okay Patronus, but he couldn't help grinning. "You did it though."

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance," he said stiffly.

Harry grinned more. The Lethifold lay small and kinked in the corner of the room, completely unmoving. "Need help putting that away?"

"No," Snape assured him. He waved a charm at the crate and pushed it over beside the dark creature with his foot and waved another charm at the trunk. Rushing air sounded and the Lethifold was sucked into the crate. Snape waved the lid shut and latched it all around before picking it up to take it back to his office. At the door Harry tugged the robe clear of the door gap and shook it out before draping it over his arm.

"Ever tried to become an Animagus?" Harry asked.

Snape raised his eyes briefly to the ceiling. "Yes, of course," he replied darkly. He paused to unspell his office door before saying, "Now I truly wish I had managed, given the animal I most likely would be."

Harry draped the robe over the back of the visitor's chair. "One of the deadliest snakes," he said.

"Yes," Snape agreed in a tone that made it seem as though his thoughts were a little far away, or long ago.

Harry frowned. "It's late . . . I better get to the tower."

Snape put the small trunk into a cabinet and locked it. "Good night, Harry," he said.

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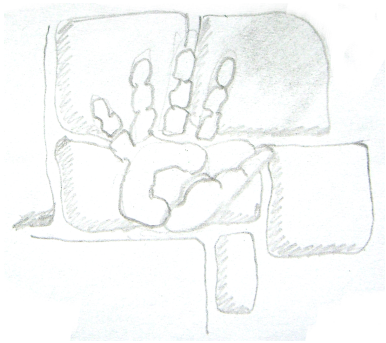

End of an Era

"Okay," Hermione whispered, when they stopped at an empty corner of the second floor corridor. "I have an idea. Ron, you said your brothers could make any color of the Goo?" At Ron's nod, she went on. "We need clear."

"Clear?" Ron confirmed.

"Invisible color." Hermione insisted.

"Oh," Ron said, still trying to cotton on.

"You think that will work?" Harry asked, sort of understanding but also doubtful. He was keeping an eye out; some First Years were wandering in their direction, but slowly.

Hermione said, "The colors when they go on top of each other, completely hide the ones beneath. Well, owl George and ask him to try it and send us some if it works. A LOT of it."

Ron shrugged and said he would ask. Harry felt a little relieved that they had a plan, their fellow students were behaving surly toward them still and it would be good to move on from a prank that had long outlasted its novelty.

A few nights later, Harry crept down the staircases carrying a canister of invisible Goo and a homemade straw brush resembling a miniature broom. He had insisted on being allowed to do the Slytherin door. He had won with the argument that he was the only one for whom getting caught by the Slytherin Head of House would not matter.

A little nervous despite his assertions of confidence to his friends, Harry stopped before the Slytherin common room door and looked both ways. He imagined the conversation he would have with the headmistress should he get caught and had to take a slow breath to relax. Under his invisibility cloak he still had to pay attention, lest someone bump into him. With care, and starting right at the edge of the hidden door, Harry dipped the brush and began painting. The bristles made a lot of noise, grating loudly in the stone corridor. This made Harry realize that it was Greer whom he actually had to worry about down here. Setting down the canister of Goo, Harry wiped his hands well on his pants and pulled out his wand to put a Silencing charm on the brush. He returned to painting the floor, leaving a space for himself to get around it to do the door as well.

Finished with the floor, he considered that he really needed to do the other side of the door since that side got handled more by students pushing it to go out. Frowning, Harry shuffled over against the wall and waited, hoping someone would go in or out on a late-night errand. He should have come sooner to overhear the password, it now occurred to him.

Long minutes ticked away. Harry sighed. He had a lot of time before his friends wondered what happened, since they had said an hour and it had only been half that, at most. Harry was pulling out his pocket watch to check the time when a disgusted voice said, "What now, Potter?"

Startled, Harry jerked his head down the corridor. Draco stood there, arms crossed, sneer firmly in place.

Harry glanced down at himself, wondering if his feet were showing or he had left something on the floor.

Very snidely Draco breathed, "Yes, I can see you, through the cloak."

Harry pulled the cloak off his head. "How?"

"Someone taught me," he breathed haughtily.

Harry considered that. "Not Dumbledore I assume."

Laughing mockingly, Draco confirmed, "No. Not Dumbledore." He looked Harry over. "Not in enough trouble yet that you are out looking for more. Please, I can fetch Professor Greer, if that will help you."

"Reversing trouble, actually," Harry said, holding out the can, inside which sloshed an unseen liquid.

"Thank Merlin," Draco huffed. "What a hag it has been." With a distant expression, he made a hand print on the wall in a small space where there weren't quite as many.

"The floor and the door are done," Harry said, feeling gracious since this was Draco's territory. "Give it a try."

Haughtily, Draco asked,"Why is the floor still green with a thousand miserable footprints?"

"It doesn't work like that. Someone has to touch it and then something else." Harry gestured for him to walk over the floor then moved to remain facing Draco, hand not far from his wand pocket, although Draco seemed too self-absorbed to start anything.

Draco stepped briskly to the door and put his hands flat upon it before going back to the wall and obliterating his previous mark. "That's an improvement, I'll admit," he murmured.

"Open the door so I can do the inside of it," Harry suggested.

Draco sauntered back to the door. "Shooting star," he said and the door cracked open. He stepped back for Harry to open it. Harry, who didn't want to turn his back on Draco, gestured in return for him to open it. Draco scoffed condescendingly. "I don't even have my wand at the moment."

Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion at that. "Why not?"

"I loaned it to someone–not that it is any of your business."

Harry gave him a doubtful look but reached to pull on the crack at the edge of the door. He glanced inside to make sure the room was empty before shuffling in to paint. As he worked, Draco stood aside, arms crossed, looking like an overseer. "So," Harry said conversationally. "I'm curious to know if you really changed places with your dad willingly." When no reply was forthcoming, he turned to the other boy.

"I don't think you'd understand, Potter," Draco said flatly. He shifted against the doorjamb to lean on it harder. "Or maybe you would. Father is certain you have Professor Snape under an Imperius curse, though he can't figure why you would bother. I, of course, know better. You missed a spot," he said, pointing at the lower corner.

Harry frowned at him, but then crouched to paint the lower part of the door with a crooked grin. "Sorry, forgot you Slytherins crawl out the door on occasion. You didn't answer the question."

In a less confident voice Draco said, "He insisted. Not that it is anything to you." His shoulder twitched then and with a huff he stalked inside. "He's my father . . . even though he did end up on the losing side." Draco spun back and in a more angry voice, said, "You won, Potter. You destroyed my father's Master. The Ministry took our fortune. You took my mentor. What else do you want?"

"Just to be left alone, I suppose," Harry said, dropping the brush into the canister and rolling up his invisibility cloak, careful to keep it clear of the Goo since he was unsure what would happen if it got some on it.

Draco laughed. "Well, that's something you'll never have, Mr. Hero." He gave Harry a sadistic smile. A door opened on the far side of the common room and Nott stepped out, holding out a wand. He stashed it away quickly upon seeing Harry there.

Harry glanced between the two of them, but their faces both had gone flat. "Going to pass your tests after this little time?" Harry asked Nott.

Nott just shrugged uncaringly, so with a sigh, Harry stepped backward, pulling the door with him to close it.

"Watch your back, Potter," Draco said suggestively before it shut completely.

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically.

The next morning, excited conversation filled the Entrance Hall as everyone marveled at their newfound powers to remove all of the colored paint everywhere. Some of the younger students where shuffling around the hall obliterating swathes of color, then leaping to get the last few stray spots.

"Well, that worked bloody well," Ron said in a tired voice. He patted Hermione's shoulder and led the way down the Grand Staircase.

At the end of the week, during Potions, Harry wondered what else his House had cooked up. Hermione, after scratching something madly in the margin of her notes that looked like arithmetic, pulled her wand into her sleeve and thoughtfully considered the bench to their right and one row ahead. Harry stirred his cauldron and observed her. Justin, Cory and the other Hufflepuffs at the table in question were busy brewing and paying little attention to anything else since the assigned potion, Ulgants salve, was the hardest they had ever been assigned.

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Carefully watching his cauldron for the subtle fizzing indicated in the instructions, Harry spared little attention for his friend, until she whispered a spell. A moment later a very stressed Cory blurted, "Bloody hell," when his potion turned black.

"Mr. Corkrin," Greer snapped at him. "I'll not have that language in my classroom. Five points from Hufflepuff for that."

Hermione waved her wand slightly; Cory breathed a sigh of relief and returned to stirring his cauldron while dropping in toad toes, one at a time. Hermione rushed to add her own toad digits and stir, just in time, Harry believed, since the tiny bubbles had almost ceased breaking the surface.

Hermione next subtly twitched her wand at Mandy and Michael. Harry was beginning to worry a bit, but remained silent, since drawing any attention would only make things worse. Penelope and Frina were too absorbed in their brewing to notice a centaur galloping through, much less Hermione with her wand in her sleeve.

Michael spoke loudly, "Boy, I think my potion is the best, don't you?" he confidently asked Mandy. His tablemate glanced very doubtfully into his cauldron. Greer, attracted by his statements, veered that way.

"My boy, what are you on about?"

"Look, it's perfect," he said proudly to the teacher.

"You are surely addled by too much revising, Mr. Corner. That must be the most noxious Ulgants salve I have ever had the misfortune of smelling."

"No!" Michael argued.

"Five points from Ravenclaw for your delusion, Mr. Corner."

Hermione bit her lip and added diced rat brain to her cauldron. Harry was tempted to point out that her potion was not stellar at this point either, due to her distracted brewing. What he did whisper was, "Ron has been a very bad influence on you." When Hermione just shrugged, Harry added, "You should have used the Bragging curse on one of the Slytherins."

"Next," she assured him. "Bet it gets the opposite reaction."

At the end of a very long Potions class, Harry wished he could return to bed. He was honestly worried about Hermione, whose eyes looked a little wild with stress and determination. It would all be over soon, he reminded himself and tried to concentrate on his own revision tables.

At the end of lunch, they all trooped by the brass cauldron, which spat forth their N.E.W.T. schedule, folded neatly into a diamond shape. Harry caught his out of the air and moved aside.

"We have to get to Binns' class," Hermione pointed out urgently as he stopped to open it. He stashed it away instead and followed his friends.

As Binns started to lecture on Wizard Criminal Law in the nineteenth century, Harry opened his schedule in his lap. Defense first, followed by Care of Magical Creatures. Then after lunch, Potions and Divination; that was day one. He rubbed his eyes before looking at day two and again reminded himself that it would all be over soon.

"How's it look?" Hermione whispered.

Whispering back, Harry said, "Like a test schedule only a nutter could love."

Several students turned around and grinned at him. Binns droned on. Seeing Hermione jot something down, Harry picked up his quill and started listening more seriously to the lecture.

As they arrived for Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, they turned in their long, long essay parchments on blue wombats. Harry's and Penelope's along with Hermione's and Frina's were definitely much thicker rolls than the other students'. Hagrid tossed them into a wooden bucket, which he then placed beside the door to his cabin, and said, "Well, we should do a lit'l reviewing before yer N.E.W.T.s." He pulled out a ratty parchment that had tea and whiskey stains on it. Malfoy huffed in annoyance and Harry shot him a warning look.

Malfoy held up two fingers and mouthed "Two a.m. Astronomy Tower," at Harry with a challenging expression. Harry hesitated just an instant before nodding.

"Now then, Brinkenpops. Who kin tell me how to catch a Brinkenpop?" Hermione and many others raised their hand. "The rest of yeh fergot?" Hagrid asked loudly in disbelief. More people raised their hand. "Well, tha's better. Unicorns can perform wha' four magic functions?"

After dinner, Harry did something he would never have imagined he would do. He went to Snape's office and told him ahead of time that he was about to break the rules.

"I just wanted to warn you that I'm dueling Draco tonight," Harry said, standing just inside the door to Snape's office. Snape still looked like he needed a real night's sleep.

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"You really feel the need to do that?" asked Snape after putting down his quill and rubbing his neck.

"Yes. I'm dying to do that."

Snape rested his chin on his hand and considered Harry. "Willing to tell me the time and place?"

"No."

"Overconfidence, Harry," Snape chastised.

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I'll let someone else know," he pointed out. "Since I need a second."

"Ms. Granger, please, or Ms. Weasley."

"Not Ron?" Harry asked, letting the door to the office close just in case anyone was walking by in the corridor.

"I must admit, I trust his judgment less than that of your other friends."

"Penelope?" Harry tossed out, curious what the response would be.

Snape tilted his head again. "Her magic is limited by low confidence or bad experience, or both. Her judgment seems fine."

"All of them, then?"

Snape hesitated, lips working in silence. "Do not allow the duel become an all out war, if you can help it."

Harry hadn't considered that. "Okay," he agreed, settling on Ginny in his mind and hoping immediately that Penelope didn't find out.

In the common room that evening it took a half hour for Harry to catch Ginny's eye to slip her a note without anyone else noticing. As soon as she surreptitiously read it, Harry wished he had made the reason clearer for why he was asking her to meet him at 1:30 that morning, because her eyes revealed a strange struggle. She slipped the note away without looking up at him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said first thing when he stepped down into the common room to meet Ginny. She wore a dressing gown over her nightgown and she waited with her

arms wrapped around herself. He went on, "I should have been clearer. I need a second for a duel in half of an hour."

She straightened and blinked. "Oh. Okay. Uh . . ." She looked down at herself. "Let me go change, just a minute." At the stairs she added, "Or a few, since I have to be silent."

Five minutes later, she reappeared in her regular school robes, wand in hand. "Thanks," Harry said with feeling. "I appreciate this. Snape insisted . . . "

"You told Professor Snape you were dueling?" she interrupted in shock.

"It does make it harder to punish me if he hears about it later," Harry pointed out pleasantly as he held open the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"True," Ginny admitted. "Why me? Why not Ron?"

Voice quiet in the empty corridor, Harry replied, "Believe it or not, Severus preferred you over your brother. He also had faith in Hermione, but she needs sleep more than you right now because of revising."

"Huh. Maybe there is hope for my final grade after all."

"You aren't doing well in Defense?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Practical is fine–I hate taking examinations," she complained tiredly.

They were ten minutes early, but Draco and Nott were waiting when they arrived, standing casually beside the stairs leading into the tower. Nott's face had thinned to skull-like during his absense for recovery, lending him a poisonous look.

"Thought you'd bring Longbottom," Draco said.

"He's too stressed from revising," Harry explained. "You don't accept my second?"

Draco shrugged. Harry looked to Nott who stood silent and unreactive, though he still looked calculating. He moved only when Draco did, to walk up the stairs to the tower. Nott and Ginny moved off to opposite sides of the large room, the last room before roof level. The telescopes were packed in trunks along one wall, and they would have to be careful not to damage them. The room was a little too small for duelling, which made it harder to counter what was spelled, which made it more dangerous.

Harry and Draco started back to back, and this time Harry remained silent and focused rather than taunting his old enemy. They parted, counted off, turned and

spelled at exactly the same moment. Draco flew backward, struck with Harry's Blasting Curse. The white arc of light, that had emerged from Draco's wand as he sailed backward, spun its way slowly toward Harry. Harry had not heard the incantation that produced it. He tried a series of counter-curses to no effect. Across the room Draco was standing up using the wall, licking his lips in apparent anticipation of his opponent's fate.

"Come, now Potter, just one little spell," Draco taunted. "It isn't in any textbook this school would use, even with Snape teaching the class."

Harry found himself backing up and trying a series of blocks, but even the most advanced ones he knew had little or no effect. The arc now felt like a scythe inextricably approaching him. He swallowed hard and thought frantically.

"A Doppelganger," Ginny said insistently.

"I don't know that one," Harry shouted, still backing up.

Draco complained, "No help from the second until you are down."

"Like you don't cheat every time," Harry snapped, ducking down rather than backing all the way to the wall. The arc dipped as well, not fooled. Harry began to wonder frantically what it was going to do to him.

Ginny shouted, "Stand still and tap your forehead with the incantation Doppelgangus . Quickly." Harry moved to the other side of the narrow oval on his side of the room and did as she said. Ginny added stridently, "Wait for it to form before you move."

Harry needed a lot of will to hold still while faced with the curved blade of light turning ever faster toward him. A shimmer formed before Harry's eyes, a shimmer like a mask with eyeholes. He dove aside just as the arc rotated in to strike, and looked back in time to see an explosion of light swallowed up by sparkles. As he got to his feet, Draco incanted something angrily, it sounded like a Fire Charm. Harry reacted without thought, putting up a Freezing counter. Another explosion erupted, though it swallowed itself rapidly.

Harry didn't flinch during the following barrage of spells and counters, and half a minute later Draco was down just as the door to the tower swung open.

"Well," Professor McGonagall breathed. "I should have guessed, but I continue to expect better of you, Mr. Potter." Filch shuffled in behind her, carrying his wide-eyed cat and grinning fiercely.

Harry, for the very first time, didn't feel her disappointment. He slowly lowered his wand hand and held her gaze steadily as she approached. He felt outside of this

place, and this room, as though it had lost its meaning. Her eyes darted over his face. "Hm," was all she said before stalking over to the small white ferret trapped in a power pentagram on the floor by Nott's feet. "Undo this, Mr. Potter," she said, gesturing at the floor.

Harry hesitated, only because he was trying to read her mood. She had not commanded him; her voice was unexpectedly flat, conversational even. He waved the spells away. Draco reappeared in a heap and floundered to stand up. Nott watched him struggle for a few seconds before reaching down to help him.

"No second, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Harry glanced around. A voice incanted a Disillusionment reversal before Ginny appeared and stepped forward.

"Nicely done, Ms. Weasley," said McGonagall. "Didn't see you there." She turned to the Slytherins "Fifty points from your house for each of you for duelling."

"What about them?" Draco demanded when she turned to leave.

"Unfortunately we don't have a system that accommodates negative points, Mr. Malfoy, otherwise I would."

Harry wondered if it had actually become that bad. He had noticed that their gems had seemed even more paltry than before, as though everyone in the House was now in the spirit of making the best of the situation. As he followed the headmistress down the staircase, he hoped a hundred points put Slytherin behind Ravenclaw, then thought of Snape and sort of hoped not, but then thought again of Malfoy and Parkinson and hoped so again.

At the seventh floor McGonagall turned on Harry and said stiffly, "I'll be informing your guardian, who can deal with you as he pleases." When Harry just shrugged casually, she stiffened. "Goodness, I hope Severus knows what he has got himself into."

Draco and Nott glanced back at them several times as they departed, glowering in defeat. Harry watched McGonagall stride away in the other direction, leaving Filch, who was muttering to his cat. As Harry watched the headmistress' robe billowing behind her, he mulled her comment over with a little concern.

"Best get along now," Filch said. "Never know what might happen to ya out late like this. Eh?"

Harry and Ginny walked away, reviewing the duel in low tones. "Thanks," Harry said, when they stepped through the portrait hole. "For the spell–it saved my skin."

She grinned, clearly enjoying that notion. "I had to learn that one a long time ago to make my brothers think I was in my room when I was out secretly practicing Quidditch."

"Good thing," Harry breathed. He gave her a wave as he headed for the boys' dormitory. She gave him a smile with just a hint of melancholy.

Hermione's strange new hobby of spelling her fellow students reduced over the next week, so Harry didn't bother Ron, the mad reviser, with it. Harry found himself ignoring most everything and holding dearly to the notion that it would all be over before he knew it, one way the other. They revised and quizzed each other constantly over the next week. Harry doubted anything could sink into his exhausted brain, but somehow it did, since he did better on Hermione's practice examinations at the end of the week than he had with the ones at the beginning.

Ron looked haunted and frantic during the day and he mumbled a lot in his sleep, which he didn't normally. The Durmstrang students were holding up much better, not seeming to dread the looming examinations the way the rest of them did, although Darsha was less civil than usual as though sensitive to getting distracted. Harry didn't take it personally since he didn't believe he was at his best either.

Draco ignored him now, although Harry found Nott's eyes on him more often when he looked over at the Slytherins during class, making Harry think Draco's last words to him in the Dungeon were good advice.

The first day of N.E.W.T.s finally arrived. Nervous, even though the first test was his best subject, Harry took a seat at one of the old desks and focused his thoughts exclusively on Defense against the Dark Arts, valiantly calming the swirling in his mind of book pages and notes that tried to overwhelm him like a wave. Beside him, Neville, who had knocked the chair over while pulling it out, was apologizing with a stutter. Harry decided that he fortunately was not feeling that nervous. The old witch across from him gave him a nice smile, adjusted her tiny glasses as she studied him, then said, "Well, we'll go through the tests anyway, dear boy."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry agreed. Beside him he heard Neville saying, "Sir? Sir?" Harry turned and found that the middle-aged wizard across from Neville was staring at him . The man sat straight finally and tried to find his place in his parchments. "Well, uh, Longbottom, right? You probably aren't as dangerous as that one over there."

Harry scoffed loudly enough to carry, then cleared his throat when his testwitch looked up in confusion. She had pulled a silver pill box out of a large case beside her and set it on the table. "Curse neutralization first," she said in her plodding voice. "Remove the pin from inside the box." She backed up her chair as though expecting the worst to happen. Harry ran through the Curse Removal spells he had had copious opportunity to practice on Malfoy's wombat crate. The pillbox popped open and he held out the straight pin by its pearl end.

"Yes, very good," the testwitch said in relief as she scooted her chair closer in.

Harry turned to give a victorious grin to Neville and found his friend had already handed his pin over. Harry gave a low growl of happy challenge as the testwitch brought out three dolls and explained that one of them was charmed, one was cursed, and one was a transfigured stuffed bear. She informed him that he was required to determine which was which without undoing any of the spells.

Harry sat up and studied the three old cloth dolls with china faces. Other than being old and grimy in slightly different ways, they looked identical. He took out his wand and prodded one of them and nothing happened. Two tables down there was a shriek, the sound of a knocked over chair, then someone, maybe Justin, saying in great distress, " That's the cursed one. That one." Harry leaned back a as far as possible before prodding the middle one. Finally, he shook himself and incanted the curse detection spell Snape used, the one on the right, still unprodded, flared red. "That one's cursed," Harry said.

The testwitch smiled sweetly. Neville cleared his throat. Harry glanced that way and found Neville's testwizard was putting away the dolls. With a groan of annoyance Harry scratched his head. How does one detect charmed? he wondered. With a blush ahead of time, Harry leaned over the remaining two and whispered, "Good dolly." The one in the middle opened its eyes. Harry glanced around to make sure no one else had heard him.

Next came a series of curses he had to counter. Harry did as instructed and stood before the desk, wand out. The testwitch was very gentle with her curses, seeming very reluctant to risk hurting him. They got through that quickly enough and the old witch smiled broadly as she made notes on her parchment at the end.

Chapter 46

Harry and Neville finished at the same time. As they stepped away together, Harry said, "You were doing well."

Neville replied, "I'm sure you got a better score."

"I don't know," Harry returned with a smile. They returned to the corridor to wait for the next section to begin. "Is the Defense N.E.W.T required for growing plants?" Harry teased.

"They said they'd like to see it, because some things like Magisterum and Pickwicker can get dangerous, unexpected like. And there's an entire greenhouse full of Pickwicker at Waxman's."

"What do they use it for?"

"Treasure chests–try to break in and they swallow you whole. People like them for traveling abroad, because they're light."

Harry grinned at that image and leaned heavily against the wall. He sighed and thought ahead to the written test for Care of Magical Creatures.

Lunch was quiet all around. Students were either studying or had caught the general mood of pained panic and kept their conversations low in deference to it. Ron was cramming for Divination so Harry offered to quiz him and as a result lunch became a bit of a game, with Frina, Penelope, and Ron guessing answers in between Hermione's scoffing and eye-rolling. After a bit of this they switched to Care of Magical Creatures.

Harry felt confident about Potions. He had even looked up the instructions for Farnsworth's Faffery, just in case, although he thought it would come in useful at some point anyway. The written test was first. Harry, seated with his friends, waited for the signal to begin. The first question: What ten potions use mossbeak? was easy enough, although a few people groaned upon turning over their examination parchments. Two hours later, Harry turned his long sheet back over and stretched his shoulders. He shared a smile with Hermione and checked on Penelope, who looked less elated and more worried than expected.

The practical section was two potions, the Draught of Living Death and Moonstone Elixir. There were many ingredients to choose from, hundreds maybe. Several students stood before the supplies area with hands on their heads, looking distraught. Harry collected his needed ingredients and brewed with studious care. He finished with just five minutes to spare, and long after Hermione, but he was not going to unnecessarily rush this examination section.

Care of Magical Creatures was harder than expected and he was glad for the quizzing session at lunch since it gave him two answers he otherwise wouldn't have known.

At the end of the day, Harry, stumbled to the dormitory, fell onto his bed, and fell asleep. Penelope woke him two hours later. "Your friends wish to know if you are coming to eat," she said as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Harry eyed her there and considered that they were alone and that the common room sounded very quiet outside the dormitory door, so it was unlikely anyone would come in. He pulled her down onto the bed, feeling gratified just to put his arms around her.

Snape stopped by as Harry sat down to dinner. "And your testing went how?"

"Good," Harry assured him, feeling confident since he could list on one hand of fingers the questions he wasn't sure of from all three tests that day.

"Even Ms. Granger looks ready to be finished," Snape observed, looking over Harry's friends.

Hermione nodded tiredly, making them all grin..

The next day, Harry had his Transfiguration examination right after lunch. Astronomy and Herbology that morning were a bit of a blur. Unusually, tea was provided at lunch in big kettles. Harry drank three cups and as he left with his friends, wished he had drunk a fourth.

The hardest part of the examination was the globe transformation. Harry managed to get a wisp of smoke inside the delicate glass on his third try, just inside the time limit. Breathing out deeply in an attempt to overcome his utter relief, Harry waited for the next items to be set before him, a pair of baby chicks to be turned into cotton balls. Beside him, Lavender's chicks were leaping for freedom as white puffballs with legs.

At the very end, as the testwizard was straightening his score sheet, Harry said, "I'd like to do an extra credit transfiguration."

The middle-aged wizard with a birthmark in the shape of Wales on his brow, said, "Which one would that be? Oh, no, let me guess, Animagus?" At Harry's nod the man went on in an amazed tone, "There have been so very many of those this year. Well, go ahead," he prompted as though it had become rote.

With a frown, because Harry had hoped to surprise the man at least a little bit, he stood up behind the desk. The room was crowded, but there was just enough space.

He hoped. He breathed deeply and tried to manage the spells through the veil of fatigue clouding his thoughts. Imagining Malfoy mocking him for not getting into the Auror's program, Harry felt the rippling pass over his flesh. A moment later he was looking down at the now diminutive wizard in old grey robes. The testwizard looked up at him, unblinking and stunned. The rest of the room had fallen eerily quiet.

Harry flapped his wings once to get the testwizard to shake out of his spell. The man blinked, appeared to consider ducking under the table, and quickly made a note instead. Harry released the membrane around himself and his view shrunk down to normal.

"Well," the testwizard breathed. "Interesting. Can you, uh, fly?" he asked, sounding honestly curious. Harry leaned on the back of the chair and nodded. "Well, full points for that, I would say. You are all finished." Harry stood straight and started to leave, only turning back when the testwizard said quietly, "Honored to have met you, Mr. Potter."

In the common room before dinner, Harry was wishing for a butterbeer, or a real beer, or mead even, anything to calm the crazy circling of his thoughts and the accelerated beating of his heart. Repeating to himself that it was all over didn't seem to help at all. Around him, his friends sat or, in Ron's case lay, on the floor, with expressions of shell shock and over-stress. Harry didn't want to move, even though he wasn't relaxed, because he feared tensing even one muscle more than it was already.

"I think it's dinner time," Ron mumbled from the floor, his gaze centered beyond the ceiling.

A minute later Ginny came down the staircase. "Shall I get you all trays?" she asked solicitously. They all twitched and shifted slightly but no one actually stood up. "How did it go today?" she then asked brightly.

"Pretty good," Ron answered in a muffled voice. He seemed to have rolled over and now had his face against the rug.

Ginny laughed. "Shall I fetch Madam Pomfrey?" she asked kindly, though it was clearly a tease.

Ron raised a finger over his head. "Just you wait!" he proclaimed, then lost energy and fell silent.

"Dinner," Harry said and managed to sit up. He thought food would help, or knock him completely unconscious. Either way, it would be an improvement.

The Great Hall was even quieter than usual. Some students still had N.E.W.T.s the next morning, so stacks of books and parchments littered the tables. Harry barely

tasted dinner, would have sworn he had not eaten, except that he remembered serving himself and later his plate was empty. For once, Ron only managed one serving of everything, with his head propped heavily on his palm and his fork hand a little uncertain and slow.

Snape came by at the end of the meal. "Feeling all right?" he asked, sounding surprised to find them all in such a state. General nodding and grunts went around. Harry looked up at his guardian with a doleful expression of exhaustion, bringing Snape's hand to his shoulder. "How did your Transfiguration examination go?"

Harry brightened at the memory. "Really good. I got full extra credit and I managed the hardest practical just in time. So I think it went okay. A few questions on the written I didn't know, but only a few." His eyes fell half closed as this brief flicker of elation wore off.

Snape patted his shoulder. "Go to bed, Harry. If you cannot sleep, send me a silver bird–I'll bring you something."

As Snape turned to leave, Ron asked, "What about the rest of us?" sounding hurt.

"What about you, Mr. Weasley?" Snape prompted before he was distracted by Harry's head nodding to his chest and jerking up again. "Do you need to be hovered to your dormitory?" Snape asked.

"No, no," Harry insisted, standing up as a blind man might, with judicious use of the table to guide him. "I'll make it. No hovering." As he walked to the doors, his friends akilter behind him, he stated, "I'm going to make it out of this school without ever being hovered again."

The next day, mostly recovered from his examinations but with mixed emotion, Harry followed his friends down to the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast. Some of the portraits waved at them as they passed. Students were talking excitedly about the upcoming summer holiday and going home, but Harry remembered clearly when this was his only home.

When they reached the second floor, Hermione walked quickly ahead of them, confusing Ron, which confused Harry, as he had believed Ron knew what she was up to. Hermione stopped at the top of the staircase to look around the walls and then frantically around the people milling in the Entrance Hall. When they reached her

beside the doors, she waved them back and continued to look around as well as watch the stairwell up from the dungeon. Ron and Harry shared a hopeless and worried look but did as she bade them. A minute later, she turned and said, "Draw Malfoy over there by the wall, will you?"

Harry considered suggesting something reasonable like: maybe she should take a Calming draught and go to bed early. Instead, he wandered over to the blonde boy and said, "So, given up finally?" mostly because he had been fantasizing something akin to this conversation.

"I told you, you won," Draco snapped darkly. "Trying to make me change my mind?"

Harry drifted toward the wall Hermione had indicated, the one beside the tall main doors. "That was before the duel," said Harry in a challenging way to ensure Draco's continued attention. Draco followed and Harry glanced over at his friends and saw Hermione chatting with Greer. Harry opened his mouth to say something in response when Greer, red-faced charged their way.

"Six points, Mr. Malfoy . . . eight points, actually it should be, four for each of your insulting remarks. And it should be more considering how well I've treated you this term."

"What?" Draco asked, truly, completely confused. He glared at Harry who honestly shrugged back. Greer stalked off while Harry wondered why Hermione was giving points to Slytherin.

McGonagall stepped down the staircase and into the Great Hall, freezing the gems. The students began whispering fiercely and glancing at the score. A few giggled even. Harry blinked and accidentally bumped into Ron as he rejoined his friends. Gryffindor was far behind in last, but the other three houses were in a straight tie with three hundred twenty six points each. Slowly, all of them turned to Hermione who looked much less frantic and very smug instead.

Ron shook his head and then put his head against the wall and laughed heartily. They all joined in as they walked into the Great Hall, until tears were staining their cheeks and Harry had to take off his glasses to dry his eyes on his sleeve. "I don't bloody well believe it," Ron kept repeating while they all sat down.

"They all won," Frina said as she and Penelope joined them.

"They all lost," Harry pointed out, still very amused.

Snape stopped beside them on the way to the front, looking disgusted. "I should have known." With a pursed mouth he looked over each of them before returning a

narrow gaze at Hermione. "I should have known the paint charm was merely . . . a distraction."

Harry turned to his friend in surprise. She sat straight and levelled her face. "Oh, yes, of course." They all chuckled again, despite trying not to. Snape groaned and stalked away.

At the head table McGonagall said to Snape, "Well, I think this is a first."

"It was quite well settled," Snape crossed his arms and said in a low voice, "until someone deducted a hundred points for a mere duel. From only one house, I might add."

"I might remind you of the story Albus used to tell of the time three hundred years ago when Hufflepuff went a hundred points to the negative and all the students in that House disappeared. Poof! And no one could find them for a week until one of them owled from Iceland." She took a long sip from her goblet as though alarmed at the very notion of that happening while she was headmistress. "I'll confess I was a little afraid of even tempting anything of that sort."

Snape's brow furrowed farther, though he looked more concerned now. "I had not heard that story," he admitted. He picked up his goblet as well, peered into it and appeared disappointed by its contents. "Leaving Gryffindor's points alone did not change the outcome, in any event," he conceded.

McGonagall stood and brought the students to silence. "Well, we've arrived at the end of another year. I did not imagine it could be more memorable than the last . . . but somehow it feels so at this point." She managed a smile. "We seem to have no clear winner for the house cup. So . . ." She waved her wand and banners dropped down from the ceiling, swirled with the colors that had until recently marred the schools floors. The students frowned, except the Gryffindors who couldn't help grinning.

McGonagall went on, "I certainly do hope you all return to us safe for next year, those of you who are due to, of course. And to the rest of you, who are moving on, the best of luck to you all." Harry was certain her eyes came over to him at that moment. She adjusted her chair in preparation for sitting again and concluded, "But, we are all hungry, I'm sure, so let's eat."

A few owls flitted in during the subdued dinner. Errol, slow and as clumsy as ever, stumbled through a landing on their table. Harry found he had more sympathy for the bird than he had before so he helped it right itself. It held its leg out to him, even

though the letter clearly was addressed to Ron. Harry took the letter and gave the bird a boost to get airborne before handing the letter over to his friend, who seemed surprised to see it.

Ron put down his fork and opened the envelope. When he fished inside, he gave out a strange squeal. "Look, look," he insisted to Harry. "My finishing present, look!" Harry examined the small stack of tickets Ron held. Little Quidditch players on broomstick circled the edges in orange ink. "Tickets to see the Cannons." He gazed heavenward. "Thank you dad," he whispered pathetically. "Hermione! Want to come? It is just four days away. Oh, what a perfect end of school present," he marveled.

"Sure Ron," Hermione agreed.

"And Harry," Ron said, gripping Harry's sleeve and almost making him spill his butterbeer. "And dad. And me. That's four. Uh, sorry Ginny," he said.

She shrugged. "That's all right . . . they're playing the Falcons."

"Don't like them, then?" Harry asked.

Ginny made a cutting motion across her throat after checking that Ron wasn't watching.

Dinner concluded quietly, which was fine with Harry's worn nerves.

"Do you wish to take the train with your friends?" Snape asked him as the Hall slowly emptied out. The Seventh Years were almost the only ones left.

"It's a little out of the way, but yeah, I think I would."

Snape nodded that he understood. "I will see you at home late in the evening, then."

"You can leave right away?" Harry asked.

Snape frowned. "I have much too much to finish. I'll bring it with me and come back when necessary. It is all paperwork this year rather than potions."

Harry's friends were standing up to go as well. "I'll see you at breakfast," he said as they moved to the doors, Harry with Penelope's hand in his. Snape nodded once and drifted ahead of them.

Suze angled past them at the doors and said to Harry, "Too bad you are all finished."

"I was thinking the opposite," Harry said, making her grin. He then had a thought. "Hey, do you go to the Falmouth home games?" When she nodded vigorously, he

asked, "Are you going to be at the Chudley match? We'll be there, Ron got tickets from his dad."

"Yes," she replied eagerly. "Just in the bleachers though."

"That's where these are," Ron said, still clutching his tickets to his chest. "We can meet up then."

"By the banners," Suze suggested. "Do you need another ticket?" She fished in her small bag and pulled out a pair. "My parents don't particularly like to go and if I'm meeting people they'll let me go alone." She held the ticket out, wavering between giving it to Harry or Ron.

Harry reached out for it. "Thanks," he said. She smiled broadly in return.

As they walked through the corridors, Penelope said, "You are not intending that for me?"

"Can you make it?" When she shook her head sadly, he said, "I'll find someone to use it." At the very top of the stairs, Harry said, "I can't believe we're leaving for good."

"It is hard to imagine," Hermione agreed.

"I can't bloody wait to be out of here," Ron stated. "How many times have I wished to be like Fred and George I cannot tell you." He threw up his hands and announced loudly, "And we're alive!"

Harry and Hermione laughed while Penelope eyes widened in alarm. McGonagall came beside them. "Having a nice evening?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Professor," Ron said with great feeling. "A wonderful evening."

As she swept away, McGonagall said, "Good thing your N.E.W.T.s are completed, Mr. Weasley, I don't think you could have survived another."

The next morning Harry said goodbye to everyone, all the teachers, especially Hagrid, but not Filch who stood in the Entrance Hall glowering at them as they trouped by on the way out.

"Visit often, Harry," McGonagall said as he shook her hand yet again.

"I will, Professor." She retained his hand and tugged him back as he turned to depart. "And go easy on my deputy headmaster over the summer holiday," she stated quietly, but apparently in complete seriousness.

"Yes, ma'am."

The train ride required almost no time, it seemed, as though a time-turner sped it along the tracks back to London. On the platform, students were exchanging addresses and notes and saying goodbyes. Harry stacked his trunk and Hedwig's and Kali's cages onto a trolley. Hedwig fluffed herself, annoyed, as Kali sniffed her through the tiny bars.

Hermione restrained Harry as he started toward the gateway. "You can't take a Chimrian out in Muggle public Harry. An owl is bad enough."

He hurriedly dug out an old robe which he tossed over Kali's cage. Her needle-long claws immediately came through the fabric, moving it. Hermione waved an Impermeable Charm at it and the motion stopped. She then gave Harry a firm hug.

"I'll be seeing you, Hermione," Harry insisted.

She nodded, making the hair on her lowered head bob as she dabbed at her eyes. Ron shrugged and appeared vaguely embarrassed.

"I have to catch another train," Penelope said, glancing at the clock on the platform.

Harry gave her a hug and a kiss, while his friends found other things to occupy their attention. Then Penelope ran off, Opus pushing Penelope's and Frina's trunks with his own on a trolley. He shook Harry's hand as he went by, then waved to them all before disappearing through the archway.

Mrs. Weasley came and collected her children while Harry made plans to meet his friends as soon as possible, the next day if they could work it out. When they were gone, Harry took a seat in the sunny slice at the end of the platform, waiting for the next train back north again.

Chapter 47.

The Game of Life

The next morning Harry bounded down the steps, forcing Snape to step backward out of his path. "Off somewhere?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Yep. Ron, Ginny, Hermione and I are going into London for the day," he replied brightly. He stopped and looking hesitant, asked, "That's all right, isn't it?"

Snape tossed one long-sleeved hand to the side and said, "Of course." Harry gave him a smile and went to the dining room where he grabbed up toast, quickly buttered. Snape asked, "You will be returning at what time?"

Harry chewed and made a thoughtful noise. "Late, maybe."

Snape thought a moment. "Not later than 1:00, if you would."

"Okay," Harry readily agreed. He was looking forward to the day with hungry anticipation. Before he stuffed the last of the bread in his mouth, he was already reaching for the Floo Powder.

"Have a good day," Snape intoned. Harry, chewing, just nodded. "Do try to exercise some caution." Harry waved him off and stepped into the hearth.

After stopping at Gringott's to change some Galleons into Pounds, Harry and his friends wandered the city in good spirits. They walked in pairs, Harry sometimes with Ron and sometimes with Ginny, who didn't seem to expect anything, which allowed him to relax. When it rained lightly they ducked into a sandwich shop,

where they drank three pots of tea and talked for several hours. The sun broke through as they departed, so they walked around Regent's Park and rented paddle boats. A plantsman had to yell at them when their water fight got out of hand. He seemed a little confused as to how they were making so much water fly everywhere without using anything but their hands. Giggling, because they Harry and Ron had threatened, when Hermione sided with the park staff, to dump her into the water to make her transform, they walked toward the the exit to the park. By the time they reached the north side, the scent of food drove them to search for an early lunch.

Stuffed with Indian food, which Ron could not cease raving about, they took the underground to the Victoria and Albert. Feet aching after hours of strolling the many, many rooms, they found a pub and settled in to recover. Harry leaned his head back against the paneled wall, exhausted. Only four in the afternoon and this already felt like the longest, funnest day of his life. Hermione had taken off a shoe to rub her foot. Ron solicitously offered to rub it for her, making Ginny roll her eyes. Thirsty, they ordered another round of beers after the first quickly disappeared.

A few other patrons cheered at the football match that was on the tellie over the bar. Harry tried to follow it as Hermione and Ginny discussed shoes. It looked like a very boring game since the players were always stuck on the ground. He watched idly until he was distracted by an old man in an even older appearing cloak, approaching along the booths with a stunned expression on his face. Everyone hushed when he leaned on their table for support.

In a quavering voice he said, "So very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter," while holding out his hand. Harry returned the jittery handshake and wondered just how old the man was, since with his thin hair, age-spotted scalp, and straggly sideburns, he was possible a hundred and fifty. As if reading Harry's thoughts, the man said, "In my day, it was Grindelwald, you know. We thought no one could get any eviler than 'im. Should never think that."

"Jake," the barman said, approaching. "You botherin' these youngsters?"

"It's all right, sir," Hermione quickly said. Harry had just opened his mouth to say something similar. He closed it and shook his head but the man approached anyway.

"No, it isn't," the barman said, putting a hand on Jake's arm, then pulling it back, apparently because he got a kink in his shoulder. "Come on, Jake," he insisted as he rubbed his neck in painful annoyance.

"Really, sir," Hermione insisted. "He's a friend . . . of an old friend." She squinted a bit at the old wizard and said, "You're Jacarro Sazelac, aren't you?"

The man smiled faintly. "Ay, you know this old bloke?" the barman asked, stunned.

"Pull up a chair," Ron insisted, when Hermione elbowed him. "Would you like something?"

"Scrumpy, but they don't serve that anymore," the man muttered nostalgically.

"How about cider?" Ron asked, and went to fetch it after yet another elbow in the ribs.

Jake leaned over to Harry. "Ya' got yourself some fine friends here, young man."

"You mentioned Grindelwald," Ginny prompted in an interested voice at the same time as Hermione asked, "Did you know Dumbledore well?" Harry waved them to silence as the barman returned with the cider.

"Don't believe a word 'e tells you," the barman announced loudly, exasperated, as he plunked down the drink. "Mad as a hatter. Shouldn't be on the street."

Jake sipped his cider and smacked his lips. "Cold at least. Yeah, Social try to pick me up sometimes. Never seem to quite manage," he stated easily as though amused. He took another longer drink and said, "I knew Albus Dumbledore. He was older than me, believe it or not, though 'e never seemed to quite look it, the ol' weasel."

"Did you fight Grindelwald?" Harry asked.

Jake half smiled, half frowned, as he considered Harry sideways. "Not in the sense you would perhaps think meaningful. I was Assistant to the Minister of Magic when Grinnywald made his announcement that he was king. He was a mad one - made the announcement to the Muggles too. That was a mess in itself. Fortunately most Muggle newspapers thought it a hoax. Then the fires started. He liked starting fires it turned out and them Muggles certainly noticed those."

"No, the only thing I found myself able to do was keep the Minster, Fishbane, 'is name was, outta Albus' hair while 'e fought him." He studied Harry for a long moment. "Albus was a lot older than you, young man, hundred maybe, but he lost his former mentor, Druis Xerxentot, the finest wizard in those days, in the very first battle. That woke everyone up, let me tell you. People refused to believe he was really dead to avoid believing things had got so bad so quick like. No one was used to fighting dark wizards back then, thought they was over all that long ago. Above it."

They all drank and listened raptly as Jake went on. Jake sipped his second cider slower than the first with much animated lip-smacking. "Fortunately, Grindelwald was a loner, though that just meant there weren't any stupid people dragging him

back, neither. Albus put out a call for help for anyone who knew how to fight dark magic, which was considered beneath most witches and wizards back then. Now they teach it to you all, I hear, and don't I know who's doing that was. I did a little searching in the Ministry Archives for anything I could find and sent 'im an owl or two." He shrugged.

His bloodshot eyes took them all in one at a time. "Did you kids all fight Voldemort, or you just keeping Potter company now?"

"They stood in front of me during the final battle," said Harry with laugh of chagrin. "I was a little too distracted to defend myself."

Jake winked at them and toasted them sloppily with his mug. After a large gulp, he said, "Don't get to be my age–your friends'll all be dead." They all gave each other bemused looks while Jake finished his cider. "Well, the misses will be wonderin' where I'm at." He stood up shakily.

"The misses?" Hermione mouthed silently in disbelief.

"Gretel, my fourth. Don't have more than three wives. Second one's the best, remember that," he said to Harry, then chuckled as he shuffled out. When he was outside they all broke out laughing.

"Shouldn't encourage 'im," the barman complained when he came by later to collect empties.

Harry stared at the time and the last of their drinks. "Maybe we should go too."

Out on the pavement, they were walking a little unsteadily but the fresh air felt good. "Hermione," Ron said jokingly, "will you be my second wife?" This made them all double-over with laughter.

"No," Hermione replied forcefully, making them all laugh again. Harry had a hard time stopping giggling once he started. They stopped at a corner and looked around themselves. "Where are we?" Hermione asked.

Ron reached for his wand, and Harry had to shove his arm to get it out of sight of a group of women walking together in identical t-shirts and fake bunny ears. One wore a veil and little red horns. "Wha' was that?" Ron asked loudly, garnering sharp looks from a few of them.

One street seemed much quieter than the others. "Let's go this way," Harry said, starting out without waiting for a consensus. They walked a few blocks until they reached an area of nightclubs. Harry blinked down into the nearest one. "I love this place," he announced.

Ron laughed. "What are you talking about? You haven't been here."

"Yes, I have," Harry insisted. "With Tonks. Had a great time, well, 'til her ex tried to join us, but . . ."

"What?" the others all said together, moving in closer with avid expressions. Harry looked them over and thought over what he might add to that to improve things. Nothing came to mind. "When was this?" Hermione demanded, insinuating.

"Uh, maybe I don't want to say," Harry said, blushing.

"I think . . . we need another round," Ron concluded. He headed down the steps into the nightclub, Ginny's eyes following him in concern.

"Sounds good," Harry concurred.

In the club the barman gave Harry a friendly hello. Ron leaned over the bar, "Was he in here with a woman whose hair always changes color?"

"Sure, Tonks. She used to come in here a lot."

Ron elbowed Harry painfully before dragging him to the far wall where it was a little quieter. "Why didn't you say?"

Harry shrugged, wondering how he had lost control of his tongue. Hermione eventually brought over two drinks and handed one to Ron. Ginny gave the drink she held to Harry. "Not having any?" Harry asked, sipping gratefully from the straw to cover his embarrassment. She shook her head, looking grim and very Mrs. Weasleyish.

It was just after two when the door of the house in Shrewsthorpe creaked open, following no little fumbling with the lock. Ginny hauled a stumbling Harry across the threshold and stopped before a dark figure, outlined by the light from the hall beyond. She was very glad she had not joined the others in the last two rounds. The dichotomy of Snape as dreaded professor and Harry's guardian made her lick her lips nervously before she said, "Sir. Evenin', sir. Had to get a portkey to the station. Little worried about taking the Floo, you see," she explained, having had her brother Charlie knocked cold by landing on his head once after a night at the Leaky Cauldron.

Snape didn't respond or make any move to assist. Ginny tightened her hold on Harry's wrist at her shoulder and despite the extra weight it meant taking, urged him to step forward, hoping they both wouldn't tumble over Harry's drunken feet.

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"Severus," Harry slurred in a greeting.

"You may just leave him here, Ms. Weasley," Snape intoned with just enough edge to chill anyone, let alone a student at Hogwarts.

Ginny cringed, extremely grateful that it wasn't her facing this. She wondered how Ron was fairing and whether he had let Hermione convince him to go home with her and make up an explanation tomorrow, as difficult as that would be. "Yes, sir," she said. "Ya' all right, Harry?" she asked. Not wanting to simply drop him on the floor, she propped him against the wall and gradually let go of him.

"Yeah, 's great," he managed, sounding happily out of place. "Than's."

Ginny backed up to the door, wondering if she should say something in Harry's defense. Harry straightened and pushed away from the wall, although he swayed a bit as he stood there. Snape's eyes were barely visible in the dark entryway. Ginny breathed deeply and said, "See ya' later, Harry." As she stepped out, she added quietly, "Probably much later." The door closed quietly and relatched when Ginny pulled tight on it from the other side.

"Hiya," Harry said, working his way down the wall a few feet. "Sorry. I'm a little late, I think."

"Hm." A pause ensued where Harry squinted at his guardian in the dim light. "Come with me," Snape finally said, apparently reaching some decision.

Harry pushed away from the wall and had to immediately catch himself on the other wall, but fortunately, the corridor of the entryway was narrow. Snape grabbed Harry's arm and hauled him firmly along with Harry barely keeping up as they crossed the main hall.

"Ow," Harry complained about the tight grip, but it didn't relax. "Where're we going?"

When they reached the toilet, Snape dropped Harry onto the bench across from the tub and turned the lamp up. "What were you drinking and how much?" Snape demanded.

Harry rubbed his arm where it had been clutched and thought that over. Snape roughly tweaked his chin up, making him reply, "Uh, mead, cider, coupla ciders, something bright blue. Those were good," he added in sudden memory.

Snape shook his head and went to the cupboard and searched among the myriad bottles. "I am tempted to simply let you suffer," he stated. "But you may have

consumed enough to do you harm." He came over with a very small bottle of black liquid. "You do realize alcohol is toxic in excess quantities, do you not?" he asked snidely.

Harry considered that at length, not likely to come up with a response. Snape, with jerky movements, opened the bottle, lifted the glass stem out of it and held it horizontal so it would not drip. "Put out your tongue," he said.

"What is that?" Harry asked, never having seen it.

"It is going to make you empty the contents of your stomach."

"Wha?" Harry sounded dismayed.

"Because there is drink in your stomach you have not absorbed yet," Snape explained. His tone continued to harden. "Given your state, I expect you will inevitably do so anyway. You might as well make the most of it. Stick out your tongue."

Harry frowned and turned away. Even seated he was swaying as the room swung on an uneven axis.

"I am not giving you a choice," Snape pointed out, sounding vaguely malevolent now on top of stony. Harry, after a brief battle with himself, opened his mouth. Snape let two drops fall from the stem onto his tongue. Harry put his head in his hands to wait, moaning slightly. "I do hope you aren't expecting sympathy," said Snape.

With a hint of petulance, Harry said, "I just wanted to go to bed."

"You would have awoken most unwell in that case."

Harry frowned as nausea rolled through him. He fought it the first wave, but not the second.

When he stood straight from the toilet, he was handed a warm, damp cloth. Harry cleaned his face and rinsed his mouth thoroughly in the sink. His stomach felt better, but the room still reeled unnervingly. He dried his face and tried to hang the towel back up. Snape took it from him with a sharp motion and tossed it aside.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded, glancing at his disheveled self in the mirror before looking quickly away, but not without straightening his shirt in a way that left it crooked on the opposite side.

"What is wrong?" Snape echoed in disbelief. "You are incapacitated with drink . . . that is what is wrong. Have you forgotten that you are a powerful wizard?" he demanded. "Did you consider what enormous damage you could do with that wand

of yours in the state you are in?" Harry felt his pockets. "Did you lose it?" Snape asked derisively.

Defensive now, Harry snapped, "No, it's right here," as he pulled it from his back pocket. He didn't admit that it should have been in the wand pocket of his cloak. He did not remember moving it.

Snape crossed his arms, straightened, and sneered, "I admit, I expected better from you. Or more intelligent behavior, at least."

"Why are you being so mean?" Harry demanded, unable, presumably because of the alcohol, to fortify himself against the disapproval.

Snape hmpfed. "You may suffer in the morning then, if that is your desire." He pointed at the door to the toilet. "Go up to your room."

Harry gave him a dark look and tried to stalk past him angrily. He lost his balance, though, and had to catch himself on the doorframe. He clipped the bone of his shoulder and the pain made him angry. "You don't care about me," he muttered.

He didn't see Snape's eyes flicker to the ceiling in annoyance. "No, clearly not. Do you need help getting to bed?" he asked, sounding about as ungracious about the offer as one possibly could. Wounded green eyes came around to Snape, who huffed again in response. "You are hopeless right now," he commented. "Whatever it is, it is better left 'til morning. Come." He took hold of his charge's arm again and lead him across the hall to the steps. At the bottom Harry shook himself free with a jerking motion and stomped up on his own with generous use of the handrail.

Snape followed behind and stood in the doorway, watching Harry weave his way to the bed and fall on it. "I don't understand why I'm not allowed to have any fun. Just because you never have any doesn't mean you have to be so cruel," complained Harry, voice muffled by the duvet.

Snape stepped into the room partway, arms crossed, eyes dark. "It is not cruelty. I simply want to make it eminently clear that I disapprove of your behavior."

"'S cruel," Harry insisted groggily, rolling over and putting his feet, shoes and all, on the bed. His face reflected pain as though he might lose control.

Snape stepped over and rather ungently removed Harry's shoes before dropping them on the floor and crossing his arms again. "Shall I have treated you in the manner my father did under these exact circumstances?" he asked, voice like a knife edge. "He took my wand and locked me out of the house, too incapacitated to even get out of

the rain." When Harry didn't comment, Snape said more vehemently, "You think it is cruel to make certain you are not sick in your bed, to make certain you actually make it to your bed?"

Harry didn't want to accept that. He rubbed his eyes and said, "Do you have that pink stuff? My head is cracking open."

"You think you deserve it?"

Rubbing his temple now, Harry sat up on one elbow. Sounding close to the edge of control, he murmured, "Didn't I do everything I was supposed to? You said I did. I was tired of remembering being responsible." He rubbed his dry eyes then and added sadly, "I did everything."

"Yes," Snape agreed stiffly, "you did everything." With a slow shake of his head he went out and minutes later returned with a fizzing cup of pink liquid, which he handed over. As Harry gratefully sipped it, Snape said firmly. "Repeat this and you will be grounded for a week. No visitors. Repeat it again it will be two weeks."

Harry finished off the last of the liquid and sighed as the pounding in his head eased. "You're saying I'm not allowed to drink at all?"

"I am saying you are not allowed to lose control to it. There is a crossover point where your judgment about how drunk you are is impaired. Do not cross it again. I am surprised Ms. Granger let you, frankly."

"She was ahead of us," Harry pointed out.

"Good thing Ms. Weasley was behind, then, otherwise none of you may have found your way home."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, remembering Ginny turning down additional drinks. She had looked a little disapproving, he remembered now. Harry dropped back onto the bed, feeling almost normal. He watched as Snape went to the wardrobe, brought over a fresh set of pyjamas and dropped them on the foot of the bed. He then re-crossed his arms, still looking disapproving. "Are you set for the night?" he asked stonily.

Harry nodded and reached for his pyjamas which prompted Snape to depart.

Harry was awoken by a knocking on his door. He rolled over groggily, believing it to be in his dream. "Get up," Snape's voice said as he opened the door. Harry just groaned, reminded distressingly of his Aunt Petunia and every morning of the first eleven years of his life. "Up," Snape repeated.

"W' time is it?" Harry asked, his brain feeling as though it had an anchor tied to it, dragging him forcefully down into sleep.

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"Eight. I am not going to allow you to sleep late simply because you stayed out late." When Harry didn't move he said, "Up, or I will teach you a spell you will definitely not enjoy." Harry opened his eyes, alarm shaking the lethargy off somewhat. Snape continued in a snarkier tone, "It would be ironic to use it on you as I learned it from your father that way."

"Oh dear," Harry murmured, forcing himself to sit up. "I'm up, I'm up," he insisted, rubbing his eyes hard since they were gritty and ached abominably.

"Breakfast will be on the table shortly," Snape said, making even that sound like a command.

Harry stumbled around the room and managed to put on some clothes, which was difficult as his eyes would not stay open very long at one time. Somehow he made it downstairs and into a chair at the table, where he propped his head up on his hand. He wanted nothing in the world more than to be back in bed, asleep, or at least attempting to sleep. Breakfast appeared. Snape poured him coffee and pushed it closer, even though it was well within reach.

"You must have had quite a bit. The "pink stuff" as you call it usually renders one more recovered than this."

"I had a lot," Harry admitted, forking a sausage and chewing it down. He felt better almost immediately. "Ron must really be hurting," he said, then wondered where he had ended up since the last blurry thing Harry remembered was Hermione trying to convince him to come home with her instead. He also considered that it was nice of Ginny to make sure he got home. "So I'm not grounded?" he asked, thinking of checking up on his friends.

"Not this time. Some jubilation is to be expected when you finish school . . . though I am surprised just how much you indulged in," he added in a dark tone.

"You lose track like you said," Harry agreed, thinking he would definitely have to work out a way to avoid that. Harry buttered his toast and nibbled that down as he thought over the night before. "I'm sorry I said you were cruel."

"I wanted to make it clear I was angry with you. That feeling of lifted responsibility alcohol produces is a trap. I would let you despise me before allowing you to fall into it."

"So, if it does happen again . . . ?" Harry began.

Snape's eyes narrowed and his face, which had relaxed, hardened. "You will not like me, then."

"Yeah, I bet," Harry breathed, feeling cowed and little surprised to be so, especially after last night when he was feeling so independent and self-possessed. Harry sighed and moved his coffee in a way that cued Snape to refill it for him.

Harry took the Floo to the Burrow late in the morning. Mrs. Weasley gave him the usual hug, but it didn't have much feeling behind it. Ginny sat in the living room reading Witch Weekly . "Didn't expect to see you so soon," she said.

Harry sat beside her on the worn cushion. Mrs. Weasley headed back to the kitchen and started making cooking noises. Quietly, Harry said, "Snape wasn't happy, but I got off with a warning."

Ginny laughed. "Wow, didn't look like that was going to be the case last night."

"I blackmailed him a bit," Harry said, studying his fingers.

"You what? And how does one do that?"

"I reminded him that I did away with Voldemort," Harry said. "Think I can see Ron?"

"Oh, well." She thought a moment and leaned forward to look into the kitchen. "His punishment is YTBD." At Harry's questioning look, she explained, "Yet To Be Determined. But go on up, what can they do to you? Though, I'll warn you, Ron isn't feeling so good."

Harry glanced at the busy Mrs. Weasley and headed to the stairs. In Ron's room, his friend was lying in bed still a little greenish. "'ello," he managed, upon turning his head to look at Harry coming in the door. "You look good," he accused. "How's that?"

Harry reached into his pocket and took out three small bottles, from which he poured out a splash of each into a grungy water glass beside the bed. He held it out to his friend saying, "Compliments of your least favorite Potions professor."

Ron managed to sit up halfway and accept it. "Who, Greer?"

"You never had Greer as a teacher."

Ron sipped the fizzing liquid. "I heard 'Mione complaining enough." He swallowed the rest of it. "Wow," he breathed, blinking brightly. "Get the recipe for that."

"He won't tell me so I think it's restricted."

"Who cares?" Ron exclaimed, sitting up. "No wonder you look so chipper. You get that last night?"

"After being forced to puke."

"I didn't need forcing," Ron said, slipping out of his pyjamas and into some clothes. "I need to go do damage control so this Quidditch match is still possible. Merlin, what was I thinking last night?"

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Over the next days, Harry spent a great deal of time on correspondence. Friends and acquaintances from school all owled as the holiday began, saying how their time was going to be spent and providing addresses for the summer. Harry wrote back explaining his planned trip and his testing so many times he thought he should learn a parchment duplication spell. Even McGonagall wrote, wishing him luck on his continued application to the Auror's program. Harry wrote a very carefully penned letter back to her. As he sealed it up in an envelope he wondered why he had tried so hard, since he never did before and hadn't when writing her an essay just two weeks ago.

Harry also wrote a long letter to Penelope where he hoped her travels home had gone smoothly and giving her news of others from their letters. He sort of missed her already but he could easily get wrapped up in other things, for a while anyway, until he thought about being really close to her.

Snape came into the drawing room where Harry was working at the desk. "I'm almost done," Harry said, thinking his guardian wanted to sit there.

Snape waved him off. "I ordered you this," he said, holding out a large book, still wrapped in brown paper.

Harry opened it and read the cover. Menacing Mastery , it read. Harry pulled his head back and looked up in surprise. "This was in the restricted section at Hogwarts." When Snape gave him a look that implied he had incriminated himself, Harry explained, "Sometimes we were actually allowed in. But mostly not," he said as he opened the book. It contained a lot of very nasty things like disemboweling curses and inferno spells. "Thanks," Harry said. He set the book aside for later study and asked, "I can still go to Switzerland, right?"

"If you can fit it in, I don't see why not," Snape responded while he straightened the files stacked on the credenza.

Harry collected up his letters and the new book and stood to leave. "Thanks," he said again.

Snape shrugged lightly. "You are of age and may do as you wish . . . as long as it doesn't interfere with the peace of this household. Or threaten your future," he added with a sharp look.

The portkey to the Falmouth match dropped Mr. Weasley, Harry, Severus, Ron and Hermione between the circular towers of a small castle, overlooking an expanse of green lawn and, far below, a bay.

"Ugh, Pendennis," Ron grouched. "I think they do this to all the visiting fans."

"Where is the pitch?" Harry asked.

Ron pointed across the inlet to a similar castle on the other side. "Over there, in a spatial slice. Why did we not appear there , you may ask?" Ron continued to complain.

"Really?" Harry asked, trying to imagine a gap big enough to hold an entire arena. He could see an unusual number of people meandering around the towers across the way. A pair of gulls noisily flew overhead and the wind gusted onshore, making it almost chilly. A distant figure in a large orange hat disappeared as Harry watched him.

Ron put his hands in his pockets, looking happy to impart Quidditch history. "They've been extending the spells for two hundred years, from when it only seated three hundred rather than twelve thousand."

"Well, shall we go then?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Coast is clear. Heh, literally," he added with a crooked grin as he gestured at the empty lawn dipping down to hillside out of view and finally the ocean.

Ron quickly turned his bright cloak around so the autographed side faced out; he then took his father's arm. "Can't bloody wait to have the license," he muttered just before they Disapparated. Presently, Mr. Weasley reappeared, graciously offered Hermione an arm and disappeared with another pop!

"We need to find time for those lessons," Harry said, holding up his arm to be grasped.

Near the silver entrance, marked by tall, glistening banners, they found Suze waiting. She gave Harry a nice smile and greeted her professor a little shyly. Mr. Weasley introduced himself warmly, which brought her smile back. The area outside the seating was full of gregarious witches and wizards, some carrying drinks and snacks, others talking and gesturing broadly about the upcoming game.

Just as they found their seats, the sun came out, sweeping the blue-grey light from the stands and making the gilding on the banner poles sparkle. Blinking in the glare, even with the shade of his cap, Harry filed into a row between Suze and Snape. The stands were crowded even this early, maybe because the weather was so nice.

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"You don't mind that I'm cheering for Falmouth?" Suze asked, pinching the corner of her grey cloak where a black falcon head logo resided with the encircling motto Let us win, but if we cannot win, let us break a few heads .

"No, not at all," Harry assured her. "There are other Falmouth fans in the visitor's section," he pointed out, gesturing at the two fans just down from them. ". . . so you won't be cheering alone, which is good, because I expect you'll be doing it often, if Ron's assessment of the Cannons' season is accurate."

"Sounds like it is," she opined a little pertly.

"Don't rub it in," Harry insisted with a smile.

"Want anything?" Ron shouted. "I'm going down for treats."

Harry leaned forward to look past Snape and Mr. Weasley. "What do they have?"

Ron started to list many things Harry had not heard of, such as Crusted Caterwauls and Delectable Delicates. "I'll just get you something," he finally said, seeing Harry's expression.

"Thanks."

Ron came back with something that at first Harry thought was an ordinary caramel apple, since it was red underneath, on a stick and smelled of caramel.

"Yum, a Cherry Bomb," Suze said beside him.

"Did you want something?" Harry only now thought to ask.

"No, it's unlucky to get anything before the game starts," she said knowingly.

"Ah." Harry started to take a bite of his treat only to have it spit a caramel-covered fruit ball into his mouth before he even got close. He pretended to expect that and chewed the sticky sweet. It tasted pretty good, actually. He tried not to imagine growing up like this, with regular sunny afternoons watching Quidditch, eating exploding candy. Tried, but didn't quite succeed. Snape was eyeing his sweet, Harry noticed when he glanced at him. "Want some?"

"No."

"Certain?"

"Quite," Snape replied in his driest voice.

Harry grinned and opened his mouth for another morsel; the treat was on target again. By the time the teams were being introduced, Harry had had his fill and given

it up to Hermione who had originally insisted she did not want anything too sweet. She looked to be enjoying it from what Harry could see this many seats away.

The teams circled. Suze called out to a few of the Falcons by first name, shouting encouragingly. The Cannons fans in front of them turned around a few times in annoyance before finally ignoring her. For someone her size, she really could shout.

The Quaffle was tossed into the air and the teams became blurs of color. The Chudley first possession was wasted on a poor shot and Falmouth came back immediately and only did not score because a misdirected Bludger clipped the shooting Chaser's broom tail. As the game went on, Harry made himself relax, since he really didn't care who won beyond making Ron happy, and Ron seemed happy just to be here.

An off-key song started up among the more orange-clad fans. The words were not flattering at all. Harry glanced down their row and saw that Ron was mouthing the words and glancing at Mr. Weasley, who had his arms crossed and appeared sternly disapproving.

"You don't know the songs?" Suze asked Harry.

"I've never been to a match before."

"Really?" she sounded completely disbelieving.

"I went to the World Cup a few years ago. That's it."

"I was there too. Took months to talk my dad into taking me. Fortunately we left that evening; otherwise, I don't think I'd have heard the end of it."

"Good time to have left," Harry agreed.

"You were there that night?" she asked curiously after cheering a Falmouth goal.

"Yeah. What a night," he said at the memory. "Mr. Weasley sent us into the woods to get out of the way and we lost track of people and then someone sends a Dark Mark over our heads, using MY wand."

"Really?" she blurted, stunned and a little amused. A Cannon had fallen off her broom onto the turf and medi-witches were tending her.

"What are you discussing?" Snape asked when the crowd quieted.

"My last Quidditch match: the World Cup."

"Ah," Snape said somewhat snidely. "Surprising you wanted to go to another, given that."

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Down on the field, they were picking up the fallen player on a large orange tarp and a substitution was announced.

"Someone used your wand?" Suze prompted curiously.

"Yeah, and there I was, trying to explain that I didn't know where I'd lost it. I didn't even know what the Mark meant-"

"Wait," Suze said sharply. "YOU didn't know what the Dark Mark was?"

"No," Harry insisted.

Her face twisted in doubt. "Professor, is he telling the truth?" she asked Snape.

The game restarted and Falmouth nearly scored twice, one shot after another, the second shot bouncing off the ring. The crowd groaned. Snape replied. "I assume so. Remarkably naïve boy, Harry was."

"See?" Harry said in chagrin.

The game continued. A Falmouth player fell and this time the medi-witches took their time moving him off the pitch. The referee called a rare halt to the game, bringing both Seekers to the ground in the center of the grass where they proceeded to chat like old friends. Harry sat back, wishing he had not given away his sweet so quickly. But then, a commotion from down the bench made them all lean forward. Ron was red faced and Mr. Weasley had a hold of his cloak, which meant he had a hold, in a way, around Ron's neck.

"Ronald Bilious . . . " Mr. Weasley was stating furiously, "I cannot believe a son of mine would use such language." He tugged Ron before him in Harry's direction. "Harry, would you mind terribly changing places with my son, who is apparently incapable of holding his tongue and temper at a harmless Quidditch match."

Harry glanced from Hermione's pained expression to the gaping looks from the two grey-robed Falmouth fans in the next row forward and finally to Ron's beet-red face. "Sure, Mr. Weasley," Harry replied agreeably. As he stood and let Ron pass, he said goodbye to Suze with ease, knowing that she and Ron would not have difficulty discussing the game. Furious, Ron took Harry's seat and crossed his arms. Harry slipped down the row to sit beside Hermione, wondering how long it would be before Ron realized he was sitting beside Snape.

Harry said hello to Hermione, wanted to ask what happened, but the furtive glances from the Falmouth fans with bad haircuts just ahead of them made him hold back. The game resumed, but the crowd remained quiet. One of the Falmouth fans scoffed

and said to the other, "Gee hope this one doesn't claim to have fought Voldemort too. What a numbskull the redhead was."

Harry narrowed his eyes and glanced at Hermione. "I see the problem," he said.

She leaned close. "You could take your cap off."

"That would be too easy," Harry returned, watching Falmouth score easily on a simple dodge play. The fans in front of them leapt up and did a strange little victory routine that ended with four hands slapping over their heads followed by bumped hips. "Maybe I haven't missed that much," he commented to himself.

"I would say," Hermione confirmed dryly.

The Cannons finally scored, off an admittedly dirty play involving a Beater-pinch that could have been called as a foul. Harry was glad he wasn't on a broom facing the oversized Cannon Beaters. One of the Falmouth fans spun on them and snipped, "That the only way you can score?" Harry, not really wanting to get into a position of defending that, simply shrugged. The man scoffed. "You friends with that loon down there?" he asked indicating Ron.

"Best friends," Harry replied distinctly.

"Amazing he has friends," the thinner man said, the one whose bad haircut left him with a triangular bald spot that Harry had to work not to stare at.

"Yeah," the chubby one on the right agreed gregariously. "Bet 'e also claims to be in the Order. Order of the Pigeon, wasn't it called?" he added with a laugh.

Harry glared at the man as the world tried to close in on him. He could feel the green haze, sucked in by his anger, hovering just beyond the sphere of his vision. His hand was on his wand pocket when Hermione jerked him by the elbow. "Harry!" she whispered harshly. He dropped his arm and shook himself. The first man was eyeing him warily now, but at least it quieted him down.

The score was eighty to ten and the Cannons' Seeker was diving, apparently for the Snitch. The stands rose up, but he either was faking or lost track of it, because he returned to circling high. The fans, happy to stretch, remained standing. Mr. Weasley turned from talking to Snape and asked how things were going. "Fine," Hermione replied brightly. "Harry's only gone for his wand once," she teased.

"Hermione," Harry quietly chastised her. Snape, eyes narrowed, slid past Mr. Weasley with purpose. Harry just heard Hermione's whispered apology as Snape came alongside him in the crowded space and put an arm around his shoulders, gripped hard, and leaned over him. "You what?"

"I was just checking that I had it," Harry insisted, surprised by the concern Snape was showing.

"No green visions?" Snape whispered matter-of-factly.

"No," Harry replied, which was mostly true. He was again surprised, this time by Snape's perception.

The chubby Falmouth fan turned and made faces. He nudged his friend and pointed over his shoulder. The other turned and said, "Ha, he's in trouble with dad?"

Snape looked up and after a pause said, "Something you need, Mr. Trellis?"

Confused, the chubby man asked, "Do I know you?"

"No," Snape replied darkly. "Nor do you wish to."

The man's eyes bugged a little before he turned to his friend. "Dad's a friggin' dark magic goon . . . wonderful."

Snape's eyes narrowed to slits and Harry asked with a touch of innocence, "Not thinking at all about where your wand might be, are you?"

Snape backed off and released him. "As you were, Harry," he said easily, but he remained standing beside him. Gradually, everyone returned to sitting on the benches when it became clear the game was going on a lot longer.

After Falmouth scored ninety and they were forced to watch the victory dance yet again, Hermione nudged Harry. He looked down and saw that she had her wand up her sleeve. With a malicious grin she whispered something, of which Harry only caught the word "binding". Curious, he watched the two before them. Nothing immediately happened. After a minute though the one on the right began shifting oddly in his seat and stamping his foot. Finally as though exasperated, he reached down and tried to take his shoe off, unsuccessfully. Hermione covered a giggle. Another minute of frantic tugging ensued before the spell wore off.

To Harry's surprise, Hermione immediately nudged him again. She muttered something while glancing at the sky. Harry waited for the result, trying not to be too obviously amused. A gull passed close overhead, then another, one dropping on the shoulder of the left-hand fan's robe and the other on his head. Harry had to duck and pretend brush off his jeans to hide his laugh while the Falmouth fans cleaned up with discarded sweet wrappers.

This time, Harry nudged his friend, after furtive movements to pull his wand into his sleeve. " Caldera Garmentia ," he whispered while pointing at the chubby man on

the right, who immediately began fanning himself with the colorful team report in his hand and complaining about the sunlight. He had completely unhooked his robe, and was getting dirty looks from the little old ladies in orange in front of him, before Harry canceled the spell.

Snape leaned in. "I assume that was you."

"Why would you assume that?" Harry asked innocently and received a very doubtful raised brow in reply.

Mercifully, the Falmouth Seeker caught the Snitch ten minutes later. Ron groaned in genuine-sounding pain and put his head in his hands. Harry wondered how he could still have been that hopeful. "Better luck next time, I'm sure," Harry shouted to his friend as they all stood up and waited to file out.

The Falmouth fans stood on tiptoe, hoping to find a fast way out. The chubby one turned around with a frown at Snape, who apparently made him uneasy, which made Harry smile. The scorching sun was beaming down full time now and Harry pulled off his cap and wiped his brow unthinkingly. The man yelped in surprise, making Harry tense. He avoided the stunned man's gaze but it could not be helped. The man tugged hard on his friend's robe saying, "It's 'Arry Potter, it's 'Arry Potter." This got everyone else's attention as well.

Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic frown when it was clear that the top rows of their section had stopped shuffling toward the exit because everyone had turned to look for him. Harry stuffed his cap into his pocket resignedly. The two Falmouth fans moved away, pushed aside by others moving in. "Eh, did 'Arry Potter make yer shoe too tight?" The thin one asked the other excitedly as they were swallowed by the crowd.

"Oy, imagine that if 'e did," the other said, sounding bizarrely reverent. They glanced back with eyes full of amazement. Harry studiously avoided glancing directly their way. A wizened little wizard came forward from the surrounding crowd and shook Harry's hand in silence, nodding continuously. This cued others to move in as well. Harry shook a lot of hands before the stands emptied out and he could put his cap back on.

As they made their way down to the grass, a group in orange approached. It took a moment to realize it was the Cannons themselves, some still carrying their brooms. Ron grabbed Harry's arm to bring him to a halt and wait for the others to come aside. The team stopped. "Oy," one of them said, "We 'eard 'Arry Potter was here."

Harry glanced at Ron, who had gone moony-eyed, and shook his head. He slipped off his cap again and stepped around his friend who seemed to be stuck in place. The

Keeper, a tall man with a ruddy face and dark hair pulled back in a short ponytail high on his head, came forward and gave Harry a powerful handshake. Beside him, Ron murmured, "Roybus Barbicon," kind of adoringly. Harry stepped back, "My friend, Ron," he said, pushing Ron forward.

"Wow," was all Ron managed, as his hand was shaken.

Handshakes went all around as they were introduced to the team. Harry got a bruising hug from one of the Beaters, a hulking woman with cropped hair who didn't seem to speak any English. "Natasha," Barbicon had to prompt to get her to let go. Natasha finally did, patting Harry on the head and looking teary-eyed. Barbicon then asked, "Can we get a picture? With the team?"

Harry shrugged, but then nodded upon seeing Ron's very hopeful face. They stepped onto the pitch before the goal posts and lined up. Snape and Mr. Weasley declined to get into the picture, but Suze was dragged into it, despite her clear Falcon affiliation. The team photographer, a man about Flitwick's size, bustled about getting everyone adjusted just so before firing off a flash pan that burned like a pyre while he took several pictures.

"Anytime you need tickets," Barbicon said to Harry after they broke up. "Just owl the office; you know our address," he said with a crooked grin and an elbow jab in the direction of Ron's cloak.

"Yep. And thanks for that."

The man made an odd noise like a hissing scoff. "'S nothing. Really." Harry realized then that the man was actually nervous talking to him. The man's gaze went distant. "Oy, Gregor come over here, meet our biggest fan," he shouted and gestured with his arm. Harry turned as a group of four in plain robes approached. They had a confident swagger to them, although they looked wary as well. "Falmouth Captain," Barbicon said to Harry, apparently noticing his lack of recognition. Suze sidled over beside Harry as the others arrived and rocked up on her toes while biting her lower lip.

"Co-opting our fans," one of the Falcons accused, indicating Suze.

Barbicon replied, "No, just a friend of Harry Potter's here."

"Ah, so it is," Gregor said dryly, his thin sandy hair tossing easily in the wind. He shook Harry's hand perfunctorily. Behind the captain, a bald man with one long eyebrow, lowered it an inch as he looked Harry over closely, making the hair on Harry's neck bristle. Harry shook hands with him too, not giving away his unease.

The man's eyes sparkled strangely as they exchanged pleasantries. Harry introduced Suze to them who, unlike Ron, didn't seem to be moony at all, just interested.

When the four had sauntered off in the direction of the open end of the pitch, Harry said flatly, "Unnerving group."

"They're a little surly, all right," Barbicon commented with a shrug.

"No," Harry murmured, still feeling uneasy as though their recent proximity made him now require a counter-curse, "it's not that."

Barbicon pushed his shoulders back and watched the four Falcon's step out of sight. "Well, I'll be sure not to insult them to their faces anymore."

"I'd do that," Harry confirmed. He looked down at Suze beside him.

"I didn't like them," she stated, sounding confused.

Barbicon said consolingly, "The others are much nicer; too bad they didn't come out."

She adjusted her cloak which had been pushed crooked by the steady breeze. "I don't think I want to play for them."

"Four years is a long time," Harry said reassuringly. Snape still gazed over where the four had disappeared. Ron with Hermione beside him was chatting animatedly with the Cannons a few feet away, not paying attention.

"You can play for us ," Barbicon said brightly, holding out his broom to Suze.

"What?" one of the others complained; "You were taken off recruiting, remember?"

"Yes, after I brought you in," Barbicon returned teasingly, his ruddy face pulled into a broad smile.

Harry grinned, thinking that Ron had picked the right team to cheer for. Barbicon held his broom out farther to Suze. "That's a Mortabella," Suze said, looking it over.

"Gift from my grandmum," Barbicon stated brightly.

"No," Suze said, shaking her head.

"No, really," the man insisted, sounding serious now. Harry wanted to break out laughing but held back. Barbicon went on. "What position do you play, Keeper?"

"You are teasing me," Suze insisted, clearly not happy about that notion.

Harry said, "He teases everyone, I think."

"'Cept this bloke," Barbicon said conspiratorially, indicating Harry. "Not sure what he'd do to me . . ."

Harry straightened and blinked in surprise, wondering how he appeared to this big man. Suze, giving Barbicon a doubtful look, insisted, "He wouldn't do anything." She accepted the broom though, and looked it over with an expert eye. "Can I really try this?"

"Sure. Just bring it back before the next match."

Suze looked to Harry who gestured that she accept. She shucked her cloak to the grass and kicked off. The team watched her circle and slalom lazily before returning to their conversations. Suze veered suddenly a few times, then headed straight at the tallest bleacher. Barbicon grabbed Harry's sleeve. "What's she doing?"

"Her favorite maneuver," Harry answered calmly. The grip on Harry's sleeve tightened as Suze accelerated and pulled a right angle diagonal at just the last moment to avoid crashing, then flew a fast corkscrew that tightened each turn ending in spin, which she halted perfectly level.

"Her favorite, eh?"

"So her opponent ends up in the hospital wing," Harry said.

After watching her slalom some more, Barbicon said, "You play Seeker, right?"

"Yep. I was out of the hospital wing by the next day," Harry stated reassuringly.

"Toss out the practice snitch," Barbicon suggested loudly. A blonde man frowned from the other group, but obeyed. The Snitch fluttered a moment just above the ground before taking off under the control of a pointed wand.

The Cannon's Seeker stepped over. "We aren't really having a tryout, are we?"

Barbicon shook his head as Suze gave chase to the Snitch and they all watched. "Broom flies like there's no one on it," he observed after a minute. After two, Suze had caught the Snitch despite it being rather controlled rather illusively. She landed with it in hand after one of those braking dives that looks like an imminent collision with the ground.

"Nice broom," she said to Barbicon as she handed it back. She was at least a little out of breath.

"When do you finish school?" the Cannon's captain asked in an innocent tone.

"Four years," Harry supplied

"Oh, good," the current Seeker breathed in relief. "I'll have broken my neck again by then, so that's okay."

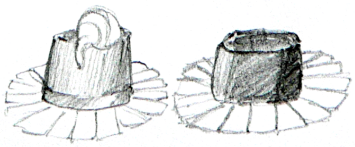
Later, while they walked around the lee side of the castle to get to a portkey, Suze asked Harry, "Do you really think I can play professional?" She sounded very hopeful.

"You impressed their captain and had their Seeker worried," he pointed out. Seeing that more was needed, he added, "Why not? Just keep working at it."

She frowned thoughtfully until they came to a halt at a torn crisps wrapper weighted down with a smooth grey rock. "You were wrong, Professor," Suze said. When Snape turned to her curiously, she said, "Winning isn't everything."

Mr. Weasley picked up the wrapper and the rock and held the wrapper out so everyone could reach it. Snape responded, "There are times when it is." His eyes flicked to Harry. "Fortunately, they are rare."

Chapter 48.



Distant Shores

Harry finished a long letter to Penelope and sealed it up. The large white owl which had delivered her letter, waited on a chair back as he wrote. Harry handed the owl his reply, which it immediately departed with out the window, then took her scented letter to the drawing room, where his guardian worked on large piles of parchment. Snape looked up when he entered and dropped his quill down, seeming grateful for a distraction.

"The only time I can go to Switzerland is next week, since my Auror testing is the week after," said Harry. He was trying to not feel too hopeful about managing to arrange his first trip to the Continent.

Snape rubbed his temple thoughtfully, then said, "Are you eager to travel alone?"

"Um." He shrugged. "I've never gone very far before, so I guess not."

"There is an extensive library, the Bibliothèque Magie Vieux near Geneva, which I have always thought worth a visit. If you wish, we can travel together most of the way." He watched Harry think that over, before adding, while he slowly rubbed his long fingers together, "If you see this as some kind of right of passage, then by all means-"

"No," Harry replied quickly. There would be a lot of hours on trains, he considered. And finding one's way around unfamiliar places. "I'd like to have someone along. Can we leave on Sunday, then?"

Snape glanced over the parchments spread before him in thought. "I'll manage to make it work."

Harry was not familiar with packing for traveling, just for school. He put things in and out of his trunk, unable to decide if he needed them or not. He also had to consider that on Muggle trains, he would have to handle his trunk by hand, not magic, so he didn't want it to be overly full.

Snape stopped by his room. "Are you eating lunch?" he asked.

"I'm trying to pack."

"You will want a smaller container. Just a moment." Snape returned with a half-size trunk, red with silver corners and latch. "Do try to fit everything you need in that, without the use of magic, if possible." He started to leave but paused to say, "And come down to lunch."

During sandwiches and tea, Harry studied the itinerary from the travel agent, fascinated by the spell used for the animated logo of a witch on a broomstick with a big heavy trunk balanced on the back of it. Everytime the animation repeated the turnk had destination stickers from different continents. The schedule below indicated that it would take most of a day to arrive in Bern from when they departed. A very long day where they would try to maximize magical transport, which, as Harry expected, wasn't terribly organized.

First they would Floo to Canterbury where they had to catch the train and then a ferry across the Channel. Then they could Floo or take a train, a decision to be made when they arrived on the Continent, but it seemed likely that they would have to catch the train to Cologne, where they could definitely use another Floo network to Lake Constantz. Although, the travel agent warned them that the pub was hard to find and the lines could be very long at the hearth, but it was a pub, so they could manage to pass the time there or they could buy a token to hold their place and explore the old town a while. Then onto the German-Swiss border where they had to catch a train again because foreigners were not allowed to Floo inside Switzerland. It all looked very complicated to Harry, and as adventuresome as it sounded, he was glad he would not have to navigate it alone.

That evening, Harry finally finished packing. He had sent letters to his friends, telling them in detail where he was going and for how long, now that he knew for certain. Hedwig's cage was empty and Kali was gnawing on the small stuffed bear he had bought her to play with. Elizabeth had promised to come and take care of both of them. Nervous and excited at the prospect of distant travel, Harry headed down to find Snape.

He found his guardian in the drawing room working on his endless piles of paperwork. "I'm all packed for tomorrow morning," Harry said, feeling as though that were some kind of major victory.

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"Ready to leave, then? Ready for your first visit to the Continent?"

"Definitely."

"Ready to meet your lady friend's parents for the first time?"

Harry opened his mouth, then thought that over. "Maybe."

Snape continued on in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Ready to spend unsupervised hours alone with said lady friend?"

Harry tried very hard not to give himself away as he replied, "Yes."

"Take a seat, Harry. We should have a little talk."

Harry scratched his ear and pulled over a chair from the wall to before the desk. He did not like the tone of that. With crossed arms he waited for Snape to finish what he was doing. Snape finally did, putting his quill down and considering Harry for an uncomfortable span of silence.

Snape steepled his fingers and grimaced lightly. "We have never discussed certain things."

Harry's clothes suddenly felt too tight and his collar itchy. "Guess not."

"You need to be aware of certain things when you faced with a situation which man not be conducive to circumspect decision making," Snape said. Harry thought that had to be the most roundabout thing he had ever heard. Snape went on, "Going on eighteen, you almost certainly believe you know everything."

All the things Tonks had discussed during their one night together flitted through his mind, making him flush as well as making his collar damp. He didn't feel utterly ignorant, really, but didn't with to argue that point either.

Snape had fallen silent. Harry Occluded his mind and looked up at him, cueing him to continue. "You need to be very careful, more careful than your friends need be. Your reputation is a commodity, one that can be traded upon by those with less than your best interest at heart."

Brow furrowed, Harry said sharply, "You think Penelope-"

Snape firmly cut him short. "I am not speaking of anyone in particular. I do not think it wise to completely trust anyone when we are speaking of things such as progeny you are not intending to produce. You must always take your own precautions, is what I am insisting."

"I understand what you are saying," Harry said, discomfort translating into anger as he spoke.

Snape answered the anger with a steely tone, "But are you knowledgeable enough to manage?"

Harry forced himself not to squirm; he really wanted this conversation over with. "Yes," he breathed, keeping his anger down. When Snape gave him a doubtful look, Harry asked, "You have a book I can read or something?"

Snape frowned and muttered, "No, unfortunately I was not thinking ahead."

"I really think I can manage." Harry was feeling more grateful to Tonks by the moment. "Really. I'll be very careful," he said as though by rote.

"Do so," Snape said firmly before returning to his thick stacks of parchment.

Ron and Hermione met them in Canterbury early in the morning to see them off. They walked down the quiet main street while waiting for the train, their luggage beside the platform disguised as two pet carriers containing very ornery rottweilers. After two groups of wizard tourists recognized Harry, he pulled his orange cap out of his day pack and donned it even though the clouds gave no hint of letting any sun through.

"You should get back to the station," Hermione said as they stood outside a crooked and sagging half-timbered pub. The whole town looked as though it might have been constructed over a swamp, the way everything leaned in different directions. They turned around and headed back to the gate, where they split up, Hermione giving Harry a nice hug and telling him to behave.

"Sure, Hermione," Harry laughed at her serious attitude.

Ron gave him a slap on the shoulder and told him to have fun instead of behaving. At the station Snape and Harry transformed their luggage back to normal when no one was looking and waited for the next train.

The ride to the coast took longer than Harry thought it would, and the train rocked a lot as it clattered along, much more than the Hogwarts Express. He watched the rolling landscape and could not help imaging instead the steep Alps from the travel brochure.

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The ferry ride across the Channel left Harry believing that no Muggle child knew how to behave. The total journey felt impossibly long as he stared out the scratched window at the rain beating on the grey choppy water.

In Brugge they stopped for tea after a bus ride from the port dropped them in old town. Harry stared into his cup and thought the day had gone on a little long already, but at least the sun was shining part of the time and it was not actively raining. They sat outside on a cobblestone street beside a railing overlooking a canal lined with very old stone buildings. Harry kept forgetting where he was and had to remind himself this was not just some unusual part of Shrewsthorpe, Hogsmeade, or London.

"We should find the Floo network or local equivalent," Snape commented. "Muggle transport is proving more ... annoying than anticipated."

"The travel agent wasn't exactly clear about getting across Belgium," Harry complained "She seemed to think it was small enough that any manner of travel would suffice." A tour boat went by, repeating the some historic point in seven languages. Harry could smell something wonderful cooking. "Do we have time for lunch?" he asked hopefully, even though it was only just after eleven.

"If they will serve it to you this early."

Harry flagged the waiter, who pretended that he didn't speak any English, forcing Harry to settle for the recommended dish. What arrived was an alarmingly large canister, steaming with a wonderful seashore and onion aroma. Inside it were more black mussels than Harry could imagine in one place.

After a minute of slow eating, the waiter came over and demonstrated with copious rambling French on the side, how to use an empty shell as a pincer to get the meat out of another shell. Harry thanked him and began eating with gusto. In the end he sat back and Snape finished the rest, including the curry and mustard mayonnaise, which hadn't appealed to Harry at all. As he had more tea and rubbed his full stomach, Harry decided traveling was all right after all.

It took only a quarter hour of wandering the alleys of Brugge for Snape to locate a wizard-run shop to ask how best to get to Cologne. The man told them to use the Booth network to go to Aachen where they could catch a train to Cologne. After a series of confusing questions, they were made to understand that the booth network was intended for wizard tourists and that it only went to a few cities in the Benelux region, since the Ministry had never finished building the network. He shrugged as if to say that its incompletion was expected. He sent them off to hunt for a Muggle photo booth.

They located one off the main square. Snape pointed to the sample photo on the side, of a slightly cross-eyed man, the signal that the booth was also a portal. They fed two Galleons into the coin slot, magically shrunk their trunks so they would fit beside their feet inside the booth, and slipped onto the seat. Harry pulled the curtain closed at the edges as Snape addressed the screen. " Please select your destination ," the screen read in flowing script. A list appeared beside a row of large red buttons down the side of the screen normally used for selecting photographic options. Snape pushed the one corresponding to Aix la Chappelle. " Please wait for your turn on the network ."

"I thought computers broke around magic," Harry commented.

"Not always," Snape said as he sat back on the narrow bench. Falling into lecture mode, he explained, "It is easy to cast a spell to disrupt Muggle technology and many spells will do so, but it is possible to cast ones that will not, although it requires some skill."

Their turn on the network finally came up and after a flap of the curtain and a vibration of the floor, the screen informed them that they had arrived. Harry doubtfully peeked out, but indeed, they were now in a strange bus station. He slipped out and looked back into the booth, only to realize it lacked their trunks.

"That's not good," Harry said, peering back inside and under the metal seat. They both looked all around the outside of the booth and the surrounding area full of people. Losing his luggage made Harry feel very uneasy, as though he might not find his way home again without it.

"We will wait a few minutes before returning to see if it was merely left behind," Snape said.

After what felt like a half an hour but was probably only five minutes, the trunks materialized behind the booth, full size. Harry breathed out loudly in relief. "I will second that," Snape said as he pulled his trunk off the top of Harry's.

Since they were at the bus station, they caught a bus to Cologne. Harry expected to have to wait for one, but for once their timing was dead on and within minutes they were roaring down the autobahn at a good clip and the bus was mercifully quiet with almost no children.

Snape pulled out a French dictionary and began studying it. Harry wondered if he should have learned a few words of German before leaving or learned a polylingual spell. He decided to not worry since Penelope could take care of translations when

needed. He watched the landscape go by as well as the occassional very fast German sports car, passing on his side of the bus, the left side, which felt odd.

Outside the Cologne train station, the blackened cathedral towered over them as they stepped off the bus. The sun shined brightly here, making Harry squint and pull his cap down farther over his eyes. They towed their trunks–Harry surreptitiously had put a Featherlight charm on his–up around the cathedral and down a side street into the old town.

It was busy here. Many people sat outside pubs at small, high tables drinking diminutive glasses of beer. Their trunk pulling garnered some strange looks from the well-dressed drinkers. At a corner, Snape pulled a parchment from his pocket and looked around at the addresses. It required three passes down the block but finally they found the pub, sandwiched between a violin store and a pizza shop. Harry was sure it had not been there on previous passes, and frankly, maybe it hadn't.

Inside, the Dom Brauhaus was crowded and smokey from many pipes. Harry followed behind Snape as he made his way around to the blonde, braid-sporting barmaid pouring drinks from a tap at a rapid pace. "We want to take the Floo to the south," Snape said to her.

"Ein minute," she growled and carried the tray of little glasses away. Harry watched her swoop around the room, replacing empty glasses with full ones before returning to repeat the process. "Talk to Guido," she said, nodding at a rotund gentleman in a cap with a feather and a very long pipe, sitting on a stool by a tall clock. "Haf a dreenk," she said, handing a glass to Harry. Since it was small, he accepted it and sipped it as they found a path through the tall hats and cloaks to the far wall. Harry didn't see any hearths in the place, even in the side rooms off the main one. The beer was refreshing, making him realize he was very thirsty.

"Good?" Snape asked, as Harry gulped half the glass down. Harry nodded, then held the glass at his side rather than swig the rest of it as he was tempted to. He adjusted his cap to distract himself. Snape took Guido's attention away from the unsavory gentlemen he was speaking with and began a crude conversation in pidgin-English about how to take the Floo.

"Ees four galleons each," the man explained. The man beside him snorted. Snape's eyes narrowed. "Ya, for you, tree then. Und, uh, two and ten for the yung man mit you. Dat includes enough powder to get to Vienna if you vish." He made it sound as though he were being generous.

"We wish to go to Lake Constantz," Snape explained, fingering his coin purse. "Or Basel if you think that is better for getting to Switzerland."

"No, no connection at Basel, or it ees a difficult one. You would have to take a Muggle taxi for a ..." He waved his chubby hand in the air. "...tirty kilometers, forty. At Kreuzlingen, is only half a block to de train. Unless you have been before and can Apparate."

Snape shook his head and counted out the coins. "And the drinks are included, right?" he said. It sounded vaguely like a threat.

"Uh, ya. Fraulein Volf," he shouted to the barmaid and pointed at the two of them when she stood on tiptoe to look their way. The man put the coins away and pulled another coin purse out of his other pocket. He removed two large brass coins and handed them to Harry. "You are number fifty-three." He pointed at the tall clock beside him which Harry realized wasn't a clock at all but a big dial of numbers with three hands, one rusty steel, one brass, and one green copper. The brass hand was pointing at eighteen. The man said, "You vait for your turn, ya? Ven your number here, go up to stairs dere." They followed his gesture around behind him where the bottom of an old red-carpeted staircase could be seen through a doorway at the end, back dropped by a grimy stained-glass window. He waved them away and fell back into his low conversation with the seedy fellow who had slunk back against the wall. Harry had forgotten he was there.

The room was wall to wall with long tables pushed so close together that the benches touched. The end of table had just space for two across from each other. Snape strode over there and pointed at the two seats. One of the middle-aged men sitting there wearing a dark green linen coat said something in German, and when Snape didn't reply, he switched to English. "Dis is free."

Harry gratefully sat down, although he felt strange backed up against a wide witch behind him and forced to press against the man beside him to have enough space on the bench. The barmaid arrived with a faint smile and gave them each fresh glasses, taking Harry's warm one away. In the smoky warmth of the room the cold beverage was a relief. The rusty pointer on the dial moved two places. When the German wizards' conversation faded, the man beside Harry said something to him in German. The man across the table in the green coat said something with the word 'Englander' while gesturing at Harry. He then froze and looked a little surprised. "Solche grüne Augen," the man said and nodded at his fellow. Puzzled, the other turned to Harry, ducking to look under his orange hat brim. Across from him Harry could see Snape's alert gaze moving between them, even though he still casually sipped his beer.

The man beside Harry leaned close and said, "Dere is very famous English wizard with zuch eyes. He might wear a hat like this to hide his-" the man gestured shakily at his own forehead with a worn finger.

"Might he?" Harry asked, sipping from his glass.

The men exchanged an uneasy look and the one leaned over again and said conspiratorially, "Dere are no dark vizards here. None."

Confused by this proclamation, Harry replied agreeably if a bit doubtfully, "All right."

Seeming a little more nervous, the man said after glancing around, "You are hunting dark vizards, no?"

Harry laughed, which only apparently unnerved the man more. "No. Well, not yet anyway," he quipped.

The man in the green coat said, "You varn us, you start. Ve get out of the way."

Harry checked that the man looked serious and sat straight. "Do I look that dangerous?" Harry honestly asked the man before turning to Snape.

"Your reputation precedes you," Snape commented dryly.

"Do I really look more dangerous than him ?" Harry asked the men disbelievingly, indicating Snape.

They appeared to give this due consideration before shrugging. "You are der junge der ablehnte zu sterben, ja? Uh, der boy who refused to die?" the man restated upon seeing Harry's blank expression.

Harry gave in, took off his cap and fluffed his hair back and forth to get it off his head. Wearing a hat all day was the only way his hair did not stick up in many directions automatically.

The man's intent bloodshot eyes went over Harry's face and scar. "You destroy the Mitternachtlord," he went on forcefully, darkly. "You can defeat anyone."

"Oh, I don't think so," Harry said, grinning at the man's insistence for lack of a reasonable response. A fresh beer replaced his glass, which he had not realized he had emptied. A glance at Snape didn't reveal that he cared if Harry had another. The brass dial was now on twenty-three.

"You let us know," the man repeated with a nod before returning to the conversation with his companion.

"I will," Harry reassured him. Seeing Snape's serious expression, Harry asked, "You want a warning too?"

"I expect at this point I will see it coming in time," Snape replied easily. When Harry frowned lightly at him, he continued, "Trouble does seem to follow you."

After another half hour, the dial finally approached their numbers. They stood and collected their bags from the floor. The men gave them nods and one gave Harry a sloppy salute as he moved to where their trunks were stacked by the wall. On the stairs to the first floor, Harry said, "I was sort of hoping no one here would recognize me." Snape responded with a doubtful tilt of the head.

The room above was also covered in old, worn, red carpet. A pair of witches, speaking gaily in German, were pulling their trunks out of the very large pink marble hearth. A man in a Muggle business suit was waiting impatiently for them to move on, tossing his brass coin in the air and catching it. As soon as there was space to do so he rushed forward, dropped the coin into a decorative stein on the mantle and tossed down a great deal of Floo powder after announcing Berlin.

Harry was glad there was no one waiting behind them as they struggled a bit to arrange their trunks inside the firebox. Harry remembered just in time to toss the coins into the mug and duck back inside before Snape tossed the Floo powder. With a surge the red carpet was gone and they were spinning past fires and walls of stone and brick. Eventually they landed, unexpectedly on a nice carpet.

The hearth at this end was modern and almost Muggle looking with white paint and brushed steel on the hearth. A few wizards in steely grey cloaks stood chatting near a row of square windows on the far side of the room, but they paid no mind to the new arrivals. Bright engraved metal plaques pointed the way out and they followed the one which indicated it led to the Bahnhof. They charmed the trunks and carried them down a modern staircase, along a well-lit corridor and through a plain door into the middle of the train station. Minutes later they had tickets and were on the train, their trunks taking up most of the luggage space at the end of the car. Harry reclined his seat and let himself relax.

"Is it me or was that last part too easy?" Harry asked.

"They don't manufacture watches here for no reason," Snape commented as he pulled out his dictionary again and began reading. The train pulled away right on the minute printed on the ticket.

The low hills spread out beyond the windows, the sun glowing blindingly bright from patches of snow in the distance. Harry's eyes slipped closed with the methodic rocking of the train.

"You are missing the scenery," Snape said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Harry snapped awake as the train pulled into Winterthur and announcements blared incomprehensibly on the platform. As they pulled out again, Harry tried to keep

his eyes open and watch the neatly farmed hillsides with their unusual-looking farmhouses. Little towns clung to high hillsides of green with roads snaking up and through them. Harry found himself unable to accept that this was still the same day they had departed Shrewsthorpe.

The world blinked out as they passed through a tunnel and out over a bridge as though the train had taken flight. Harry's eyes felt too heavy even for such a pastoral scene of fields backed by snow capped peaks, and hanging valleys and he fell asleep again.

Something chittered at Harry, something hard to catch a clear sense of beyond the spindly limbs, long fingers of unbreakable grip, and jagged teeth of grey stone. Harry opened his eyes and was disoriented by the black window, the tiny overhead lights brightening the blue fabric of the back of the modern seat before him with its empty black net. Two breaths later he remembered where he was. Snape leaned forward and turned to him questioningly.

Harry muttered, "Strange dream," as daylight returned out the window. Harry looked out over the landscape, at the clouds floated low just beyond the immediate hills, giving one the feeling of being on the top of the world. They paced a motorway for a short distance, bent around a hill and entered another tunnel. The sides of the car seemed to shift outward with a pop as they did so. The muscles in the back of Harry's neck twinged as he sensed the same scuttling dark creatures as before, only this time he was wide awake. The tunnel went on much longer than Harry hoped, considering his growing sense that, whatever they were, they were aware of his own awareness and were quieting to pay attention. Harry touched his wand pocket with a casual movement as he imagined that they might be clinging to the train despite its speed.

Snape leaned farther over their common armrest and studied him closely. "Something the matter?" he asked quietly.

Harry's sensed a shifting of the odd attention as though it were solidifying into malevolence. He balled his fist near his wand and asked, "You don't notice anything?" When Snape shook his head a little perplexedly, Harry hurriedly tried to explain. "Something's out there. What lives in mountains?"

"Many things," Snape replied, sounding like a lecture already. "Trolls for example."

Harry swallowed, thinking he could see daylight casting itself obliquely on the rock face beside him. "Not trolls. Small, nasty, sharp stone teeth, chatter a lot."

Snape's expression made Harry wish that he had not said anything, especially since the blast of full sunlight made the clawing sense dissipate completely.

"Not in your mind?" Snape asked carefully. Harry shook his head, dropped his hand to the armrest and forced himself to relax. Snape went on, "Your description resembles a Shetani, but they are usually only in Africa. They are quite nasty, though. Strongly attracted to magic, especially certain kinds."

Harry set his head right against the window and tried to look ahead for more tunnels. Only green slopes could be seen. "What kinds?" he asked, feeling like knowledge was his best hope for making it across this land of hills and tunnels.

Snape's lips twitched reluctantly. "I do not think you will have difficulty with them at this speed. Although they have been known to set traps," he added thoughtfully, then seemed to realize he should have left off the last. "Do not concern yourself," he insisted quickly, but since empty platitudes were not among Snape's best abilities, it did not come out well.

Another tunnel and the chattering made it difficult to sense the seat and the lights, as though the creatures meant to distract him to death. Then they were through again. Snape had a grip on Harry's upper arm, making Harry flush and shake himself back to embarrassed reality. "What kinds of magic?" Harry demanded to cover his lapse.

Again the reluctance. "The darker kinds," Snape finally divulged.

Harry's brow furrowed and he wondered what these things saw in him of such interest. As a narrow pure blue lake slid into view, he wondered perhaps if the trailings of Voldemort he still possessed carried the scent of darkness to these creatures. He didn't like that thought.

Open sunlight continued for a long time after that, almost long enough to forget. At the next tunnel he closed his eyes and Occluded his mind to no avail, but fortunately there seemed to be only a handful of the creatures making them much less bold.

"We will take a different route home," stated Snape, when daylight again filled the carriage.

Harry nodded. "Maybe I'll read up on them," he suggested a little glumly, thinking that knowing for certain they hungered after dark magic would not make him feel any better. Usually, he didn't think about his Voldemort inherited abilities, but at the moment, he dearly wished that he could exorcise them.

The trolley came by. Snape purchased tea and forced it on Harry with uncharacteristic urging. Harry gave in and sipped it. At the next tunnel, the warmth radiating on his hand seemed to keep him anchored and he did not sense anything. "They're gone," Harry said and took a scalding gulp. "You're right, trouble does follow me."

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A half hour later, they pulled into Solothurn where Snape was visiting an old colleague before going on to the archie. He moved to stand, but hesitated. "I can skip my visit here and continue on with-"

"No," Harry said firmly. "Go on." But he bit his lip as Snape collected his shoulder bag from above them.

"I'll see you in four days," Snape said. "Do behave."

Harry shook his head lightly. "Yes, of course."

As they pulled out, Harry espied Snape pulling his trunk along the platform. Harry gave a wave that went unnoticed and he remembered that the train windows were heavily tinted. With a small smile at how out of place his guardian looked among the nicely dressed Muggles, Harry sat back and thought ahead to seeing Penelope.

The train pulled into the Bern Bahnhof precisely at the scheduled time. Harry had already collected his trunk and day pack and was standing at the doors when they opened. Down on the platform, where he pretended his trunk was heavier than it felt, charmed as it was, he looked around and spotted Penelope coming the other way against the crowd, a broad smile lighting her face. She looked better than he had remembered, or perhaps it was just the stress of examinations being over which made her face seem to glow.

"Harry," she greeted him happily and gave him a hug. Harry returned the hug and didn't see anyone with her. "Did you haf a goot trip?" she asked, her accent thicker than he expected.

"Uh . . . yeah. Not bad. I need to read more about this area, maybe you have a book?" he suggested, the hair on his arms bristling in memory.

They started along the warning track toward the exit. "Not in English, but there is a bookstore." She hooked her arm in his. Harry gave her a smile, glad to see a familiar face among so many foreign ones.

She led him out faster than he could attempt to interpret the signs they passed giving directions around the station. "I live just down the hill into old town, on Rathausgasse, so we can walk."

"Rat house?" Harry echoed quietly.

"Rathaus, where the mayor works; I forget vat you call it."

Outside, the sun was still shining with the unnatural glare Harry associated with winter. They strolled along the covered pavement beside a brick street. Many people

were out, walking quickly towing their shopping or pushing prams. Several blocks later, she stopped at a door beside one to a pastry shop and unspelled it. Inside, Harry hovered his trunk up the staircase and through another spell-neutralized door. Harry wondered at so much security, but didn't comment. Inside was a bright, high-ceilinged, sitting room with a kitchen off to the side.

With an apologetic grin she patted the couch. "Dis is the guest room, so you can put your trunk here." Harry did as she suggested, glad the trunk didn't look too imposing there. She grabbed his hand, "Come, I vill show you around de old town." On the way out down the steps, Harry wondered at her accent before deciding she must not use English much here.

They headed down a side alley to a wide street with a statue in the middle. Many other tourists were wandering here, pointing at things. The sun was finally low in the sky, lighting the stone with an orange glow. They walked downhill along the pavement, Penelope explaining about the bears they kept in the moat, about Albert Einstein. Harry, worn down from the very long day, was not taking much of it in. People here seemed to walk very fast and he felt it took all his attention to stay out of their way.

"Ah, my favorite shop," Penelope said energetically. Harry peered through the glass at a grand array of perfectly spaced, dainty chocolates. Inside, he let Penelope pick out a boxful. On the way out she hooked her arm through his. "I think you haf need of coffee," she said with a laugh in her voice. Harry was glad she wasn't unhappy that he was so worn out.

As they found seats in an airy, tall-windowed shop with a big brass expresso machine dominating the marble counter, Harry said, "I'm sorry I'm not very good company right now."

"You had long travels," she said easily, opening the elaborately packaged and wrapped box of chocolates and pushing it over before him. Harry selected a black and white swirled one; it tasted strongly of vanilla. "Good?" she asked eagerly. When Harry nodded, she said authoritatively, "Much better than Honeydukes," as though she had been suffering all this time.

Harry hesitated at that, but didn't argue the point. Despite sitting for most of the day, Harry wished only to continue doing so, although the coffee was making him more aware of the world around him. A couple in nice clothes sat at a table by the wall leaning in closely to talk. A woman near the window was reading a small book while pushing the stroller beside her to and fro.

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"Ve can walk around tomorrow; the flower market will be in the platz in the morning. And my parents will be home by now."

Harry stared into his cup to gauge how much more he had to drink and was startled to find it empty. "Yeah, let's go," he said, glad not much was expected of him right now.

The door at the top of the stairs was open when they returned. Harry braced himself as they entered. "Mama," Penelope said to catch the attention of the couple opening the post at the table beside the window. "This is Harry," she said, sounding nervously proud.

They halted what they were doing and came over. Through the coffee static in his brain, Harry had the fleeting impression that they had only half-believed he existed. Penelope's mother, an oval-faced woman with dark hair, held out her hand, "Madeleine Toffen, Mr. Potter," she said, sounding very formal.

"Just Harry, please," he insisted, shaking hands next with Penelope's father, a balding man who squinted when he smiled. He seemed to have a hard time taking his eyes off Harry's scar.

Madeleine was saying, "We planned to go for a nice dinner, if you are up to it." Harry nodded, although he worried that when the coffee wore off, he might fall unconscious.

Cleaned up and changed into the nicest clothes he had brought, Harry sat on the couch waiting with Penelope's parents for Penelope to finish getting ready. Beside him on the end table was a white lacquer framed photograph of Penelope and a boy just a little younger, presumably her brother Robert, given the resemblance. Harry looked away from it and tried not to frown obviously. Penelope's mum tapped her fingertips together nervously. "Rather amazing to haf you here, Mr.– Harry," Mr. Tideweather said, breaking a long silence.

"I've never been to the Continent," Harry said. "The mountains are very beautiful."

"It is much easier to travel now," Madeleine said, "Everyone is abroad now, it zeems, even so early in the zummer. But you should go to Paris, a young man like yourself, as zoon as you can."

Harry considered that they had planned on taking a different route home. "I don't have much time right now. I have testing for the Auror's program with the Ministry coming up next week."

Mr. Tideweather said, "Ah, yes," leaning forward and clasping his hands. "Peni said as much."

Another silence settled on the room. Harry was just figuring out how he might ask about dark-magic-hungry creatures in the mountains when Penelope came out, apologizing for taking so long. She looked pretty smart though in a short grey dress with a sweater over it.

They walked uphill many blocks with much turning left and right. Harry didn't think he could make it back on his own if he had to without having set a direction charm on his wand. His hosts didn't seem to think the walk excessively long, even though his feet were feeling sore when they finally arrived at the restaurant. The scents inside made Harry's stomach rumble.

Dinner passed sedately. Harry tuned out the conversations around their table which he could not understand anyway, turning it into a dull roar in his ears. Penelope's father talked about Penelope's plans for becoming an archivist, at the very library Snape was going to visit. Harry had not realized her plans were so well formed. When the topic had come up before, she made it sound like ideas rather than contracts. He wondered at that discrepancy and watched her attending to her plate closely. "But I'm sure you would find that boring," Mr. Tideweather was saying.

"Sounds interesting, actually," Harry insisted, thinking of midnight forays into the restricted section of the Hogwarts library.

"You should take Harry to Geneva, Peni," Madeleine said, shifting topics. "You have not been, correct?" she asked Harry, who shook his head. "You could stay with my sister," she said, then frowned lightly as though rethinking that.

Penelope looked up from her plate, looking slightly amused. "Aunt Vreni is fun to visit. Do you want to see Geneva?" she asked of Harry. Harry nodded, thinking they would be having a little more fun, if not around overseen by parents.

The next morning, a car horn woke Harry. The sound of the vertical blind clacking followed. "It is a taxi driver. They are not supposed to do that," Mr. Tideweather said from beside the window. Harry blinked and sat up on the flattened couch. "Did you sleep well?" his host asked. Harry nodded while rubbing grit from his eyes; he had had some very strange dream about flying his broom around the mountains looking for something, but it was fading fast as the morning sun poured into the room.

Right after breakfast, Penelope led Harry around the city, starting with the market and moving to the parliament. The city still looked very foreign this morning; yesterday's walk had not accustomed him to the look of the buildings and streets.

Harry's feet were very grateful when they stopped for lunch at a pizza shop on the main street. They sat at a small corner table, Harry stretching his toes inside his

shoes. Cars rumbled by on the brick street and many pedestrians walked past the tall windows.

Harry took off his hat and fluffed his hair. A metal pizza tray clattered to the floor beside the next table and the waitress scurried to collect it up, glancing up at Harry in alarm. Harry frowned and listened to her apologize, he assumed, in rapid speech.

Penelope, who was reading from a ragged tour book of the city, did not seem to notice. "What vould you like to do next? History museum or Art?" she asked.

Behind her, Harry watched the waitress explaining to the chef over the stainless steel counter that ran along the far wall. The chef seemed unsympathetic. "Art sounds better," Harry replied. Eventually the waitress came back, holding a small notebook very tightly while smoothing the page down with the other as she said something he couldn't understand. Penelope ordered and the waitress took the menus then hesitated before asking something.

Penelope said, sounding a little testy, "She wants to know if it is really you."

"It is really me," Harry said to the waitress, almost making Penelope giggle. The woman seemed confused by this, but went to the counter. "I didn't expect to be recognized here," Harry said, feeling like he had been cheated out of something.

Penelope looked disbelieving. "More Muggles here vould know who you are than in Britain. It is not so . . . separate here, such news anyway."

By that evening Harry was certain this had been the longest day of his life. As they sat down back at Penelope's flat, he wished he knew a charm for sore feet, because sitting was not making them feel any better. Penelope didn't show any effects of the day at all. With eagerness she said, "We have seen most every major thing, so tomorrow ve vill go to Geneva." Harry's spirits, which rose at the first part, flagged significantly on the second. She went on, "Very famous city. Great shopping."

Harry who had taken out a significant part of what remained in his vault for spending money, felt a panicky twinge at that, but Penelope, who was making coffee, did not notice this. She brought back very small cups of coffee. "You are hafing fun, no?"

"It's, uh, yes ," Harry replied. His feet complained at that answer. "I'm not used to so much walking, I think."

"Ah," she said and sipped her coffee. "No hike then to Kleine Scheidegg. It is my favorite."

"Uh," Harry began, but then realized that she was grinning too much.

"You can take the rail most the way, you know," she added, sounding chastising. Harry took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind; he was not keeping up well.

The first train of the morning dropped them in Geneva in time for an early breakfast. Harry bolstered himself with a big meal at a little cafe on the street. The city's narrow streets curved away, promising more exploring than could possibly be done in a day.

"We will not walk so much," Penelope assured him. "I am thinking of a short walk, then a long picnic by the water, then a boat ride."

"Sounds brilliant," Harry said agreeably as he put down his fork and drank his coffee. He had to admit, the coffee was like the chocolate, thicker and richer than he had ever had it. They wandered along the narrow streets, every one of which seemed to have cafes along them. Penelope turned down a quiet street and stopped before a wooden door and knocked three times and then three times again. The door, despite looking like it might swing inward, probably with a loud squeaking sound, parted quietly in the middle. Penelope stepped through and glanced back as Harry followed.

Inside was a small wizard museum, really the town house of an old wealthy witch who had lived in the 1800s. Every available wall had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and some doorways were half-blocked by freestanding cases. Every shelf was crammed with every imaginable magical item, some really useful like handmade never-out quills with gaudy silver decoration, and some really strange such as a self-stirring make-up tin. The whole place was musty, tickling Harry's nose.

On the first floor, Penelope beckoned to Harry to join her in the drawing room. "Dame Vera," she said, indicating the large painting of a woman in a shocking violet lace dress. Dame Vera straightened her skirts, then smoothed them before giving them a smile.

"Looks a bit like you," Harry observed.

"Very distant relative, actually," Penelope said. "I don't think I'll look that good at a hundred and thirty though." Vera primped her hair and smiled more.

The tall clock chimed and a real blackbird flew out of the little door at the top, cawed harshly eleven times as it circled the room before diving back inside. The clock resumed ticking.

A small middle-aged man with tiny glasses came into the room. "Thought I heard ze door," the man said, squinting at Penelope. "Do I know you?"

"I haf visited before. Penelope Tideweather, fifth cousin to the lady here," she explained, waving at the painting, who blew a kiss at Harry.

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"Don' be such a tease, Vera," the man said to the painting. "Please, excuse her," he said. After looking Harry over, took off his glasses and cleaned them thoroughly before replacing them on his nose and frowning more. "Vell, if you have any questions, let me know." He disappeared again.

After the museum, the sun was intense and the shadows of the buildings starker than normal. Penelope led the way to a shop where they bought an array of cheeses, dried sausages, bread sticks, dried fruits and a bottle of wine. Most of it fit in Harry's daypack and Penelope insisted on carrying the rest, even though the overnight bag on her shoulder could not hold it. They walked down to the lake and along the tree-lined waterfront to a large park with rolling slopes leading to large circles of flowers. They found a relatively level spot still in view of the water and dropped onto the grass. For once Penelope seemed a little tired.

They spoke of minor things, such as how different Hogwarts was than Penelope had expected and how glad her parents were that she was home safe, even though they should not have worried so much. Harry wanted to ask what her plans were now, but found he didn't have the will to risk spoiling the lovely moment. Eventually, they ate their picnic, or part of it, and after the wine, Harry was very sleepy so he spread his cloak out and put his head down.

Harry woke later, when some seagulls cried out noisily overhead. Penelope's head was resting on his chest as she stared up at the clouds which had formed over the lake.

"You vant to be an Auror?" she asked, apparently noticing that he was awake.

"Yes."

"It zounds dangerous," she said evenly.

Harry thought being an Auror sounded challenging and like something that would satisfy his hunger to be involved while also knowing what was going on. He didn't voice these things. When he sat up, he felt lightheaded. Penelope opened the sparkling water, poured some into a plastic cup, and handed it to him. Drinking it made him feel much better.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

Harry stood with a grunt at his aches from the hard ground. "Certainly. Where to?"

They wandered some more along the waterfront, took a Ferry down the lake to the next port, Nyon, where they disembarked. Harry noted as he turned back to look over the boat, that the long list of destinations on the sign beside the dock also read

Montreux in all capital letters, making him wonder how Snape was faring at the library. He squinted across the slightly hazy lake and imagined one of the towns in the distance contained his guardian.

They wandered through the many pedestrians up to the main square before a turreted castle. "The Château," Penelope explained taking a seat at a cafe, whose tables were arranged in neat rows. A few seagulls hunted under the tables and chairs, quick to get out of the way. "It needs renovations. Soon they say." She ordered coffee for them both when the waiter appeared. Harry thought she sounded pretty good when she spoke French. She took out an old tour book. "It says the view from the Roman columns over the lake is nice and the museum very good. But it is such a nice day to be inside." She put the book away. "We'll walk over to the ruin."

They caught the ferry back as darkness fell quickly, rendering the apparent distance to the shore longer and the one to the mountains closer. They bought food from the little counter on the boat and ate that with the leftovers in Harry's daypack. The ride went quickly in this direction even though there wasn't much to see out the darkened windows.

Penelope, taking Harry's hand as they stepped onto the quay, said, "We should find my aunt." They walked along a different part of the waterfront than they had earlier, the lights across the dark lake, glinting romantically on the ripples. Rising from the water the hills were visible as clusters of dwindling lights. Behind them, the ferry was plying its way back down the lake, its many windows brighter than the lights beyond it.

They walked along a big, dark, open expanse of concrete along the water that did not seem to have much purpose. Music drifted on the air from somewhere. Penelope stopped beside a grungy boat dock where two open motorboats were bobbing in the algae-filled water beside the quay. A rusty metal sign like a gate led to steps directly into the water. The air was swampy smelling here. Penelope urged Harry down one step, took out her wand, and tapped each pole. The air rippled and revealed a waterfront full of people sitting at an outdoor bar. The music was loud now. They stepped through and along to the last establishment where plants framed a stage where a band played and colored lanterns swung on cables in the faint breeze around the tall tables.

They had to wait for a table to open up outside, but eventually a couple left and Harry and Penelope took their seats. "Your aunt works here?" Harry asked as the waitress came by and Penelope ordered something in French.

Penelope pointed at the stage. "She plays bass."

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Harry looked at the band for the first time and located the woman with bright red hair and black leather trousers playing an almost equally bright red, large, stringed instrument in the center back of the group. The song ended and another immediately started up. Penelope's aunt looked intent on her playing and not aware of them in the audience.

"American blues, you know?" Harry shook his head. Penelope went on, "Aunt Vreni is kind of the black sheep as you say."

"She seems to like playing music," Harry said as the drinks arrived. They were short glasses with ice, little straws, and slices of lemon, sweet and alcoholic. Snape's admonitions were trying to intrude in his mind even over the thrum of the music.

Many long songs and two drinks later, Harry excused himself to use the toilet. On the way back out, he found the side door first and took it, rather than work his way back through the crowded restaurant. It was quiet over here on the city side. Cars went by infrequently and the shop gates were all pulled down. He walked around the building to where their table was on the outside edge. As Harry came around the potted ferns, he noticed others were gathered around the table. Penelope, lit by the yellow and blue lanterns hanging overhead, gestured in an unfriendly way at one of the people. Curious, Harry slowed in the shadows to observe. He could almost hear them, but he couldn't understand what must be French, although it did not lilt, it sounded guttural spoken so low.

Harry stepped over quickly. "Friends of yours?" he asked.

The three young men backed off just a little, apparently not expecting him. One of them, with close-cut brown hair and a beard neatly trimmed around his jaw, said snidely, "You brought an Englishman back with you?"

"Not friends. Former fellow students," Penelope darkly explained to Harry. "They were just leaving." Harry watched in amazement as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled her wand into her loose sleeve. It was not a motion she tried to conceal although the wand was now hidden from casual view. Harry looked at each of the young men in turn; they looked cocky and sneering, though a little wary now. Penelope said something in French and received what sounded like a threat in return, though they were all speaking too low to really discern.

Harry stepped closer to Penelope so their shoulders were touching. "Why don't you leave now?" he said firmly, threateningly.

"Or vat?" One of them mocked. "You vill use a little British spell on us?"

"No. All I have to do is let go of her hand," Harry explained, showing them the grip he had taken of Penelope's vibrating wrist. Penelope looked about as furious as he could imagine her being. Murderous even.

One of them backed up but the other two just laughed. "She does not scare us. Nor do you. The English are as wimps at Quidditch and wimps at magic."

Another song had started up and the nearby tables which had glanced their way once were not paying them any attention. Harry narrowed his eyes at the boldest of them, the one with short brown hair and a long fringe. In a low voice, he said, "I destroyed Voldemort; I can certainly take on you."

The pair straightened at this news but did not budge. The third stepped back close and asked, "Vat did he say?"

"He . . ." one of them began dubiously.

"What?" Harry asked with a hint of mockery that felt much too good, "Don't recognize the scar?" The three looked more surprised and glanced at Penelope indecisively. Penelope still looked rather murderous. "Get lost," Harry said. "Or I'll finish off what she leaves behind." He released her wrist which she held stiffly at her side, wand not hidden anymore. Harry went on, "And you know, when we explain to your authorities, I bet they believe Harry Potter over you, so please, do try us."

The wariest of them urged the others to move on and they all left with repeated backward glances. Penelope was shaking as she put her wand away and flattened her hands on the tabletop. Harry pushed the rest of his drink over to her. She swallowed it and put it down hard.

"Dey vere insinuating tings about Robbie; like they knew vat happened but would not tell," she explained in a distressed voice. "Dey never proved what happened," she went on in general explanation.

"I'm sorry, Peni," Harry said, retaking his seat and squeezing her arm in his hand.

"Dese ones who ver bad but not so bad to get caught, vere zo cocky dis last year," she went on angrily, her accent thickening alarmingly. "I could kill them."

Harry picked up and twisted a napkin between his fingers. "Well, I have to say I know exactly how you feel."

Sadly, she went on, "I vas supposed to protect him, but I did not know how to do dis."

Harry closed his eyes on the lights inside the restaurant, the swinging lanterns. All kinds of old pain was washing through him. "I should have just let you have at them. Sorry."

"My parents vould be very disappointed if I did this," she said with a sad chuckle.

"I could have taken the blame without much trouble," Harry said. "I can't imagine they would do much to me, even here." He watched the band playing, unconcerned with anything but music. "When does your aunt finish?" he asked hopefully.

Penelope sniffled and dabbed carefully at her eyes. "Not 'til late, I don't tink. But, the zet, it should end."

"We'll go at the end of the set, then, when we can get the key," Harry said reassuringly. Penelope nodded, looking bleak.

The music finally wound down and the singer made some announcement in French before the lights on the stage went to half. Harry took Penelope's hand as they walked around to the back of the stage, and kept a close eye on everyone around, especially checking the shadows by the building.

"Aunt Vreni," Penelope called as the woman was setting her bass on a metal stand.

"Penelope!" the woman exclaimed in surprise. She jumped off the back of the stage and gave her niece a tight hug. "And who vould this be?" she asked of Harry.

"Didn't you get my owl?" Penelope asked, concerned.

Vreni waved her hand dismissively. "Ah. I haven't been to my flat since, uh, Wednesday. But if you need a place tonight, please." She fished in her pockets, then went thoughtful a moment before digging around in the pile off the corner of the stage to find a leather jacket from which she finally produced a key. She presented this to Penelope as one might a treat.

"Zo," Vreni said, putting an arm around Harry. This close he could see she showed her age much more than Penelope's mother. "This is your mensch? The one you told me of in your letters?"

Penelope bit her lip. "Yes. But, I, uh, might not have meant everything I wrote."

Harry smiled and straightened, lifting very thin Aunt Vreni to her toes, she was hanging so hard on his neck. Vreni let go but she pounded him on the back. "He is big strong boy, it seems," she opined approvingly. "You take good care of Peni, she write to me," she said to Harry.

"It was easy," Harry insisted.

"Ah, tha's good. Well," she said, patting his shoulder. Her gaze fixed on his forehead. "Interesting scar; you vill have to explain how you got it sometime. Over breakfast.

Right now I have an appointment with the barman during my break." She stepped away, turned back and said, "I'll zee you in the morning." She gave a little wave and a smile.

"Was she serious?" Harry asked, grinning.

"She is renown for having no sense of current events, but I would not have thought she was that far out of things."

"I like her already," Harry said and offered Penelope an arm to lead her away toward the boat launch.

Vreni's flat was not as chaotic as Harry feared it would be. There wasn't enough stuff in it to be anything but neat. Just beside the door was an odd assortment of things like boots, documents, a book, a key, all in a random pile. Penelope straightened the few things in the room and went off to find bedding for the futon. The bedroom was more chaotic Harry saw, when Penelope opened the door to go in. Harry decided to survey the kitchen and amazingly found the refrigerator had enough food for breakfast, although it also contained many things that didn't need to be there, such as salt, sugar and bread. He poured himself a glass of water and refilled it for Penelope who was straightening the duvet.

She drank the water and went into the kitchenette. Harry looked over the small bookshelf of photography books, of all things. Penelope came back with two steaming mugs of cocoa, which he would not have imagined could be put together by what he had seen in there. Maybe the milk had been in the cabinet.

It was almost midnight when Penelope declared herself too tired stay up any longer and took her large shoulder bag to the toilet. She returned in a fuzzy night gown, scented with something flowery. Harry did the same, washing up and putting on his pyjamas. When he came back, Penelope was already curled up on the futon. He laid down beside her, hooked an arm around her, and tried to put the evening out of his mind. She turned toward and under him, and Harry decided that there were better ways to forget the evening.

The next morning, Harry was woken by noises from the area of the stove. Penelope and her aunt were cooking breakfast. Harry now realized the problem with not getting redressed the night before; he really should know better, he considered. He scooped his pyjama bottoms off the floor and put them on under the duvet, to Penelope's amusement from where she stood cutting bread at the counter facing him.

As they ate eggs and stale bread toasted to a crisp in thin slices, Penelope tried to explain things to her aunt. "Yes, I hear of this wizard," Vreni insisted, pointing at

the table with her index finger. "Very bad wizard. But I do not understand," she said to Harry, "why you fight him zo many times?"

Harry sighed and put marmalade on his toast to have with his refilled coffee. "Took me a while to figure out how to finish him off."

"Oh," Vreni said, sounding unimpressed.

Harry shook his head and had to grin, as this certainly was a first. Penelope shrugged at Harry apologetically.

After breakfast, Penelope said, "We should check the train schedule, leave sometime this morning."

Harry nodded that he agreed. He and Snape were leaving early tomorrow, he realized in surprise. "Time went fast," Harry observed.

Penelope nodded with a sad smile.

The next morning, Snape was waiting on the platform when they arrived, wearing his cloak, his trunk beside him. Harry felt a rush at recognizing him there in the crowd. He placed his trunk beside Snape's and greeted him before pulling Penelope aside quickly, since their train was already beside the platform, doors open.

"No thoughts of revenge, all right?" Harry said, firmly to her.

She glanced away. "Okay," she said a little unwillingly.

Harry frowned but had no time to say anything more as Snape was putting their trunks aboard without help.

"You are Harry's guardian?" Mr. Tideweather asked when Snape stepped down from the carriage.

"Yes," Snape replied and shook the man's hand.

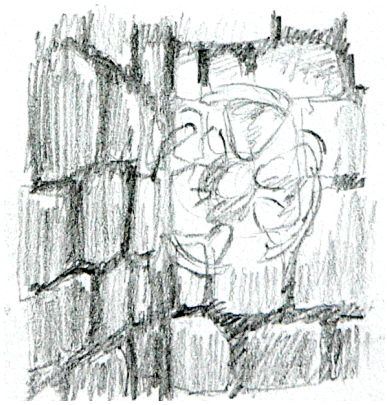
"He is a very nice young man. It was a pleasure to have him," Mr. Tideweather said in a very complimentary way.

With a sideways glance at Harry, Snape said, "He must have been behaving himself." He glanced at the platform clock and gestured that they should board.

Harry shook his head and Mr. Tideweather's hand. Madeleine kissed his cheeks before Snape tugged him to the imminently departing train. Harry waved to Penelope and shouted that he would write as he pulled himself up the high steps. The automatic doors hissed closed behind him as he cleared them, and the train lurched forward.

Author's Notes:
Mensch carries the Yiddish meaning.

Chapter 49.



Silent, Steadfast, and Forebearing

Harry stepped rapidly across the Ministry atrium and stopped before the lifts. Everyone else waiting turned to stare at him. He gave them all an uncomfortable smile and tried to stay focused on the day ahead. His nerves were bothering him much more than he had expected. Last night's confidence seemed to have deserted him.

After one wrong turn, he found the correct room in the department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry had been here before with Mr. Weasley and recognized some of the corridors. Desks had been arranged in a corner of a large room that looked as though it may be used for athletic workouts and given the scorch marks on the walls and ceiling, spell practice. The desks were nearly all full which meant there were fifteen applicants. Tonks had said there were rarely more than six. Eyes found his and went wide. He ignored them and took one of the remaining seats on the far side in the second-to-last row.

The young man next to him was Indian with shiny black hair that covered his collar. His gaze at Harry didn't waver.

"You are Harry Potter," the man stated in a heavy accent.

After a glance to confirm that the middle-aged wizard at the front was still waiting

for something before starting, Harry held out his hand. With deliberate movement the man shook it. "Vineet Abhayananda," he said.

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said automatically. He pulled a quill and inkwell from his bag and set them out, noting that Vineet's dark eyes tracked him doing this.

"You and I are the only two not availing ourselves of a never-quill," Vineet said.

It took Harry a moment to get that. He glanced around. Everyone else did have a never-out quill. Harry preferred a normal one–dipping in the inkwell forced him to take time to think.

The middle-aged wizard at the front introduced himself as Reginald Rodgers, Senior Trainer, and handed out the examination parchments by walking the narrow aisles. He touched each quill with his wand as he passed–Harry presumed with an anti-cheating spell. The exam roll was thick and heavy. Rodgers stepped back to the front of the room and said, "Time." Harry unwrapped a foot of the roll and glanced at the first three questions. The fourth one looked easier, so he tackled that one first.

By the time he had answered the question at the end of the parchment, hours later, Harry was stretching his neck frequently. Vineet beside him sat in the same straight-backed pose, calmly dipping and writing. A glance at the clock showed that there was still half an hour of the four hours remaining. Harry went backward through the questions, editing his answers and trying to write something for the ones he had left blank. Of the row in front of him, one test taker had left early, one with very short hair had her head on her arm for a nap, and the other two slouched low in their seats, tiredly perusing their parchments.

Harry closed his eyes and thought about the first question. It asked what seven spells Marvin the Magnificent had used to destroy the Breakwater Banshee. Harry had heard of Marvin–a statue of him as a stooped old man graced the fifth floor corridor at Hogwarts–but he didn't know anything about Marvin fighting a banshee. The second question was a Potions one. It gave a formula and six variations and asked what effect the original potion and the variants would have. It wasn't a recipe he had ever encountered. Rather than leave the space blank, he made notes about each step and what the result would be. At the end it seemed like the whole thing would be inert. He wrote that the potion would do nothing, even though he strongly resisted that answer. Only the fifth variant would leave anything active. He wrote that down and thought that it would be a long complicated way to end up with a mild oxidizer. He noted this conclusion too and hoped it was not too flippant.

Five minutes left, and only the first question was blank. Harry imagined facing a banshee. He would definitely start with a Silencing Charm. He wrote down that he

did not know what Marvin had done, but that he may have begun with that. Since Banshees have poisonous teeth, he wrote down two suggestions for that, then added three more ideas to disable the claws, including a Treacle Trap. That was only six. He mulled over what a seventh might have been until Rodgers called for a halt. Harry wished he had just known the answer. With a sigh he rolled it up and handed it to the head trainer as he came by for them.

Everyone was standing to stretch and Harry did as well. Vineet sat staring ahead, looking relaxed and out of place as a result.

"There will be a break for forty-five minutes and then the physical testing will begin," stated Rodgers. It was one o'clock. Some of the test-takers took lunches from their bags. Harry's stomach gurgled. Mr. Weasley had suggested Harry join him. Thinking that he would like that, Harry took his leave.

"Mr. Weasley?" Harry said, sticking his head inside the office door after a fast walk through the burrowish Ministry corridors.

"Harry! How did it go?"

Harry shrugged. "I probably got some of the questions right. More than that . . . " he finished with another shrug. "You said there was a tearoom? I only have a short break and I'm famished."

"Of course, of course." Arthur stood up and hustled him down to the end of the hallway. A cart with sandwiches sat in the break room with a can for money. Harry took a cheese sandwich and put in four sickles for it. He spotted a jar of pumpkin juice on the second shelf and paid a sickle for that. The tearoom was empty so they took the middle table.

Halfway through a quiet meal, Mr. Weasley said, "They didn't just give you a free ride on the entrance exams?"

"I didn't want one," Harry said in a difficult tone.

"Ah. I see. You are too honorable, my boy," Arthur stated sagely. "You make the rest of us look bad."

Harry gave him a doubtful face then jumped up as he saw the clock. "Gotta run. Thanks for lunch, Mr. Weasley."

"Anytime, Harry," he said with affection.

Back in the testing room, the desks were gone and the applicants, fourteen of them now, were pairing up on mats in rows on the floor. Harry spotted Vineet standing alone and stepped over to him. "Do you mind?" Harry asked.

"By no imagination could I," the man responded.

Many of the other applicants were doing warm ups. Harry stretched his legs the way Neville had taught him for running, just to do something. Vineet did a series of moves, kicked out and turned gracefully. Harry stepped back automatically to get clear. "What is that?" he asked.

"It is an Eastern Art of defense. I will demonstrate?"

Harry shrugged and stepped onto the mat as indicated. Vineet bowed and Harry watched his hands, which was a mistake, as a dark skinned foot kicked around and took his legs out from under him. Surprised more than anything, Harry got back to his feet. The landing on the mat had not even jarred him. The whole room stopped to look at them.

"Can you show me that?" Harry asked.

Vineet grinned, which Harry had not yet seen him do. He patiently explained and demonstrated the kick. Harry tried it a few times in the air–he needed his arms to counterbalance a lot more than Vineet appeared to.

"You may try it," Vineet said, stepping on the mat before him.

"Sure," Harry said. He gauged the distance to the other man's legs and rehearsed the move in his mind then twisted and swung his foot. His foot did not connect. Instead, Harry was airborne, rolling over Vineet back-to-back. He landed on the other side of the mat. With a challenging look at the Indian, Harry stood up again and hoped Eastern Arts were not a requirement of the Auror's program. "Should I have expected that?" Harry asked him, while trying to gauge the man's intent through his calm visage. The entrance of the training wizard cut off any reply Harry may have received.

Harry made it through the timed laps, the push-ups, the weights. None of it was really hard, although several of the applicants were like Vineet, in very good condition.

A set of basic spell drills came next. Harry breezed through his set and Vineet stepped up to follow. With great concentration the Indian completed his set as well. When he stepped beside Harry, Vineet's face was sparkling with sweat as though he had exerted himself greatly. Harry wondered at that. The other applicants all finished with varying degrees of ease.

Rodgers called them to order when the last applicant completed her drills. "Each of you, step up into the marked area in front of me. You will receive five spells, Radian, Figuresempre, Dragonian, Quiotidus, and Polaria Diarama. The spells will be in a random order. You are to block each one. Potter, why don't you go first?"

Harry regripped his wand and stepped into the area marked with yellow paint.

Rodgers said, "You are expected to stay in that painted area." He paused as though to be sure that was understood. "Ready?"

Harry nodded, mentally flipping through the blocks he would need. Rodgers spelled him with a Dragonian first. Harry managed a basic dome block to meet it, but the force of it made him step back anyway. He resisted glancing down after the spell faded, just stepped forward to approximately where he had started as the second spell came at him. A Chrysanthemum block handled the Radian and the Quiotidus that followed immediately after. Harry was breathing hard; Rodgers put more power into his spells than he was used to. The air was staticky with magic afterward.

Rodgers paused before the last one. "Ready? Since you know what it is, it is going to be loaded."

Harry blinked at that, wondering what the man thought the previous ones were. The Figuresempre that hit his Titan block almost collapsed it. Rodgers, seeing this, re-incanted it. Harry, adrenaline pumping, poured more into the block to counter it. The orange field around him solidified, thankfully, and Rodgers canceled the attacking spell.

Harry let out a breath as his arms dropped limp. Rodgers tipped his head to the side to indicate he could step out. Harry, relieved, did so. The rest of the applicants looked wary now as Harry stepped over to them, clustered in the middle of the room. Glad that was out of the way, he watched, relaxed, while one-by-one the others were tested. Eight were not able to stay in the box. One needed to be hovered out of the room to the Healer. Vineet, despite what seemed to be poor spell power, kept himself upright and in the box by sheer will and physical strength. He bowed deeply to Rodgers after the fifth spell was finished and stepped over to Harry.

"You made it look too easy, I think," he said, sweating hard again.

"Didn't mean to," Harry said in an apologetic tone.

After the testing Harry used the stairs down to the atrium. It was mid-afternoon and he felt as though it should be ten at night. This morning, he had planned for this afternoon to make a trip to Diagon Alley for a few things, but they seemed much less important now. He took his time walking across the large open space as he tried to decide what to do. He was down to his last handful of Floo powder, so if he did go shopping, he would have to remember to get more.

Deciding he would later regret not taking care of things, Harry shucked his robe by the lift and stuffed it into his bag. Up on the surface of Muggle London, he started

walking. He came upon Vineet standing at a bus stop at the end of the first block. Happy just to see a familiar face where he least expected it, Harry gave him a nod and a smile. The Indian stepped smoothly out of the crowd and came aside.

"May I ask you something?" he said.

Harry stopped and shrugged.

The man hesitated as a group of Muggles went by, then hesitated further. Finally he said, "I have read everything I could find about what you did to the Unnamed One. It is mostly supposition, however." Harry looked away from the man's dark brown eyes and watched a red bus trundle slowly away from the stop. Vineet went on, "I am not wishing to impose, just very curious. I do not expect to make it to the apprenticeship, and I am thinking this is my only chance to talk to you. Kismet if you will." He smiled uncertainly.

"Why don't you think you're going to make it?" Harry asked.

"Ah." Vineet sighed. "My magic is not so strong. That is why I am working so hard on my martial skills in vain hope it will be a difference. You were convenient for a demonstration, I am forced to be confessing."

"Ah, I get it now," Harry said. "But I asked you to partner."

Vineet bowed slightly at that. "Kismet, my grandfather would say. His mother was a witch–it is my only inheritance of magic."

Harry looked him over. He thought that if he had even half this man's poise, he would be all set in everything.

Vineet went on, "But you have not shared with others, so I cannot hope to have you share with me. It seemed to me from the vague retellings that you used very little magic. I have taken much from that; it is what has led me here."

Harry stared at him in surprise. Relenting in the face of that, he said, "I was told I was using old magic, but I think my headmaster was using the term 'magic' a little broadly." Vineet's eyes became very interested as Harry spoke. Harry could not help but give in farther; a year was a long time and the story felt much less weighty. "I forced Voldemort to feel everything he was incapable of feeling. He couldn't handle that."

"How did you reach him to do this?"

Harry frowned. "I didn't have to reach him. I'd got part of him when he marked me." He gestured vaguely at his scar. "It got worse after he used my blood to give himself human form again."

Vineet's eyes were more intense. "I am not hearing that story."

"It was published in a pretty obscure place."

Vineet thought a moment. "Can you give an example, give me an example of what you made him feel? I am not understanding."

Harry waited for more Muggles to pass. "Voldemort never felt anything good. Love, for example. Need for . . . " Harry paused to try to name the emotion he had felt at the abandoned manor. "Need for caring, I guess."

"That is all that was required?"

Harry thought about that. "I suppose. I did have to catch him off guard to really win, which is too complicated to explain. Then I had to manage an Avada Kedavra with no hate in it after only reading a description in a book. Funny, they don't teach that one at my school," he added, attempting lightness. Thinking he should give Vineet some encouragement, he went on, "You are right that I didn't use much magic. I relied on my friends' magic, which was better than mine in some cases. Voldemort had most of his followers with him and they were not in a very good mood."

Vineet gave him a weak smile in apparent acknowledgment of his joke.

Harry continued, "You have to understand, and maybe this is something you will, that I was destined to destroy him, so some things just happened."

Vineet nodded at this thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, "My number of bus is approaching." He held out his hand and Harry shook it. "I am hopeful for seeing you again," he said calmly without any hint of hopefulness.

"Good luck," Harry said sincerely.

"Worth a thousand blessings of Shiva, I think," he said with a hint of amiability. Harry watched him step on the bus just before as it pulled away with a smoggy roar.

Harry gratefully stepped out of the Floo at home and found Snape in the drawing room. "How did it go?" his guardian asked.

Harry tilted his head to the side. "I have no idea." He told him the formula of the second question.

"You would get mud if you mixed those things together under those conditions, unless you are reciting it incorrectly."

"I think I got that one right then. The first three questions were really odd."

"To make the test takers panic, I should think. Did you?"

"I skipped them and tried to fill something in when I was done with the rest." He shrugged. "They are going to owl if I made the first cut with the schedule for my second day of testing." Snape gave him an odd look, forcing Harry to comment, "You don't think I won't get in. I shouldn't be in it if I don't deserve to be." Snape's expression did not change. Harry huffed and walked away.

Feeling like he deserved to, Harry relaxed over the next few days. He sat in the dining room before lunch, rereading Penelope's last letter and writing out a reply. He found himself expressing more of his hopes for this apprenticeship than he suspected she wanted to hear, but could not think of anything else to write about since it was all that was on his mind. Snape came down as Harry released her owl out the window.

While they ate, an owl with an official leg band from the Auror's office arrived. Harry tore open the envelope with some impatience and read the message quickly. "I am scheduled to go back in on Thursday, 8:00 a.m."

"Congratulations, Harry," Snape intoned as he buttered a second slice of bread and began making a sandwich out of the cold joint on the platter in the middle of the table. "Still feel you have been passed through unfairly?" he asked levelly.

"Um, no. It says I got the second highest score on the written examination. And the highest on the spell drills."

"I am glad that leaves no question in your mind. Or anyone else's, for that matter." He ate a bite. "It also bodes well for your N.E.W.T. results, which should be coming soon as well."

"Oh yeah, those," Harry said, as though he were trying to think about too many things at once.

"Worrying about Thursday already?"

Harry rearranged his sandwich which kept falling apart. "Guess so. They said that it's a kind of personality and character test. They want to make sure you won't crumple when faced with danger."

Snape put down his silverware a little loudly and looked at him. "You certainly have been well-prepared for that," he said dryly. "You would do best to worry less, I should think."

Silent, Steadfast, and Forebearing

On Sunday, Harry stepped into the drawing room where Snape was buried again in parchments. They looked a bit like Hogwarts acceptance letters, which made Harry curious, so he approached and tried to read one of them upside-down. It was the familiar form letter all right. Snape looked up, prompting Harry to say, "Mr. Weasley said he would give Ron and myself Apparition lessons today, so I'm going to the Burrow."

Snape sat back and surveyed the piles before him. "I have not had much time, have I?"

Harry shook his head. "It's all right; Ron said his dad wanted to do it. And you need a break from teaching."

"Do be careful," Snape muttered, returning to the pile before him. To Harry's eye it looked as though he was signing the letters in McGonagall's name. He supposed it didn't matter, really, since the new students would not know the difference.

Harry stepped out of the Weasley hearth a few minutes later. Ron and Ginny were playing wizard chess on the couch with Ron leaning far forward looking more intent on the game than expected, making Harry wonder if he were losing. "Hi, Harry," Ron greeted him without looking up.

Grinning, Ginny said, "Did you hear?" When Harry shrugged, she went on, "Draco's hearing was on Friday."

Harry paused, he had not heard that it had been scheduled, despite being at the Ministry last week. He felt a twinge at the realization that people still didn't tell him things. Trying not to appear angry, he sat down beside Ron and said casually, "So what happened?"

Ginny hesitated, gauging him, before she replied, "He got eight months counselling."

Harry frowned. "He could use it, I suppose." He thought a little more as Ron aborted ordering one of his pieces to move. "He'd probably be killed in Azakaban."

Quietly, Ginny said, "That's what Dad said. The stated reason was for extenuating circumstances, given that he participated at his father's urging . . . that he wouldn't have for anyone else."

Harry felt that was probably true and as well that if Malfoy the younger stepped out of line again Harry himself might be in a position to haul him back into it, which he

would enjoy doing. They waited for Ron as he looked over the board with a frown. Ginny glanced into the kitchen before saying quietly, "Dad was really angry at Percy because he argued at the hearing that if Malfoy or one of the other Death Eaters did something to Draco in prison, that he'd deserve it."

Ron finally made a move, then hit himself on the head. "I didn't see that; dang."

"Check again," Ginny said, clearly enjoying every syllable of it.

"Ron," Harry prodded. "I can't believe you are losing."

"Neither can I."

Mr. Weasley came down the rickety staircase. "Well, Harry, how are you? Ready for some Apparating?"

"Yes, sir."

"We HAVE to finish this game, Dad," Ginny insisted.

"Later," Ron said, standing up. "We don't want to make Harry wait."

Pointing at her brother accusingly, Ginny said, "Your chess set rearranges the board if left alone. Finish or concede. I'm not giving in on my best game ever."

Ron glared at his sister. "All right, I'll give it to you," he huffed, disgusted.

On the lawn outside the ever-sagging Weasley house, Mr. Weasley gave them a long lecture about Apparition safety. "No Apparating or Disapparating in view of a Muggle. No Apparating or Disapparating within the hearing of a Muggle, unless it is an emergency."

Ron grabbed a biscuit from a chipped, gaudily flower-patterned plate Ginny had brought out. It sat on the heavy wooden table beside them where Ginny sat munching and listening in.

Mr. Weasley continued, "No Apparating after alcohol until you have had at least a year of practice at it and then only if it is an emergency." Ron nudged Harry with his elbow, prompting Mr. Weasley to huff at them. "Now," Mr. Weasley went on, "The first thing you need to learn-"

"Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley's voice rang out from kitchen window. "I need you to help get the gnome traps down from the hall cupboard."

"Back in a flash," Mr. Weasley said and headed around the house to the door.

"So, Harry," Ginny said, chopping through a tiny red apple with a rusty knife. "Where's your dad today?"

"Busy."

When Ginny popped a small slice of apple in her mouth, Ron said, "You'll get sick eating those."

"What are they?" Harry asked.

Ginny pointed at a scraggly apple tree at the edge of the lawn. "I used a spell to ripen them."

"They're going to make you sick," Ron repeated.

"They're going to make you sick," Ginny mocked. "Not if you do the spell right," she countered and ate another piece. "What's Professor Snape do during the summer?"

"Today he's preparing the Hogwarts acceptance letters," Harry explained, helping himself to a biscuit.

"This year's letters will be signed by Professor Snape?" Ron asked, sounding dismayed.

"He's signing McGonagall's name to them."

"Oy, I still treasure my letter from Dumbledore," Ron commented bleakly. "Wonder who signed it?"

They fell silent in thought until Harry asked, "Where's Hermione?"

"Said she was busy," Ron said.

Ginny said, "She's getting private Apparition lessons next week. At the end they get a test and a license all in one day."

"Sounds expensive," Harry commented.

"It was her end-of-school present," Ginny explained.

Mr. Weasley came back out, brushing off his hands. "All right, where were we?"

"No putting radishes in your ears while Apparating," Ron supplied sounding bored.

Mr. Weasley put his hands on his hips. "I don't have to take time off on my free day to do this, Ronald."

"Sorry, Mr. Weasley," Harry said and hit Ron on the arm. Even though he didn't hit it hard, Ron rubbed that spot anyway. Harry was not keen on showing up for his apprenticeship, should he get in, unable to Apparate. He was hoping to at least be able to say he had applied for his license. They should have done this last summer,

but with spending most of the holiday stuck at school where it was impossible, there had not been a good opportunity. He suspected his friends of holding off until Harry could also learn, but didn't really want to know if that were true because Harry might feel the need to yell at them for it.

"Now, most important," Mr. Weasley was saying, "is to concentrate completely on the spell. It is the best way to avoid Splinching yourself. Don't be distracted by anything while you're doing it. Stop, center yourself and . . . " He reappeared ten feet away with a pop! "It is that easy. Ron you first," he commanded.

Ron stepped over to his father and turned to face Harry with a bit of a slouch. Mr. Weasley became serious. "Imagine yourself shrinking away into something the size of a marble. . ."

Ginny interrupted, "Mum says imagine yourself folding up like a paper airplane."

"If the marble doesn't work, we'll go with that next," Mr. Weasley. "Now, close your eyes and give it a try."

"Do I always have to have them closed?" Ron asked in concern. "I want see where I'm going."

"Not always, but it helps when you're learning," Mr. Weasley said impatiently. "Cuts the distraction."

"I could plug my ears, then I wouldn't have to listen to Ginny," Ron volunteered.

"I've seen people learn that way." Mr. Weasley said. "All bundled up like a mummy and starting from a dark cupboard. Bad way to learn, really. Your cousin used to have to Apparate into the attic when she came to visit because she never learned better. Scared the bats. Anyway, we are getting distracted ourselves. Close your eyes." Ron did so. "Imagine yourself shrinking up into a marble-sized ball."

Ron opened his eyes, looked around doubtfully, then closed them again and silence descended. Nothing happened. Harry thought of eating another biscuit but didn't want to distract his friend with the noise of it. "Paper airplane," Ginny said.

"Can I try that?" Ron asked without opening his eyes.

"Go ahead," said Mr. Weasley.

After another half minute, Ron's arms disappeared, then reappeared as he made a noise of surprise. He patted his arms in a panic. "Oh. Good. For a moment there I thought I'd lost them." When Ginny giggled into her hand, Ron angrily said, "Let's see you try it."

Ginny immediately disappeared and reappeared just to his right.

"You've been practicing. Dad, she's not old enough," he complained.

"Just another month," Ginny said, strutting back to the table and starting to chop up another tiny apple. She gave Harry a cocky look.

"I think the twins taught her, although we never caught them at it. Now back to you and your wayward arms."

It took an hour for Ron to get through getting all of himself to go ten feet, then came the problem of explaining exactly how one knew where one was going. By the time Mr. Weasley did a roundabout explanation of how to imagine where you wanted to end up, it was time for dinner. As they went inside, Mr. Weasley said, just realizing, "We didn't get to you, Harry."

"That's all right, Mr. Weasley. I appreciate the lesson."

Harry woke early for his second examination. He had cheated a little: he had gone to bed very early and used a sip of potion to sleep soundly. After a reasonable breakfast he bade goodbye to his guardian and took the Floo back to the Ministry. Fewer people were around this morning, both in the atrium and down in the Auror offices.

Rodgers came out of a doorway as Harry stood in the corridor, wondering which door to knock on. "Ready?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry said, trying to sound confident. The other applicants had whispered odd things to each other about this test during the previous session. Harry wished he had listened more closely.

"Give me your wand." Harry handed it over and the wizard said, "Follow me."

Rodgers led the way down to the end and around the corner. He pulled a black silk scarf out of his pocket casually and told Harry to turn around. He put it over Harry's eyes and guided him, so blinded, down the corridor and into a room. Harry knew this because could hear his footsteps echoing. "Count to ten and remove the blindfold after I have gone. I will give you one piece of advice that a trainer gave me when I had this test." He sounded as though he repeated this frequently and that it was not something he was doing just for Harry. "Nothing in here will harm you. If anything will defeat you, it will be your own demons."

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Harry stood blinded and didn't hear anything at all after that, not even a scuff of a shoe on stone. After a minute he supposed that Rodgers must be gone. He counted to ten anyway and pulled the blindfold off. The room was only fifteen feet square with rough stone walls and floor. The one fairy light did not add much illumination. He could not make out the ceiling in the paltry light, so he supposed that it was quite high.

Time passed. Harry lost complete track of it. Bored, he took a seat in the center of the floor with his legs crossed. After another long gap of silence, the fairy light went out. Despite believing he had been starting to anxiously hope for anything to break the monotony, the sudden darkness still startled him.

Feeling too vulnerable where he was, Harry got to his feet and felt his way to one of the walls. The darkness was absolute. Harry ran his hand over the stones and mortar just to sense something of his environment. He heard something then, like a small door opening, then a sliding sound resembling a cape being drawn across the floor. Another similar sound joined with it and Harry realized what it sounded like.

Harry imagined himself before the cage at the zoo and said, " Are you here? "

The sliding paused and a long silence ensued. The fairy light reappeared, brighter this time. A very large snake faced Harry, positioned for maximum effect when the lights came back.

" Nagini ?"

" Master?"

" I am not your master, " Harry said. Nagini lowered her head and slowly coiled up. Harry stepped away from the wall and took a look around for the door she must have used. There was no sign of it. " Been busy? " Harry asked her.

" Many scared humans these last days ."

Harry laughed lightly.

Back in the Auror's meeting room, Rodgers commented wryly, "We don't ask on the application about Parseltongue, do we?" He sat at a small table where five other Aurors and older apprentices also sat watching the large crystal ball on the table. In it, Harry was taking a seat in the center of the floor, making odd hissing noises.

Tonks entered. "Harry's in?" She leaned over one of the other women and stared at the ball. "Why did you bother with Nagini? He captured her." She shook her head.

"They said no exceptions for him," Rodgers supplied.

The snake coiled beside Harry, it seemed to be showing him her teeth.

“ My poison has been taken, ” she said.

Harry peered into her mouth. “ Your new fangs actually look longer.”

“ They are. ”

They chatted for a while, until the fairy light went out again. A bell sounded. “ I must go ,” she hissed. Harry heard the sliding fade and the small door close. He imagined that if one didn't know Nagini, that spending that much time with her might be unnerving.

The fairy light brightened again slowly. Harry remained on the floor, waiting. Expecting another long pause, he relaxed. After a few minutes, something shiny in the mortar of the floor caught his eye. He turned and saw that liquid was running in across the floor. Standing quickly, he stepped over to where it poured in from the join of the floor to the wall. It was dark and a little thick. Soon, it was lapping at his trainers as though the room itself were being submerged. He stepped back with a jerk when it coated his shoe in red. There was no place to go, though, and soon blood had filled his shoes and lapped at the hem of his robe.

Harry had never imagined that much blood. It kept rising. When it reached his knees, he started looking above him for anything to grab, or to test if the gaps in the mortar would allow him to climb the walls, but it wasn't possible. He leaned into the corner and forced himself to stay calm.

When it reached mid-thigh it halted, to Harry's relief. Then it drained quickly, leaving him soaked in it. He thought about taking off his robe, but as he shook it out, the remaining blood disappeared, leaving his robe light and normal. Even his shoes dried instantly.

The next break had to go on a long time again before Harry thought sitting on the floor to be a good idea. Eventually, when his legs ached, he relented and again sat in the center of the room. When a deep grinding sound started, Harry came alert again. Stone ran on stone mysteriously until Harry realized the walls were tightening in. The ceiling came down in a surge, making him duck to lie on the floor. Then the walls came in and Harry curled up as they pressed close.

The fairy light stayed with him, which at first he was glad for, but when it showed him only his feet, shoulders and knees pressed against unyielding square flint, he realized it was making it worse. Everything stopped for several minutes. Harry squirmed a little to get in a better position to breath. Then he waited. When the wall at his feet

moved in suddenly another inch, he jumped severely, bruising his knees. He again calmed himself. It moved in again, and again he successfully fought instinctive panic.

Five shallow breaths later, the walls pulled away. Harry's hand shook a little as he put in on the floor to keep from falling over. He let out a few full breaths and returned to waiting, thinking that those three tests were about as unrelated as he could imagine and left him uncertain what to expect next.

The wait was shorter this time. A clang sounded. Harry spun around and scambled to his feet to face an ogre that had appeared behind him. After reaching for his empty wand pocket, he forced his hands to his sides. The ogre clomped over to him. It wore only a wrap around its green belly. Muscles rippled on its hefty arms. Harry had not realized he was backing up until his spine met the wall. He chastised himself, thinking that Vineet would have stood his ground.

The ogre pulled metal rings from his belt. With immovable force he took Harry's wrist and locked the ring around it, then did the same to the other. He then grabbed the chain running between them and yanked Harry into the center of the room. Harry, knocked off balance, fell. He got back to his knees and watched as the ogre pulled something else from his belt. It was a whip. Harry could not prevent himself from jumping nervously at the first loud crack of it within a foot of him.

Harry stared at the ogre as calmly as possible as the whip snapped closer and closer. The whip was finally stashed away and Harry could not avoid releasing his next breath audibly; the last strike had touched his hair.

The ogre shuffled his warty, oversized feet closer and grabbed the chain again and locked it to a ring that had appeared in the center of the floor. Rings were added to Harry's ankles, but not without a struggle that he just could not hold back on. The chain between his feet was fed through a large ring to the chain between his hands. The ogre gave it a tug, pulling Harry into a curled position. With a grunt the ogre stood straight and the lights went out.

Harry, surrounded by total darkness, forced the chain to yield its slack so he could sit more comfortably. This he could think of as some kind of game, though he imagined that someone who had previously been a prisoner would find this difficult to endure.

The small door opened again and Harry scooted around on the floor to face the direction of the sound of it. The fairy lights came up to reveal a dozen or so perfectly ordinary-sized tarantulas. Harry relaxed. They scuttled around him, one taking a shortcut over his exposed shin. The feel of its pointed legs made him shiver. After a minute or so they stepped away and the small door closed.

Some time later. Harry blinked to clear his eyes and with a loud shuffle of chain, rubbed them under his glasses. The room was filling with an aqua fog. Tendrils of it curled out across the floor, issuing forth a disturbing light. When Harry smelled its sickly sweet scent, he tried to stand, but the chains were ungainly. He passed out, forced by the exertion to take a gasp of tainted air.

When Harry next awoke, his first thought was that his arm was cold and the floor was too rough. He blinked and sat up part way. His clothes were gone and he was still chained. He huffed in annoyance and sat up the rest of the way. There were three fairy lights now. Harry looked around at them and realized with a bad start that someone stood in the corner of the room.

Harry composed himself, put his knees up to rest his arms on and considered the dark form as it stirred and moved into the light. The blue lights revealed a wizard with severely styled, grey-streaked dark hair, wearing a cloak with a turned-up collar edged in scarlet. He walked with a gold-tipped cane that reminded Harry too much of Malfoy's silver one. Malfoy, however, never had the opportunity to push Harry over with it, which is what this man did as he passed. Rubbing the spot on his chest where the cane had pressed, Harry sat back up, feeling slightly woozy as he did so. He shook off his unbalance and looked the wizard over as he circled, cane tapping on the stones. He did not recognize him at all. He supposed that he represented the ideal of a dark wizard. Harry tried not to scoff internally. Fake dark wizard or not, he really wished he weren't naked.

The wizard finally spoke. "Presumptuous one, aren't you?" he asked in a sneering tone.

"I don't think so," Harry replied easily.

The wizard gave him a derisive look. He circled some more. Harry stopped watching him since turning his head was making him dizzy. He looked up when the cane tapped him on the shoulder. "What would your mother think of seeing you like this?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I never knew her."

"She would be appalled." The wizard caught the chain with his cane and jerked it, pulling Harry to his side. Harry was starting to really hate being restrained so. "She would wail and wonder where your pride was," the stranger went on mockingly.

"I doubt that."

"Do you miss her?" The wizard asked suddenly, leaning in close.

"Yes," Harry replied instantly, then wondered why he had catered to this bloke.

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"How can you miss someone you do not remember?" the wizard sneered.

"I just miss having a mum. I see other mothers–I know what they do," Harry heard his voice coming out sounding hurt and thought he should rein in his answers.

The wizard circled more. Harry tried to hunch over to prevent access to his chain. The man laughed. "I can do anything to you that I like. How does that make you feel?"

"I don't like it," Harry answered. "Though it is somewhat more interesting than being in here alone."

The cane lifted his chin. "How touching," the wizard sneered. He circled some more. "Did you enjoy taking revenge on Voldemort?"

"Revenge would have killed me," Harry said, listening to himself prattle on with some alarm. "Any negative emotion and he would have taken me over. I didn't want to show him everything, but I had to–he had control of me. He used my hate against me."

"Have you ever taken revenge?"

"I tried to take it against Pettigrew. Wormtail, what an appropriate name . . . he was a rat and I didn't see anything wrong with him dying like one. Severus stopped me before I could go after him, pleaded with me not to do it." Again Harry was startled by how much he was saying. He wondered if being naked and chained had brought his sense of self down that far.

"Was fighting Voldemort the worst moment of your life?"

Harry immediately shook his head.

"What was?"

Harry thought about that, feeling strangely desperate for a good answer. "Maybe one of the times I thought I was being expelled or . . . " Harry stopped for a long time, not wanting to think about an answer.

Turning suddenly the man shouted, "Tell me!" in his face.

"I don't know!" Harry shouted back. "I have to think about it," he pleaded with him, frightened irrationally by the disapproval. "When Voldemort took me over, in the atrium upstairs, and taunted Dumbledore to kill us both. It was awful beyond words. I was pleading in my mind for him to kill me too, I so badly wanted it to stop." Harry breathed heavily in the wake of this.

"Name another time," the man demanded.

Harry's mind was racing. "What was in that vapor?" he asked, heart thumping as he considered that something was wrong with him.

"It was merely sleeping gas," the wizard stated reassuringly. "Tell me another time."

Harry face immediately crumpled. "Finding the mirror," he whispered and shook his head in remorse.

Sharply he was asked, "What mirror?"

"The mirror Sirius gave me. I would have known where he was," Harry's voice cracked as he spoke this. "I was such a fool. I believed Voldemort when he gave me visions that he had Sirius captive. So stupid. There wasn't anyone to help. I didn't trust Professor Snape. Sirius came to my rescue instead and died for it." A tear traced out of Harry's eye at this. His chains rattled as he put his hands up to dab at his eye.

Harry pulled off his glasses when the tears didn't stop. "He wanted me to live with him," he felt compelled to explain in an empty voice. He sniffled as he pressed his forearm against his eyes.

"Tell me another," the voice said after a few more circling steps.

Harry shook his head as he felt a liberating surge of defiance. "No," he said firmly. The wizard scuffed to a halt before him. A crystal goblet appeared in his hand and he poured something into it from a silver flask in his pocket. He held this out to Harry.

"Drink it."

"What is it?" Harry asked, suspicious.

"Veritaserum and two other complementary potions."

Harry glared at the man. Heat filled his face with blood. "You've already given me some," he accused.

The man nodded once and continued to hold the goblet out. "You have two clear choices: leave, or drink it."

Harry closed his eyes to force control through himself. He opened them and accepted the cold goblet. The liquid in it shimmered in the fairy lights. He asked himself if he wanted this badly enough as he stared into it. After a long hesitation, he drank it down. It was almost tasteless. The goblet disappeared when he tried to hand it back.

The wizard resumed circling. Harry wanted to shout at him to stop but clamped his mouth down on it.

Tonks exhaled audibly. Everyone around the table leaned in close to the crystal ball now.

"Was he talking about Sirius Black?" One asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Tonks said. "His godfather."

"He's still going," another commented, impressed, while the first shook his head in confusion.

After a few minutes of circling hypnotically around Harry, the dark wizard said levelly, as though he were in total control, "Tell me another."

Harry tiredly thought about it. "The Dementors maybe. No." He could feel the potion changing his control, loosening his will. That alone made his eyes burn again. "The tea–the bark tea Snape blew across to cool." In his mind he saw the firelight, felt Snape's arm around him, felt that queer resonance to some deep memory. "It was like it was my mother," Harry heard himself try to explain. He shook his head and felt that awful yearning again, although it was vastly muted by time.

"Doesn't sound very bad," the wizard mocked him.

Harry felt his shoulders relaxing. "He adopted me," he explained, relieved to find so little pain attached to the memory. "Took me home."

Tonks rubbed the back of her neck, uncomfortable with hearing this.

"They always get incomprehensible after the second dose," one of the apprentices complained.

Tonks stood straight and walked out. She stretched her legs by walking the length of the corridor. "Severus," she said upon finding him loitering near the lifts. She had owled him that morning when Harry had arrived to be certain he came to get him.

"They said he wasn't finished," Snape explained.

"He is still in," she confirmed, trying to sound as calm about that as possible. This was the first time she had understood why he and Harry had ended up in the arrangement they did and she felt like an interloper.

"It has been three hours," Snape observed. "More."

"He's most of the way. It is good you came–he's going to be wiped out when he's done."

This news made Snape look at her sharply. "Severus," she admonished his attempt to Legilimize her.

"My apologies. I am . . . concerned about him."

Tonks gave him a teasing smile. "I see that."

After a space, Snape said, "It is strange. I had considered parental instinct to be purely genetic. I have found it to be circumstantial instead."

She gave him a more reassuring smile than she felt. "The first task was a bit of a joke for him. We utilized Nagini to test for fear of snakes. We've lost two applicants to her already." She laughed lightly. "This, without announcing she was Voldemort's. Imagine if we had. Harry had a nice ten minute conversation with her." She threw up her hands. "No one has the slightest clue what they talked about." At Snape's relaxed and almost amused look, she said, "I'll bring him out here as soon as he's finished," before she took her leave.

Back in the room, the dark wizard demanded, "What else do you regret?"

Fishing for an answer, Harry replied, "I regret losing my parents."

"That wasn't your fault, was it?" his tormenter asked sarcastically.

"They were trying to protect me." Harry fell silent. "Born as the seventh month dies," he finally murmured.

"What?"

"Born to those who thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. They had to run, to hide, because of the prophecy," Harry said sadly. "Either must die at the hands of the other for neither shall live while the other survives. They died because of me." The weight of that felt much heavier than any of the others and was the least expected.

The meeting room had fallen silent again. "Shit, he knows more of it. It was supposedly lost," Rodgers said.

"Dumbledore knew it," Tonks explained. "I expect he told Harry."

Bleakly, Harry said, "I always said it the other way 'round for some reason. That they died for me."

The crawling aqua mist had returned. Harry glanced around for the dark wizard, not finding him. The first whiff of the gas knocked him out again.

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When he next awoke he was clothed and the chains were gone. With relief he sat up and rubbed the grit out of his eyes. He hoped the whole thing would be over soon; he felt as raw as he had after defeating Voldemort–a state he had hoped to never descend to again.

The room went dark again. Gradually light returned but the room was gone. Instead, Harry sat upon a small pedestal overlooking infinity. Wisps like clouds or space dust drifted slowly past. He glanced down over the edge and found his spindly pedestal stretching downward into the mist like a needle. It made him a little dizzy, so he sat back straight and peered at what looked like a pterodactyl flying in the distance. He supposed that if he fell over the edge of the pedestal that there really wasn't any place to go except the testing room floor beside him.

Eventually the scene faded and darkness returned. Time passed. Harry grew eager to go. He stood up and discovered his wand was back in his pocket. He took it out and cast a Lumos charm. With more light the room looked smaller. Harry paced around it once. He was familiar enough with the stones making up the floor to remember that when the ogre had appeared, it had come from that direction there, while his back was turned.

Feeling re-energized, Harry stepped over to that wall and looked at it closely, but it didn't seem to have any opening. He stepped back and said, " Alohomora ," to no effect. He then ran through all the unlock spells he knew. The eleventh one made a jagged crack of light, corresponding to the mortar joins, form in the wall. Harry grabbed it with his fingertips and tugged on it.

Rodgers stood in the corridor. "I actually was going to come get you. The last quiet time is to give you a chance to recover."

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem. You know a lot of unlock spells . . . two I've never heard. Follow me." He led Harry into the meeting room. Five people were collected there now. Rogers explained the setup.

Harry flushed. "Everyone was watching?" he asked, dismayed.

"All current Aurors and apprentices are allowed input on applicants," he explained. "Eventually everyone needs to know everyone else's weaknesses. We find this speeds up that process."

Harry dropped his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to accept that.

"You made it all the way through. You should be proud of that, whatever else happens." He urged Harry out of the room. "The afternoon applicant will be here

soon," he explained as he gestured for him to follow. Tonks met them in the corridor and led him away.

The first thing Snape thought when he saw Harry turn the corner was that his eyes looked far too much like they did on the chocolate frog card. Harry's gaze found him waiting there and the strained look faded considerably, startling Snape.

"How did it go?" he asked when Harry reached him and received a shrug in reply.

Tonks replied instead, "He made it all the way through; that is most of the way to being accepted to the program." She patted Harry on the back. "Go have a nice quiet evening, maybe a glass of mead, or two."

"Thanks, Tonks," Harry said tiredly and felt a surge of affection for her attention.

They rode in silence in the lift. The atrium was bustling now, grating on Harry's nerves. Snape put a hand around Harry's arm to get him to step out of the lift and into the atrium. They waited in line at the first hearth. When their turn arrived, Snape held out the Floo powder and gestured for Harry to lead.

Harry couldn't remember being so happy to be anywhere as when he stepped out into the dining room. In a flash of green flame, Snape appeared behind him. "Perhaps I should inform Winky to prepare an early dinner."

"That sounds good. I could use some tea too. . . ."

Winky appeared in the doorway right then with a tray. Atop the tray was a steaming pot and a bowl of chocolates. Harry smiled at the elf and sat at the table, Snape across from him, after hanging his cloak up.

"An early dinner, if you will, Winky," Snape said.

"Yes, Master." She finished pouring tea, arranged things, then left.

Snape sipped his tea. The haunted look appeared and faded from Harry's eyes several times.

"Are you allowed to tell me what happened?" Snape asked conversationally.

"Only in general." He ate a chocolate. "They make sure you don't have any common phobias for one, by making you face them all. Then they make you face some other things that probably occur in the course of being an Auror."

"Such as?"

"Such as being interrogated with Veritaserum." At Snape's dismay Harry pointed out, "I seem to recall you threatening me with that at one point."

"I do apologize," Snape breathed in pained sincerity.

Harry thought of saying that he had not been naked and chained to the floor that time so it was okay, then he decided that he did not want Snape to know about that. He stared into his tea and Occluded his mind, just in case.

After a long while Snape asked, "Worth it?"

"I hope so," Harry replied wryly.

They sat in quiet conversation until dinner appeared. A large bowl of spaghetti with a cream and seafood sauce surprised them both. It smelled wonderful, so Harry served himself a large pile.

Snape stood and returned with a bottle of honey-colored wine, which he opened. He poured a large glass and placed it beside Harry's plate. "I am assuming Ms. Tonks knows of which she speaks."

By the time Harry finished his plate and half of the glass of wine, his eyes were failing to stay open. Snape stood and came around to pull Harry's chair out as he stood up with the help of the table and then made his way upstairs.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted as he sat on the edge of his bed after being followed up to his room. "Just really tired all of a sudden."

Snape backed off. "If you need anything, Harry. Even if it is just someone to talk to. Please fetch me . . . no matter the time."

Harry closed his eyes. The twisted up feelings inside him were pulling at the past, when he always felt this way. Painfully grateful that things had changed so much, he said, "Thank you, Severus," as he opened his eyes.

Snape considered him before nodding sideways and leaving him alone. Harry changed clumsily into his pyjamas and fell asleep even as he adjusted the covers over himself.

Harry awoke from an agitated dream about being chained, perhaps because that had been something new, rather than because it had bothered him. He fell easily back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, with a dream of revealing too much to McGonagall about some rule his friends kept breaking, a shadow was beside the bed. Harry turned his head to look at his guardian and realized that, in the darkness of the room, he could see Snape better in his mind.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Snape intoned. The edge of the bed shifted as he sat down.

"I was having a bad dream anyway."

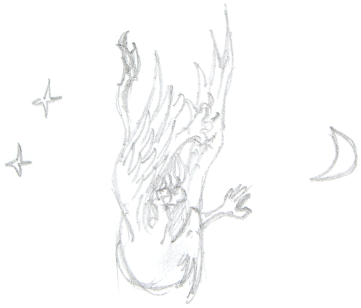
"Is there anything you need?"

"No. The dreams aren't really so bad," Harry mumbled and rolled onto his stomach.

As Harry drifted back off to sleep, he could see Snape moving away, closing the door, and stepping along the balcony.

Harry dreamed vividly of a cold stone floor, unyielding and cruelly bruising. Without the strength to lift himself, he lay upon it for a very long time, until his bare shoulder hardened to it with numbness. Having no strength to free himself, he might have lain there forever, aching and exposed to the damp draft and gritty rock. But he did not. Someone approached on silent feet and bent to lift him up. Standing was possible then and he could even sustain the heavy cloak that had been draped around him as he departed that cruel place.

Chapter 50.



Tangled Up in Blues

The next morning, Harry felt a little empty as he stared at the ceiling. It was very early, barely five. Thoughts of yesterday's test made his shoulder twitch in embarrassment. The soft warm bed was a nice contrast from the floor of the testing room, so he closed his eyes and drifted there for another hour before finally getting up.

Tea was already set out in the library along with more chocolates. A half hour later, Snape came in and poured himself a cup before settling down with some correspondence. The morning passed in near silence. Harry wrote to his friends about his application being completed with sketchy observations about the examinations. At lunch the post arrived with a formal looking envelope he could only assume contained his N.E.W.T.s. Harry, with a little trepidation, tore it open. It felt like too much reckoning in too short a time. He flipped past the official documents and request forms for sealed copies to the results themselves, and was relieved to see that there was nothing below an E, which meant his Auror's application was still alive.

"Five Os and three Es," Harry said to Snape, who held out his hand to see it. Harry gave it over, heart beating fast.

"An 'O' on Potions. Nicely done," Snape commented. "I saw how hard you worked last year. It is good to see it pay off."

"Thank you."

After a pause Snape said, "It is good to see you doing well."

Harry, a little flushed, said, "You've made things much easier."

"If it is the least I can accomplish . . ." Snape said with a hint of his old snideness.

Harry grinned at it. "I'm sure you've done more, but at the moment I'm not in the right mind for making a list."

"And by no means do you need to come up with one."

After lunch Harry reread Penelope's last letter. The tone sounded a little pleading, making him anxious. She wanted to come for a visit, which he would like, but he had held her off until after his testing was over, which she had not seemed to understand the need for. Harry had wanted to talk to Ron about his situation with Penelope, about her living so far away. Ron was going to encounter a similar situation with Hermione, unless he could talk his parents into letting him live in London, which seemed very unlikely. Trouble was, last time he was at the Burrow, Ginny had been around and he didn't feel he could broach either topic. He should have Ron over, even though every time he suggested it, Ron suggested somewhere else. Harry was thinking he should insist.

He owled both his friends and invited them over for the next evening. Only after the owls had left, did he think to mention the invitation to Snape, who shrugged that he did not care. The parchment piles seemed smaller now, so perhaps Snape would be caught up soon. Harry hoped so; he wanted to ask him for an Apparition lesson.

Harry read the only chapter in the house he could find on Apparition. He even practiced a little in his room, but didn't manage much; at least, he didn't seem to have moved when he gave it a go. Worried he might get Splinched and have to be rescued–with all the chastisement that would entail–he put it aside until he could get some of Snape's time.

Ron and Hermione came the next evening for dinner. Snape ate early without saying he was going to do this and disappeared into the drawing room. Harry was just following him inside the makeshift office to ask if there was a problem, when the hearth flared from the dining room.

"Your guests are here," Snape said, his large nose buried in one of those large decorative policy documents.

Harry left it at that and went to greet them. Rather than waste the nice day, they sat outside in the garden while the sun set. "How are things with Penelope?" Hermione asked, leaning back into the ivy growing up the house. She and Ron sat on the stone bench, while Harry sat on a chair pulled out from the library.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. He missed her, but perhaps less than he expected after seeing her every day. On the other hand, a lot had been going on the last few weeks. "She doesn't want me to become an Auror," he said, pulling that out for something to say.

"I wouldn't either if it were me," Hermione pointed out. Ron bumped her arm. "Well, I wouldn't," Hermione insisted.

"And she lives too far away. No matter how good I get at Apparition I couldn't get all the way to Switzerland. She wants to come for a visit now that my testing is over. How are your lessons, Ron, gotten any farther?"

"Dad hasn't had time. Said tomorrow, maybe, if you want to come over again."

"I'd like that. Severus is still really busy." Harry tried not to wish Snape hadn't been promoted to Deputy Headmaster, but he kind of wished he hadn't.

Hermione sipped her mead and teased, "Harry, discovering parents aren't all they're promised to be . . . "

A tad defensive, Harry said, "He put everything down to take me to Switzerland."

Stars were starting to twinkle in the east. Ron rubbed his stomach. "Are we eating here? Not that I'm complaining or anything."

Harry stood and picked up his chair. "Yeah. Come on inside."

When they reached the table and sat down, dishes appeared. "Wow," Ron murmured. "What I wouldn't give to have an elf."

Hermione gave him such a disgusted look, Harry wondered why she never criticized him. She looked over and seeing his face said. "Winky is different. She really needed a home."

"Oh, of course," Ron said in a patronizing manner, then smiled, apparently to buffer it.

They talked until almost midnight. Yawning, Hermione suggested they should call it a night. Harry watched them depart in the hearth, before heading for the main hall. The lights were all out in the doorways on the ground floor. Upstairs he found Snape awake in his room.

"Your friends are gone?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Harry."

Tangled Up in Blues

Harry came home from the Burrow after dinner the next day. The Apparition lessons had gone chaotically with the twins there teasing constantly, and eventually it had broken down into an impromptu Quidditch match with just one side attacking Ron at Keeper and Hermione, who played Beater magically from a comfortable seat on the ground, using her wand to hover and throw the Bludgers around.

Harry picked up the letter for him from Penelope and carried it to his room with a stop at the drawing room to say hello to his guardian. He almost asked when Snape might have time for lessons, but held back seeing the wild-haired look Snape had as he carefully filled out some strange form in red ink. Arrayed before him were jars of yellow and orange ink as well and apparently the lamp had run out of fuel because two large gutted candles were lined up beside the inkwells.

Harry swallowed a sigh and went up to his room. He took off his shoes and opened the letter. Each letter reinforced his sense that Penelope was feeling anxious and this one made it clearer. The letter was written in two parts, he could tell because of the angle of the writing. In the last, shorter, part she said she would visit that week and looked forward to seeing him. He folded up the letter and put it in the night stand drawer with her other ones. He feared she would find Shrewsthorpe a bit quiet in comparison to Bern. They would have to tour London, perhaps, for a day. He had a bad sense that he was missing something with Penelope. With a sigh he collected his pyjamas from the wardrobe and changed for the night, even though it was early. The skin on his arms was red, he noticed, having got too much sun playing Quidditch at the Burrow. As he pulled the covers up he felt anxious about her coming; maybe that was part of the reason he had told her to postpone coming.

Penelope arrived Tuesday afternoon and Harry went into London to meet her at Waterloo. In the crowded noise station he did not see her right away, not until she tugged on his sleeve from behind. She greeted him with a forceful hug and he took over steering her small trunk off the platform.

"We'll take the underground to the Leaky Cauldron and take the Floo Network from there–much faster," Harry informed her.

On the way, after talking about Harry's tests in more detail, they fell silent until reaching the wizard pub. Everyone greeted Harry warmly with a wave and a few handshakes. Tom came around the bar and introduced himself to Penelope who returned his handshake politely, but stiffly. Harry, not wishing to encounter the likes of Rita Skeeter with Penelope in tow, headed straight for the hearth.

Dinner was quiet. Harry at the beginning thought he caught Snape considering his guest a little more closely than Harry was comfortable with. But after the dinner dishes vanished, Snape sat back with a glass of sherry and appeared relaxed. Harry found himself short of topics, which he had not expected. He considered topics one at a time and discarded them during long silences.

Snape finished his little glass and set it down loudly. "It is a warm evening, perhaps you should go for a nice walk," he suggested.

Harry jumped at that suggestion. Outside, the air was sultry, and once their eyes adjusted, it was quite pleasant to be out. They turned at the first corner and walked through pools of light cast by the overhead street lights. A dog barked and ran up to the side fence to look at them through the slats, startling them both.

At one corner Penelope announced into the quiet, "I am thinking of looking for a position in London."

Harry stopped. "You are?" He considered that. "You don't want to work at the archives in Montreux?" he asked, confused.

"Vell, yes, but . . ." she began.

Harry felt his anxiety returning from the other night. He started walking again and pieced a question together. "Are you finding anything?"

She reluctantly answered, "Not yet. My training is not so appropriate here."

"Uh," Harry began, then said, "I don't want you to move for my sake."

She stopped this time. "Why not?" she asked, voice whip-like.

Harry swallowed. Instinct had made him say that, he decided. "Because . . ." Harry started to say, then decided this required some careful wording.

"I thought you loved me," Penelope queried flatly.

Harry stiffened at that word, and studied her distressed gaze. Something, a bat or a swift, dodged through the light above them, chasing insects. He took her shoulders in his hands. "I like you a lot–more than I've ever liked anyone before, but . . . I don't

want you to change your whole life around for me." Harry felt good about that; it was exactly what he wanted to say.

Penelope frowned. "I thought you vould vant me around, no matter vat."

"I like having you around. I like being with you," Harry tried to explain. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache teasing at him. In the odd light she looked exceptionally saddened. "Let's talk this over tomorrow, all right? You've had a long journey," he added, remembering his own condition when he had arrived in Bern.

In a brooding silence she followed him back to the house. She was friendly to Snape when they crossed in the hall on the way upstairs to see her settled into the guest room, but she fell silent again when they were alone. She unpacked a bit sloppily as though uncaring of things.

Quietly, Harry said, "I don't know what to tell you but how I feel."

"Tomorrow, like you said," she said bluntly.

Harry backed out and left her alone. In his own room, he dug out a book on dragon lore that Hagrid had given him last term, apparently having no idea that Harry would have no time to read leading up to his N.E.W.T.s, and tried to distract himself with it. It was fortunately an amusing book full of unwise Muggles and wizards and their bad encounters with dragons, like Marvin Murgatroid who believed so faithfully in the dragon repellent he had purchased from a vendor at the harvest fair that he walked straight into the karst caves of Slovenia and got by three stunned dragons before stumbling off an underground cliff when his torch ran out of pitch, just a hundred feet from the horde of gems he was seeking. Fortunately for Marvin he fell into the underground river and was swept out to safety, only singed on the top of his head.

Harry read halfway into the night, then lay awake for the rest. Achy and tired, he rose the next morning and found Penelope, talking pleasantly with Snape over toast. "Shall we go into London today?" Harry asked, assuming she would answer.

"Sure," she replied.

Snape departed for Hogwarts ahead of them, giving Harry an odd look on his way out. But Harry wasn't in a position to ask what it meant with Penelope reading the newspaper right across from him.

The day went well enough, albeit quietly. Penelope didn't speak much, but would answer questions. On the underground on the way to the riverfront and London Bridge, Harry asked, "Are those boys from your school bothering you still?"

"I don't zee them normally. I rarely visit Geneva and they are actually from Strasbourg."

That made Harry feel a bit better. They visited the theatre and an old gaol and walked on the bridge which made Harry wish he had worn his cloak as the wind was brisk along the river. Penelope didn't seem to notice the chill in her nice woolen coat.

It was getting late when they reached the Tower of London. Harry suggested they find someplace for dinner before heading back. Her reply was a shrug, which almost made him say something in anger, but he held back. They had to walk a distance to find a place that looked casual enough, but they found a pub finally and had pies, which Penelope looked a bit dubious about. Harry kept waiting for some kind of comment, but none was forthcoming, nor was much conversation.

When they arrived back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry felt a bit strung thin. Fortunately or unfortunately, Snape was not back from Hogwarts, even though it was rather late for him to be gone still. In the main hall, Harry said, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Maybe dere isn't anything to say," she stated flatly, looking over the Celtic-framed mirror mounted under the stairs beside the door to the drawing room. The silvering was giving out along the edges where she drew her finger as she looked it over rather than face him.

"I don't want you to rearrange your life for me," Harry repeated. He thought that was pretty straightforward, really.

She spun on him. "Vell, thank you very much," she said sarcastically. "I just thought I meant more to you than that."

Harry had no answer to that since he was pretty certain he had not said anything in that regard, or even implied it. "I do like you," he insisted, then fell silent since he didn't want to get too argumentative. She stepped by him with an exasperated huff and went upstairs. Harry followed slowly, feeling his pride complaining along the way. At the door to the guest room he was surprised to find her packing "You aren't leaving now, are you?" Harry asked.

"Might as vell," she said through clenched teeth.

"That's silly. Leave in the morning at least."

"Silly vas thinking you cared."

"Aye," Harry said and hit himself on the forehead. The urge to shout at her almost overtook him, but he forced it down. Calmly, he said, "Leave in the morning, Penelope, please."

"Dere is an overnight train. I vill take that."

"All right, but you have to find your way from the Leaky Cauldron to Waterloo," Harry said. "And it's getting late."

"I'll take a taxi. I am not a clueless witch who cannot manage dis."

Harry listened to the hardened anger under the words. "I'm sorry," he said on automatic, then said, "I don't know why I'm apologizing, since I haven't done anything that requires it."

She had her trunk in her hand as she stepped over to him in the doorway. "No," she said with more than a hint of sarcasm. "Of course not."

He followed her down to the entryway where she collected her cloak, then to the dining room where she shoved her trunk into the hearth rather forcefully. Harry held out the Floo powder and took a handful himself.

"Vhat are you doing?" she asked.

"I'll take you to the station," he said.

"I can manage," she replied coldly.

He almost said, don't be silly, again, but stopped himself in time to say, "I want to see you off."

She pulled out her wand, wielded it with a wave, and stashed it away again. "I can manage on my own."

"Look . . ." Harry began.

"You look," she said, cutting him off. "You hurt me. If you do not vant me here, den there is no point in anything." Her voice broke at the end but she covered with a dark look. "Certainly, I do not need your chivalrous help to merely catch a train home."

Harry poured the Floo powder out of his hand back into the canister. It was damp and sticky from his holding it so tightly. He set the canister on the table, held up his empty hand for her to see, again resisting expressing deeper anger by just a hair.

"Goodbye, Harry," she said and tossed her handful of powder down. With a whoosh she was gone. Harry dropped his hands to his sides and replayed the last few minutes in his mind. He couldn't figure out what else he should have said or done. He stalked out of the room, kicking the chair out of his path on the way. He dreaded having to explain what had happened when Snape came home.

He couldn't have told her to find a prospect in London, could he? That sounded monumentally unfair to her since she had something in Switzerland that she wanted to be doing. Harry certainly wouldn't have dropped his Auror application to move to Switzerland. With a groan he paced the hall once, looking for something to vent his frustration on. There was little here but a rug and a floor lamp that looked antique, although ugly. He turned from it before being tempted to smash it.

The Floo flared in the dining room. Harry stood in the middle of the hall, resisting hoping that Penelope had returned. He stood transfixed until Snape stepped out, looking over a stack of post. He glanced up at Harry, then down, then back up again.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked.

Harry frowned. "Penelope left," he said simply.

"Ah."

"Ah? What do you mean, ah?" Harry demanded, finding an outlet for his annoyance and anger.

"Only that. McGonagall and I just had a very, very difficult meeting with two members of the board and so I am going to stop at that."

Harry watched Snape walk into the drawing room, annoyed that he had not given Harry a better excuse to vent at him. Anger washed over him but he resisted the lamp and growled instead. He wished he knew what he should have done, while at the same time he had no desire to change his mind about what he had said. He stalked to the wall and slapped the unyielding stones with his palm. Snape came back out and stood in the doorway to the drawing room.

"You are going to say you saw this coming," Harry accused him sharply.

"No. I was not going to say anything," Snape replied in studious calm.

Snape's calm aggravated Harry more. "What was I supposed to do?" he demanded loudly. "Argh," he growled and again slapped his hand on the wall, this time producing a burst of pain. Snape's steady gaze didn't waver when Harry turned to him. Harry desperately sought someplace to channel his frustration. The world twisted and untwisted as though he were transforming Animagically without will. Needing to escape the suddenly cramped hall and breathe, he charged through the entryway and out into the garden.

The road beyond the garden wall was quiet except for a few crickets. Harry stood looking over it, breathing heavily, trying to dampen his burning emotions. The world

twisted again and suddenly he was completely free. Anger beat out of him, lifting him from the earth. He gave it free rein then and, without thought to direction, leaned forward into the wind and flew harder.

The dark earth rolled beneath Harry as he soared over it. He flew high, then dipped low. Hills were joyous when he flew low; he couldn't see beyond them until he pulled up over their crests at the very last moment, making his heart leap. He veered away from pockets of light that indicated towns, strings of sliding paired diamonds that marked roads. He flew toward the blackness of wild countryside, where starlight and the slivered moon provided the only glow. Harry forgot everything except steering away from light and beating his wings in long strokes and coasting on the buffeting air.

Harry flew over countless hills, rose exhiliratingly in the updrafts rising from the edge of as many valleys, flapped until his wings felt leaden and he couldn't draw enough breath to fill his lungs. He could no longer hold the Animagus spell reliably and the world kept twisting, the ground rearing up as though to strike him. In a square of lighter pasture, just angled to catch the moonlight, Harry made a desperate bid to land. It was too difficult in the steeply-shadowed moonlight to properly judge the distance to the ground, nor did he have enough strength left to brake his descent. Dark clover swallowed him up as he struck earth and rolled.

Harry came to himself some time later and moved slowly to check that each of his limbs worked. His side ached horribly when he lifted his shoulder off the damp ground to see above the thick plants surrounding him. A low, collapsing stone wall marked the boundary of the field he lay in. Over the top of a grey rise he could see the darker angled roof of a barn. He forced a deep breath into his lungs and staggered to his feet. Things did not look much better once he was upright. He made his way gingerly to the wall and sat down on a large, flat stone that only shifted a little when he did so.

Harry looked 'round as a night bird resumed chirping. He felt a little better in one way, having given himself something more pressing to worry about than Penelope. He forced in another deep breath and considered the dark landscape. The stars glowed thick overhead, as dense as he had ever seen them. The constellations were unidentifiable in the mélange of the sky and the Milky Way, a river of light, wound across with its own strange hue. He felt for his wand and with relief, found it in his pocket where it belonged. He wondered what he should do. He pondered his predicament for a while in an almost pleasant, semiconscious stupor, until he grew chilled with dewy cold. There wasn't a chance, given his state, of regaining his

Animagus form and flying home, even if he knew the right direction. If he could Apparate, he would probably be back home now, he thought with annoyed regret.

Far down the undulating hillside there was a light. Harry could not see from here if it was a street light or a house light. The thought of making his painful way over there just to face the disappointment were it to be a street light held him in place. He could, he considered, try to flag the Knight Bus. He had no idea if it traveled such remote routes or only city streets. Wrapping his arms around himself for warmth, he imagined that he may have no choice but to try. Or to walk until he found a house and could use a telephone. This brought up the question of who he would call. Hermione's disapproving face loomed up in his mind and he considered that maybe Dean would be a better choice, if Harry had had his number memorized. He could probably manage Hermione's number with some guessing.

Time passed. Harry knew this because the moon was now touched by the treetops of a small copse, which meant it was only going to get darker. Feeling a little lightheaded, he shifted down to lean back against the stone pile, rather than upon it. Relaxing, however, required giving in to the sharp pain in his side, so he sat tense, though warmer out of the wind. Memories came back as he sat there. One in particular stung hard: the night Remus interrupted their returning Pettigrew to the school by transforming into a werewolf. The memory seemed starker in this near darkness. So close they had been to saving Sirius. Regret rose at that, joining with his regret over Penelope, rendering him rather miserable.

After a time Harry felt more lightheaded, despite resting. He should have tried sooner for the one close light, he realized with some alarm. Standing was difficult now; his knees, which he had not considered injured, felt wholly bruised now and complained about taking his weight. Sitting higher on the stone again, he gathered his will to make his way across the field, plotting in his mind the exact path through the clover that he would take to get there. Like a countdown before a Quidditch match he willed himself to stand up and go on one, two, three. Harry stumbled across the field which turned out to be much larger than it looked in the poor light. At the far wall he stopped and caught his breath, his side now felt like it actively had something stuck in it, something sharp and pointed. Holding his ribs, he lowered himself to this side of the wall and fought panic at his predicament.

The tantalizing light didn't look any closer. Harry closed his eyes and tried to will his body to obey and continue on anyway. Despairing now, at the cold and pain, Harry opened his eyes and rubbed his knees one at a time just to do something vaguely productive. He rubbed his eyes as his vision was disturbed. A strange red glow had

formed around him, around his fingers and face, making it hard to see. Harry reached for his wand and the red disappeared.

Alert now, Harry held his wand at ready and looked around himself, at the amorphous dark stands of trees nearby, at the hill tops. Many minutes later, the glow returned, shorter this time but Harry couldn't detect anything nearby, friendly or not. The next time the glow came and went, a figure landed in the field at a bit of a run. Harry held his wand out and tried to stand. His next thought was that the cold must have gotten to him and he was seeing things. "Severus?" Harry asked in surprise, recognizing Snape in the red glow from his wand.

Snape stepped over to him, carrying two brooms. "You made it much farther than I imagined," he stated almost apologetically, transferring Harry's balance from the wall to himself. Harry leaned on him gratefully. "Hurt bad?" Snape asked evenly.

"No," Harry said, enjoying the quick warmth of his support and letting himself lean into it more.

Snape raised his red-tipped wand and looked Harry in the face. "Crash landing?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"A bit of one," Harry admitted. "How did you find me?"

Snape huffed and said, "Rather complicated spell that I did not have much faith would actually work. McGonagall owled it when I asked her for ideas. Harry flushed at the thought that McGonagall knew he had run off. Snape changed the spell on his wand with a shake to make it white instead with a Lumos charm. "You look as though you could use a visit to St. Mungo's."

"No," Harry pleaded. "I just want to go home."

Snape hovered Harry's broom and spelled it with a Sticking charm before helping him onto it. "You should not have left in that case," Snape stated with just a touch of snideness. "We will fly until we are within Apparition distance then Apparate from there. You came a very long way, Harry," Snape repeated, sounding astounded.

In the main hall of the house where they reappeared, Snape held Harry upright. "I should not have listened to you," Snape said. "You are injured. It is very dangerous to be injured in an Animagus form; the injuries do not necessarily translate safely to your human form."

"I think I landed as myself, if that helps. I don't want to go to St. Mungo's," Harry insisted, imagining the miserable stay in the crowded waiting room with everyone looking at him and wondering.

Snape held him there in the quiet hall, considering that. "To your room then. I'll contact a Healer." Snape then helped him upstairs.

"Thank you for coming for me," Harry said as he sat crookedly on his bed, favoring his side. When he rubbed his hair back, he was dismayed to find drooping clover caught there, tangled rather thoroughly.

Snape bent close and touched his shoulder. "You will be all right while I use the Floo?"

"Yeah," Harry assured him a little sharply, checking his hair for more debris. "I think I'll be fine if you don't call a Healer."

"You look as though you have broken a few ribs, at least," Snape observed. When Harry just shrugged, Snape stood straight and said, "Feeling better?"

"A bit," Harry replied quietly.

"Hm," Snape murmured before he turned to leave.

"She wanted to move here. With no prospects," Harry complained. "I couldn't let her do that." Snape turned back before the door and considered him. Harry went on, "I . . . It wouldn't be fair to her . . . I'm not sure I like her that well. I can't just suddenly start liking her enough to want her around enough to have her do that." He frowned, everything coming back again except muted by the pain.

They looked at each other. Harry finally asked, pleading, "What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't have an answer to that. Perhaps there isn't one."

"It wasn't good either way," Harry said. "Was I supposed to want her here no matter what?"

"You may have." When Harry opened his mouth then closed it without speaking, Snape added, "If you didn't, then I believe you did the right thing. It is worse to lead someone on. I'll be right back."

Harry listened to him go down the stairs. The ticking of the downstairs clock seemed louder after the footsteps faded. The pain was numbing now and he cared less at this moment about the world than he ever had. The footsteps returned. Snape stepped in and at Harry's request, brought him his pyjamas. Harry tossed aside his dewy clothes and put on his bottoms before pulling the duvet around himself against his chilled skin. Snape stood by the door, arms crossed as he considered him.

"I thought you'd be angry," Harry said.

"I was, briefly," Snape replied, eyes narrowing. "Then enough time passed that I asked Winky to fetch you and she informed me you were far out of reach." Speaking slowly, he went on, "It is not magic she is especially gifted with so it was difficult to ascertain just how far that was. It also seemed to be as much a matter of distance as a mood for her. In any event, failing her assistance, it was not exactly clear how to find you and the longer you were gone, the more likely it seemed that you were unable to return."

Harry frowned and shifted with a grunt to take the strain off his side. The door knocker sounded from downstairs, drawing Snape down to answer it. He reappeared with the Healer in tow.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, we meet again," the wizard said, removing his pointed hat and folding it into his pocket.

"We do?" Harry asked, squinting in the lamplight at the unfamiliar wizard with his thinning hair.

"Healer Redletting," the wizard said pleasantly as he set his worn case down before the night stand. "I was here last summer. You had a wizard influenza, bad case, so you may not remember."

"I remember not feeling well," Harry admitted.

"Well, at any rate, looks as though you've had a bit of an accident, young man." He bent over his case and pulled out a long wand of cherry wood. "So, what happened?"

Harry explained, "I fell. I was flying and I got too tired and I fell." The Healer was spelling Harry on the top of the head as he spoke.

"On a broomstick, then?"

Harry's wrist was lifted, pulse taken a spell put on it that made it tingle, then the same with the other. "No." The Healer ceased and looked at him. "I'm an Animagus," Harry explained, wishing he could just lie down, that the man would finish quickly. Harry lifted his arm over his head on command, requiring a great deal of will against the pain, but his ribs were healed with a series of spells. The release from the pain was enough to make his eyes water. The Healer stepped back and appraised him before leaning in and prodding a spot on Harry's forehead where he hadn't realized he had been injured.

"Drink these," the healer commanded after rummaging in his bag for a handful of chipped old bottles. Harry obeyed, taking each sour potion in turn. He glanced at Snape then, who stood at the end of the bed, gaze inscrutible.

The wizard packed up his things, saying, "If he is lightheaded tomorrow, call me again or bring him in right away." He handed Snape a bill, which he paid in silence. And after an admonishment to not fly for a week or even transform, he said, "Good to see you again, Mr. Potter. Do be more careful." Then he put his hat back on , tipped it and left.

Harry shifted back on the bed, very pleased to be breathing easily. "I really thought you'd be angry," Harry said tiredly.

Snape's lips twitched but it was hard to tell if it was into a smile or a scowl. He stepped a little closer and said, "At the moment I am merely grateful to have retrieved you."

Harry, reminded all over again that it was good to have someone to rely on, said, "Thanks for that,"

Another twitch of the lips that this time resembled a wry smile. "It is nearly morning and you should rest."

Harry settled back on his bed and adjusted the covers. Trying to piece things together, he asked, "What was the spell you used to find me?"

Snape, who had turned to depart, turned back slowly. "It was a blood spell," he admitted. "One I did not expect to work. It made you a beacon I could follow at any distance."

"Aren't blood spells all dark magic?" Harry asked.

"Almost exclusively."

"I'm surprised you did that," Harry said, feeling uneasy.

Snape explained, "I was not going to try it, despite Minerva's suggesting it, until I found Kali frantic and had to assume you had met with something unpleasant. Fortunately, it was merely the ground."

Harry glanced at the Chimrian, or what he could see of her bundled asleep in the rags at the bottom of her cage. He then stared at the lamplight flickering on the ceiling. He still felt rather uncaring in general, but curious about this. "You didn't have any of my blood to work with," he pointed out.

"True. Nor was it convenient to obtain some from a living relative, a requirement of the spell," Snape said, sounding dry and teacherish.

The sky beyond the window was turning grey, making Harry's eyes heavy with the prospect of the long, exhaustive day ahead. "So what did you do?"

Snape stepped to the door, prepared to pull it closed behind him. "The only thing I could. Good night, Harry."

Harry's brow furrowed at the ceiling, now lit by the dawn. "You couldn't have used yours, we're not related," Harry said.

"No we are not," he agreed. "Good night." He closed the door.

Harry's brow failed to unfurrow as he fell asleep.

At a late breakfast Harry, feeling the clarity of a new day, said, "Sorry about last night." Snape tilted his head without comment. Harry regretfully went on,"You had to call a Healer, even."

"Feeling better this morning about the girl?"

"No, just embarrassed." Harry buttered his toast and crunched it down quickly to satisfy his famished stomach. "Do you think you could find the time to teach me to Apparate?"

"I thought you were under Arthur's tutelage."

Harry sighed and buttered another slice. "He isn't . . . he doesn't know how to teach, really. And Ron gets most of his time . . . not that he shouldn't," Harry added quickly. "Should have done it last summer."

"It did not come up, did it?" he said in an odd tone. When Harry looked up questioningly, Snape said, "It was much easier to keep track of you that way."

"Oh."

"Easter break, I considered it, but you seemed to need a break from learning. I will make time this afternoon. I expect you will catch on quickly, so it should not take long. You would have gotten out of practice during your time at school, in any event, so it is just as well."

Snape refilled his quickly consumed coffee, and Harry noticed the bandage wound around his left hand. "You did you use your blood," Harry said a little accusingly.

"There was no choice. Or there was, but it was to leave you to your own devices." Snape put his left hand back in his lap and sipped his coffee thirstily. "I tried using Kali's, as you and she must be bound by blood as that is the only way to create a

Chimrian with that much empathy. That is actually how I received this wound." He held up his hand again momentarily, showing the stained bandage at the base of his thumb. "It did alter the spell, I believe, but since it worked, I did not take the time to investigate the intricacies."

Harry grinned then fell serious. "Dark magic always takes its toll, though. That's what everyone at Hogwarts always says."

"I do not plan to make a habit of it," Snape commented with forced ease. "Nor do I plan to care for your pets any time in the near future."

That afternoon, Harry stood in the main hall before Snape, who looked about to launch into a lecture when he stopped and said, "Doesn't that hurt?" indicating the large purple bruise above Harry's left eye.

"A bit."

"Certain you are up for this? It requires rather a lot of concentration in the beginning."

"Yes," Harry stated firmly, then wished he had not sounded so exasperated.

Snape put his hands behind his back casually and began. "Apparition is a form of relocation magic. But since it involves the caster himself or herself, it is quite different from other kinds. More hazardous, obviously because one is not working with an object or an animal that can be recovered easily or disposed of if necessary." He paced a few steps and continued with Harry's full attention. "Given that the caster is also the castee, some interesting magical capabilities become available, such as self awareness of the transformation at hand. When one is, say, hovering a book, one can only see what the impact is as the book moves or fails to move, or falls. In this case one feels what is happening instantly, making it possible to adjust instantly. With practice, Apparition truly becomes second nature as a result, unlike most magics."

He stepped away a few strides. The silence made Harry realize that he had gone for weeks without a lecture, which made it very easy to follow every word closely. Snape said, "One could teleport without collapsing, the two stages of the spell, but it would require enormous power. Collapsing is modeled many ways by Apparators as everything from crunching down a sheet of parchment into a ball to letting the air out of a balloon."

"Fred and George imagine being folded into a paper airplane," Harry commented.

Still lecturing, Snape said, "It does not, in the end, matter what model one uses, just that it involve shrinkage of some kind. Is there a model you prefer?"

Harry wished he knew what his mum and dad had used; the paper airplane sounded odd to Harry although it had worked for Ron. "I'll try the ball of paper."

"Close your eyes then. Realize that you are not trying to go anywhere, just remain where you are. That is important at this stage in order to remain in one piece."

Harry did as he was told and stared at the insides of his eyelids. He imagined balls of paper, then paper airplanes, again tried hard to imagine himself as the ball of paper. He felt like he was missing something. He shifted his feet on the hard floor from standing too long and tried again, more determined this time. A crack! sounded and Harry jumped, only to realize he didn't have any feet. He fell on his backside as they reappeared.

"Do try not to panic," Snape said.

Harry wished he had not laughed at Ron and his arms as he stood back up and rubbed his sore bum, sore from previous injury as well, he realized.

"Again," Snape commanded.

Harry tried again. It took less time for the crack! to sound this time and when he opened his eyes he was whole. "How do I not make so much noise?" Harry asked.

"One thing at a time."

After three hours Harry could, for the most part, reliably get from one end of the room to the other and was feeling pretty happy about that. Snape rubbed his brow yet again. "I do not mean to put you off, but after the late night, I am inclined to stop for now."

Harry, feeling tired as well but still eager, agreed anyway because Snape looked rather worn down and that was Harry's fault.

Late the next day after a follow up lesson where Harry practiced Apparating in from the back garden, successfully avoiding all walls though with one close call near the lamp, Penelope's owl arrived with a letter. The owl was so tired that Harry carried it up to his room and gave it Hedwig's cage. It gratefully ate the cold meat he fed her and put her head under her wing. Hedwig, sitting on Kali's cage, fluffed herself in annoyance. She had to peck at Kali to stop the Chimrian sniffing at her feet.

"Behave yourselves," Harry chastised them all, taking Kali out while holding the letter. He sat down on the bed, Chimrian climbing around his shoulders as he read.

Penelope started her letter by apologizing for getting so upset but by the end, essentially said she felt it was warranted. Harry took out a quill and parchment and wrote out a reply. Remembering Snape's words of the night before, Harry explained that he could only be honest about how he felt. He tried to explain that her moving specifically to be near him would not be fair to either of them. Also that his training was reputed to be very difficult and time-consuming and he would not have much time for anyone else for a long while and that this was very important to him even though he liked her very much.

He reread the letter with a kind of sadness at the cruelty of making choices, but didn't alter it. He folded it up, added a note to the back about sending her owl along when it had recovered, and gave it to Hedwig, who seemed happy to go. For practice, he Apparated down to the hall and found himself without Kali, who squawking, flew down to meet him. "Sorry," he said to her as she regained his shoulder.

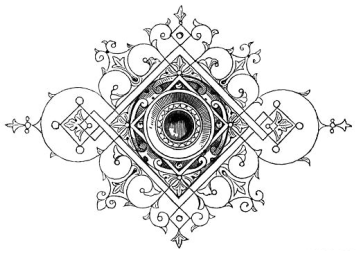
Harry strode to the doorway of the drawing room where Snape had returned to his parchments. He stood, lost in thought until Snape asked, "Everything all right?" Harry shrugged. "Recovering?" Snape then asked.

"In what way?"

"In any way, but I can only assist with the physical. The other you must work out for yourself," he commented, dipping his quill and pulling his sleeve aside as he returned to writing.

Harry watched Snape's precise writing, lit by the sunlight from the window behind, the nib making a low hollow noise as it moved. Kali chewing on his collar broke him out of circling thoughts this time. He sighed as he turned to go out to work on the garden, just for something to do.

Chapter 51.



Uncertain Glory

Severus Snape completed the student record for the previous school year by filling in the very last entry in long columns of classes, teachers and students in green, red, blue and brown–in lieu of yellow–inks. At the bottom of the section's last page were logged notable events of which there were surprisingly few; the first one being the passing of the headmaster, noted by McGonagall in factual language. The sizable square dusty book containing the record had a thick leather binding that creaked ominously from its infrequent use and only bound enough pages for the compilation of the last hundred years. The book flickered occasionally with old spells applied to protect its utterly mundane contents. New spells had been put on twenty years ago: a locking spell and a content protection spell that had to be neutralized before writing in it.

Snape adjusted the soiled bandage on his palm, and turned the large stiff pages back to the previous year. McGonagall's hand was very different from his own, curlier and prone to flourishing beyond the small boxes supplied for each of the student's names along the left hand side. Horizontal, were coded entries for classes attended and grade given, or a code for a footnote of which there were several, such as Crabbe's line of daggers and the note that he withdrew for family reasons. The same note was repeated for Goyle. It is always the foolish who pay in the end, Snape thought idly, noting that Malfoy and Nott were in good stead throughout. Nott, Snape would have in his House one more year, because of his missed year recovering from his injuries during the final battle. He considered that if the boy remained the quiet outsider, Snape's job as Head of House would be easier. Sometimes though, Seventh Year

created unexpected changes in older students, drawing out leadership potential or the opposite–active disloyalty–where none had manifested before.

The notes section below the final name–Zerxes, Saris–comprised a tidy list in McGonagall's competent hand.

Teachers and Aurors respelled the barrier to the Forest before classes resumed as Centaurs can no longer be relied upon to defend it. Cancelled all Quidditch in the interest of safety. Cancelled student Hogsmeade visits on 1 January for remainder of year.

Snape swallowed, gripped unwillingly by the memory of everything spiraling down into doom. He had begun to seriously question his faith in Dumbledore about the time McGonagall had made the Hogsmeade note. The old wizard's opaque plans and gentle assurances had grown maddening that winter. The Ministry's assistance had constituted little help as the Order, Ministry, and others worked at odds to each other. The constant strain of his own dual role had rendered him unable to do more than mindlessly follow the orders he had been given. His own single-minded priority of avoiding exposing his disloyalty to the Dark Lord had overridden larger thoughts about the usefulness of what they were all doing. Even as he had realized this, during the rare quiet moment, he could do nothing about it.

It wasn't nearly long enough ago. Perhaps after another year, the memory of the stress would not be so acute.

Student, H. Potter, abducted from grounds during Easter break. Recovered from Forest by Headmaster and Prof. Snape.

Bloody lucky that, Snape now realized. Very, very lucky that Goyle and Crabbe had been as stupid as they were. Had they forgone their own petty revenge and turned Harry over to the Dark Lord they would have been richly rewarded, and the Order would have lost its single most important, yet unacknowledged member. Snape had not known at the time how very close that had been to utter disaster. Although, perhaps, just perhaps, Harry could have managed, could have overcome Voldemort rather than the other way around.

Dwelling on that imagining, of an utterly desperate Harry as Voldemort's prisoner, was too much. He moved on to the next line and savored it joyfully.

Dark Wizard Voldemort broke spell barriers surrounding castle and entered with his followers only to be summarily dispatched by student, H. Potter.

Snape had replayed said moment in his mind countless times: the spells sizzling and flaring in all directions, the groans of the fallen Death Eaters, the shouted warnings,

and above it all, Harry, wand aimed, his gaze full of the bright intensity of someone who has absolutely no thought of failure. Everything that Snape had endlessly derided as naïveté and weakness had in the end served as overwhelming power. Harry's shouted Killing Curse had held the high pitch of desperation, but it flared true. Snape now knew that desperation had not been born of fear but of a need to cast a spell that was not supposed to be possible, an Avada Kedavra containing no hate. Snape closed his eyes to better remember the wiry body falling in a halo of green light, skull-like face wide with shock.

Snape's mouth twitched. A moment joyful enough even for a Patronus, he thought as he closed the book and released the protective spell to lock in the contents.

Out in the back garden, Harry tired of going back and forth to an abandoned sheep shed on the edge of their village to practice his Apparation. He went up to sit on his bed, and played with parchment spells rather than writing to Penelope, who had not yet written back, although that may be because her owl had only left that morning. He lifted his head as the door knocker sounded from downstairs. Footsteps and then Snape's voice could be heard speaking to someone. When Harry heard, "Come in," he put his things aside and got up.

"Ms. Tonks is here, Harry."

Harry came fast down the steps and, with firm control, held his face from looking too hopeful. Tonks, whose hair was bright green and very short, grinned, "Congratulations, Harry." Harry, ecstatic, jumped forward and hugged her. "Easy there, mate," she teased.

Flushing, Harry released her and accepted her outstretched hand vigorously. Her smile was going straight through him, or maybe it was the affection in her gaze that was making it hard to grip her hand.

Snape's voice interrupted them, his gaze watchful of Harry's reactions. "If you wish to make him truly happy, you will insist that he earned it."

"He did," Tonks insisted. "It was a good year to apply as well. Due to our . . . losses the last three years, we have the largest ever incoming class of apprentices . . . four."

"Did Vineet get in?" Harry asked.

"I am not supposed to give other results. There is an orientation meeting next Monday, you will meet your fellows at that time. I suspect you will be pleased with them." She winked, and smiled when Harry brightened more.

Chapter 51

"Can I have a party to celebrate?" Harry asked his guardian.

"If you wish. Please keep it to fewer than twenty attendees, if you can at all manage."

"Tonks, can you come, uh, Saturday, tomorrow, I guess," he asked brightly, then felt awkward about being so blunt.

She smiled more. "Of course, I'd love to." She took her leave with another round of handshakes. Harry couldn't stop smiling and his face was actually starting to hurt from it.

After she departed Harry turned to his guardian. "I got in," he said brightly.

Snape crossed his arms and stared down his nose at him. "Of course you did." He considered Harry a long moment from that pose. "I believe I am missing something here."

"What?" Harry asked in alarm, quickly pouring on the innocence.

Snape's brow furrowed more, his stiff posture not easing. "You should go write out invitations."

"Oh, yeah." Harry turned to head upstairs, pulled to a stop by Snape saying, "Invitations to more appropriate companions."

Harry, hand on the railing, did not turn to look down at his guardian. "Yeah," he agreed dryly, before dashing upstairs, two steps at a time. At the top he said, a little flustered, "Maybe I'll go to the Burrow, tell everyone I was accepted."

"Be back by dinner."

Harry, now at the door to his room, replied, "Yes sir."

The next morning, Harry finally received a letter from Switzerland. He hesitated opening it since he had put everything out of his mind and didn't feel like picking it all up again so soon. The strange owl that had delivered her letter had not waited for a reply, so there was no hurry. Eventually, the unopened letter began to bother him, so he gave in and read it. This letter was a little more conciliatory, he was grateful to see, but in three separate places Penelope expressed a wish that things could be different. Harry could certainly identify with that, but he still felt he had

made the right decision. At the end she noted that she had started as an assistant at the archives in Montreux and was looking forward to working on bigger projects.

Harry collected a parchment and quill and, with afternoon tea spread beside him, composed a reply. Snape came in, collected a cup and wedge of shortbread, watched Harry a few moments, then departed in silence. In the letter Harry explained that he had been accepted to the apprenticeship, which was what he had always wanted. The act of writing that out hardened something in him, making him feel hungry almost, as well as impatient for his training to begin. He explained that he still felt a lot for her and should she need anything he could help with, to please ask, and to please keep corresponding as he would like to keep in touch. He reread the letter slowly before precisely folding it up and addressing it.

Snape stepped in and said. "Do you wish me to be absent for your party this evening?"

"No. Why?" Harry asked.

"In my experience, when one of your age holds a party, one does not want one's parent or parents around."

"I wasn't thinking it would be that exciting, especially since Headmistress McGonagall and Hagrid are coming."

Snape looked rather surprised. "Did you warn your friends that this was the case?"

"No, do you think I should have? Eh, they'll find out soon enough, and most of them are finished at Hogwarts anyway." Harry fidgeted with his pen and finally asked, "Can you try to be nice to Neville?" At Snape's questioning look Harry explained. "He has this challenge to himself to walk up to you and talk to you about something not school-related."

"Has he ever done that?" Snape asked aloud. "I don't actually remember an instance."

"Give him a chance, maybe?"

"Nice place, Harry." Dean said as he came into the hall from the entryway. "Nice town; tons of history."

"Thanks," Harry said as he poured a butterbeer for someone. He sensed that the returning students were disappointed to find the teachers in their midst, but his older

friends took it as an opportunity to flaunt their new freedom. McGonagall shook her head as she was regaled with yet another story of mischief that had gone undetected.

"Knock it off, Ron. Headmistress will think we are all miscreants," Ginny complained when her brother explained about yet another secret scheme.

"Don't worry, Ms. Weasley. I already believe that," McGonagall bent down to tell her.

"Congratulations, Harry," Neville stepped over to say. After they chatted about the examinations for the apprenticeship, Neville turned and stiffened when he found Snape right behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Longbottom," Snape said.

"Uh," Neville managed. "Good evening, sir."

"'Ello Harry," Hagrid said from the entryway, where he was bent low to get inside.

"Hagrid!" Neville said and immediately escaped in that direction.

"Maybe not sneak up on him," Harry suggested.

"It is impossible to do otherwise with someone who does not notice what is happening around him." Snape moved off to join the other two teachers.

Harry topped off his own butterbeer from the metal pitcher sitting on the tea warmer and surveyed the room. Everyone seemed very happy. Harry marveled at how good he felt as well; he fairly tingled with anticipation. Tonks stood snacking at the other side of the table and gave him a wink. He smiled back in a restrained way, because he could see Snape eyeing him from Hagrid's shadow. Harry escaped by stepping over to Ginny and Ron, since he had not yet spoken with them.

"Thanks for inviting me, Harry," Ginny said, toasting him casually with her butterbeer glass.

Harry, honestly confused, said, "Why wouldn't I?"

Ginny smiled and shrugged, flushing around the ears. Ron lowered his brow. "You better not have designs on my sister," he said to Harry.

Harry pulled his head back from his friend. "Excuse me?"

"I don't mind if he does," Ginny commented slyly with a sloppy grin.

"And I thought this part of the room would be safer than the one by the teachers," Harry complained.

"Oh, it is," Ginny assured him with a wag of her eyebrows. "I heard you broke it off with Penelope," she said, very conversationally.

"Where did you hear that?" Harry asked, giving Ron a pointed look.

"Word gets around, Harry, especially word about you," she said. "In fact," she added, leaning in close, "I heard some great gossip about Lavender and this boy from Beauxbatons . . . "

"'Scuse me," Ron groaned. "I'll skip this." He headed off to where Hagrid and Neville were talking near the staircase.

Ginny chuckled and straightened. "Always works." Harry had to grin. She finished her butterbeer and, tapping the empty glass with her fingers, said, "You're looking good, Harry."

"I am?" he asked.

"Yes, you. You look like you are getting along with things. Wish I was. Can't stand the thought of another year of school." Using her wand, she fetched the butterbeer pitcher from the serving table and refilled both their glasses, then hovered it back a little more carefully.

"What would you do instead?" Harry asked, curious.

"Work for Fred and George. They need someone to do marketing who isn't a looney. They'd make even more money than they are now. I've almost convinced them; the last three ideas I gave them were the bomb."

"That's great, Ginny." He leaned in a little and checked that Ron was on the other side of the room. "Better than training security Trolls," Harry commented with a grin.

Ginny had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. Between giggles, she said, "Did he tell you they have a new pair of Trolls coming in next month at Gringott's?" When Harry shook his head, she went on, "They don't work for long, you know. Make enough to live on back in the mountains for years in just a few months, so they leave. The new ones are Romanian, apparently, don't speak any English. Gringott's gave Ron a Romanian phrase book to work from, so he has been going around the house practicing, What color is this umbrella?" She laughed harder. "As if Trolls would know what an umbrella is." Laughing so hard she could barely speak, she hit him on the arm and said, "Turns out they're color blind."

Harry chuckled, then with effort made himself stop because he couldn't laugh too hard at his friend. Across the hall, Snape and McGonagall were glancing their way.

Harry said, "You know, he gets good at training Trolls he'll be ordering us all around and we'll obey without thinking."

She sobered. "There is that. Hey, that would probably qualify him for Minister of Magic. Speaking of which . . ."

Luna Lovegood wandered over. "Are you talking about the vote?" she asked in her slow, dreamy way. "Do you think Fudge will be supported? I heard Madam Bones is considering challenging."

"I heard that too," Ginny said. "I like her."

"So do I," Harry added, thinking of his hearing, oh so long ago.

Ginny and Luna fell silent. Finally, Luna said, "Are you going to publicly support Madam Bones?"

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't planning to. Why do you ask?"

"Why?" Ginny echoed in disbelief. "I expect you'd swing the vote."

Harry asked doubtfully, "Really?" Luna nodded too, making Harry shake his head. "I'll have to think about that." He didn't feel at all like getting involved, even though he had no real love for Cornelius Fudge.

The hall fell silent. Harry glanced around to see why and found Winky hovering in a very large, round, scarlet-frosted cake covered in sparklers. The lamps went down on their own, leaving the cake alone to light the big room. Harry approached the drinks table as it settled there, bathing him in no-heat sparks. He glanced over at the side wall by the mirror, where Snape and McGonagall stood in a position as though interrupted from talking. Snape broke away and came over to the other side of the table where he picked up the broad cake knife and handed it across.

"Thanks," Harry said, accepting it. As their gazes remained locked, he thought of adding something like, for coming to get me, or just for everything, but there were too many others around. He finally looked down at the cake instead. Several people shuffled their feet as though somehow realizing that they were intruding by being there. A stack of small plates appeared at Harry's elbow and he began to cut and serve. Ginny stepped up for the first piece, took the plate and, on tiptoe, gave him a chummy one-armed hug and congratulations.

The party remained subdued as everybody ate and many went over for seconds, still leaving a very large section of the oversized, triple-layer cake. Harry moved to the darkened, narrow windows as he forked a bite into his mouth. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione made space for him to join their close conversation.

"You almost brought us to tears there, Harry," Ginny said, getting an elbow from Ron as though to shut up.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"Nothing, just kidding," she replied. "Think I'll get another piece," she breathed and stepped away.

Harry looked between his two best friends. Ron straightened and said, "So . . . uh, you start on Monday."

Harry nodded. "I'm really looking forward to it. Learning really powerful spells and getting to use them. Learning everything because you have to know it to defend against it." He looked at Hermione, who was biting her lip. "How are you getting on?" he asked her.

"Good. I started on Thursday, but already I have a month worth of work. Mostly research, but I get to summarize findings . . . " She faded off and said, "Congratulations, Harry."

"You said that already," Harry observed, feeling out of touch.

"You deserve it though," she insisted quietly, then took a deep breath and glanced at Ron.

Ron bumped Harry on the arm. "Everyone's really glad you got what you wanted, you know."

The party quieted down after one in the morning and guests started to depart. Eventually, it was just his closer friends, sitting around the dining room table with a small fire in the hearth lighting the room along with a single candle. Neville sat sideways on the end staring into the flames, a hot cocoa cradled in his hands. When Luna had departed, she had given Neville a kiss on the cheek, which had embarrassed him into shyness, but now he looked serious and brooding. Harry shifted his chair around to the end to face the fire as well.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, swigging his cocoa the way Hagrid would whiskey. "Not still trying to carry the weight of the world, are you?"

Harry scoffed. "I can't even carry one girlfriend."

"Oh, sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right," Harry insisted.

Neville turned back to the flames. "I still find myself surprised that Luna, well, likes me."

Chapter 51

"You two are perfect together."

"Really? You think?" Neville asked brightly.

"Yes," Harry assured him. He felt a bit sorry for himself in comparison, and sighed into the flames.

Neville turned back to the flames as well, looking pensive. Conversation went on behind them between Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. Quietly, Neville said, "I heard some things recently."

Half a minute later, when Neville didn't elaborate, Harry asked, "About what?"

Neville turned and put his empty mug on the table, then fidgeted with his empty hands as he leaned forward over his legs toward the glow from the hearth. "About the prophecy," Neville finally explained. Harry shifted in his seat and Neville went on without looking up, "Did you know it could have been me?" He sounded vaguely horrified.

"Yes. But Dumbledore insisted it wasn't you." Harry paused, and Neville turned to him. "He said my scar was the mark from the prophecy. But . . . he seemed to think it could have been either of us before that point, that Voldemort chose unknowingly."

Neville was silent a long while before he said, sounding self-effacing, "Good thing it wasn't."

Behind them, Ginny was telling a story about the Creevey brothers getting out of History of Magic for a week by convincing Madam Pomfrey's holiday replacement that they were allergic to ghosts.

Harry said, "You don't know what you can do until you have to. I remember hearing the prophecy the first time. I dearly wished it wasn't me, then I realized I couldn't wish it on anyone else, including you."

"You did all right, though," said Neville. "I wouldn't have. Imagine if it had been me . . . we'd all still have . . . Voldemort to deal with." His voice dropped at the name as though it still needed whispering. "You'd all have; I guess I'd be dead." He swallowed hard, turned back to look in his empty mug, then wrung his hands.

Harry insisted, "Neville. You don't know how things would have worked out. If the prophecy had gone the other way, you'd have had the power to destroy him. You could have done it."

Sadly, Neville said, "I'm glad it was you. Not that I would wish that on you . . . "

"It's all over with. Don't worry about it," Harry insisted. His eye was caught by something in the doorway. Winky had arrived with more cocoa, Snape behind her. Harry nudged Neville to get his mug out for a refill. Snape looked very serious as well in the firelight, his eyes taking in each person in the room separately. "What time is it?" Harry asked him, wondering if they were staying up far too late.

"It is 2:00, but it is no matter," Snape replied. "I was just . . . checking that everything was all right. I'm going to retire, in case you need anything."

"No. Good night, Severus," Harry said. Hermione and Ginny echoed this with 'Professor' instead. Neville seemed to have caught Snape's eye and they locked gazes before Neville looked away, back at the fire. Snape departed with a quiet swish of robe.

Long minutes later, Neville said, "I know he adopted you and all, but I don't think I could trust Professor Snape quite as much as you do."

"You mean . . . how could I trust someone who had once joined Voldemort?" Harry queried. When Neville nodded, Harry said, "Thinking about the prophecy has you rattled, Neville. Severus's all right, really."

"I know. I just . . . don't think I could. But he is very conscientious with you. Like a real dad . . . doesn't let you get away with anything." Harry laughed lightly and Neville went on more confidently. "I always wanted a dad; you're really lucky to have found one, former dark wizard or not."

Even more quietly, Harry said, "That pain never quite goes away, does it?"

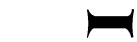
Neville shook his head. "You still wish for your real dad?" he asked curiously.

Harry thought that over. "In a way. Maybe because I always have, not because I'm still missing him." The room felt colder, even this close to the fire. Harry had not thought about his parents in a long while and resisted dwelling on them now.

Behind them chairs were moving. "It's late and I have to get going," said Hermione. "I'm already out beyond my curfew." She touched Harry on the shoulder, said goodbye to everyone and Disapparated with a pop!

"Show off," Ron muttered. "We need to go too. Got any extra Floo powder?"

Harry took down the canister and after a round of goodbyes saw all his friends off. The house seemed very quiet as he made his way up to his room.



Chapter 51

Harry arrived for his apprenticeship orientation with time to spare. When he was shown to the meeting room, he grinned to find Vineet already there. He shook the man's hand. "Congratulations," Harry said.

"I am surprised to find myself here," Vineet calmly returned.

"I'm not. What did you think of the personality test?" Harry asked.

Vineet shrugged faintly. "The written test caused me more difficulty."

Harry blinked at that. His attempt at coming up with a response was interrupted by the entrance of two other new apprentices. Rodgers followed behind with the two senior ones. "This is Kerry Ann Kalendula," he said, introducing one of the new admits. "And Aaron Wickem," he continued, indicating the dark-haired man who stood with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "You all know Harry Potter, I assume, and this is Vineet A.K.A. Vishnu Abhayananda. You may have met the one year and two year apprentices in the program." He gestured behind him at the serious-faced pair flanking the door. "Munz and Blackpool."

The new apprentices took seats. Rodgers went on. "You will all be getting to know each other extremely well over the next months, so don't be shy. I have to collect one more person, or more specifically, I must rescue Ms. Tonks from a meeting with a Ministry administrator." He gave them a pained smile and departed.

The senior apprentices lounged near the wall, arms crossed. Their eyes gravitated toward Harry a bit more than to the other three. Kerry Ann broke the silence. She had very short, mousey brown hair that stuck up straight off her head a bit militaryish. "This is going to be fun," she said, glancing at Harry. "You as good as they say you are?"

Harry shrugged.

"I remember you from school," Aaron said. At Harry's look of question, he went on, "Kerry Ann and I finished in '93, she was a Ravenclaw, I was a Slytherin. Everyone regarded you with suspicion back then as I recall; though it seemed a bit much to pin on a Second Year and a small one at that."

"Yeah," Harry said remembering. "That Heir of Slytherin thing and the Basilisk."

A bit derisively, Aaron said, "Why would a Gryffindor be the Heir, anyway?" He laughed. "Speaking of Basilisks, what about that snake they had for the test?" Aaron went on, shifting topics. "Did you get past that one?" he asked stridently.

"What? Nagini?" Harry asked in amusement. "She was harmless."

"That snake has a name?" Aaron blurted in dismay. "It should be stuffed and put on display in the atrium."

"Why?" Kerry Ann asked, offended. "I thought it was cute," she teased him with a sly grin.

"I don't think I'd have said 'cute'," Harry commented. "What did you think of the snake, Vineet?"

"It was just a snake. Everyone calls me Vishnu, by the way," he said informationally.

Prodding at his calm, Harry said, "You were lucky they took her poison away. She attacked my best friend's dad once and he was in St. Mungo's for weeks because her poison kept the wounds from healing."

"That snake?" Kerry Ann asked. "How do you know?"

Harry grinned widely. "Nagini was Voldemort's pet snake," Harry said as though they all should have known that. They gaped at him in nearly comic horror, making him laugh. "Look at you," Harry scolded them teasingly. "She didn't kill your house-elf or nearly kill one of your friends, so what's the matter?"

"They locked me in a room with Voldemort's snake?" Aaron asked, appalled to the point of trembling.

"You are being lucky not to know ahead of time," Vineet commented. "She was just a snake, nevertheless."

Rodgers returned accompanied by Tonks. He glanced over them, then asked if anything was wrong. After explanations he shook his head. "We just wanted to use her to test your fear of snakes; telling you who she was would have complicated that. The only person who knew who she was, seemed pleased to see her . . . which was a little odd." He handed out several parchment booklets to each of them. "We are all a little curious what you two talked about, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Old times. Her dental work." He winked at Tonks, who smiled back before falling serious again.

Aaron clutched his booklet until it crackled. "You talk to snakes? For real?" He looked to Rodgers uneasily. "Wouldn't that disqualify him from this program?" he asked their trainer.

Harry gave Aaron a dark look and Rodgers chuckled. "It hasn't so far," he replied in an easy tone. "We noticed that you didn't indicate it on your application."

"I left it off intentionally, sir," Harry said, flipping through the booklets he had been given. They were about the structure of the Ministry, with all the departments drawn on a big tree that ran sideways from one page to the next, followed by basic rules and policies. Another was an overview of the mission and schedule of the three years of the Auror's program.

Rodgers stepped back to the front beside the chalkboard and went over their training schedule. They would do spell training every morning followed by physical training and studies of law, procedures and spells in the afternoon. This was four days a week for now with one or two days of field training, Friday and Saturday, when they reached the three-month mark. He then went over each of their strengths and weaknesses so that they all knew them. As expected, no one had any significant weakness. Aaron's was in theories of spells and potions. Vineet's in his steadfast disregard of danger and his weak spell power. Kerry Ann needed to work on blocking and physical training. Harry's was described as having a lack of emotional balance. He almost complained about that, by pointing out how much he had improved, before he thought better of it.

"As for strengths," Rodgers went on. "You all have a lot of them, or you wouldn't be here. Aaron has steadfastly followed this calling for five years without wavering in applying and improving, so I expect him to continue to work very hard, which is as critical a skill as any in a program as long and difficult as this one. Kerry Ann scored highest on the written test, tying the record high score. Her emotional balance is excellent. Vishnu has superior physical skills and excellent knowledge as well as an almost eerie psychic balance. Potter scored highest on the spell testing and second highest on the written test. We also know from life experience that he is determined to persevere under the worst of circumstances."

Aaron turned to Harry when Rodger's paused. "So on the application, you just wrote, Killed Voldemort in big letters and sent it in, right?"

"No," Harry replied levelly.

Rodgers sighed. "We are going to go over the reading assignments and give you a tour, take your measurements for your uniforms, and then send you home for the day to start studying."

After complicated measurements and small talk, Tonks stopped Harry in the corridor as he headed out. "I need to talk to you. Come into the office."

She sounded very serious, making Harry nervously consider what might be the problem; certainly his wink had not been that unwise. Her office was a cubicle shared

with the other Aurors none of whom were there. Harry borrowed another desk's chair and sat facing her, hands clasped in his lap.

Tonks frowned and hesitated before beginning, making Harry bite his lip. "It's like this, Harry. . . " Harry was certain something bad was forthcoming. "Minister Fudge is insisting that your apprenticeship fees be waived."

Harry stared in silence at her, trying to adjust to what she was saying.

"You probably noticed you haven't been sent a bill yet," she went on. Harry hadn't, but he nodded anyway. "I know you have insisted all along that you be treated the same as everyone else, and believe me I understand that, although Minister Fudge doesn't. But nevertheless, I also understand the Minister's position." She paused to gauge Harry's reaction. Harry wasn't reacting much; he was thinking that an expensive apprenticeship fee was not something he could afford. Tonks plowed on, "Frankly, I think Fudge is afraid of what would happen if the Prophet found out we were making you pay. But I don't think you should pay. . . Harry?" she prompted him for a reaction.

"Uh, let me think about it," Harry hedged, feeling multiple kinds of relief.

She seemed disappointed with that response. "All right. But get back to me soon. I have to tell higher-ups what is happening with it."

Harry stood, feeling transfixed by his dilemma. "Can I go?" he finally asked. She waved him off, already sorting through the parchments on her desk.

Study was what Harry did that afternoon and evening. His trainer strongly suggested that everyone finish two chapters a night from the six books they were starting with. Harry began reading while taking copious notes as he went, then realized he was not going to have time. He read the chapters without taking notes, but with an extra effort at memorizing. He decided to sleep on what to do about his fees. It occurred to him now that he should have asked Tonks how much the fees were, so he could better work out a plan.

Snape came into the library as Harry sat jotting down a few things from the more complicated chapter on spell theory. "They have you working hard already," he observed.

"Yep," Harry said. "It isn't supposed to let up, either, although we only have training four days a week right now."

Snape bent down and read over his shoulder for a minute. "Need help with anything?" he asked.

"Probably," Harry sighed. "But at the moment I am too overwhelmed to know what to ask." He shut the book and rubbed his eyes. "I hope I'm smart enough for this," he said, a little worried.

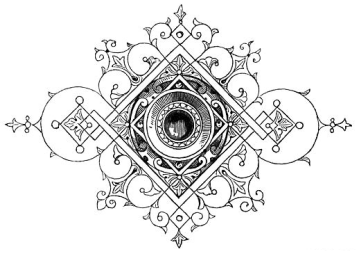
"You are, Harry," Snape said easily, resting his hand on Harry's back. "Give yourself time to adjust to a new kind of learning,"

Harry looked up at him and Snape raised a brow at his expression. Harry said, "I was just thinking how little you sound like yourself."

Snape stepped away, dropped onto the nearby leather lounger, and said, "It is summer holiday, Potter. I do not have to be Professor Snape right now."

Harry laughed at that, a bit harder than it probably deserved, but it felt good to do so.

Chapter 52.



The Aurors Apprentice

The next day at training, Harry stood in the workout room with his fellow apprentices. He was amazed to feel very comfortable around them already. Rodgers came in, interrupting a story Aaron was telling about his grandfather trying to spell London Bridge into an arch on a bet. Rodgers was again flanked by the two senior apprentices, who looked unnaturally serious, and immediately sobered everyone's mood.

Rodgers picked up the chalk and rubbed it between his fingertips. "We are going to start with defensive counter-curses along with some incarceration spells, since stopping someone should be immediately followed by capturing them." He drew a diagram of arcs and circles on the board around a stick figure. "Who knows what this is?"

Aaron said, "It is a Titan block, kinda." Harry squinted at the diagram, having never seen spells drawn out that way.

"Correct," the trainer said, putting the chalk back down with a loud clack on the metal tray. "It is a modulated version of it. A properly modulated block or counter is indefeatable, which is how I want you all to be when you are finished here. But it takes a great deal of practice, a very great deal, even for those who think this stuff is easy." Here he gave each of them an eyeing in turn. Harry tried not to feel overly confident, but found it harder than expected to think that he might have difficulty. "Ladies first," Rodgers said, inviting Kerry Ann to the front.

Their trainer walked through the practical points of modulation and repeated a set of three drills with Kerry Ann until her spell dome showed signs of the distinctive

nodes. It took over a half hour and she seemed very frustrated with herself by the end of it.

"Let's give it a go, then, shall we?" Rodgers suggested, stepping back to dueling distance and sending a weak Blasting Curse at her, which she countered and then another, which she did not, forcing her to stumble back when it struck. "Did you notice what happened there?" Rodgers asked. Kerry Ann shook her head. "I changed the attack, which we will cover eventually, but you have to change the counter to match or you will be worse than unprotected."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Kerry Ann admitted.

"You have to get a feel for it. And for the first blocks you learn to modulate it will take a lot of repetition. Then it will get easier."

Harry shuffled where he stood, thinking this sounded depressingly like Occulamency. Rodgers repeated the attacks about ten more times, resulting in alternating failures and successful counters.

"Next," he eventually said, indicating she could step aside. Seeing her bent head, he added firmly, "You are doing fine. Didn't I warn you this was difficult? Vishnu, you're next."

If Vineet did better, it wasn't by much. After many rounds, Rodgers said, "I think you are trying too hard. It is instinctive." He gestured for him to move aside and for Harry to come up.

Harry raised his wand and tried to produce a modulated Titan block. It took many tries and advice about how he should hold his wand and how much power to use before he could get the glowing nodes on the shimmering dome surrounding him. Kerry Ann and Aaron were discussing the fine points of what was happening with the spell, and Harry listened in for more help.

"Ready to try it?" Rodgers asked, stepping back.

Harry nodded and held his wand at ready. Rodgers raised his from the far side of the room, and Harry incanted the block as the Auror trainer started to speak the spell. Harry's first thought was that the incantation he heard didn't sound like a Blasting Curse, and second, he wondered why he was skidding backward on his knees.

The room had fallen silent after a gasp from Aaron. "You thought you were ready," Rodgers commented dryly. Harry's vision sparkled from the flash of his block exploding. He pushed himself to his feet and saw Rodgers raising his wand. "Again?" the trainer asked matter-of-factly.

Harry, his instincts for preservation coming to the fore, raised his wand, then quickly his hand. "Can I get a moment, sir?" he asked, since he had apparently lost his breath and had not yet regained it. Rodgers crossed his arms and waited with an impassive expression. Harry finally drew in a full, deep breath, straightened and signaled that he was ready. The next spell had a little less on it, and he blocked it all right, but it was still more power than the trainer had used on the others. It was repeated countless times as Harry tried to get a sense for tuning the block to meet each attack.

Finally, Rodgers signaled that he could step aside and that Aaron should take his place. Aaron looked a little worried but he did as well as any of them, which is to say, he needed a lot more practice. They worked on modulating two counter-curses, after which Harry felt bodily sore from getting knocked back so many times. If he had been using a normal block he would have done just fine, which made it all the more frustrating.

"We have time for one incarceration spell, a Prisoner Box. Aaron, stand there." He pointed near the chalkboard.

"Me, sir?" Aaron asked reluctantly, sounding a little childish.

"Yes," Rodgers confirmed, still pointing. Aaron trudged to the indicated spot and a moment later he was replaced by a little trunk, inside of which his shrunken face could be seen pressing against the barred opening in the side. A bit of his robe stuck out of the corner, unshrunken.

"Wow, you made that small," Kerry Ann said, resisting a wide grin.

Harry had never seen this spell and felt a little less picked on by their trainer since it wasn't him in the box. With a wave Aaron was released, red faced, which prompted Rodgers to say dismissively, "Get used to it . . . you will be practicing it on each other." He gestured at the larger part of the room. "Right now, in fact. Pair up."

Harry, wand in his pocket, waited while Vineet listened to the spell being explained. Then Harry stood still while a box slammed into existence around him, although it was fully as tall as him and very thin-walled.

"We need to give you spell-power exercises, Vishnu," Rodgers said while rubbing his hands together a bit fretfully. Vineet looked resigned, as though he didn't have much hope for that helping. Harry was put into a, thankfully, large box several more times before getting a chance to try the spell himself.

Remembering Vineet using him to show off his Eastern Arts, Harry shouted the spell and pointed, twitching the wandtip in a box shape. With a swirling whoosh his fellow

apprentice was reduced to a red box about two feet high that looked suspiciously like the luggage Harry had taken to Switzerland, which he may have been thinking of as he incanted it. He looked to their trainer expectantly and received only a flat nod. Harry waved the spell away and Vineet stood straight.

"Perhaps we change partners?" the Indian suggested hopefully to the trainer.

Late that afternoon, Harry stepped out of the hearth at home. The house felt empty as he carried his bookbag across to the library. In the hall Winky came up from the kitchen and with hands rubbing nervously together, said, "Master out on errands."

"Thanks," Harry said to her. He dropped his bag inside the door, started to turn away and instead grabbed out one of the books about spell predestination and took it to the dining room, where he shucked his cloak and sat down to read with a groan. He read a chapter, then stretched his neck as he mentally reviewed the main points of it to help him memorize. His mind wandered a bit, resting briefly on Penelope before he realized that he had not seen Tonks that day to ask about the fee amount. He really needed to figure something out. Lord Freelander had offered to pay for his education, Harry remembered, but that felt the same as letting the Ministry waive the fee in the first place. His chest clenched at the thought of talking to Snape about it, so he settled his book back before him and started the next chapter.

Snape returned home to find Harry asleep at the table, his head cushioned on the crook of his bare arm. Harry woke to a light tug on the shoulder of his t-shirt. His neck complained when he lifted it.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape asked, sounding concerned.

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Yeah, just a rough day." He pulled his sleeve up to look at his sore shoulder from the first hard spell; it was bluing now with bruises.

"What spell was that?" Snape asked.

"It was a Hopimi, our trainer said, which I hadn't seen before." Harry tossed his sleeve back down and ran his hand through his hair, trying to perk himself up.

Snape put his packages aside and leaned over the table. "It isn't that strong usually; didn't you counter it?"

Harry shut his book and pushed it aside. "It's complicated. We were learning the basics of modulation, you know, so the counter doesn't always hold and there was a lot of force behind the spell." Looking for sympathy, he added, "Our trainer is really tough on me."

Snape stood straight and gathered up his packages. "Good," he stated, with no hint of sympathy. Harry watched his guardian depart and stroked his shoulder gingerly.

The next day, they covered three more incarceration spells, one very similar to the web spell Harry had learned from Penelope, which allowed him to get it right on the third try, while his fellows were still struggling. This time he didn't expect any praise from their trainer, which was just as well.

After lunch, Rodgers stepped into the workout room and said, "More modulation practice. Potter, come up here."

With reluctant feet Harry did as he was told. Many bruises throbbed in unison as though urging him to disobey. He took his place and held his wand at the ready.

"Same as before," Rodgers said, and cast at him.

Again the spell took his breath away when it buffeted its way through the Counter and he almost fell to his knees, just catching his balance on magic-weakened legs. While he tried to take a breath, Rodgers voice said a little ruthlessly, "You knew what was coming. Try harder. Again."

Harry held up his hand to forestall, but too late, as the same spell was already coming at him. More desperate, and slightly disoriented, Harry brought up the counter as fast and forcefully as he could. This time, like a fluid, the shielding dome around him bent and arched rather than exploded. Bright spots on it slid forward and back. The attack wore off and his Counter faded. Harry sighed in relief at avoiding the hit.

"See how much better it works when you put some effort into it?" Rodgers asked snidely.

Harry considered arguing that he had been trying hard before, but he couldn't rightly argue with success. His wand hand jerked into position on its own, when Rodgers said, "Again. Let's make sure you've got it."

When Harry finally stumbled to the watching group, they looked uneasy, but Aaron, who went next, got a much easier round. Sympathetic half-smiles from his fellows made Harry feel a little better.

At the end of the day, Harry dragged himself home rather than follow Kerry Ann and Aaron to a pub as they urged. He wondered how they planned to finish the reading for the next day. One more day and then he would get a much needed break, he told himself as he put his books in the library. He found Snape in the drawing room reading long, red-edged parchments that Harry did not recognize.

Chapter 52

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in the way of a greeting.

"Reading the minutes of past Hogwarts board meetings. Dull, but at the same time they sometimes make decisions or have discussions that we do not otherwise hear about." His voice dropped lower, sounding strategic. "Some we would like to know about."

Harry held back a chuckle at the notion of Snape applying his strategic conniving to something as mundane as school administration.

Snape re-rolled the gaudily decorated parchment and put it aside before asking, "How was your day? New bruises?"

Harry shook his head, "No."

"Your trainer has not eased up, I hope," Snape went on while he stacked more parchments into a beaten-up crate that looked like one Hagrid might have owned once, except that it was painted gold.

"No," Harry reassured him. "I just . . . got a little better," he admitted with reluctance, since it had necessitated getting beaten up a bit.

Snape turned from the crate and asked, snideness fully in force, "You learned to modulate a counter-curse in two days?" He almost sounded angry, his disgust was so complete. When Harry just shrugged, Snape stood up and came over.

"It was just a Titan," Harry explained.

"That is the easiest to modulate, but nevertheless," Snape huffed and stepped by him, shaking his head.

"Want to see it?" Harry eagerly asked his departing back.

"Perhaps later," Snape replied without turning around. "When I can trust myself to stick to a limited set of attacking spells."

Harry frowned slightly and took himself back to the library to read. Later, when Snape stepped into the doorway, Harry found himself ignoring him even though he had not given any prior thought to doing this.

After a pause Snape said, "Dinner is on the table."

Harry closed his book around a small leather marker and stood up without replying. As he tried to pass Snape, feeling as though he wanted to make a point by being reticent, he was grabbed up by the arm. Harry flinched as his tender bruises complained bitterly at being handled and was immediately released.

"Sorry," Snape muttered. Harry turned to him with a sigh, prompting Snape to say, "Certainly you are old enough to not require regular praise."

Something rebelled inside Harry. "I guess not," he insisted anyway.

"If you do, perhaps it is time to grow up a bit."

Harry took a closer look at his guardian, who appeared soberly serious. The rebellion continued, solidified into arguments about his deserving some make-up consideration or just deserving in general, but he clamped down on them and frowned a bit as pride came to his rescue. "Just as long as you aren't jealous," Harry snipped.

Snape turned away. "Dinner is ready."

Harry followed behind. At the door to the dining room, Harry relented, "I didn't mean that."

Snape stood beside the table set for two with covered silver platters in the center. "I do not like things to be too easy for you . . . it will lead you to be overconfident."

"It wasn't easy," Harry insisted as he dropped achily into a chair. "I got beaten up badly before I got it right. Rodgers pushed me into it out of sheer survival. He didn't do that to any of the others," he ended in complaint.

Snape still remained standing, gripping his chair back. "It sounds as though he expects more from you." Finally he pulled the chair out and seated himself. "Nothing wrong with that," he opined while lifting the lid of the largest platter to reveal pork chops.

Harry fell into the rhythm of his new program. Although he wasn't as good at remembering the details of their readings as Kerry Ann, he did better than Aaron, who didn't seem to always do his assignments.

It was during the afternoon discussion section on Thursday that Rodgers announced that they were to return to the workout room for some spell drills so that the Prophet could take some pictures. At the groans he said, "P.R. is very important to us, get used to it. Put on some smiles; you are the darling class of the Ministry, after all."

"Potter is, anyway," Aaron quipped darkly.

"'Scuse me?" Harry returned.

Rodgers scolded them both. "None of that . . . leave it in here." They followed him out in silence. In the workout room several photographers and reporters waited. Harry wished he and his fellows were not all wearing the black fuzzy one-pieces they wore during training. They looked like old-style Muggle swim wear except with a Ministry patch on the breast. "Here they are," Rodgers announced. "Our largest ever Auror apprentice class. Pair up and show them a few things, kids."

Harry paired with Vineet. They went through the basic blocking drill they had done every day that week. The Prophet photographer came over to photograph Harry, which he ignored as much as possible; although the flash was blinding him at the worst possible moments. When the drills were finished, Harry carefully placed himself between two of his fellows to make it hard to take a picture just of him.

Skeeter came over and gave him a chummy smile. "How are you, Harry?" She had her Quick Quotes quill out.

"I won't talk to you unless you put that away," Harry said firmly. His fellows looked at him a little sharply as did Rodgers.

She grabbed the feather out of the air and stashed it in her purse, from which she retrieved a normal quill. Not missing a beat, she asked, "How is training going?"

"Good. It's hard work," Harry replied smoothly. "The Ministry wants us all well-prepared for our eventual service."

Skeeter gave him a narrow look, which slid cleanly over to Rodgers. "What did you do, give them interview training the second day?" she complained. When Rodgers just shrugged innocently, she turned back to the apprentices. To Kerry Ann, she said, "How about you? Few witches in this department, how do you cope with that?" Kerry Ann was happy to go on about this for a while, until Aaron was shuffling nervously beside her. Skeeter asked Aaron if this was his calling, which he went on about for a few ego-filled minutes. She then asked Vineet about his home town in India and what they thought about his being here. After all this, she turned back to Harry. "How am I doing?" she asked impatiently.

Harry laughed. "Good. Better than expected." His fellows turned to him then, just catching on to his machinations.

She glared at him a bit before saying, "So, dating anyone?"

"No."

"Hm, why not?"

"None of your concern," Harry replied firmly.

She picked at her teeth with her pinky nail before repoising her quill. "So what do you think your parents would say if they could see you now?"

"They would say this was too dangerous and they wished I would do something else."

"Really?" she asked in surprise.

"I'm pretty sure," he answered easily. "But they would let me do it anyway, I think, because I can't imagine doing anything else."

She looked at him closely before jotting that down. He gave her a nice smile and a flash bulb went off.

Rodgers announced that Minister Fudge wanted to give the press an overview of what the reorganized Auror office was hoping to accomplish now that Voldemort was no longer a concern. The other reporters and the Prophet photographer headed off with him. Skeeter pulled Harry aside. "You've changed," she opined in a quiet voice. "There's a story there alone. Sure you don't want to give me an interview?"

"You don't want to hold this over my head anymore?" Harry asked.

"I'm not making very good use of it, frankly," she commented as she smiled and waved to stall Rodgers, who had stopped in the doorway and looked back at them with concern. "Don't feel like relieving the collective guilt of the wizarding world?" Skeeter asked.

"They shouldn't be having that anymore."

"Potter, last time I asked you that question you nearly broke down on me," she pointed out. "Owl me if you change your mind." With a wide, patronizing smile, she finally followed their trainer out.

Harry went to the bookstore that weekend to order the next set of required books for his program. Two of them had very stodgy titles: Magical Regulations: A History and Form and Policy for European Magical Administration. Harry got sleepy just imagining cracking those in the evening. He also received a severe jolt at the price tag. The old wizard behind the counter at Flourish and Blotts waved half the pre-order price he usually insisted on when Harry realized how short his coin purse was.

"Pay when you pick up," he insisted kindly.

Harry considered going and getting more from his vault but he felt better dodging finding out exactly how little was left. Feeling a little stressed, he stopped at Weasley Wizard Wheezes instead of going to Gringott's. One of the twins was manning the counter and explaining to two little girls just how to arm their latest smoke bomb for timed release. They pocketed their purchases and snuck out whispering fiercely and giggling. Harry felt a little nostalgic watching them depart. He stepped out from behind the center rack of hard sweets and gum to be greeted warmly.

"Harry! Good to see you." The Weasley twin lifted a broom from beside the register and pounded the ceiling with it. "Oy! Fred! Come down!" he shouted upwards.

Pounding feet came down the back staircase. "Hey, Harry! Thought we had another emergency sugarbeetle explosion, but it's just you," he said, shaking Harry's hand. He pulled a package off the rack behind Harry and offered it to him. "Try these–latest and greatest."

Harry opened one, smelled watermelon and popped it in his mouth. The backs of his hands turned green with stripes like a watermelon rind and the palms of his hands turned pink. It tasted good, though, like the real thing.

"Much better than the grapefruit," George commented, "which makes you look like a hag with kidney disease."

Talking wetly around the sweet, Harry asked, "How long before this wears off?"

"Five minutes or so. We've found that repeat business comes mostly from the lower-key stuff," Fred explained, straightening the remaining packages on the rack as he spoke.

"Sad but true," George added as though discussing real tragedy.

"So how is your apprenticeship, O Great Auror?" Fred asked.

"Not bad. My trainer has it in for me."

"The bastard," Fred commented. "Need anything for that?" he offered eagerly.

"No. I'll manage," Harry insisted, alarmed at the notion of making trouble at the Ministry. He popped another sweet when the color began fading from his fingertips. "I'll take a pack of these, though."

"Go ahead," Fred said. "No charge."

Harry thanked him as he put the plain brown sack of ten in his pocket. He didn't have any money on him anyway, he realized with a flinch.

Sunday, Harry took a break while the sun was shining to weed in the front garden. The back, an utter jungle of vines and nettles, he decided could stay in its wild state. It harbored more creatures than the front as well, and he felt fixing it up was tantamount to evicting them all, or that made for a nice excuse, anyway.

Elizabeth came by as he knelt, spreading out the tulip bulbs that had multiplied into tiny clumps resembling spring onion, too crowded to produce any flowers. "Hello," she said, leaning over the crumbling wall. She was smartly dressed, which he commented on. "Just had a recital," she explained.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling like he should have known that, although she would have had to have told him. "Would you like tea?" Harry asked, feeling suddenly and strongly like company.

Her face pulled into a nice smile. "Sure."

Harry laid the dug up bulbs into the shade of the ivy and tossed mulch over them before standing and brushing his hands on his trousers. "I'm glad you don't wear that hat anymore," she said as he led the way inside.

"Everyone knows I'm here," Harry explained. "It is useful still though when I'm out."

"You like to hide?" she asked as they walked through the main hall, with Harry wondering how he could have forgotten how pointed she was.

"I don't always feel like being mobbed," he said defensively as they sat down.

"Is it really a mob?" she asked doubtfully. Winky came in with tea just then–possibly record time.

"Took a half hour to get out of the Falmouth bleachers after everyone realized I was there, yeah." He took a biscuit while waiting for the tea to steep.

"They move on quickly though, I would think. You are so ordinary."

At that Harry crunched through his biscuit a bit hard. "You make it sound like I'm boring," he accused her. She poured out tea for herself; it looked like it had steeped plenty, which meant Winky must have started it before Elizabeth arrived. He shook his head.

"I didn't mean that," she said sweetly. "Just that you don't seem to try to entertain everyone like some famous people do. Like this violinist I saw after a concert once, Alverna, his name was, kept a mob around himself by making jokes and keeping everyone in the conversation."

"Yep, I don't do that," Harry agreed, thinking of Lockhart.

Chapter 52

The next week of training went much faster than the first and Harry marveled at how much he had learned already. Physical workouts had been added in the mornings before spell drills, and Harry slept soundly every night due to exhaustion and marveled at the luxury of it. Thursday during lunch he had an odd thought as he watched Aaron and Kerry Ann leaning together and talking. He realized with a flash of confusion that he had not seen Candide around at all this summer. Nor had Snape mentioned her, even once, that he could remember. During their afternoon sessions the notion would not leave him alone, nor would the sinking feeling that accompanied his mulling over explanations for it.

After their end-of-day assignments meeting, Harry headed off to Diagon Alley where he had seen a sign for the accounting firm she worked for. Part of him thought that he was doing this without enough forethought, but he couldn't stand to leave it until later.

The offices were on the first floor up a narrow staircase with rounded, sagging risers. At the top, rooms opened up off both sides of the landing. The one on the left was a good-sized group office. The door was open for the breeze and Harry looked in at the large tilted desks, the racks of four-foot-wide parchments rolled onto wooden rods, and the massive ledger books in tall, narrow slotted shelves. A lone woman jotted down numbers off a ledger before she closed it and handled it with practiced ease back to its slot. She gave the parchment to one of four owls that sat in a complicated two-sided cage in a wide window. The bird flew off.

Harry almost departed, but stopped when he noticed on one of the desks, the dismaying Demyse of Voldemort mug that he had autographed long ago. He stepped in instead.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked without looking up from hooking a large scroll over a rig on her desk just sized for it. Like a bizarre window shade, she pulled the narrow rod on the end down to hook it into metal loops at the bottom before attaching a handle for turning.

"I'm looking for Candide," Harry responded, fascinated by her spinning the long parchment to a particular section and starting to work on row upon row of narrow neat numbers.

"She's in a meeting with the boss. Should be out in a moment."

"I'll wait."

She picked up a battered, metal-edged ruler and used a brown ink quill to extend the grid lines with machinelike precision. The door opened on the far side of the room and as people meandered out of it, Candide said, "Harry?" in surprise. The first woman and the others from the meeting stopped and gaped at him.

"Can I talk to you a moment?" Harry asked her.

"Sure," she replied. "Uh, why don't we go across the hall," she said quickly, cutting a practiced path across the narrow aisles between the desks and their menacing hooks. At the doorway, she said, "I'll be right back, sir." A portly man in a three-piece nodded mutely in response.

The room across the hall held more storage for the massive scrolls. When she had closed the door, Harry said, "I'm sorry to bother you-"

"Goodness, don't apologize. It's good to see you. What can I do for you?"

Harry frowned lightly and tried to put his thoughts together. She plucked at his sleeve while looking over his clothes and asked doubtfully, "What is this?"

"I didn't change from training at the Ministry," he explained. At her questioning look he added, "Auror training."

She looked impressed. "Wow. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Look. I'm kind of cutting in where I don't belong, but you haven't been around, and, it's easier to ask you why that is."

She gave him a wry smile and rubbed her forehead. "I do miss being around," she commented with a strange reluctance. "But I don't want to get in the middle of things, Harry," she said.

"Severus asked you to go, didn't he?" Harry asked, fearful he already knew the answer to that.

She gave him a sad smile, which made Harry turn away in anger at himself. "It was more than that," she insisted, then hesitated. "I couldn't live with making things hard for you. Do you know how strange it was to imagine that I was giving the Hero of Wizardry nightmares?"

Harry closed his eyes and tried to take her words in. "I didn't want that much consideration," he complained in anger. He regrouped and said, "Are you still free? I mean . . . I know it's been a while . . . "

She smiled. "I don't get out much," she said, "so even after six months, I am, sad to say, still free." After a pause she added, "Have Severus owl me." Harry brightened, and she said, tweaking his arm, "You're a sweet thing, Harry."

He gave her a dark, dubious look, which would have withered some, but only made her laugh. She opened the door and lead the way out. The doorway of the opposing office was full of curious faces, crowded close. At Harry and Candide's appearance the eavesdroppers all tried in vain for casual poses. Harry ignored them and headed down the stairs, turning at the landing to say, "See you."

"Cheers, Harry."

"And here I thought you'd signed that mug yourself," Roberta said to Candide.

"That would be on top of many things you were wrong about," Candide returned levelly as they went back to work.

Mr. Farnsworth's face twisted a bit. "How do you know Mr. Potter?" he asked curiously as though seeking a networking opportunity.

"He lives with a friend of mine," Candide said.

"Which friend?" Roberta asked dubiously.

"A very good friend," she returned, giving Roberta a stern look.

Harry returned home after a stop at Gringott's, where he cleared out the remaining Sickles and Knuts, feeling better about leaving the remaining small stacks of gold alone. On the way, he plotted how to broach the topic of Candide. It was Thursday, he considered, as he conjured an idea. In the drawing room, firmly Occluding his thoughts, he said hello. Snape looked up from his correspondence and responded in kind. "I was thinking we should do something fun tomorrow since it's Friday," Harry suggested casually. "I need a break from studying."

"You have been rather shockingly diligent," Snape observed. "You have a suggestion?"

Harry shrugged honestly. "Going out to dinner, maybe?" He put his bag down and opened it to take out his books. Pretending to have just thought of it, he said, "I haven't seen Candy around this summer." Then he very carefully pretended that he maybe should not have said that, while appearing to think it over anyway.

Snape was studying him closely, rubbing his fingertips together. After a pause he said, "I doubt she would be available on such short notice."

"Oh," Harry commented distractedly, sounding just disappointed enough.

In measured speech Snape said, "I could owl her and inquire, though."

Harry shrugged lightly. "Sure. If you want to," he replied extra casually, although his heart rate was trying to give him away.

"Dinner, you are thinking," Snape clarified slowly.

"Sounds good to me."

"The place above the Inn in Hogsmeade is reputed to be nice," Snape said as though thinking aloud.

Harry almost suggested that he not go along, but then thought that would make his scheme too obvious, plus he really did want to go out; so he kept mum.

When Franklin returned midmorning the next day, Harry silently hoped Candide was smart enough not to say anything. Snape unfolded the small parchment as Harry held his breath. "She regrets that she is free and is very happy for the invitation," he stated slowly. "Does that make sense to you?"

Harry paused to think of an answer. "Maybe it would only make sense to another woman," he suggested.

"Perhaps," Snape said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, we are meeting her at 7:00."

Harry turned back to his notes rather than have to Occlude his mind. "It will be good to get out," he observed neutrally with an upbeat tone.

"Yes," Snape agreed softly.

After lunch, Harry decided to take a look at his dress robes, which he would probably end up wearing that night. They were comically too small; it was as though they belonged to someone else. He went back down to the dining room, where Snape was still having tea. "Do I need dress robes for tonight? How fancy is this restaurant?"

"Quite, I think."

"I have to go early and pick up another set of robes. My old ones are much too small," he said in disbelief.

"Potter," Snape said snidely. "When was the last time you wore them?"

"Uh, Boxing Day."

"You are probably five inches taller than you were then," Snape commented "Maybe more." He set his cup down and stood up to face Harry. He looked down at him a moment. "Yes, I think you are taller than your father was."

"Really? I better stop growing soon then," he said and then observed, "I still feel short compared to you."

"I am much taller than average," Snape said thoughtfully. "We can go into Hogsmeade early and get you outfitted. And perhaps order some more of that marvelous tea."

At four o'clock, they took the Floo to the Three Broomsticks, which was busy enough to let them pass through unnoticed. At Gladrags the shop clerk gave Harry a dazzling smile.

"You're Harry Potter," the young lady said brightly.

"Yeah," Harry replied flatly. "I need a set of dress robes. For tonight," he added, and at that thought, felt grateful that he might have more pull than the average customer.

"Wow, well, I'll have to check with Mum, she does the alterations. Let's get you measured up first." He slipped off his jumper and stood up on a short wooden pedestal, moving as directed. "Right then," she said, when she finished. "What color?"

He glanced over at Snape's dark green robe as his guardian perused the far wall of the shop. "Dark blue, maybe?"

She grabbed a few off the rack and brought them over. "Frilly?" she suggested. He shook his head. "Demure?" He nodded.

"That's a nice one," he said, indicating the one in her hand. It was velvet with quilted satin cuffs and collar. The color was that of a blue sapphire at midnight. Snape wandered back over to see it.

"It's a pricey one," she commented.

Harry froze. "How pricey?" he asked, suddenly acutely aware of the low value of the coins in his purse.

She looked at the tag, "Thirty-two galleons." She held it up, waiting for a decision.

That was a lot for a robe, even if Harry had that much money. He looked over at Snape and found himself in a very new position. "If it looks good on you, why not?" Snape asked.

The clerk unhooked it and handed it up to him. Harry slipped it on over his t-shirt and denims. She moved the nearby mirror so he could see himself in it. It did look good on him, but he hesitated, feeling very awkward about asking for money.

"Sharp," the clerk said. "You dating anyone?" she asked.

Harry gave her a dark look. Behind him, Snape said, "Not anyone in particular."

The clerk smiled at him more. "It only needs to be taken in on the sides and that can be done later if you want. You can come back and have that done, anytime. Or just owl it," she suggested with clear dislike of that option.

Harry still hesitated. Snape stepped over and looked him up and down. "You don't like it?"

"It isn't that," Harry said quietly, reluctantly.

Snape eyed him closely and said, "He'll take it. Cut the tag if you will . . . he will be wearing it out."

Harry frowned as he stepped down from the platform. The clerk used a spell to remove the tag and its tie. As she took it to the counter, Harry hung back, letting Snape follow her over to pay. On the way out she bagged his jumper and handed it to him with a glowing smile.

Out on the street, Snape observed, "We seem to have encountered a sensitive topic." It was, Harry thought; it made his insides knot up miserably, even as he appreciated the fierce blue movement of his new robe. When he remained silent as they walked slowly along the gravel edge of the stone street, Snape said, "You are remarkably low maintenance. An expensive robe now and then is really no matter."

With a small frown Harry said, "I'm going to need money for the next round of assigned books, too."

"Auror-assigned books are really no matter," Snape said firmly. They stopped at the corner where they would have to turn for Puddifoot's. A little impatiently, he prompted, "What is bothering you, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. He could just make out the collapsing roof of the Shrieking Shack over the other rooftop and he let it hold his gaze.

"Loss of independence, perhaps?" Snape inquired. Harry considered that, but just shrugged again. A pair of witches scuttled past, chatting simultaneously about frog canning recipes and ignis fatuus spells. When they were out of range, Snape said, "This is going to be an ongoing thing, I suspect. It would be unfortunate for it to cause this much distress every time."

Harry was not going to put his finger on his discomfort in the middle of High Street in Hogsmeade. He nodded to say that they should continue on to the teashop.

The teashop was empty and the bell on the door sounded too loud as they stepped inside. Snape took a seat at a table near the side wall. The proprietress came out

and greeted them warmly. Snape ordered a pot, looking very out of place among the frills draped over every object.

After the tray arrived and the Madam departed again, Snape said. "This is the money left by your parents, correct, that is apparently running low?"

Harry nodded as he traced with his finger the letters CD LUVS CC carved in the tabletop. "It seemed like a lot a long time ago," Harry said, frustrated with himself. When he had first seen the piles he imagined that it couldn't run out. He sipped his tea; it was bitter, over-steeped. A glance upward showed him Snape waiting passively for him to say more. He thought about it longer, seeing that. His gut reaction to needing things paid for was to think of the Dursleys.

Harry put his cup down and sighed, "My aunt and uncle used money against me."

Snape straightened. "Ah," he said in understanding, sounding relieved.

Harry explained, "It was so nice to be free of that once I had access to my vault. They constantly complained how expensive I was, and how I was so lucky they had taken me in at all." Harry burned at the memory. "It was ludicrous. They never bought me anything, not clothes or presents for sure. They barely gave me food." Harry cut his ranting short. "In any event . . ." he muttered before gulping more tea. This time he appreciated the bitterness.

Snape breathed in deeply. "It helps me to understand. Rest assured I will not use it against you."

"I don't even know how much you make," Harry pointed out, sounding difficult.

"Certainly more than enough to support two," Snape said firmly. "We'll put you on an allowance. That will spare you from having to ask." He took out a scrap of parchment and Fetched a battered never-out quill from the counter. "What are your normal expenses?"

"Twenty for a few lunches out a week. That's in pounds."

"Goodness, what is Gringott's giving on those these days."

"Bad rates, that's one of the reasons I've been taking a lunch. It's been coming out to about a Galleon and half." He watched Snape write that down.

"And you've bought books at least twice already. The law books could not have been inexpensive."

"About twenty Galleons each round," Harry said with a wince.

"Harry," Snape insisted, "don't worry about it."

Harry went on, "The Minister wants to waive my fees, which are three hundred and sixty Galleons a year." At Snape's surprised look, Harry said, "Second most expensive apprenticeship among registered guilds . . . only alchemy costs more." Harry rubbed his fingernails. "I haven't decided what to tell them. But . . . I don't have any choice but to accept, I don't think."

"You really do not like taking anything from Cornelius Fudge, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't like him."

"Would you rather accept it from Madam Bones?"

Harry scratched his cheek and considered that. "Yeah, I guess."

Dryly, Snape explained, "Hold on a week then . . . that is when the vote is. Minerva does not think he is going to survive it, and since she had taken over Albus' role of confessor to the Wizengamot, I expect she would know." When Harry didn't reply, Snape returned to his list. "Fare for the underground, evenings out, presents for girlfriends?"

Harry averted his eyes, embarrassed. "The first two."

"Could easily be the third, if the shop clerk was any indication." He added the list together. "Rounded up, about eight Galleons a week."

"That much?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Save it if you do not need it." Snape said dismissively.

"Thanks," Harry muttered and dropped his gaze to his cup. He chafed at the situation, but realized it would be years, literally, before he was making his own money.

They drank tea in silence with Harry tapping his crossed feet against the chair leg in an unusual display of fidgeting. When it was time to leave for the restaurant, Snape arranged the empty cups on the small tray with the teapot. He started to stand, then hesitated and leaned back in his chair with something resembling a sigh. "There are few things I would begrudge you, Harry. Frankly, you do not ask for much." Harry fidgeted more, really wishing the situation were simply different, but the only way to make it so would be to ask for money from someone else or from the Ministry.

"Thanks," Harry said again.

"I think you will get used to the situation," Snape said as they stood to leave. "As tangled as it is for you, apparently."

Chapter 52

At the Middle Inn they met Candide, who was waiting for them at the top of the stairs outside the small dining room. "So good to see you two," she said with emotion, giving them each one-armed hugs. "Wow, you look smart in that," she said of Harry's robe.

They were shown to a table along the back wall below a gaudy brass cherub sconce that matched the shiny brown tablecloths. Candide told the waiter that they would start with champagne and he bowed and disappeared. "What have you two been up to?"

"I've started the Auror's program," Harry offered, mostly to get things straight in their ruse.

"Wow," she said, giving the same response as before. "Impressive. How long does that take?"

Harry sighed, "Three years."

"How is it so far?" she asked brightly.

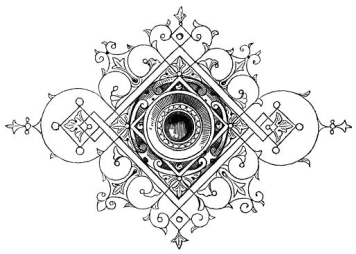
"Good. A ton of work, plus I get picked on by our trainer."

She grinned crookedly. "Your trainer doesn't underestimate you, you mean?"

"Something like that," Harry said stiffly.

Champagne arrived and as they clinked their glasses, Harry had a feeling of being in just the right place. It was an unusual feeling, one he longed to capture and keep in a bottle for later if that were possible.

Chapter 53.



Desperately Seeking Something

Unfortunately, Harry's mood from the nice dinner with his guardian and Candide was destined to be spoiled already the next morning. After their long night of conversation, closing down the Middle Inn, Harry didn't rise for breakfast until late morning. Snape was having coffee and reading the post at the table. He gave Harry an odd look as Harry pulled out the opposite chair.

"What is it?" Harry asked, unable to think what might be wrong.

Snape's lips crooked into a dark smile. He reached into the pile of letters and tossed over a magazine. "Candide owled this over after I informed her last night that we did not subscribe."

Harry stared at it, chest tight for a breath. It was him on the cover, nearly full size. The picture must have been taken during the press session at the Ministry, as he was wearing his Auror's workout outfit. Fortunately, with his face so big in the picture, only the collar and shoulder were visible. He swallowed hard and pulled it closer. Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelor the headline proclaimed below.

"So I assume you did not know about that," Snape intoned. Plates appeared before them and he took up a butter knife as he added, "If you are looking that grim about the picture, I do not suggest you read the article."

"Who wrote it?"

"Who else?"

Harry, with an angry motion, flipped the magazine open and located the correct page. Across from an advertisement for Danzer's Dazzling Hair Cream, Makes your locks sparkle, was Skeeter's article. Hunch-shouldered and frowning, Harry began reading.

Harry Potter continues to amaze the wizarding world with his ongoing accomplishments but the one accomplishment he apparently cannot manage is locating a suitable witch to settle down with.

"I could have told her it didn't have to be a witch," Harry complained.

"I do not think their readership would like to hear that, frankly," Snape pointed out as he refilled both their coffees.

"And what is this 'settle down' nonsense?" Harry continued to grouse.

So what is Mr. Potter looking for in a potential mate, one may ask? When interviewed, his former school chums were eager to tell us.

"Oh, Merlin, who did she talk to?" Harry muttered aloud.

"Would you like something stronger added to your coffee?"

Harry shook his head, distracted by continuing to read.

Ms. Pansy Parkinson assures us that Mr. Potter is only looking for the same thing as any young man.

Harry put his head in his hand and hoped the average Witch Weekly reader didn't read too much into things.

"He's always been attracted to the odd sort. Girls that do their own thing rather than follow the crowd. At school, it was always the smart, thinking, boring kind that he went for. I assume he hasn't gotten any more interesting since then." Mr. Potter's fellow schoolmate Portny Wereporridge says Harry always liked girls who are good at Quidditch or ones that speak a foreign language.

Oddly, parts of that weren't untrue, Harry considered. He cringed though, through the last part.

So ladies, are you of this sort? This reporter would like to hear from those readers who think they are the perfect match for Most Eligible Bachelor and Hero of the Year, let's call him still, since this year's hasn't been announced. Send me an essay and the best will be printed in this very spot! Perhaps a lucky one here can capture the most elusive of wizard hearts.

"What potion would make someone write this way?" Harry asked in an exasperated tone. "Flowery Befuddlement Draught or Swineherder's Seductive Swill?" he suggested, growing more annoyed rather than less. He watched Snape suppress a grin, dropped the magazine aside, and went back to his cold breakfast. Something teased at him though and he looked over at the post stacked high beside Snape. "So that pile . . . it isn't extra large because . . . ?"

"Would you like me to lie?" Snape asked.

Harry's shoulders fell. The pile was not that big, really. "Could be worse, I suppose. Although it will be weeks before it dies down."

"It is worse," Snape said casually. "There is a box by the window." He gestured over his shoulder. When Harry pounded his head lightly with his fist, Snape said, "I do apologize."

"For not blocking the owls?"

"For ever believing you could bask in this."

Harry shook his head disbelievingly, then cast his mind back a long, long way. "'Ah, Mr. Potter, our new celebrity."' Harry quoted, imitating just enough. Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. Harry said, "First thing you ever said to me."

"I do remember that," Snape said, sounding regretful.

"'Course, I was sure you were dark, you made my scar burn the first time you looked at me. But it wasn't you, it was Quirrell. You just happened to be next to him."

"I did not just happen . . . I was keeping an eye on him." Snape's brow furrowed and his gaze went far away. "True, we did not start out well, but you also aggravated me by not paying attention in class the first day."

"What do you mean?" Harry retorted. "I was copying down every word you said."

Snape looked undone. "You were?"

"Want me to fetch my notes?"

"No. I believe you," he said grimly. "And I do apologize. But . . . you should probably open your post."

Harry pushed his plate aside, appetite reduced after reading the article, or maybe it was last night's five-course dinner. "Yes, Professor Lockhart," Harry said and stood to fetch the box.

Chapter 53

Harry was sorting letters on and off between reading his assigned texts and practicing spells on the fireplace irons when the door knocker sounded. He went to the door and found Elizabeth there, fringe wet from the hard rain. When she stepped inside, he took her yellow slicker and hung it up with the cloaks. "Come on in," he said easily.

"I hope this is an acceptable time for a visit?" she asked.

"I'm just studying," Harry assured her as he led the way to the dining room. "Oh, and sorting letters," he added darkly. She stopped at the site of the piles on the table. "Have a seat," Harry urged her. "I'm sure Winky will bring tea in a minute."

She sat down before the pile of colorful, scented letters, adjusted the top one to read the address, looked like she wanted to open it, but let it go and sat back with a sigh. The sound of it caught Harry's attention. Tea arrived as expected. He waited for Winky to depart before returning to figuring out that signal. Elizabeth was casually turning a few of the stray photographs her way.

"She's pretty," she opined about a woman with quite a head of Auburn hair who winked and waved from a pastoral scene of trees and grass.

Harry shrugged. He didn't disagree, but he also didn't know the woman at all, so it was just an empty image. Maybe Elizabeth saw more in it than he did. She certainly sighed again as she pushed it back into the folds of the letter it had fallen out of. After straightening and sipping her tea, she asked politely, "How is your training going?"

"Good. How are your music lessons?"

"Good. I am practicing for a concert in two weeks. The piece needs a lot of work," she added, sounding a bit tired at the notion.

"I've never heard you play."

"You don't have a piano."

"True."

They talked idly until lunch, when Elizabeth realized that she was late for an appointment. At the door as she put on her slicker, she said, "Come over tomorrow and I'll play what I'm working on."

"Okay," Harry said.

"At three then," she confirmed. She flipped up her hood and gave a wave behind her as she stepped into the garden and the rain.

Back inside the hall, Harry stopped by the drawing room. "Do you think I'm ready for the Apparition License Examination?"

Without looking up, Snape replied, "Probably."

Harry smiled. "Brilliant. Maybe I'll try to schedule for next week one day after my training."

"An excellent idea," Snape responded dryly, still looking for something in a stack of parchments.

Harry left him to it.

Harry knew where the Peterson house was, but had never been there. It was just beyond the small train station, a white house fronted by two-story balconies with white railings, everything very neat around the lawn. He pressed the fancy brass button beside the door and heard a musical chime from far inside. Mrs. Peterson answered the door after a minute, and gave him a rather glowing smile of recognition.

"Harry dear! Come in, come in," she urged, gesturing broadly. Harry stepped inside and immediately thought he should remove his shoes given the large expanse of white carpeting that flowed over every visible floor. Mrs. Peterson brusquely waved him off from doing so and led him into the back part of the hall, which opened wide with a curving row of bay windows, everything painted white, including the imposing piano angled to catch the window's light on the music. "Gerald, come say hello," Mrs. Peterson admonished someone in a side room that resembled an office.

A tall, balding man with black-rimmed glasses stood up and came over. "Ah, the young man I hear so much about," he said, though it did not sound as though he appreciated this, necessarily. Harry shook his hand. Mrs. Peterson disappeared up the wide curving staircase, calling for her daughter.

Harry put on a neutral face as he found himself getting a rather close looking over from Mr. Peterson. The man put on a half-smile that did not make it to his eyes. "The witches in this house tell some very strange tales about you," he finally said. "Especially out of that funny old newspaper my wife reads sometimes."

Uncertain how much the Muggle father of his friend knew, Harry said, "I don't know what stories they've been telling, sir."

Unless Harry could not read the man correctly, he seemed to think this response grudgingly acceptable. Upstairs, footsteps could be heard approaching, deadened as

though on thick carpet. Mr. Peterson nodded and said quickly, "If you plan to spend much time with my daughter, you and I will have to have a long talk." He backed off then and appeared generally amiable in the next instant.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, feeling he was running into someone with Vernon Dursley's sense of the world, although this man must be more open-minded than his uncle if he actually married a witch.

"Hi," Elizabeth said brightly as she fairly bounded down the stairs before spying her father there. She slowed and, with more aplomb, led Harry to the sitting area by the piano. She sat down to play and began with no preamble. Harry sat back in a very comfortable, overstuffed chair and listened as quiet notes were interspersed with loud pounding chords. Eventually the music shifted into a confusing, loud playing that made him think there must be two pianos being played at once. He sat up and leaned forward, but he could see nothing more than Elizabeth's hair tossing as she played. He stood up and came around the side to watch her hands moving over the keys, trying to catch the melodies without much luck.

Elizabeth finally stopped and lowered her hands slowly, the piano resonating with discordance that only faded slowly. "That was the first movement," she said, resetting the music book before her to a new page. "Want to hear the second?"

He nodded but asked, "What was that?"

"Faust battling Mephistopheles. The composer is Rachmaninov."

Harry thought the music made more sense, knowing that. "Ah," he said, noncommittally.

"Rachmaninov did not tell the first pianist to play it what it was about," Elizabeth informed Harry.

"What is it called?"

"First Piano Sonata," she replied, and let her fingers trail over the keys as though playing a sequence from the music.

"A simple name for something involving such a battle," Harry said.

"Yes," she replied, setting her hands back on the keys. "I think he was hiding it. This next part has more of Mephistopheles and witches, as Rachmaninov knew them." She started to play again and the music became even more confused to Harry's ear, as though the piano were being played almost randomly. Between page turnings, Elizabeth was intent on what she was doing, hands moving rapidly up and down, her

head jerking with each sequence. She made an error, fingers stuttering, which Harry could only confirm by her grimace, although she did not pause for it. Nor for the next. At a slow spot, she said, "I have to work on those bars."

The slow spots intermingled again with loud ones. "That is Gretchen," Elizabeth commented, which didn't clear anything up for Harry, who resisted shifting from one foot to the other for fear of distracting her playing, although the song went on a very long time to remain very still throughout. As the piece went on, it only grew more disturbed and finally it ended on that distraught note. Elizabeth sat back, looking for an appraisal.

"Wow," Harry said, for lack of anything more meaningful. His ears were ringing along with the wood of the piano.

She frowned. "I cannot get it all, though; it's too hard," she said, closing the lid over the keys with a padded thud. "I shouldn't have picked such a difficult, long piece, but it is too late to change. I'll have to simplify some of harder parts and some people will notice at the concert, but most won't." She ran her hand over the lid as though to dust it. "It is better to play slowly and accurately; that will sound faster than playing faster but poorly." She stood, her fingers still lingering on the white wood. "I have to work on it more. But it was good to have you come; it made me play all the way through."

They looked at each other in silence until Harry said, "You are really good at playing."

She shrugged. "I started at the age of four; one would think. . . Would you like tea?" she interrupted herself.

"Sure," Harry said. She led him to the front of the house, past her father's office. Harry was glad the man didn't look up from his work as they walked by.

Tuesday afternoon, Harry raced to the lifts after his training session was over. He distractedly returned a smile to the two chubby wizards in the lift who were carrying a battered metal crate that thumped from the inside.

"Illegal dragon kept as pet," one of them explained.

"In the Docklands, if you can imagine," the other went on.

"Like we could afford another Great Fire, ya' know," the first said disgustedly as Harry stepped out at level six.

Walking quickly, he made it to the Apparation Test Center just two minutes late. The small room was crowded and everyone turned when he entered. The greetingwitch took his name and told him to wait in queue for Group E.

"Hey, Harry," a familiar voice said. Harry stepped over to wait beside Colin Creevey, a little embarrassed to be taking the test with someone a year behind him at Hogwarts. Colin had his camera. "Would you take a photograph of me when I'm taking my test?"

"I'll do it for you, dear. You should have let me bring the ordinary camera," a woman sitting beside him said. "Oh, dear me, it's Harry Potter," she then blurted.

"This is my mum," Colin explained. Harry shook hands with the petite, wide-eyed woman. Colin then asked, "Do you want me to take one of you getting your test?"

"No, thanks," Harry said, thinking of being distracted by the flash.

"You can go ahead of me, if you want," Colin then solicitously offered.

Harry adjusted his cloak tighter around his workout piece. "No, that's all right really." He watched another Hogwarts student, Prissy Pritchard, as she was instructed to stand in the corner of the room. The testwitch backed up, clipboard in hand and observed as Prissy disappeared with a pop! Prissy came in the door to Harry's left and went back over to the witch as she noted something on her clipboard and accepted the wooden dowel Prissy handed her. Prissy disappeared again and again walked in the door with another rod, this one metal. After that, she was dismissed and another witch, middle-aged with homespun clothes, was called up and approached uncertainly.

"Group E," the greetingwitch announced. Harry accepted the clipboard with the written test and leaned against the wall to complete it. Colin gave him an energetic thumbs-up when Harry looked his way; it made Harry feel old for some reason. A few minutes later, Harry handed back his test sheet. The greetingwitch scored it quickly and with a patent smile, handed him a dowel and told him to wait in the next queue. Harry sighed and moved to stand against the wall beside another row of chairs.

Finally Harry's turn came 'round. The testwitch seemed confused to see him but, after fumbling with hooking a new comment sheet onto her clipboard, told him what to do. He was to walk down the corridor to the end where the floor was painted orange, leave the dowel in the tin there and come back. Harry did so. He then easily Apparated back to fetch the dowel and walked it back to the testwitch. She then gave him a list of four locations he might know in London, of which he had only been to St. Mungo's.

"You know the Apparation incoming area, in the cellar?" she asked.

"Uh, I've been there, but I wasn't really paying attention," Harry admitted, remembering the lift from the alley to the cellar. He had been carried most of the way, he remembered with a twinge.

She frowned. "Never been in the top o' the Tower, eh? Or Canary Wharf?" When Harry shook his head, she asked, "Do you think you can get to St. Mungo's all right? Don' want you trying if you can't."

Harry felt that he did not want to get Splinched during his test either. "How about the alley beside. I'll fetch the dowel by walking in. That I'm sure I can do."

"All right then, but remember you have a four-minute time limit," she said, flipping a miniature hourglass attached to the top of the clipboard.

Harry stepped back into the corner and closed his eyes on the many curious, watching faces in the room. It had been years since he was in the alley. He imagined the wall, where it was relative to the streets on either end. He had to think of the permanent things, not the empty wooden crates or the rubbish bins. Imagining his usual getting crushed into a ball of paper, he willed himself to the alley.

A car horn blared as Harry's feet met the pavement. He quickly looked back and forth, but it had echoed in from the street. Exhaling, he stepped around to the visitor's entrance rather than use the emergency one. After weaving his way through the waiting area and begging off that he was going to be late he rushed to the door to the cellar, grabbed up a metal dowel, and hurriedly Apparated back to the orange end of the corridor. Harry's elbow whacked the wall as he arrived, almost disastrously. Hurriedly he suppressed his relief at the near miss and quickly stepped back to the testing room.

"Just in time," the testwitch said.

"The St. Mungo's reception room was crowded and I don't get through a crowd quickly," Harry explained.

"Oh, yes," she said, sounding unsympathetic and then some. But she made a few notes and handed him a folded parchment to take back to the desk in the other corner.

"Thanks," Harry said, glowing with the notion of success.

She grudgingly gave him a half smile. "I speak Portuguese, you know," she offered coyly.

Harry turned back, requiring a moment to understand that. "Argh," he whispered, turning back around and striding to the corner desk.

Chapter 53

Freshly written license in hand, Harry arrived in the hearth at home. As he brushed off the usual powdering of ash, he wondered if he could get eventually get enough distance to skip the grimy Floo to come home. He found Snape in the drawing room, sitting at the small marble table having little glasses of something with Candide. She gave him a friendly greeting when he barreled in. Harry composed himself completely and folded the thick parchment away into his pocket.

"Is that your license?" she asked eagerly.

"Yeah," Harry said, shrugging. "It was no problem."

"Can I see?" she asked, still undaunted.

Harry pulled it out and handed it over. As she oohed a little, he reminded himself that he had been taking the test with a group of recent sixth-years. She handed it back and he took out his old knitted wallet and put it in there.

"His other license is much more interesting," Snape said, peering over his glass at Harry with an odd sparkle in his black eyes.

Curiously, she asked, "Which one is that? Did they give you an Auror's Apprentice one?"

"No," Harry said, reopening the metal clasp on the wallet and pulling out his Animagus identification. "I think he means this one," Harry explained, trying unsuccessfully to read his guardian.

She accepted it and jumped a bit in surprise as she studied it, making Snape smirk. The Ministry had insisted that another person be in the photograph of him for size, which did make for a startling image of man and beast, even as small as it was. "That is your Animagus form?" she breathed, reading it over again.

"Yep. Want to see it?" Harry offered, prepared to change right there.

"No," Snape stated. "Out in the hall, if you must," he quickly amended.

She stared at the photograph again, making Harry assume his wings were flapping, which they sometimes did. She handed it back and stood after downing the rest of her drink. In the voice of someone whose poker hand has been called, she said, "Sure, I'd love to see it."

Snape was suppressing a small smile as Harry led the way out to the hall. Harry stepped away and transformed on the spot, held it only a few seconds, then changed back. It had gotten very easy to do that.

"That's really something, Harry," she said, clearly amazed. "Very . . . red."

"Yes," Snape drolled, "And as long as he takes his broom for long flights, an actually useful form."

Candide stayed for dinner and Harry just escaped the card playing with the excuse that he had to study. The sound of conversation punctuated by the occasional laughter of Candide kept Harry from completely taking in his assigned reading. He disliked that it bothered him; they clearly got along well, and Snape really did deserve have someone.

The next day after morning drills, Tonks came in and said to them, "Want to go watch the vote? Should we take the kids to the gallery?" she then asked Rodgers.

Rodgers scrunched his face in thought, then said. "Sure. I think we're getting a new boss, so we might as well be the first to know."

Harry, who didn't normally pay much heed to the doings of the Minister of Magic, unless the man had it in for him, was nonetheless eager to watch the vote.

"Bones has indicated that she is mounting a challenge," Tonks said as they all trouped their way down the corridor to the lifts. They got off a level early and walked to the gallery entrance, where many people were queued and appeared to be arguing their way in.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said as they reached the group. Harry greeted him and recognized some others such as Skeeter close to the heavy wooden door, which was propped open just an inch, or perhaps Skeeter had her foot in it. Mr. Weasley explained, "They haven't let anyone in yet. Still arguing over who should get in. Maybe I'll see what's happening." He pushed his way into the crowd.

A balding man with a goatee, wearing a set of fancy, though wrinkled, robes turned away from the door in frustration. "I need a smoke," Harry heard him say to Skeeter in an American accent. He pushed his way out of the crowd and fumbled in his pockets as he glanced up at Harry. His eyes did the usual fast blinking as he took Harry in. The man glanced back at Skeeter, then with a quickly narrowing expression put on a small grin and stepped closer to Harry. He took out his notepad and said quietly, "So, Mr. Potter, are you hoping Minister Fudge survives the no-confidence vote?"

Harry considered the almost snakelike quality of the man's eyes and said, "No comment." Tonks glanced across at him from her whispered discussion with Rodgers but did not give Harry any indication she cared what he said.

The man laughed a bit derisively and chewed his lip, clearly not dissuaded by that. "How about a different topic, then? Most observers feel that you haven't been adequately compensated for your rather extraordinary services to the Ministry. How would you react to that?"

"I didn't want anything beyond eliminating Voldemort," Harry pointed out.

Speaking low and quick as though he had some inside knowledge, the man said, "You aren't real, Mr. Potter." He made a thoughtful noise and asked, "What do you think of Amelia Bones?"

Harry shrugged and the man's eyes narrowed as he licked his lips. "That would be an 'I feel she would make an acceptable Minister of Magic,' then?" He spoke as though the two of them knew each other very well and shared old secrets.

Harry felt as though he had stepped into a duel that he didn't know the rules for, and so hesitated replying. The door to the gallery closed with a boom and Skeeter stalked over easily, the pressed bodies instinctively making a path for her. "Harry!" she greeted him warmly, making Harry feel strangely rescued.

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry greeted her a bit darkly, still unhappy about her most recent article.

"So, you've met Timothy Olsen. You have my condolences," she quipped. "He writes for the Salem Gazette, biggest wizard paper in the States." Skeeter put her arm around her colleague's shoulder. "Although the Bay Howler, is catching up, I hear." She poked the man in the ribs and released him in favor of Harry. "So. You. I get your photograph full size on the most popular magazine in Wizarding Britain and not even a note of thanks."

Harry favored her with a scathing look.

"We should run an exclusive series on you, Harry," she went blithely on. "My colleague here has been interrogating me nonstop about you since he arrived. His paper would pay well for an interview."

Harry managed a mild grimace to cover his reaction to the notion of earning Galleons. "No, thanks."

She plucked lightly at his cloak before straightening it for him. "Don't answer so quick. If you don't sit for an interview, he'll have no choice but to write his article based on my notes. And my notes go way back."

Harry frowned and ignored the eager look Olsen was trying hard to submerge. "Let me think about it," Harry replied.

She grinned widely before her head jerked at the sound of the gallery door opening. She leaned close and quickly said enticingly, "We can even do it at your place, safe territory."

"I said I'd think about it."

Olsen gave him a slightly hungry look before he followed Skeeter inside. Tonks was gesturing for them all to follow as well. Harry ended up on the end of the front gallery bench with Vineet beside him and Tonks standing behind him. Harry tried to offer her his seat, but she explained that they had all gotten in because she had said she was on duty, and indeed her eyes took in the gallery with a practiced eye for trouble. "Keep an eye on the American," Harry groused. She patted him on the head from behind in response.

The Wizengamot convened in all their plum-colored glory with lots of stodgy language from a man wearing a tall black pointed hat who read from an oversized parchment. Behind him sat McGonagall, her glasses perched on her nose and her hair pinned up with something that sparkled in the globe lights. Harry found Amelia Bones two seats away to the left, looking eager and nervous, her hands rubbing together slowly on the bench before her.

Another wizened old man approached as the speech wound down and picked up another identical hat from the table beside the podium and donned it as he waited. This man seemed serious and nearly vibrated with restrained anger; Harry wondered who he was. When he gained the podium, he straightened the odd hat and said, "I, as oldest member of the esteemed and exalted Wizengamot, have been given the long-overdue honor of making the motion that we hold a vote of no-confidence in the current leadership. My reasons are many, as you are all aware from my repeated assertions before this body. I will not repeat them all now beyond the single most persuading argument that the current Minister of Magic is not fit for this position."

Harry glanced down at the floor where Fudge sat with his arms wrapped over his round middle, staring hard at the speaker and not giving away anything. Percy sat beside him, poker-straight, holding numerous folders primly in his lap.

The old man went on, "He has been involved in questionable monetary transactions which, although they were meant for a good cause on the surface, placed him in an untenable position with those of questionable background. He did nothing to hold the Ministry free of corruption and instead held it in inaction at our darkest hour. So

. . . in the interests of the future of wizardry in England I am compelled to submit that we require more suitable leadership."

"Seconded?" A voice rang out.

There was a pause, then McGonagall raised her hand. Fudge looked startled by this, then sent daggers her way with his eyes. Just try something, Harry dared him from his perch in the gallery. The old man placed the hat beside the other one and retook his seat.

"Dissenting arguments to the floor," the voice said. Harry could not place it, it rang out so.

The hats sat untouched. Fudge moved as though to stand, then sat back, resignation in his pose. Harry felt disappointed; he wanted to hear him try to defend himself. "If it were this easy . . . " Harry whispered regretfully.

A familiar-looking goblet was removed from a small trunk beside the podium. A general shuffling occurred among the assembled as they pulled out slips of paper and wrote on them before folding or rolling them tightly. The cup was passed from hand to hand, row to row, flaring each time a slip was dropped inside. It sputtered as it was carried back down to the floor and placed on a pedestal beside the podium. Within seconds a slip burst from it, to be caught easily by the bearer.

Reading aloud, the man read, "Yeahs, thirty two, Nays, twenty. The Yeahs have it."

Harry was amazed that, although no one publicly supported Fudge, the vote was still that close. Fudge stood slowly, looking as though he wished to storm from the room. Instead he stepped down to the podium, considered the hats, but then waved them off as though disgusted by them.

"I'll keep this short, since you all clearly wish to move on to other orders of business. I have served this government my whole career and have been honored to do so. In this instance I believe I have been unduly criticized." He pounded his hand on the podium once. "I held this Ministry together at a time when competing interests were intent upon tearing it apart. The enemy was within as well as without and it wasn't clear who was truly with us. I choose to believe the best of some who proved to be against us. I won't apologize for that. I refused to follow the nay sayers who insisted the situation was worse than it appeared, but that was my prerogative, I believe, to lead us forward, not backward."

"If this body wishes to go backward, so be it."

He tried to remove a hat he hadn't donned, waved in annoyance at this, and climbed up to an empty spot on the end of a bench and took a seat with the rest of the

membership. There was no place nearby for Percy to sit, so he stood against the wall at the top of the steps.

McGonagall stood and came down to the podium. "Since the floor is open for nominations for Minister, I nominate Amelia Susan Bones." This was immediately seconded. There was another nomination for an Alfred Arbuthnot that was also seconded. A third nomination was not seconded. A back and forth debate ensued with various members arguing the merits of each candidate, although it seemed as though the speakers didn't entirely believe what they were saying or that their statements were too rehearsed. Harry stifled a yawn as this went on for rather a long time.

Tonks leaned over him and whispered, "They have to make it look like they're taking it seriously."

"Ah," Harry replied.

Eventually, another vote was called and the Goblet of Fire was again pressed into service. This time it was overwhelming, with only one vote for Arbuthnot, which Harry suspected was Fudge's, which meant that Arbuthnot hadn't even voted for himself. Amelia Bones was sworn in with her hand on the largest crystal ball Harry had ever seen, the event was duly noted, a bit lengthily, by several speakers, the scribe's notes were given some special honor involving a thick wax seal and storage in a golden casket, after which, the meeting adjourned.

As they waited for the gallery to empty, Harry watched the members of the Wizengamot chatting on the floor. McGonagall looked to be congratulating Madam Bones. Others stood around them, waiting to do the same. Harry felt a keen satisfaction in watching Fudge's back as he left the room. Percy hung back, watching the proceedings from beside the door. He looked as though he wished to be more deeply involved, but did not move in closer to the cluster around the new Minister.

With the gallery nearly empty, it had quieted enough to hear what was being said. McGonagall urged Bones toward the door with the words, "There is quite a lot of Press waiting for a word, I believe."

"Ah, you arranged that, I assume?" Madam Bones said coyly.

McGonagall looked around the floor, gave someone a smile, then glanced up at the gallery and seemed surprised to find Harry there. Harry gave her a little wave, which she returned. Bones turned at McGonagall's motion and glanced up as well. Her lips appeared to say, "Mr. Potter." She then leaned over to a man beside her with a notepad and spoke something to him before she swept from the room.

Chapter 53

Back in their training area, Harry and the other apprentices started in on a short review of their readings before breaking for lunch. After lunch, Tonks pulled Harry aside and gave him a small scroll bound with red ribbon. "You've been summoned," she said.

"I've been what?" Harry asked as he untied the message. Inside was a request that he be at Minister Bones' office the next day at 10:00 in the morning. "Oh," Harry said. "What is this about, do you suppose?"

"I can't guess, Harry. Could be about any manner of things."

"Come on, Tonks," Harry cajoled," I need some help here."

She laughed. "Harry, you don't need any help, honestly. Just be yourself. That's always my motto."

Harry held back on mentioning that, during the course of their short conversation, Tonks' hair had turned three different colors. "Easy for you to say," Harry said to her departing back.

Harry combed his hair a little more carefully the next morning and put on a nicer robe, after deciding that he did not want to spend the day in his dress robes. He could not show up to meet the Minister in his workout suit, so he might have to change back and forth; it depended on how they made up their training today.

At breakfast, Harry was fidgeting a bit.

"What is the matter?" Snape asked when Harry dropped his teaspoon loudly after stirring honey into his tea.

Harry shook himself and converted his uncertainty into impatience. "What do you think the Minister would want with me?"

Snape stared at him with a lowered brow, then sighed. "I should have learned by this point to expect anything from you, but apparently I have not." He put down the Prophet and said, "You have a meeting with the Minister of Magic, I presume." Harry fished the small scroll from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. Snape fingered it open and glanced at it. "Her second day in office, no less. That is a bit startling."

"Thanks," Harry groused.

"Perhaps she just wishes to say 'hello' and to inform you that your fees are waived."

Harry relaxed at that notion. "Maybe." He quickly finished the rest of his breakfast and, even though it was early, gathered his things together to leave.

As Harry stood before the hearth, ready to go, Snape said "Harry" in a vaguely gentle voice, then waited for Harry to look up before continuing. "You have nothing to worry about. The Ministry owes you dearly. Very dearly." Harry scooped up a handful of powder and Snape added, "Just remember to congratulate Madam Bones at some point." Harry nodded, made a mental note of that, and tossed down the powder.

Harry was distracted through morning drills but, by the time he had changed back into his robes and headed to the Minister's office, he felt calm, as though he had simply run out of nervousness. And besides, Snape was right.

He had expected the Minister's offices to be in flux, but all was calm and everything was in place in the reception room. The door was open, so Harry stepped inside the dark wood-paneled room and looked around the floor-to-ceiling shelves full of heavy books. Two assistants sat debating over a parchment at the low table in the center. One of them finally looked up. "Ah, Mr. Potter," she said. "Please have a seat. Would you like some tea?"

"No thank you," replied Harry automatically. Upon taking a seat on the very soft couch which threatened to swallow him, he amended, "Uh, yes, I would actually."

She smiled as she nodded and turned to the service beside the door to pour out a cup. She handed it over and returned to the discussion about a magical expansion of Diagon Alley. Harry resisted leaning over to look at the maps spread out on the table, although he was sorely tempted to peek.

No obvious signal occurred, but minutes later the assistant stood up and said, "The Minister will see you now."

Harry set his tea on the table and stood to follow. As he stepped into the plush office where Madame Bones sat at the large, carved mahogany desk, he wasn't feeling much of anything, which was an improvement. Bones' warm greeting relaxed him immediately. "Mr. Potter," she said with feeling. She came around the desk, put her monocle against her eye, and shook his hand before looking him up and down as though confused. "You have grown a bit, young man," she asserted.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, then wondered if that was the proper form of address. She didn't seem to note it as she smiled and returned to her desk, waving him to the

plush, high-backed chair nearby. She let her monocle swing down on the gold chain around her neck. The assistant sat in a chair against the side wall, notepad out.

"So, Harry," Madam Bones began as she clasped her hands before her on her desk. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

Unprepared for that particular question, Harry hesitated before replying, "Uh, no, Minister, there isn't."

"Really? Nothing?" She waved her hand in the air. "I wanted to make certain you had everything you needed for your training."

"I do," he assured her.

"I was thinking we should be certain not to bill you for your training, since you are doing us the favor, as I see it, of pursuing this occupation." Before Harry could reply to that, she went on with a sparkle in her eye, "Barring that, I was considering naming a day in your honor."

Harry worked hard not to visibly react to what could be construed as a threat. "I, uh, could probably accept having my fees waived . . . though it isn't necessary," Harry quickly asserted, thinking that if Snape could not cover them, then Freelander probably could. Laughing uneasily, he said, "I don't need a day named after me, though." Thoughts of the torment the Weasleys would subject him to over that made him cringe inwardly.

"Harry," she said forcefully, parting her hands placatingly. "What else can we do? We owe all of it to you."

"Um . . . " Harry began, then stalled.

When he didn't manage a reply, she stood and came around the desk to lean on the front edge of it near his chair. "We have most of a year to decide–it is only the second week of July–but I insist on marking it somehow. 'Harry Potter Day' does not hold any appeal?"

Harry nearly choked. In an almost steady, though slightly high-pitched voice, he replied, "No, not really."

"That was the first choice of everyone here," she went on in an oddly affectionate tone. "Well, we'll come up with an equitable name."

Harry resisted rubbing his suddenly prickling arms. She was considering him carefully through her monocle again while he tried to think of a reply to that. He remembered

that he was supposed to congratulate her, but right then did not seem like the best moment.

"Forgive me," she finally said. "I'm still amazed by how much you've changed."

Shrugging was all Harry could think to do.

"Well, it is good to see you grown up so. You look like prime Auror material to me now. And I must say, I'm glad we didn't manage to completely alienate you from the Ministry." She removed her monocle again and sighed. "Well, Harry, as much as I'd like to have a long chat, I simply do not have the time."

Harry stood and they shook hands again, although Madam Bones didn't release his hand as she said over her shoulder, "Make a note, Rachel, that we are waiving Mr. Potter's fees for the duration. And the issue of what to name his day is still open."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry managed to say evenly. "And congratulations on your new position. It was good to see you get it."

Her eyes sparkled at that and Harry thought he could see inside her thoughts for an instant, because he found himself feeling acutely pleased to have himself on his side. He blinked and dropped his gaze as he stepped back to escape the queer sense he was getting. Her emotion felt more strategic than personal, but at least he felt some real affection in it.

After lunch, the apprentices were introduced to some of the inner workings of the Auror's office. "We can show you this," Tonks was saying, "because we finally got it back. During the Dark Times, Fudge had it appropriated to his offices."

Harry looked over the tall piece of furniture. It resembled a large, worn hutch with multiple crystal balls mounted into the upper cabinets on the shelves, some of those carefully balanced things that Dumbledore used to have so many of.

Tonks continued, "This is the Underage Magic Detector." She waved at a combination notepad, dome with something like dice in it, and oddly balanced arm resembling a giant compass. "And here is the Knight Bus Scheduler," Harry looked over at the indicated instrument, which appeared to be a spherical jigsaw puzzle that kept absorbing its pieces. New pieces appeared near a dial needle and the sphere rotated to fit them in place. "This is the Dark Magic Detector, but it is widely understood

to be easy to fool. A simple Obfuscation Charm will confuse it, frankly." That item was in a covered box, which she didn't bother to open.

Harry gazed in fascination at the Underage Magic Detector since he knew it had given him away on multiple occasions. He hoped it would detect something while they were standing there, but it remained still.

Tonks wandered to a long, long row of cabinets. "This is the file room. All our recent and open case files are stored here." She patted the worn wooden cabinet beside her like an old friend. A drawer popped open and she pulled out a file. "For example, take one Rufus Ruffian, common thief, uses your basic Accio spell to lift wallets out of purses. Files should always have a perpetrator summary, or as we call it: the perp sheet, on the top, followed by every other official and sometimes unofficial . . ." Here she pulled from the center of the file a serviette with notes on it. " . . . document regarding the perpetrator: incarceration forms, judgments, etc." She handed the thick file around. "Take a look at a few to familiarize yourselves with them. Please put them back EXACTLY where you found them; the cabinets have been known to get vicious with sloppy filers."

Harry wandered down one row and back, running his fingers over the half-tarnished brass handles. He paused when he saw Bertram-Black on one of the drawers. He glanced up at Tonks, who was still chatting with Aaron, and pulled the long, long drawer all the way out. Sure enough, behind Narcissa was Sirius. Harry pulled out the file and flipped through it quickly.

"That was fast," Tonks commented from right beside him.

Harry ignored her as he paged through long reports regarding the incident where Sirius was reputed to have killed Pettigrew and numerous Muggles, followed by one detailing his escape, and then page after page investigating alleged sightings, and finally a report about his capture at Hogwarts and subsequent re-escape. Harry flipped back to the perp sheet and blinked at the capitalized, red ink letters reading OPEN for the case status.

"What does that mean?" Harry demanded.

"His status is hard to determine. Without a body to identify, that is the policy now."

Harry flipped again through the thick stack of parchments. "But . . . I don't understand. He isn't still wanted; is he?"

Tonks took the file from him and went back to the top page then studied the notes on the back of it. "Someone noted here," she pointed to the bottom of one of the

report sheets, "that it is unlikely he killed Pettigrew. But what happened that day has never been officially established, so technically, I guess so."

"Tonks, that's nutters; he was innocent."

"Harry, there have been many more important things to worry about than whether his name's been cleared."

"Not to me."

Tonks sighed and put the file back in its spot and leaned on the drawer, which groaned in a way wood normally would not. "I realize that. But it would take a lot of time and effort as well as getting a hearing with the Wizengamot."

"What do I have to do?" Harry really wished he had known about this two hours ago when the Minister of Magic had asked if there was anything he needed.

"Let me think about the best approach, all right? Things will be a little more chaotic around here for a while."

"All right," Harry reluctantly replied, trusting her help.

That evening, Harry arrived home and plunked himself down in the library. Snape sat writing a letter at the small desk. "How did your meeting go?" he asked without looking up.

"She's waiving my fees," Harry informed him, realizing that it was much easier to accept it from Minister Bones rather than Fudge.

"So that was the purpose of the meeting?"

"Um, that and to threaten me with declaring May 10th 'Harry Potter Day'."

Snape's head nearly hit the small desk before him as it fell forward. He rubbed his eyes before lifting them, long moments later. "And the resolution of that?" he asked in a fearful way.

"It wasn't resolved," Harry painfully admitted. Snape mouthed the words slowly, then shook his head. "Basically my response," Harry said.

Snape folded up the letter he had been working on as he said, "Ah, imagine, Harry Potter: The Bank Holiday. If the weather were nice, families could have picnics in your honor." He sealed the letter in an envelope and began addressing it while continuing, "Children would run about towing balloons and kites with lightening bolts on them." Harry's noise of despair did not slow him. "The shops would sell

official commemorative joke wands that sputter in green and of course the parade, let's not forget that."

Harry leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his head, half covering his ears. "Stop, stop," he moaned, but he was also beginning to laugh.

But Snape was warmed up now, apparently, and he sounded more amused than disgusted as he went on: "The largest float just before the end, would be a towering castle with a tall gold chair-"

"No . . ." Harry murmured, visualizing without will.

". . . and you, waving and throwing sweets to the screaming children lining the streets. Everyone would have the day off, so they could all be there. The Ministry could revive the annual duelling competition on that day and the winner would receive a -"

"Now that's an idea," Harry interrupted, forgetting the agony of seconds before. "Hm," he muttered thoughtfully as he tapped his finger on the arm of his chair. "A duelling competition," Harry said, trying on the sound of it.

Snidely, Snape pointed out, "If you are assigned to hand out the trophy, you are not allowed to compete."

"Do I get to judge?"

"Almost certainly."

Harry sat with a crooked grin. "I could live with that." When Snape sighed again, Harry asked, "Sorry you mentioned it?"

"I would take it over the parade," he replied.

"What, no picnics?"

Saturday morning, Harry sat on his bed, arranging the books on the nightstand shelf to be better able to review them before going to sleep. He stacked the books on the bed and put back the ones that were relevant to the next month of training, flipping amazedly through some of the early ones he had already forgotten about. At the bottom of the stack he found his photo album. The sight of it still made him pause. He had added a few photographs to the empty back pages, of himself with his

friends from school, mostly shots Colin had given him, photographs that at the time had annoyed him but now he was grateful for. One page contained just Quidditch pictures, spellotaped in overlapping cutouts, which made him smile to himself.

Harry flipped to the front of the album and remembered something he had been meaning to do for a long time. He shut the album and put it back away. Moving with purpose he tapped the crystal egg by the window to make the vines shrink back inside, leaving colorful petals fluttering to the sill. He pocketed it and, as well, opened his trunk to pull out Sirius' mirror, which he put in the opposite pocket. Downstairs, he went to the library and pulled out the atlas. After a moment's hesitation and assuming that he could repair it later with a spell, he tore free the page he needed and folded it into his pocket. Still moving with purpose, he collected his broom, made sure he had a working compass on it, and stepped back in to stand at the door to the drawing room.

Snape looked up in question, glancing at the broom without a change in expression. Harry began, "I, uh, have to do something. I'll be back later."

One brow went up, but Snape just asked, "What time?"

"Dinner, I'll be back."

Speaking slowly and dryly, Snape said, "And I sense you do not want to tell me where, so what would you suggest I do at that time when you have not returned. I am not certain I can repeat that spell, as it was a bit accidental. Perhaps you should find a companion."

Harry thought fiercely, impatient to leave. "I'll tell Elizabeth. If I'm not back, you can ask her." Harry was Occluding his mind, so even though Snape looked doubtful, he accepted this with an annoyed tilt of the head.

Harry turned and went out the front to walk down to the station and beyond to the Peterson house. Mrs. Peterson answered almost immediately when Harry pressed the bell.

"Harry!" she said, clearly pleased to see him. "We weren't expecting you, were we?" she said kindly, as though concerned that things might not be as she wished them for a visitor. Harry propped his broom by the door and she led him into the hall.

"No, sorry to just call unannounced, but I need to speak to Elizabeth."

"Oh, of course, she is up in her room practicing. Go on up," she said sweetly, indicating the curving staircase with its thick white carpeting.

Harry followed where she indicated and walked down the quiet carpeted hallway, but he didn't hear any practicing. A knock on the only closed bedroom door didn't get a response. Harry carefully turned the handle and peeked in. Elizabeth sat at a long black keyboard with headphones on, playing rather vigorously but making only deadened thumping noises with the keys. She noticed the door open, however, and looked over, her face brightening instantly.

"Harry!" she said loudly in greeting before pulling her headphones off and standing up. "Didn't know you were calling," she said in a normal volume. "Come in."

"I just have a moment; I need you to do something for me." She stopped uncovering the nearby chair which had about six decorative pillows crammed onto it, and stood to listen. Harry said, "This is a bit awkward. I'm going off to Godric's Hollow and I don't feel like explaining that to Severus, so I'm telling you so if I don't get back by dinner he can ask you where I've gone."

Her brow furrowed, amazing him with how fast she could put on a disapproving face. "Okay," she said, though she clearly didn't follow.

"Look, it is too complicated to go into right now," he said, but felt defensive, so he added, "But the short version is that I want to go visit my parents' grave, which I've never been to before." She instantly looked more sympathetic, so Harry went on, "My dad and Severus hated each other when my dad was alive and even after; well Severus did anyway. So I just didn't feel like getting caught up in explaining, since this is something I really want to do."

"All right, I understand," she said, sounding honestly understanding.

"Thanks," he said and turned to go.

Her voice pulled him back. "Want company?"

"No. No thanks. But thanks for asking."

Outside in the Peterson's back garden, Harry fastened his cloak and unfolded the map. He studied the immediate roads and lakes before refolding it. After a quick Disillusionment Charm, he was airborne, up through the old trees, and following along the hills, heading south by the compass.

As he flew, he discovered that the markings on the atlas were a little approximate and hard to locate below him. Often he would have to fly much farther on faith before finding confirmation of where he was. He turned a little west and flew faster when he was absolutely certain of his location.

It took hours to get where he was going, making Harry very glad he had left so early in the day. It was barely noon, though, when he reapplied the Disillusionment Charm and circled lower around the village of Godric's Hollow. It was small enough to take in on one wide turn around its quaint houses and cottages, arranged along only a few narrow streets. A woman was digging in a boxed flowerbed before one small house and a car was going by on the main road at a sedate pace. On a side road at the crest of a hillside leading away was a small graveyard. Harry was assuming they were buried here without really knowing for certain. Hopeful, he landed on the gravel drive that led in an arc through the neatly lined up stones and propped his broom against a large willow that stood at the edge of the hill looking over neat square fields that fell away and rose up the next hill.

It had looked small from the air, but the graveyard held a lot of stones, Harry discovered as he wandered along the gaps, skipping the really old section as well as the newer area by the entrance. Some of the new stones there had faces engraved on them, making him feel watched. He hesitated at the grave marker of another Potter, a Harvey who had died in 1942. The gap in Harry's knowledge felt acute as he tried to assess the likelihood of relation; it made him want to fly right then to Little Whinging and accost his aunt, preferably with a potion or two on hand to help.

Shaking off the fantasy, he walked on, past a row of Morgans and Cadogs and around to the next row and stopped, taken by surprise to find himself faced with such familiarity as the names of his parents. He was also surprised by how hard the finality of those engraved letters hit him. Too many years wishing they would show up to take him away from the Dursleys, he supposed.

Harry knelt in the soft earth, reached into his pockets, and placed the crystal egg on the pedestal supporting the gravestone, then the mirror, with a sticking charm so it could not be moved. For good measure he added a sticking charm to the egg as well. He glanced around afterward, biting his lip, since he had forgotten to check that no one was watching before working that little bit of magic. But he was alone. He sat back on his heels to look over the stone. In Memory, the granite face read. Harry felt it should say something more meaningful like Died Fighting Evil, then wondered who had been in charge of erecting it; Dumbledore, he would have expected to come up with something more than this, and Sirius probably had been arrested before he could be involved. Remus seemed more likely; Harry could see that kind of straightforwardness from him. Certainly the Dursleys had nothing to do with it, or if they had it might have read Got What They Deserved.

The sun was trying to cut through the clouds, bouncing light off the crystal egg. A little sprout of vine had already begun to emerge, heartening him, because the cold stone would look much nicer with some green and flowers.

Chapter 53

Harry, who before had dearly needed to tell his parents things, now found he had things he wanted to ask instead. He wanted to ask if he was really doing what they would want in becoming an Auror. He wanted to ask why they had trusted Pettigrew. He wanted to know a thousand little things about what it was like when they were all together, the time for which his memories were all Dementor inspired. This left him feeling adrift rather than the closure he realized now he had been intent on during the long journey here.

Standing finally and brushing off his knees, Harry looked around. The wind felt brisk when he stood upright, chilling with the sun behind the clouds. The urge to move on overtook him and with a last check that he was still unobserved, he collected his broom, repeated the charm, and took flight.

It was easier finding his way home than expected. He flew northeast to the y-shaped lake, straight north to the big river valley, followed that to the motorway, then followed the main road into Shrewsthorpe. He landed earlier than expected since he had been flying quite fast, at only half past four.

Inside, he found Snape at the dining room table, having tea. He looked up as Harry sat heavily in the chair opposite. Snape's eyes narrowed, making Harry realize that he had sighed out loud. "Tea?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, he was hungry as well as thirsty. The biscuits tasted really very good as grumbly as his stomach was. That adrift feeling came back like a wave threatening to sweep him away. He tried to lift his teacup, but set it back down rather than risk spilling it, as it was steaming hot.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape asked.

"I went to visit my parents' grave," Harry confessed.

"Oh." Snape rubbed his forehead lightly. "Surprising you did not just say as you were leaving."

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know how you'd react and I just wanted to go."

Sounding befuddled, Snape said, "I certainly would not have objected. Quite a distance on broom, Godric's Hollow."

A chill ran over Harry's arms hearing Snape throw the name out so casually. "I'd never been there. Wasn't even sure they were there," Harry said, feeling the need to talk now as desperately as he had needed to go. He fiddled with his tiny teaspoon. "So many things I want to ask them," he said, sounding sad to own his ears. Forcing

control on himself he looked across the table to Snape, who had rested his chin on his knuckles. But Harry found he could not stay silent. "Do you think they'd've let me train to be an Auror?"

Snape straightened and appeared to consider that. "Your father was never one to limit his risk-taking, but people can behave very differently when it concerns their children, rather than themselves. So I do not know."

Harry stirred his tea and put the spoon back down on the saucer. With a hint of pleading, he asked, "Do you think they'd be proud of me?"

"How could they not be?" Snape immediately retorted and then frowned. He shook his head slowly as though a little angry. Harry waited tensely for him to speak. Finally, Snape said, "Perhaps I was premature with you the other evening . . . perhaps you do still require praise."

"I don't think that's it." Harry said, feeling much more anxious than that.

Snape rubbed his forehead harder. "It probably did not help. I will try to keep my disgust with your despicably easy spell acquisition to myself next time you wish to show me something."

Harry sighed again, feeling oddly better. "Who put up my parents' gravestone, do you know?"

Appearing surprised by the question, Snape shook his head. "I don't know. Why?"

"It just doesn't say much."

"Have it changed to something else," Snape suggested.

"Hm," Harry murmured, considering that from a safe emotional distance now. "What should it say?"

"Perhaps," Snape said flippantly, "Something more meaningful and recognizable, such as: Here lie Harry Potter's parents."

Harry fought a grin, despite himself. Relief had settled on him unexpectedly. "Do other wizards live there in Godric's Hollow?"

"Goodness you are full of questions. I do not know. I suspect not, but I do not know for certain." After a pause, he said, "Other questions?"

"Um," Harry said, certain there were. He scratched his head and asked, "Have you ever forgiven my father?"

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 53

"No," was the immediate response.

"That's all right. I probably wouldn't have either."

"Wouldn't or haven't?" Snape asked, sounding a little dangerous.

"Wouldn't," Harry repeated.

"That's better. No reason for you to hold it against him," he tossed out casually as he stood with his teacup. "Especially after all this time."

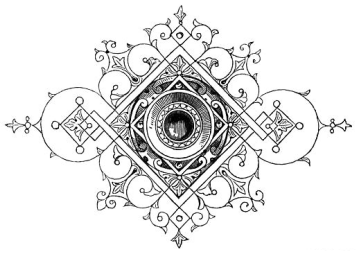
"What about you?" Harry asked.

"What about me?" Snape demanded; although Harry could hear that the harshness was superficial. "I'll bear my grudges as I see fit." At the door he turned back and in an utterly different tone, asked, "Anything else you need?"

"No," Harry assured him, feeling a smile on his lips.

Snape hesitated as though to be certain before stepping away. Harry stared into his teacup and the random array of leaf bits in the dregs, feeling strangely calm.

Chapter 54.



Distant Family

Harry was in a rush to leave Monday morning, having been slow getting ready to go. He crunched down a piece of toast and looked over a packet that had arrived by owl earlier that morning. He stopped to examine it even though he did not have the time. Pulling open the string revealed a parcel of letters. Harry glanced at the top one; it was from Skeeter, explaining that these were the best of the essays they had received at Witch Weekly and would he please let her know which he preferred. Or, it further said, tell her when she could schedule an interview that week with her American colleague before he returned to the States.

Harry folded the letter into his pocket and set the packet aside. "Gotta run," he mumbled to his guardian, after taking up another piece of toast. "See you this evening."

"Have a good day," Snape intoned as he sipped his coffee while reading the Prophet.

Harry spent the day wondering what he should do about Skeeter. He thought of asking Tonks' advice, but he didn't see her that day during training except once down a corridor when she looked to be in a hurry. The whole department seemed to be in action about something, although no one explained to the apprentices what it was and late that afternoon, Rodgers asked them to finish their last drills on their own.

They all agreed, and paired up as he dashed off. The workout room fell silent beyond the sizzle of spells. Harry concentrated on his modulation as Vineet ran through the

sequences, randomizing occasionally from the normal order. They switched attackers and Harry ran the spell sequence back at his new friend. He always felt a little bad doing this as he could see the extreme effort the other man put into his Countering. Harry kept his attacks tempered for fear of injuring the other when his blocks failed. At a break, Vineet was, as usual, breathing heavily from the effort. Harry bit his lip and gave his partner an encouraging nod.

"Beating up on your fellows?" a familiar voice said from the doorway.

Harry turned and grinned as Snape entered. "Hello, sir."

Aaron came over to them with Kerry Ann trailing reluctantly behind. "Hello, Professor," he said in a friendly greeting.

"Mr. Wickem," Snape said in surprise, giving him one of those close lookings over. " You must have had a major life turnaround to have reached this point," Snape observed. "You didn't even sit for any N.E.W.T.s at Hogwarts as I recall."

Taken aback, Aaron said, "I did later." He shrugged a little sheepishly. "My dad hired tutors for me. . . for a few years. Then I took them."

"This is his fifth time applying," Kerry Ann contributed with a sparkle of mischievousness.

Snape still looked suspiciously at Aaron. "Well, you are to be commended for your persistence, I suppose."

Aaron, sounding put out, said, "Did they just let you walk in here, sir?"

"There is no one around at the moment in the outer offices. But, in any event, I am friendly with Mr. Moody, who is the only one I would be concerned about encountering." Dismissing Aaron, he said to Harry. "I received this, this morning." He handed over a folded letter.

Harry turned away and opened it. It was a request from the Wizard Family Council for a one year interview to be conducted within two weeks. Harry folded it up again and handed it back.

"In the interest of responsiveness, I made an appointment for this afternoon. I assume you are finished here?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. "Let me get my things." Hurrying, Harry simply pulled a cloak around his workout piece. When he passed by the room again, his fellows were gathered in a tight cluster, talking in low tones. He gave them a wave and said he would see them tomorrow.

Down on the second floor, they checked in with a greetingwitch who directed them to the last office on the end. "Office" was a generous description for the very cramped space. Harry figured it would be easier to Apparate to get behind the desk. A stout witch with very long, black- and red-streaked hair looked up from copying notes onto a parchment form. "Ah, the four-fifteen, then, right?" She looked between them there in the doorway and then beyond them, a little mystified. "I need to talk to the child . . ." she said.

Harry stepped into the small space between the desk and the wall where a low bench provided a seat. Faded pictures of laughing children on colorful broomsticks hung on the wall. A small shelf at desk level was lined with miniature rocking horses, except they were unicorns or centaurs, and a few dolls. "That would be me," he admitted with a touch of embarrassment.

"Right, then," she said slowly, opening the file on her desk without taking her eyes off him. She glanced inside the file with a look of consternation and, apparently recovering, said to Snape, "You'll be called in in about a quarter of an hour." She waved him off and he closed the door while backing into the corridor.

She clasped her black, neatly polished nails before her and said, "So, Ha-. . . Mr. Potter. I have a series of questions I need to ask you. Your answers won't be shared with anyone outside this office, including your guardian, so you should be as honest as possible." She gave him a patent smile as she took out a quill and opened her ink bottle. From one of the drawers she took out some child's blocks and placed them on opposite ends of a line marked on the desk. One had a yellow smiley face and the other one had a pink sad face with a small tear. She held out a small white pyramid to him.

Harry noticed the numbers along the line upside-down to him. "I can give you one to seven without those," he said.

She chuckled to herself. "Oh yes, probably you can." She scooped them off and put them away, for which Harry was grateful. She looked at her sheet and asked in an ultra-friendly voice, "From one to seven then, where seven is very happy, how happy are you to be living with your adoptive family?"

"Seven."

She noted that. "Give me an example of something in the last year that made you happy." She waited with quill poised as Harry hesitated, thinking. In a prompting voice, she said, "Seven is a very strong response."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, holding himself from fidgeting. He was very happy, but "why" was a harder question to answer than he imagined. "It's a lot of little things," he said, mostly to stall.

"Such as?"

Parties with my friends and pink stomach medicine, Harry almost said, since that came to mind. Sleeping potion at night when he had problems with dark dreams sounded like an even worse answer as well as did the answer, having someone to come fetch him when he flew off and crashed. Frantically generalizing that, he said, "Having someone to take care of me."

She looked a little doubtful, but made a note of that. Feeling defensive, Harry added, "I've never before had someone I could go to who I knew wasn't going to turn me away."

"That is the main reason for answering seven?"

"That and having someone to talk to," Harry insisted. At her more doubtful look, he explained, "Not many people are willing to discuss Voldemort."

She moved on very quickly to the next question. "Do you have a room of your own?" When he nodded, she asked, "How do you like it?"

"Six."

"Not seven?"

"The window is small, but that is normal for the house."

"Are you kept to a regular bedtime?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "Mostly."

"How much work are you given around the house?"

"None. I get scolded when I do any," he replied. At her look of surprise, he explained, "I'm informed, repeatedly, that the house-elf is supposed to do most things. I do the gardening because I like to get outside sometimes. I don't get scolded for that anymore."

"Ah," she said knowingly. "Never lived with an elf myself," she said flatly. Harry could not interpret her tone. She moved on before he could decode her reaction. "Think of the most severe time you were punished in the last year. Got it?"

"Uh, yep."

"How happy are you with the fairness of it?"

Harry thought about coming home drunk and Snape's reaction to that. He also thought of the day after the four Death Eaters attacked and only now realized that,

earlier, Snape had totally backed down. Harry recalled the incident starkly; the disappointment, anger, and even distress he had caused his guardian had felt like punishment at the time. Harry hadn't felt that this time; Snape had been been unhesitatingly harsh, but Harry probably should not have gotten into such a state. "Six," he finally replied, then remembered how unfair the false accusation about the prank had felt, but he didn't amend his answer.

"What was the punishment?" she asked.

"Uh, a stern talking to," Harry supplied.

"What did you do to deserve it?"

Harry didn't feel like admitting he had come home pissed. He chose to consider the previous incident last summer. He looked down at her notes. "How confidential is that?"

"Very."

"Inside the Ministry even?" Harry queried.

"They are reviewed by my superior and by the council if there is a question."

"Just put down that I disobeyed then," Harry said.

"Does that happen often?" she asked with a sour expression.

"No, not at all," he replied and immediately wondered at that. He did not consider himself the obedient sort. Harry had grown warm in the cramped office so he pushed his cloak off one shoulder.

"Are you obedient the rest of the time?" she asked a little sarcastically.

"I don't think so. I agree that I messed up, that's why I think it fair."

She was looking him over now, frowning at his outfit. "Just out of curiosity, what is that you're wearing."

Harry glanced down and frowned at himself. "I came straight from training," he explained. "I'm in the Auror's program." He flipped the cloak off his other shoulder, exposing the Ministry patch on the upper breast of a glowing wand across a broken, black pentagram.

She blinked at it. "You're an Auror's apprentice?" At his nod, she said. "One could assume you could take care of yourself, then."

"I like having a family and a home," Harry retorted in a hard tone.

She smiled lightly. "That wasn't what I meant," she said gently. "I meant it with regard to this interview which is intended to assure that the council has not made a placement in error." She turned the parchment over. "The next few questions are a little more difficult. Has anyone in your adoptive family ever asked you to lie about something that happened?"

"Yes." At her concerned expression, he added, "But only so the previous Minister of Magic could take credit for it." He added a little smile. "And we are back to the reason that I got punished."

"I see," she said a little quietly. She scratched her cheek thoughtfully and said, "Has your guardian ever physically harmed or threatened to harm you?"

"No." Not since he has been my guardian, Harry silently amended.

She gestured at the door. "Ask him to come in, then."

Harry stood with effort from the low bench and opened the door. Snape was leaning against the far wall, looking grim. Harry wondered at that but merely said, "She wants to see you," while shooting him a questioning look. But Snape didn't meet Harry's gaze as he followed him back in. They sat side by side on the bench, with Harry having to consciously not look at Snape in concern over his mood. He wished he had some clue as to what what was bothering him all of a sudden.

"Mr. Snape," the casewitch said. "You fall into our "D" category of adopting adults because you have no other children, you are single, and you are male. The only category lower would involve non-human heritage."

Harry looked up sharply but held his tongue. If it had been Hagrid adopting him, he would have given them hell for that. Snape seemed to withdraw farther as she spoke. Harry heard something in her tone now that had been absent before; it spoke of knowing more than she wished to.

When Snape looked over at Harry finally, she interjected in a formal tone, "We can send Mr. Potter out for this conversation if you wish."

Snape hesitated before replying, "It is not necessary."

"As you wish," she said. "How would you describe the quality of your own home life as a child?"

Snape stared at his fingers and answered stiffly, "Poor."

Harry closed his eyes a long moment, wishing this were not happening, and thinking that Snape must have seen this coming. The casewitch went on. "That is another

mark against you, I'm afraid. And how would you describe your own abilities as a parent?"

Quietly, Snape said, "I am usually out of my depth."

Harry stared at him, stunned. The casewitch looked self-satisfied. "That's not true," Harry argued vehemently.

"You are not the best judge of quality parenting, Potter," Snape pointed out.

Harry yearned to shout at him for what seemed like disloyalty to what they had. Angry now, Harry said, "What difference does it make, as long as I'm getting what I need?"

"Are you?" the casewitch asked.

"Yes," Harry replied insistently. Snape's unexpected uncertainty was making him panic. He wondered where the obnoxiously confident wizard he had expected to come in had gone off to.

Snape straightened and crossed his arms. "Although confident I can do better than your relatives . . " he said with an unexpected, deep-seated anger, ". . . I am rarely certain I am doing the right thing for you."

"Like when?" Harry demanded.

"A hundred times a day, Harry," he insisted evenly, coldly.

Harry put his hand on his forehead. "I have no sense of that."

The casewitch cleared her throat. "Constantly questioning your decisions is not a sign of bad parenting, quite the opposite."

Shaken by what Snape was saying, Harry said stridently, "Severus, you are the only reason I'm in one piece right now." He gestured at the wall beside him and the rest of the Ministry beyond. "I found out last week that Sirius never got off the Ministry wanted list. A year ago that would have sent me over the edge."

"Part of that is simply maturing, Potter."

"And you don't think you had anything to do with that?" Harry asked loudly, sarcastically, voice booming in the tiny room.

"Hey there!" the casewitch interjected sharply. They both fell silent and Snape closed his mouth on whatever retort he was preparing. She gave them a smile. "You are clearly doing fine," she said as she made a note on the bottom of the parchment before her. "Both of you." Snape straightened and looked away.

Back in their own dining room, Harry, his voice pained, asked, "Why didn't you say something before?"

"I assumed it was obvious," Snape replied as he put his gloves into the pocket of his cloak. Harry watched him unhook it and swing it off to hang it up.

"I'm very happy here with you," Harry said. "I thought that was obvious."

Snape considered him before challenging, "There is nothing you would change?"

Harry's shoulders fell. Hesitantly, he replied, "I wish you weren't going back to Hogwarts in September, but I understand you have to."

Snape stared at him. "That is all? Your complaint is that you wish me to be around more?" His tone of disbelief had a bit of his normal sneer to it; Harry was happy to hear it.

"Yes," Harry insisted defensively.

Snape shook his head as though to clear it. In his normal tone of slight impatience he said, "Your birthday is at the end of the week. I keep expecting you to ask if you can hold a party."

"I just had one for getting into the Auror's program," Harry pointed out.

"You are turning eighteen, Potter. Multiple parties in one month should hardly be viewed as excessive by one your age. The alternative is a nice dinner out, just Candide and one of your companions, whichever is in favor at the moment."

Harry wanted to argue that last comment, but held back because the combative atmosphere had just faded. "That would be fine."

Snape said, "I admit to preferring something quiet myself, but it is truly your choice. Especially since my father wishes to visit and I told him Thursday."

"A nice dinner out would be great. The last one was very nice," said Harry primly. Snape nodded a bit formally and left the room, leaving Harry feeling strangely disconnected given how much had finally been said.

The moment Harry had been dreading finally arrived with the tapping of the door knocker the next evening. Moving reluctantly, Harry went downstairs to let Skeeter and Olsen in. Skeeter was wearing a violet robe, but Olsen was in khakis and a pale

blue button-down shirt. He looked around keenly at the house as Harry led them into the drawing room. Snape appeared immediately as they took seats.

"Do you want me here for this?" he asked Harry.

"No, that's all right," Harry said easily.

Snape looked the two over with mild suspicion. Olsen said, "Your guardian, Mr. Potter?" He stood up and held a hand out to Snape who accepted it with clear doubt about him.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Would it be all right to ask you a few questions at the end?" he asked Snape.

"Unless they were very good questions, no," Snape sneered and actually managed to startle the man slightly.

Olsen recovered quickly and said confidently, "I'll think of some," as though making a promise.

Snape departed with a last glance at each of them. Olsen pulled out his pad and started to ask something, only to stop as Winky brought in tea. "Is that a house-elf?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes," Harry replied. "You've never seen one?"

"There aren't many in the U.S., so no." Winky bowed and departed after pouring. "I thought only old wizarding families had them?"

"That's mostly true," Skeeter replied, pushing her hair back with her long painted nails.

"This is an old wizarding family," Harry pointed out.

"Aren't you an orphan?" Olsen countered, sounding concerned.

"I've been adopted into an old family."

Olsen still looked concerned. "Yes, but hasn't part of this fight been about the difference between pureblooded wizardry and mixed wizardry?"

"You mean the lack of difference?" Harry asked.

Olsen waved his hand, "Well . . . yes." He jotted something down on his notepad, looking confused. He read over some pages of his notes and finally said, "So, what I really want to get at for my article series is, who is Harry Potter?"

Skeeter, sitting with pen poised as well, didn't seem to think this odd. "Who did Ms. Skeeter tell you I was?" Harry asked. He pushed the plate over to the other side of the small table. "Want a biscuit?"

"Oh, sure," Olsen said. He held one up. "Looks like a cookie. Good though," he said munching as he talked. "What did Rita say? Well, nothing I can pull together easily. It's a good story though: the orphan left on a doorstep, doesn't know he's a wizard but it turns out not only is he a pretty darn good one, he is supposed to save the world from evil." He flipped through his notebook yet again. "But everyone knows the comic book story and it doesn't say much about you except you have a lot of dumb luck. And bad luck. Where I come from, we don't put much stock in prophecies." His derisive look was back again.

Harry sat thoughtfully before saying, "I did what I was supposed to do. I didn't have any choice."

"Your duty," Olsen said almost playfully. "Like a Gilbert and Sullivan character."

Harry's eyes narrowed, but something about that had struck an exposed nerve. "I'm real," he insisted.

"That's good," Olsen said. "What do you value?" he shot out quickly.

Harry thought that over. "Not being hunted down by dark wizards."

Olsen tilted his head. "That wasn't what I meant. What motivates you every day? What drives you to take action?"

"I want to learn more magic, powerful magic. That's why I'm in the Aurors program."

"For what use?" Olsen returned, sounding diligent.

"So evil can't rise again," Harry replied a little snappishly.

Olsen bent over his notepad and breathed, "Now we are getting somewhere."

The interview went on in this vein, with Harry eventually finding the right way to answer the questions, but only after having most rephrased. It was a little exhausting, although Olsen didn't show it at all.

" . . . and speaking of your guardian," Olsen said as Snape came to hover in the doorway some time later. "Willing to answer a few questions, Mr. Snape?"

"Professor," Skeeter corrected him.

Olsen turned to her. "I thought he taught high school?"

"Still 'professor'," Skeeter said.

"Sorry 'bout that, Professor. Please," he indicated the chair.

"What is your question?" Snape asked, not moving except to cross his arms and stare more fiercely down his nose.

"I've been trying to figure out this unrealistically altruistic young man here that we all owe so much to. I guess I would ask you why you waited so long to adopt him and why you finally did."

"There is no simple answer to that," Snape said, dismissing it.

Undeterred, Olsen insistently went on, "But, in talking to Harry, it is clear he values this admittedly late family very highly."

Snape looked the man over. "Harry's situation changed drastically after Voldemort's defeat. I adopted him as soon as it was realistic to do so, from many perspectives."

"Not sorry you didn't do so sooner?" Olsen returned.

Soberly, Snape replied, "It would not have worked out sooner."

"And you don't care to tell me why . . . " Olsen prodded.

"Goodness, no," Snape stated. To Harry he said, "Almost finished here?"

Olsen interjected, "What do you think motivates Harry?"

Snape appeared to consider this. "His sense of fairness." As Olsen jotted this down, Snape demanded, "Are you finished now?"

"I just need a picture or two. Or Rita, you said you had some stock shots?"

Coyly, she said, "I have some recent ones of Harry in a smashing little outfit. . . "

Harry groaned.

As they departed, Olsen said, "Very pleased to meet you, Harry. I'll owl you my drafts for your comments in a few days."

"All right," Harry replied, trying not to sound surprised. Skeeter waved a vigorous goodbye as she opened the garden gate. Harry shut the door and said to Snape, "You think he'll really send a draft? Skeeter never does that."

"I don't know why he would say that, otherwise."

Back in the main hall, Harry asked, "Do you think agreeing to that was a really bad idea?"

Snape sighed. "I did not particularly like the interviewer, but he did not seem to harbor any ill will toward you."

"And he paid seventy-five Galleons for it."

Snape looked taken aback, but said, "And you refer to me as Lockhart." After more thought, he said, "I'm afraid in this you will have to find your own path as I have little experience with it. I trust you have enough sense now to not get taken advantage of. Or if you do, it will be a lesson well-learned."

Thursday evening, Harry put on his new dress robes and tried to comb his hair down. It needed to be cut, he realized, but that would have to wait. Trying to put on an optimistic mind for their guests, Harry stepped into the library and pulled out a book to pass the minutes until Shazor and his second wife, Gretta, arrived for dinner.

Snape stepped into the doorway a minute later, looked Harry over quickly, and appeared to relax marginally. "Fortunately, they only visit once a year," he grumbled. After a moment's thought and an uneasy glance around the room, he quickly asked, "You don't consider them to be any kind of grandparent figures, do you?"

"No," Harry easily admitted, seeing Snape's vaguely distasteful expression.

"Good," Snape breathed.

"Candide isn't coming to dinner?" Harry asked.

"I wasn't considering subjecting her to them," Snape explained. "She would undoubtedly feel differently, just so you understand." The doorknocker sounded, drawing him away.

Harry got up but waited in the hall. Shazor came in, looking greyer and more imposing than Harry had remembered. Gretta was all smiles behind him.

"Harry!" she nearly wailed in greeting and surged upon him, bracelets jangling. Harry resisted backing up as his cheeks were patted. "My, my, my, my, my," she marveled. "Look at you. You have grown into something . . . else." She turned him bodily as though to show him off. "Hasn't he, dear?"

Shazor stepped over and gave Harry a looking over. "He's a bit taller," he said dismissively.

"Don't listen to that," Gretta whispered. "You are something to see, my dear. And that picture on the cover of Witch Weekly didn't do you an ounce of justice, which I wouldn't have imagined." She continued on as they moved to the drawing room for drinks, "And they had more letters from that little essay contest. Have you chosen one yet?" she asked eagerly.

"I haven't seen them," Harry said, uncertain how to explain that he was blackmailed into an interview and the payout was not having to read them. Skeeter assured him that she would pick a winner and only needed to have a thing or two autographed for prizes.

Gretta accepted a glass of something smoky over ice and sipped it. "Oh, did we remember the gift?" she asked her husband.

Shazor, with a flat expression, removed a small box from his pocket. Gretta grabbed it up and handed it to Harry with a "Happy birthday!" and a doting smile. Harry hesitated before opening it right then but did so. Inside was a mechanical cricket in an oversized painted matchbox. Holding it gingerly, Harry held it up to the lamp.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"It predicts the weather," Shazor explained.

Gretta added, "There are instructions on the bottom of the box."

Harry turned the box over and peered at the very tiny diagrams on the bottom. While the others talked about the vote and Bones' expected policy changes, Harry followed the instruction for determining the wind the next day at noon. He placed the little metal insect down on the table beside him and faced it north, then when it chirped once, he tapped it with his finger. It chirped six times and hopped northwest.

Harry, thinking of planning trips on broomstick, waited for a break in the conversation to ask how accurate the cricket was.

"Very accurate," Gretta assured him. "Especially about rain."

"That is because it always rains," Shazor pointed out snidely before turning back to Severus and continuing on about some obscure Muggle Obliviating policy.

Harry tried out a few more of its predictions about temperature and precipitation before putting it back away. It was rather beautifully painted with glassy onyx bead eyes. "Thanks," he mouthed to Gretta as he set it aside on the table and opened a butterbeer for himself. She smiled broadly back before listening in politely to the conversation.

Chapter 54

By the time dinner arrived, Harry was quite hungry. Winky had outdone herself in making a roast duck with a crispy brown skin surrounded by a ring of colorful vegetables.

"You managed to find a rather fine replacement for your other elf," Shazor said, sounding jealous.

"Harry did that," Severus explained.

"Ah," Shazor muttered, almost dismissively. Harry pondered as he ate, whether the man assumed Harry could do that easily, whether Harry had just been lucky, or whether it meant something else. Harry eventually served himself the other duck leg and decided he didn't care.

After dinner, Harry really wanted to excuse himself to do some reading; this being his birthday weekend, he was not going to get much reading done later. He bit his lip and wondered how to go about that. Severus' eyes flickered over to Harry after the coffee materialized. "Do you have studies to attend to?"

Harry nodded gratefully and stood up. Gretta made a disappointed sound, but Snape explained that Harry had quite a lot of reading for each session of his training. Harry said goodnight and after fetching his books from the library headed to his room where he very gently closed the door. With relief he spread out everything on the bed, sat back propped up on a pile of pillows, and continued the chapter he had started before dinner on basic Muggle police procedure.

Down in the dining room, Severus was considering having another glass of sherry as a means of easing the evening along.

Shazor set his coffee down and smoothed the tablecloth out with his long hand. "How is the boy's training progressing?"

Severus almost snapped that Harry was not a boy, but held back by reminding himself that he still referred to Harry that way with his fellow teachers at Hogwarts. "He is doing startlingly well, even given that I am quite familiar with his ability to learn new magics. His trainer, fortunately, works him very hard; according to Harry, harder than his peers, which I am quite pleased to know."

A little airily Shazor asked, "It is all inherited, though, correct, this easy magic?"

Severus refused to be baited. Casually, he replied, "I assume. His parents both were rather good at magic or they would not have survived to have him."

Shazor set his empty cup down with a light clatter in the saucer. Winky appeared in a sparkle, pot in hand, to pour him another steaming cup before sparkling away

again. Severus had to work hard not to grin crookedly at his father's taken-back, unwillingly pleased expression. "The rest of the Wizarding community does think the world of him. He is starting to finally appear to deserve it," Shazor commented when he had recovered.

Severus felt himself to be looking into a mirror, though a distorted one. The memory of his own jealous reaction to Harry felt like a poison he had swallowed that was still working on him, albeit slowly. "If you are wondering if I take credit for it, I will inform you that I do not. To my mind he is merely an ordinary teenager." Severus silently considered that that in itself was a triumph.

"Unusually humble of you, Severus," Shazor stated, sounding as though he were trying for sarcastic. With his coffee at his mouth, he muttered, "Does seem unlikely to be your doing."

Gretta filled in the ensuing silence. "He is a lovely young man. It is a wonder the house isn't filled with lovely young ladies seeking his attention," she marveled.

Severus did pour himself more sherry. "A few intrepid ones do brave their way in. I don't believe Harry wishes to be distracted from his training; although given time he may change his mind about that."

Much later in Harry's room, a light knock sounded on the door before Snape opened it and leaned in. "Do you want me to come down to say goodbye?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

Down in the hall, Harry tolerated a pinch on the cheek and a hug from Gretta, followed by a perfunctory shake of the hand from Shazor. "Good luck with your training, Mr. Potter," Shazor intoned.

"Thank you, sir," replied Harry while wondering why the man had gone so formal.

The pair departed and Snape returned from showing them out. He passed Harry with a strange expression on the way to the drawing room.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked his back.

"Yes, quite," Snape replied dismissively without turning around.

Harry started to accept that, but then followed into the room. "You're certain?"

Snape stood from arranging files on the side table, seeming surprised to find Harry there. He looked Harry over more appraisingly, which Harry had grown unused to. It made him feel uneasy as well as curious about what he had missed. "Quite certain," Snape stated reassuringly, eyes narrowing momentarily as he continued to

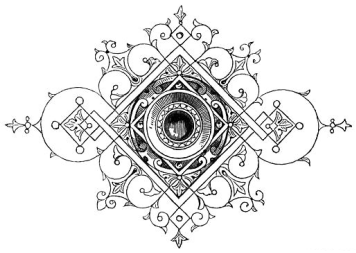
study Harry, although his gaze didn't look threatening, more oddly affectionate. "You should return to your studies as you will not have much time this weekend, I believe."

Harry could spot a diversion that obvious, but shrugged. He picked up the box containing his painted cricket before he moved to the doorway and turned back. Brushing a bit of fuzz from his dress robes, he asked, "I didn't displease your dad or something, did I?"

"By. No. Means," Snape stated. "Go back to your studies, Harry," he repeated.

"All right," Harry breathed, giving in.

Chapter 55.



Past Present

"You invited Elizabeth?" Snape asked in surprise.

"You said whomever," Harry pointed out.

"Yes. I simply expected . . . perhaps Ms. Weasley."

"Really?" Harry asked in disbelief as he adjusted the gold cufflinks on his new, expensive Muggle suit. It felt odd on him, but in the mirror he had looked shockingly formal and respectable. Aaron had recommended the tailor and, fortunately, Harry's fears of ending up looking like Aaron had not been realized.

With a shake of his head, Snape said, "Never mind. Anyone is fine."

When they were all assembled in the main hall, Candide, after oohing over Harry and giving him a birthday hug, said, "I made reservations at a very nice place in London. Popular with my boss at the office, so I thought it'd be nice even though it is Muggle and it has a convenient spot to Floo into. I can't Apparate all the way to London, I don't know about Severus here . . ."

Snape raised a brow but didn't reply.

"Glad I brought my long cloak," Elizabeth said, hitching it firmly around her, presumably to protect her clothes from the soot.

They arrived in a nicely carpeted alcove with a long corridor coming off of it. Candide used a charm to remove the ash from her hair. Elizabeth shook off her cloak, revealing a striking blue pantsuit. Harry, thinking he would try a little, took her cloak and

held out his arm to her. She smiled and accepted it with a graceful movement and let him lead to the restaurant. He was so well behaved that he didn't even turn around with a dark look when Candide commented, "Aren't they cute?"

The maitre d' took their cloaks and led them directly to a table in the middle of the high-ceilinged main room. As water arrived, everyone gave Harry the gifts they had brought.

"Hope you like it; I wasn't certain what you would like," Elizabeth said apologetically.

"I don't need anything, so thanks," he insisted, stacking the three boxes in the middle of the big round table to save them until dessert.

"Would sir like to order wine?" the waiter asked Snape, holding out a tall, leather-bound list. Snape took it and the tuxedo-clad man disappeared.

Harry relaxed with the indirect lighting, the smell of the food, conversation, and the clink of silver around them. He could really get used to this, he thought. As water was being poured, he gave Elizabeth a smile, which she easily returned.

"This is nice," she said. "Thanks for inviting me. Kind of unexpected, really . . . "

Harry shrugged, glad to have had someone to invite. Behind him the maitre d' was saying, "Your table, sir." Harry saw Snape's eyes dart up sharply, peering darkly at something just over Harry's shoulder. A very familiar voice said, "Didn't think they'd let your kind into a place like this. What is the world coming to, I have to wonder?"

Harry pushed his chair back with a jerk and stood up. He found to his surprise that he was looking eye to eye with his Uncle Vernon, rather than up at him. Dursley seemed surprised by this as well as by Harry's attire. "You are, uh, looking better than expected," Vernon muttered.

"Yes, it only required two years separate from you to undo the damage you did to him," Snape stated nastily.

Harry drew a breath through his teeth; he really wished Snape had not said that, at least not in front of Candide and Elizabeth. Candide, looking concerned, whispered to Snape, "Who is this?"

"This is my Uncle Vernon," Harry said, making sure it did not sound like an introduction. He looked next to Dudley, who was standing behind his father, also dressed in a huge three-piece suit, working on acquiring the same number of chins, it appeared. "And my cousin, Dudley." He glanced around and found Petunia standing on the far

side of the next table, looking very sour. "My Aunt Petunia," he informed them with a hand-sweep in her direction. Candide and Elizabeth leaned to the side to see her better, both looking amazed and curious.

"I suppose these are all weirdoes like yourself?" Vernon asked, indicating their table.

"Yes," Harry replied dryly, "Of course." He had thought he was over these people, since he rarely gave them a passing thought, but faced with them here, memories rose up and circled like hot whispering ghosts. He forced his breathing to slow.

Vernon turned away. "I want a different table," he demanded of the maitre d'.

"This is the only table available," the man insisted. Harry sat back down, wrestling internally. They didn't matter, he insisted to himself. It was hard to ignore them at the moment though, as Vernon had the attention of the entire restaurant.

"That table in the corner is empty," Vernon bellowed.

Red-faced, the maitre d' explained with forced patience, "It is reserved. For someone important," he added in a tone that knew how insulting it would come across.

"I am your most important guest; I brought three big clients here for lunch last month alone."

Harry was distracted by Candide topping up his wine. When he did not take the hint, she pushed it closer. "I'm sorry to have picked this place," she said, plunking down the heavy bottle beside Harry's presents. "We should go somewhere else."

"No," Harry insisted, tuning out the argument behind him as he had tuned out so many in the past, very similar in that he was being discussed in the third person, as always.

"You lived with them?" Candide asked, clearly wanting to understand.

Snape made an aborted motion to restrain her. "Yes," Harry replied. "Just ignore them." Behind him, Dudley was arguing as well now, but faced with the embarrassment of being thrown out, they were winding down and taking their seats while still grumbling. Harry took a sip of wine and licked his lips, forcing himself to taste it. He wanted to forget them completely but all he could think of was that it was unfair to lock a child in a cupboard for a week at a time, for any reason, that it was unfair especially to lie about what happened to a child's parents, to make him think their deaths weren't important.

"Harry," Snape's whip-like voice beside him shook him loose from his musings.

Chapter 55

Candide raised her wine glass and put on a smile. "Well, for what it's worth, happy birthday, Harry, and many more." They all clinked their glasses. Harry noticed Candide's eyes flicker over to the next table and narrow intensely. It made him suspect she had a fierce side he had not seen directly, and he half-wished she would pull out her wand and show it.

Elizabeth only made minor conversation over the soup and all of it very remote to their situation. They didn't really know each other well enough to make easy small talk, Harry realized. After fishing for a topic, they discussed the difference between magical and Muggle education with each concluding that they wouldn't have liked the other's school very much.

Later, while they waited for cake, Harry finished his glass of wine and leaned back in a much less caring mood. His full stomach probably had something to do with that; it wasn't something he would have associated with the Dursleys, for certain. Harry watched Candide's eyes stare beyond his shoulder for the tenth time.

"Lord, I can't imagine," she muttered. "No wonder you wanted to live somewhere else."

Harry's cake arrived, presented by a troupe of waiters who also rushed about pouring champagne. Eighteen sparklers burned atop the cake, lighting the whole table. They all wished him happy birthday again as the sparklers fizzled to glowing red curls which were quickly pulled out before the cake was efficiently cut and served, the remainder set on a side table. Harry began to wonder if the waiters weren't actually house-elves charmed to be taller; they moved so quickly and silently.

After downing his tall, sparkling glass in one go, Harry reached for the presents. Candide's was on top, so he gave her a grateful smile and opened that one first. Inside was a set of magical bookmarks, the kind that remembered multiple pages. They were gold, square on the outer edge with the insides cut out, each in the shape of a different breed of dragon. "Thanks. I was admiring these the other day at the shop . . . "

"Not the kind of thing to buy for yourself," Candide finished for him.

"No they aren't. Thanks." The next box was the largest, from Elizabeth. Harry savored the smooth feel of the glistening wrapping paper before opening it. Inside was a hat, a stylish dark grey one like someone might wear in a Muggle film. "I thought you didn't like me wearing a hat?" Harry asked to cover his near dismay.

"I don't like that orange hat," Elizabeth clarified.

"Ah." Harry pulled out the fancy felt hat, complete with small maroon feather, and put it on.

"Oh, you look good in that," Candide opined, sounding too honest to ignore. Harry couldn't imagine looking like himself in this thing. He smiled and placed it back in the box.

"Thanks," he said.

"Better than the other one," Elizabeth insisted, sipping her champagne, unperturbed by his lack of enthusiasm.

The last box was small and a little heavy, bringing back a mix of memories that hit harder with the Dursleys so near. A glance at his guardian showed Snape with one of those looks that implied he was seeing way too much. Harry unwrapped the gold paper and found a soft leather wallet. "Thanks," Harry, flipping it open and closed again. He pulled out his old knitted wallet, which seemed even more worn and dingy in this setting. Hermione, who had knitted it, would think he had used it long enough, he decided, in fact may be appalled to find him still using it. He transferred his identification and address notes to the new one before pocketing both.

As they ate cake, Harry with great relish since he was reminded now of numerous cakeless birthdays, another familiar voice spoke his name.

"Your table is right over here, sir," the maitre d' said to Lord Freelander as Harry turned.

"Yes, yes, I'll get there when I get there," Freelander said dismissively. With a smile Harry stood up to greet him. "How are you doing, Mr. Potter . . . well, looks quite well, doesn't it? My goodness." He released Harry's hand. "And Professor Snape, good to see you as well. And what lovely ladies, I have not had the pleasure." Introductions went around.

"Excuse me," Vernon's voice intruded, "But aren't you Lord Freelander?"

"Yes," Freelander replied in a doubtful voice. Harry stepped back to avoid being bumped aside by the beefy elbow of his uncle. Vernon had gone into his ingratiating mode, which made Harry's dinner turn over.

"Vernon Dursley, Director of Grunnings Holdings, we could discuss a bit of business if you had the time. Oh, this is my nephew, Harry, whom you apparently know, as shocking a notion as that is."

"Shocking?" Freelander echoed in confusion. "Everyone knows Mr. Potter," he added with a laugh of disbelief.

"Do they now?" Vernon asked. "Oh, this must be that Vold-e-mort thing, right?"

Freelander looked about as befuddled as decorum would allow. "I should say."

Harry explained, "My uncle is a Muggle."

"I see," Freelander muttered. "But that is hardly an excuse for not understanding who you are, Mr. Potter."

"He doesn't like wizards," Harry also pointed out.

Vernon was eyeing Freelander suspiciously now. Freelander grinned out of the corner of his mouth. "I doubt you really wish to do business with me then, sir," he said with a demeaning edge. He turned back to the table, ignoring Vernon, who now looked a touch apoplectic. "We'll certainly have to have you all over for tea . . . oh, a birthday. Yours, Mr. Potter? I do apologize for not remembering that. I do wish you the best."

Vernon had stumbled back to his table where he sat looking purple around the edges, as though the world had ended.

"It's all right sir, really. I appreciate your sentiments," Harry said easily to Freelander.

Freelander looked be thinking of heading to his table where a waiter still stood patiently to pull out his chair and arrange his things for him. "You are fine young man, Potter. You need anything at all, just owl."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good evening to you all," he tipped an invisible hat to the table and stepped away, leaning heavily on his cane. Harry noticed then that the table was set for one. He sat down again, feeling a little bad about that.

The rest of the evening went by without incident and Harry managed to forget his relatives so much so that he didn't notice them leave. Snape glanced at his pocket watch a few times as they drank coffee before suggesting they depart as well. Harry thought he looked uneasy and strangely in a hurry.

They returned to Shrewsthorpe, Harry a little grudgingly because he wanted the evening to go on as long as possible. Snape told Harry to leave his cloak on and he mysteriously led the way out to the garden where a familiar cat sat atop their wall.

"Good evening, Harry," Professor McGonagall intoned after transforming mid-leap to the ground.

Harry returned the greeting, unable to hold back his surprise at finding his old headmistress hovering in the darkness of their garden. "What brings you here?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"Delivering a present for you, my dear boy," she replied with a smile.

"You needn't have gotten me anything," he insisted.

She stepped back to the garden wall and looked each way down the street. "Oh, it isn't from me. It is from someone you are almost certainly not expecting a gift from."

She grinned broadly then as a rumble filled the street. Harry walked over to her near the gate and looked both ways, but nothing appeared in the pools of light on the blacktop. The wind was still and the trees looked akin to statues. The rumble grew louder. McGonagall seemed to be looking for something specific in Harry's face she studied it so closely.

Harry was about to give in and ask what the noise was when, with a clanging boom, something fell out of the sky. He blinked in shock at the sight of the largest motorbike he had ever seen, ridden by the largest man he knew. Hagrid killed the engine and swung his leg off the seat.

"'Arry," he said emotionally. "She's all yers."

"What?" Harry managed. The thing was monstrous. Unrealistically so.

Hagrid held out a set of silver keys which Harry accepted in a daze. "A flying motorbike," Harry murmured distantly, dusty memories tugging at him.

"Aye," Hagrid replied proudly. "The very one I brought you away on the night You-Know-Who attacked you and your folks."

Harry dropped the keys, but caught them again before they landed. "I've been on that motorbike?" he asked. "I used to dream about a flying motorbike. You're giving this to me?" he confirmed with Hagrid, catching up.

"No, no, I'm just deliverin' it. Yer Godfather left it to you for your eighteenth birthday," Hagrid said. He gave Harry a powerful shove toward the street. "Take 'er for a spin."

Harry stepped into the road and around the glistening chrome handlebars, trailing a reverent finger over them at the memory of Sirius. After a long minute he said, "I, uh, don't know how to ride it."

Hagrid came over. "Let me give ya a lesson then." Harry watched carefully as Hagrid demonstrated the clutch, the shifter, the brake, the throttle, the altitude throttle. "Git on with me, we'll take 'er around the block."

Harry slid onto the seat in front of Hagrid's bulk and watched intently how Hagrid kick-started the machine with a toe flip–Harry doubted he could manage that–before

they roared away down the road to the edge of town, where they turned around in the gravel carpark of a closed antique shop.

"Take the handlebars," Hagrid said and then immediately let go.

Harry made a desperate grab and made a few alarming over-corrections before they were rolling true again.

"Now the altitude throttle is here." Hagrid said conversationally before wrapping his hand around Harry's left and giving a back twist to the handle that shot them into the air. Harry's vision swam, though it was hard to tell in the darkness whether he could really see or not. Hagrid released his hand and they started to fall. "Now, keep 'er steady," Hagrid shouted.

Harry frantically adjusted the handle until they were level. With an exhale of relief he twisted the right handle backward and they shot forward, making Harry very grateful that Hagrid was behind him, because he was certain he would have slid right off the back otherwise.

"Take 'er easy, there, Harry," Hagrid chastised.

Harry turned the handlebars and the bike, despite being five hundred feet off the ground, responded smoothly by turning. Harry looked down at the end of the turn. He had no sense of where Shrewsthorpe was. Several clusters of lights that could be towns dotted the world below them. They cruised slowly while Harry tried to get his bearings.

"O'er there," Hagrid said eventually, "little more to the right."

As it turned out, Harry was almost on target. He reduced their altitude and brought them down on the street, right before the house for a relatively smooth landing. Hagrid got off the back and Harry remained sitting meditatively, arms wide to hold the humming handlebars, feeling pure happiness. He eventually realized that everyone stood waiting for him, so he steered the bike inside the garden and parked it before shutting down the motor.

"You can quiet 'er with the knob here," Hagrid said, demonstrating a silver knob below the speedometer with the label Roar.

"Excellent," Snape said from close behind Harry. "It has one redeeming quality, at least."

"It's brilliant," Harry breathed. "Thank you for bringing it," he said to Hagrid and McGonagall.

Hagrid gave him a hug. "Never thought I'd see this day, I have to tell ya." He brushed his eye and slapped Harry's shoulder, knocking him aside, although Harry recovered quickly. With two rounds of goodbyes, he and McGonagall stepped onto the street to walk to the train station, Hagrid over the wall, McGonagall through the gate, Hagrid said, "You take care of him, now, Severus."

"Oh, but of course," he said with a voice colored in sarcasm.

Elizabeth and Candide took their leave as well, each with last birthday wishes. When they were alone in the house, Harry said, "You could have vetoed that, couldn't you?"

Snape paused and turned. "In theory, but not in practice." He paused. "Not given how much Mr. Black still means to you."

Harry felt unwilling to counter that, even though it solidified some distance between them. "Thank you for letting me have it," Harry said sincerely.

In an exasperated tone Snape said, "Do try to be cautious on it. It isn't a rational way to fly, unlike a broomstick."

"It is just the same as a broomstick," Harry insisted. In the main hall Harry had a thought. "Can I ride it to the Burrow tomorrow for the picnic?"

"You will have to get up early to do so, I believe, since it will require considerably longer time than the Floo."

"Okay," Harry agreed, eagerly anticipating everyone's reaction to his arrival at the Weasley place.

That night, Harry, despite feeling very happy about his big shiny present from his godfather, couldn't sleep. He raised his head to peer at the clock to find that it read ten minutes to midnight. He plunked his head back down on the soft pillow, reminded unwillingly of his much less comfortable bed at the Dursley's, of his grudgingly allowed stay in a bedroom rather than a broom cupboard. With a huff, he rolled over onto his back and tried to think of something else.

The door creaking faintly distracted Harry from trying to sleep and he turned his head to find Snape in the dark doorway. Standing half inside the room, Snape asked, "Having difficulty sleeping?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted

With a shuffle of robe, Snape stepped over and with his wand, waved up the lamp to an orange glow. "I suspected that your rest would be disturbed."

Harry frowned and finally said, "I keep remembering how unfair and cruel they were. They really hated me." He sat up slightly, using the pillow as a backrest and glanced at the clock again. "Funny, I used to lay awake the night before my birthday because of them."

Snape clasped his hands before him, still holding his wand. "You have a minute remaining. Anything else you would like?"

Harry shook his head, amused at the thought that Snape appeared ready to conjure anything he might request. Snape flicked his wand at the clock, halting its faint ticking with the minute hand just before the twelve. "Are you certain?" Snape asked.

"Yes." Downstairs, the grandfather clock chimed twelve times. While staring at the frozen clock, Harry said, "I used to always be wishing for something to be undone, like for my parents to not be dead, or for Voldemort to not exist or to not be my responsibility, or even to just not be in trouble for something," he added more lightly. Meeting his guardian's dark gaze, he said with a shrug, "But everything is pretty good right now." He wished Sirius' name was cleared, but that wasn't something likely to be granted this instant, by this man.

Snape waved the clock to resume running and gave Harry a twitching half-smile. "Do let me know if you think of anything," Snape said as he moved to the door.

Oddly, Harry felt a twinge, watching him move in the dim light. "Good night," Harry said, to cover it.

"Good night, and happy birthday."

The next morning, Harry came down the stairs at seven sharp. Winky brought coffee three minutes later, just as Snape came in, reading a letter. "My mother is suggesting we visit," he said as he pulled out his chair.

Harry shrugged that he could survive that. He added more sugar to his coffee and opened the Prophet just as Snape stole half of it. Harry said, "You're up early. Do you want to fly with me to the picnic?"

Snape gave him a shocked, disbelieving look. "I do not think so."

Harry tried to focus on the paper, on an article about a run of cursed tinned fish showing up in Muggle shops. Mundungus immediately leapt to Harry's mind for

some reason. He turned the page of the paper. "You're certain?" he verified minutes later.

Snape put his half of the paper down with a sharp rustle. "Why would you imagine I would wish to?"

"Because it sounds like fun," explained Harry, fishing in his mind for enticements. "That and I'm sure you must have been jealous of Sirius at school because of it." He actually had no idea if Snape even knew about the bike before it came up as a gift, but Snape's expression closed down as it went distant, making Harry believe he must have. Continuing in a bright tone, Harry said, "You can ride it whenever you like. Imagine how annoyed he'd be at that thought."

Snape thought in brow-furrowed silence before saying, "You truly wish me to travel with you?"

Harry kind of did. "Yeah. I think it'd be fun." Breakfast arrived. "If you like, we can even ride it to visit your mum."

Snape's dark eyes glazed over. "Hm," he murmured. "Or my father, as Gretta wants us to visit them as well before the school year begins."

Holding back hard on grinning too much, Harry replied, "Sure. Or both, since your parents don't owl each other, it would work twice."

Snape rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If you wish, we can go together to the Burrow this morning."

Harry brightened more. "Excellent. This will be great."

Out in the garden, after a quick breakfast, Harry sat in front on the huge seat that probably could have held three of his friends in a pinch.

"You are certain you can operate this machine?" Snape asked, sounding dubious.

Harry scanned the controls; there seemed to be more of them than he remembered in the darkness the night before. "Yeah. Just give us a Disillusionment Charm and I'll start 'er up." Snape pulled out his wand and complied. Harry put the key in and turned it to the line marked as Go before jumping on the starter. To his relief it coughed to a rumble, forcing him to shove in the Roar knob to quiet it. It fell so silent, he feared that it had stalled, but then noticed the handlebars still shivered with life.

"Hang on," Harry commanded. He glanced back to see Snape grabbing the sissy bar in his right hand, his left he wrapped around Harry.

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"Should we carry a broom as well? As backup?" Snape asked.

"Nah," Harry said, twisting the left handle backwards as slightly as possible. They hovered a foot off the ground. Harry turned it farther and they rocketed into the air. When they achieved a good altitude, Harry hovered again.

"A little less yelling, perhaps?" Snape suggested dryly.

"Brooms don't do that, you have to admit," Harry shouted over the wind. He turned them south, sighting along the main road.

After twenty minutes Harry managed to relax into the ride and watch the landscape slide by beneath them. At first their speed had seemed insanely fast, but he was used to it now and it almost felt sedate, although the air buffeted them continuously around the windscreen.

It required two and a half hours, including a little time to get lost, but eventually the distinctive Burrow rose into view in its field, the dirt drive meandering a long distance from the remote road it connected to. People wandered around the front of the house, setting up tables. Harry pulled out the Roar knob and watched them stop and turn, a wide grin stretching his face.

They landed in a cloud of dust on the drive and Harry immediately had to throttle back to keep from getting thrown off on the bumps. He clutched and raced the engine a bit as they freewheeled up to the house and came to a stop. The Weasley twins banged their way out of the side door and came running, catching up with the group who were coming over. Harry recognized his other housemates from Hogwarts as well as Ron and Mr. Weasley, who gazed rapturously at the bike. He killed the engine so he could hear them.

The sudden silence felt like deafness, until one of the twins' shouts of glee went up. Snape swung himself off the back and brushed his robes flat. "Wow," Ron breathed. "Where'd ya' get that?"

"Sirius, if you can believe it," Harry responded. "Left it for my birthday."

"I thought I recognized that monstrosity," Mrs. Weasley stated, slightly disapproving. This only added to the appeal of it in Harry's mind. Some of the others grinned as well.

"And what charms does it use to fly?" Mr. Weasley leaned close to ask. Harry could only shrug, since he knew nothing about it. Mrs. Weasley looked very relieved that Harry did not know.

"Well, lunch is on if you're hungry," Molly said, drawing everyone but Ron and Dean away from the motorbike.

Harry looked the bike over in detail with them until their stomachs forced them to the food table. His friends kept marveling about the bike as they ate. "What a monster," Dean said, biting into a sandwich. "What a great present."

Harry agreed heartily, but then caught a glimpse of Snape's closed expression farther down the long uneven row of tables. Harry managed a smile for his friends as they chatted on about their holidays and Sirius' old bike.

While the cake was being fetched from the kitchen, worrisomely, by Fred and George, Harry wandered over to where Snape stood, filling his cup from a spout on a large ceramic lemon-shaped urn. Harry glanced around to see that they were alone before saying, "I don't want you to feel like you're competing with Sirius."

Snape stared into the worn plastic cup. "A bit of a one-sided competition, really."

Harry thought that over. "One-sided which way?" he asked, honestly curious.

Snape's dark eyes came up. "You tell me."

Ginny and Hermione walked over at that moment and dragged Harry back to the table. "Cake time," Ginny announced. Eighteen pinwheeling fireworks lit the long, chocolatey, broom-shaped cake, shedding sparks over everything in cycling colors.

"I can't blow those out," Harry said.

"Just cut the cake so we can eat it," Ron prompted him impatiently. Harry braced himself through the off-key song, accepted the knife, and quickly cut the broom handle into pieces and onto plates, eagerly accepted. When the seeking hands disappeared, Harry cut two more, one of which he forced on his guardian, who was observing from the far end of the table.

While everyone devoured cake, Harry said quietly, "There is no competition, or if there is, you've won it already."

Snape shook his head. "This should be dropped; it is your birthday after all and your marvelous present should not be soured. If you choose to idealize your dead godfather, you have every right to." He frowned and put down his cake with only one bite taken out of it. "Even that may have come out wrong," he breathed, sounding frustrated.

A game of Quidditch was being organized in the field beside the house. The new makeshift pitch was well surrounded by trees that had been growing mysteriously

fast over the last five years. Harry watched teams being selected by some kind of colorful, flashing lottery spell. "Don't worry about it, Severus; I think I understand." Harry then teased, "Want to play some Quidditch?"

"Beater?" Snape suggested.

"I don't know how they're choosing positions," Harry said, walking toward the group with a grin. Snape sometimes refereed matches at Hogwarts, but Harry had never seen him play.

They joined the cluster of people as they were sorted into two groups. Ron was saying, "Ginny you are dragon," he said, as a spell drew a crude symbol in the air before her. "And, Harry," he said, waving his wand at Harry's chest causing a Pegasus to appear there. "Peggy for you." He pointed to the left of himself. "And . . . are you playing, sir?" he blurted in surprise at Snape.

"'Course 'e is," Mr. Weasley said chummily, putting a hand around Snape's shoulder. "Aren't you?"

"I was considering it. What positions are available?"

Mr. Weasley responded, "Um, Keeper for you, I think. Right Ron?" Ron looked ready to protest, but swallowed it.

"Yeah. 'Course." He waved his wand. "Dragon, o'er there," he pointed to where Neville, Ginny and Fred stood with a wide variety of expressions.

Ginny looked amused in contrast to the other two. "You good at Keeper, Professor?" Snape gave her a haughty look in reply.

The rest were assigned to teams and George explained the boundaries. Charlie let his wife Gretel play and went to sit beside Hermione on a picnic blanket. They had just enough brooms. Harry wished they had brought theirs as he let Gretel have the last one that looked air-worthy. The absolute last, an unfinished pine-handled model with lots of extra twine to hold the errant half-broken bristles down, didn't look like it could possibly fly. It jumped into his hand on command though and managed a wobbly takeoff.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron asked, passing him easily.

Harry waved his Beater bat at him. "I'll just swing harder to make up for it," he threatened.

The makeshift goals were made up of bicycle tubes, a Muggle hula hoop, and a woven grape vine that resembled an old wreath more than a piece of sporting equipment.

"Everyone in position," Ron shouted. When everyone quieted and flew to the center of the field, he said, "Call your own fouls and losers have to wash the dishes . . . and anything else Mum needs done."

He tossed up the homesewn Quaffle and immediately rose to fight with George for it. They weren't playing with a Snitch and only had one Bludger that the twins had brought. Harry found himself better blocking opponents with his body rather than using his bat, making him even with Neville, who had a much better broom but was not practiced at Quidditch and didn't have the heart to swing hard when the Bludger came his way.

"Longbottom," Snape said from his position guarding the posts. "Hover here. Not quite so obviously in the foul zone," he corrected waving him back. "There. When they are making a scoring run, be there. Like Potter is doing on the other side. Fred Weasley can handle Beater on his own for us."

"Ye- Yes, sir."

After over an hour of pretty unspectacular, but amusing, play, the score was a mere twenty to twenty. Snape turned out to be a rather decent Keeper as was Mr. Weasley on Ginny's broom since he could intimidate those coming at him with embarrassing or amusing stories from their childhood. George was taking rather personal runs at Professor Snape, to no avail. Gretel was good on a broom but not accustomed to the fast passing George was, slowing him down when they made a run toward the goals.

"Neville, you are hovering in the way on purpose," George complained after shooting the Quaffle wide on one particularly fast flight at the right-hand goal.

"I'm supposed to be," Neville pointed out in distress. "I'm on this team."

Mrs. Weasley trouped over from the yard of the Burrow and yelled that they had five more minutes.

"Mum's calling the game," George said, when Ron grumbled. "She wants help with the dishes."

"Next score wins," Ron announced, taking up the Quaffle and passing it to Ginny, who called a time-out. Harry flew slowly over to Mr. Weasley and watched as the other side congregated near the posts, leaning in close to plot out a play.

"What do you think they'll come up with?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley shrugged. "Whatever it is their TIME'S UP!" he shouted.

Harry took up his position. He had to think pretty strategically to get where he wanted to be in time to have a swing at the Bludger with his bat. The other side

took up a formation. Ron passed to Ginny who was racing down the pitch with the Quaffle, eyes firmly on the center goal post. Snape left his position, taking up the bat Neville held out as he passed. He raced straight to the Bludger arcing slowly through the pitch and took a hard swing, sending it straight at Mr. Weasley, guarding the middle post. Startled, Mr. Weasley moved out of its path, leaving the goal open. The Bludger swung around in another arc back to the pitch. Harry urged his slow broom faster, trying desperately for his first real swing at the thing all game. Ginny dodged twice, Quaffle in her throwing hand, trying to outwit her father as he rose back into position. All the players were coming in fast in anticipation of a score. Harry met the Bludger and swung as hard as he could, guessing at Ginny's next move.

Harry's aim was too good; just as Ginny released her throw, the Bludger smashed through the old fragile broom she rode and she started to plummet. Harry dropped the bat and reached for his wand, but Neville and Fred were in his way and he couldn't move fast enough to get a gap for a spell. Several people shouted and those on good brooms dove for her. Harry was leaning hard on his broom but it wouldn't move nearly fast enough. George managed to grab hold of her sleeve, breaking her fall until the fabric tore, Ginny's one hand flailing for George's broom the other holding the useless broken handle of her own broom. Two other figures nearly collided, reaching her just a few feet before the ground. After a bit of grappling, frantic on Ginny's part, Ron and Snape hovered her to the field.

Harry arrived at a run, since that was faster than flying. "Thanks," Ginny was saying. "Didn't fancy an afternoon at St. Mungo's."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry apologized.

"That's all right," Ginny said, recovering quickly. She examined the broken end of the handle before sticking it in the ground and leaning on it, breathing out in tension release.

"These brooms aren't as good as the ones at Hogwarts," Ron said to Harry. "Especially not now."

Ginny stood straight and glanced around. A little reluctantly, she said, "Thanks, Professor."

Snape nodded as the other Weasleys muttered similar things. "Ginny scored, didn't she?" Ron asked, changing the topic.

"I didn't see," Harry said.

"She did," Mr. Weasley said. "Dishes for us: Harry, George . . . Gretel," he said, remembering their team.

"Just don't say anything to Mum," Ginny said. Everyone agreed that would be the best thing.

Fred said, "Oh, I'll take the broken broom, then. Buy another used one to replace it." Everyone agreed that was a good idea. Fred fetched the bristle end and did a Reparo which wouldn't let it fly, but would let it pass any glances. He gave Ginny his broom to carry back to the house.

Harry didn't at all mind doing dishes standing between George and Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley gave them an earful for making the birthday boy help, but everyone insisted losing was losing. Gretel did her part by cleaning up outside, using magic to put everything in the shed. Harry could see her steering one chair at a time around the side of the house as he scrubbed a tall stack of soaking, mismatched plates. The warm water on his hands relaxed him, which he needed since he felt a little strained and guilty.

When Mrs. Weasley headed to the living room to sit with the others, Harry quietly said, "I'm sorry about what happened," to Mr. Weasley.

"Harry, don't worry about it," Mr. Weasley said softly, sounding honestly forgiving about it. "Goodness, if you knew the trouble these kids of ours have been in over the years." He glanced into the seating area over his shoulder. "But, uh, best to not say anything anyway."

"Yeah," George said, nudging Harry with his elbow as he dried dishes and put them on a stack. "Such trouble, you don't know. We've had dark wizards hunting us down all our lives."

Harry was ahead of George on washing and waiting for Mr. Weasley to add more dishes to the sink

"You are pretty fast at this, Harry."

"I've been hunted by the Dursleys all my life. I always had to do the cleaning up," Harry explained, taking up the large pot just put into the sink. "Now the house-elf does it."

"Must be nice," George said. "I could afford one now. Think, uh . . ." he trailed off. Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley and found him giving his son a strict look. Harry wondered that no one ever criticized him directly.

Finally they finished and the last dish was hovered into the cabinet. They joined the others around the cold hearth. Harry was surprised to find Snape sitting between

Ginny and Fred on the coarse, green and orange plaid couch. He didn't look relaxed exactly, but at least not too stiff. "Goin' ta win the house cup this year, Ginny?" Fred was asking. "You are our last hope."

"Last chance, at least," George chimed in.

"She is going to work on her N.E.W.T.s" Mrs. Weasley stated, setting out fresh bottles of butterbeer on the low table and taking her usual chair by the hearth after tossing her apron over the back. Harry took a seat on the arm of the closer, plain orange couch, beside Gretel.

"As usual," Ginny said, "I have no say." When Snape turned to her, she asked, "Have any brothers or sisters, Professor?"

"Goodness, no." Snape replied.

"Oh, so you didn't have this many people mapping out your life."

"Oh, yes, not having siblings would have saved you from that." Snape said. "No, much better to have every last expectation, hope and vicarious living piled onto one child. A considerably better situation."

Ginny remained silent, taking that in.

Snape asked, "So, Ms. Weasley, do you find yourself steered to a particular career with no arguing allowed?"

"No." Ginny said. "They want me to go into something with a career path. They haven't-"

"Do you find you are forced to engage in activities where your success is strictly measured to a standard your parents have set because they base their own worthiness on it?"

"Why would they do that?" Ginny asked, clearly mystified. "You're saying I'm better off with all these hooligan brothers?" she demanded. "Don't tell me that," she huffed and sat back with her arms crossed, although she almost looked like she conceded part of the point.

Fred looked up at Harry and said, "So Mr. Auror-to-be, how's your training going?"

"Good. Tough." He rubbed his shoulder. "I'd show you my bruises, but they've healed. Our trainer really hammered on me the first few days."

"Where is that Tonks?" Fred said indignantly, looking around as though he might find her.

"On duty today," Harry explained. "Tonks isn't as hard on us, but she isn't in charge of training."

"A duel!" George announced, finger in the air. "Fred and I against Harry."

"What?" Harry asked, laughing. "Two against one?"

"If you want it even," Fred said, "we can have Ginny join our side too."

"Or Ron," said George.

"Or both," offered Fred. They were both sporting their famous grins, making Harry laugh. Fred jumped up first and they both hauled Harry outside backwards by his elbows. The others followed at a more sedate pace, but looking expectant.

Clouds had moved in but the afternoon was still warm. "We haven't covered tactics for more than one opponent at a time," Harry pointed out.

"Listen to you," George complained, poking Harry in the chest. "Stand there, now," he ordered and jogged over to where Fred stood, wand already brandished. Harry shook his head and took out his wand. It was like seeing double, staring at the two of them in their identical red jumpers and black knit trousers. Fred said, "Give us a countdown, eh? Ron?"

Harry spread his feet to balance better and held up his wand. He didn't think he could do two boxes at once, but maybe . . . Ron's count hit three and Harry waited, giving the twins the first shots. Strange things came at him. One was a twisting column of red composed of miniature dragons; the other spell approached like a swarm of confetti. Harry had only two sessions ago managed a modulated Chrysanthemum block but he tried it now anyway; it glowed warm and ripply around him, meeting both attacks and bending to absorb them. Harry was vaguely aware of a gasp of surprise from someone.

The block dissipated and Harry, just as Fred muttered, "Uh oh," and looked about to run, incanted a web spell wide enough to catch them both. And it did for just a moment before George used a blue flame to cut out of it, leaving it to wrap Fred up tightly. George was breathing heavily and aiming his wand with a very intense look. Harry waited, curious what he was going to use next. George chewed his lip and shouted, "Awahayazashi!" which Harry definitely had not heard before. Transparent spheres about a foot across came rocketing out of George's wand. Harry ducked, but George just aimed lower. Harry jumped to the side, and one of the spheres tried to eat his arm letting him know what they planned for all of him. He shook the sphere off and tried a heat charm, then a Titan block, on the approaching line, both to no

effect. He continued to dodge then rolled far enough to the side to get a shot in and shouted a Prisoner box charm. The last platoon of bubbles flew by and popped well beyond Harry as the rest of the Weasleys came over and stared down at the two-foot square red box with silver hinges and George whinging from inside, "Someone get me out."

"You? I'm first," Fred complained, still sawing at his net with his wand transformed into a bowie knife.

"Excellent spell," Ron said with feeling, tapping the box with his toe.

"Hey, cut that out!" George's high-pitched voice complained.

Harry released each of them with a wave and they straightened slowly, rubbing their necks. George said, "All right, we'll call it a draw, then."

"I don't think so," Mr. Weasley said, slapping his son on the back. "You lost."

"We needed more time to prepare," the other twin complained.

"It was your idea to duel," Harry accused them but then laughed. "I do this all day long at training."

As they walked back inside, Ron said, "And you have years to go; think how bloody amazing you'll be by then."

"You have to be better than everyone you might encounter. Takes a while," Harry said, paraphrasing his trainer. He looked to Snape but his guardian was walking ahead with his back to them. "Fred and George weren't trying to kill me."

"Not this time, anyway," Fred assured him with a challenging look.

That Sunday, still dwelling on his birthday and the past, Harry felt the need to return to Godric's Hollow. It was a nice day, uncloudy and warm, even during breakfast. Snape was surprised when told, but covered it quickly. "As you wish," was all he said.

Flying at the top speed of his broom the trip seemed to go even faster than his flight home last time. He really should work on distance Apparation so he could just arrive instantly; although as soon as he considered that, he thought it lacked something.

A groundskeeper was picking up twigs along the fence and only glanced up once at Harry, who was glad he had stashed his broom quickly after landing, as he had not seen the man there in the shade. He went straight to the grave and sat down on the warm ground. In the sunlight, everything looked better and the ivy from the crystal had grown to frame the stone nicely with colorful flowers. The mirror looked the same, reminding him of regrets he should bury and move on from.

Harry had realized the one question he really wanted to ask them: whether they were all right with him taking on another parent in Snape. In his mind, sitting here, he could imagine that they probably wouldn't be. "But he's loads better than Vernon and Petunia," Harry heard himself arguing aloud. A glance around showed the groundskeeper putting a lawnmower back in an old van on the far side of the gravel drive. "I finished what you started. Everything. It's my turn now," he said quietly, then brushed away the tear that had streaked down his right cheek. He wrestled himself back under control and stood up. "You're not here to complain, you know."

The day grew warmer, by the minute it felt. Harry shed his cloak and put it over his arm, grateful for something solid to occupy himself with, if only for a moment. He considered saying goodbye but decided they couldn't hear him, making it a little silly.

Harry's back still complained from flying hunched over for speed so he needed to take a walk. As well, he thought he smelled chips frying and this made his stomach rumble insistently as he had not had lunch and it must be around 1:00. Harry followed the low iron fence to the entrance which was framed by a black iron gateway bearing the name of the village in a gothic script along the top. It looked grim, as though it were a Halloween decoration.

Around the corner on the main street, Harry found the source of the scent: a very small shop, barely more than a shed, selling lunches and ice creams. Harry went up and ordered chips, then sat down at the adjacent picnic table to wait for them. The young woman in a frilly pink apron brought them out a few minutes later and Harry began eating, even though they were almost too hot to hold between his fingertips.

As he ate, a woman with two small children came to the window and ordered ice creams for them. The older child, maybe five, tugged on her mum's jumper edge insisting on chocolate twist. Ice creams were handed through the window, making Harry decide he would need some as well. The woman doled one cone out and then took the other, glanced at Harry as she did so, and nearly dropped it, generating a squeal of disapproval from the older child who helped catch it with fingers digging

into the fast-melting treat. The child happily licked them off, though, rather than complain about it.

The woman glanced at Harry in consternation again before grabbing up a handful of serviettes and wiping off her hands and the child's, who wasn't very interested in having this done and moved away toward the table to avoid it. The woman helped the girl onto the bench across from Harry and said, "I'm sorry to be rude, but you remind me of someone." She laughed wryly. "I've never seen you here before."

"I'm just on my way through," Harry explained. His remaining chips were getting cold, so he returned to eating. He wasn't used to introducing himself, but he did so anyway.

The woman said her name was Patricia Mathers, then chastised her daughter for trying to steal her nose with her chocolatey fingers, before saying, "Potter, my goodness. My second cousin married a Potter and you are the spitting image of him from the photographs."

Harry's insides swelled. "You're my mum–Lily's–cousin?" he asked in disbelief. "And, I guess, Petunia's as well."

The woman froze in amazement, eyes far away. "You can't be . . . the Potter son . . . the baby who disappeared that night the house was destroyed."

"He didn't disappear," Harry said a little smartly. "He got taken to the Dursley's. I got taken," he corrected himself, shaken by this notion of relatives, no matter the remoteness.

"NO," she uttered in surprise. Her mouth worked silently before she said, "They never said. We all wondered."

"Oh yeah; they pretended I didn't exist," Harry explained.

"Goodness," she said in horror. As Harry stood up to order an ice cream, she asked, "You aren't still with them now, are you?"

"No, fortunately. One of my teachers from my boarding school adopted me."

"Oh dear. That is rather tragic, isn't it?"

Harry, who didn't see it that way, said, "I don't think so."

"I am sorry. I'm being ever so rude I think," she said when Harry returned with his double cone of double chocolate.

"No. I'm really thrilled to meet you, honest," Harry insisted. "Other than the Dursleys, I didn't think I had any relatives."

"So what brings you to Godric's Hollow?" she asked curiously, before helping her young son eat the rest of his treat.

Harry nodded in the direction he had come. "I was visiting my parents' grave."

"Goodness," she said again, sounding moved.

Harry ate in silence until she said, "You should follow me over to meet my sister, Pamela; she would be thrilled to meet you as well." She laughed lightly. "You know, you used to be one of the scary stories we told as kids, because no one really knew what happened that night." She looked up with narrowed eyes as though gauging him.

Harry involved himself with his treat, not sure how to respond. Eventually, he said, "I'd love to meet more relatives."

"And gossip about the Dursleys," she added with a sly grin.

"That would be ironic," Harry said firmly, making her laugh.

She wiped her mouth and said, "Goodness it is odd to meet you. You are such a legend here."

Harry thought that she didn't know the half of it. When their ice creams were finished, she asked, "Where is your car parked?" When Harry gestured vaguely, she said, "Oh, yes, over by the cemetery. Come on, my sister's place is just two streets over. If you want, of course."

"Yes, I'd really like to," Harry insisted. He stood and followed.

She rambled on about the village as they walked, her children running ahead and returning many times before they arrived at a modest cottage painted bright blue. She rang the bell and then knocked. A similar looking woman came around the side. "Patty," the new woman said in greeting. "And who is this?" Her eyes narrowed at Harry when she noticed him.

"Pammy, guess who this is," Patricia said vehemently. "Just guess."

"Hm," Pamela said, looking him over. "He looks familiar. But I don't know." She looked more like she didn't dare guess.

"So, who disappeared the night of the Potter fire?"

"No!" she said. "You're the Potter boy? Oh my," she marveled. "Well, you look none the worse . . .except for that scar."

Harry rubbed it. "Got it that night, actually."

"Really?" Patricia shook her head. "You don't know how very odd this is. It'd be like that man with the claw hand at the drive-in suddenly showing up." When Harry laughed, she added, "Well, you have the family sense of humor I have to say."

"Let's take him to Mum," Pammy said eagerly, tossing her work gloves on her porch step and stepping away as Patricia led Harry down the walk. Her children followed with handfuls of gravel. "So what happened to you?" she asked, sounding thoroughly entranced.

"I got left on Petunia's and Vernon's doorstep."

"By whom?" Pamela asked.

"That's a little hard to explain."

"Why is that hard? Or don't you know?" Patricia asked as they walked down the street, then straight even though the drive turned. A meandering path led forward through a thicket. "Mum lives in the house over there. Doesn't like crowds," she explained, sounding like she knew that was funny. They walked along a stone wall toward a small stone house at the other side of a field. The children led, depositing the gravel along the wall.

"What's hard to explain?" Pammy echoed.

"It just is," Harry insisted and they let it drop.

Patricia slowed as they approached the house to say, "Edward Evans died about five years ago, just to let you know; your mum's first cousin."

Harry shook his head to clear it. "I'm not used to keeping track of this," he said.

They walked straight in with a sharp knock, while the children occupied themselves in the unmown lawn. A clock ticked loudly in the next room off the entryway. "Mum!" Pamela shouted. Mother Evans came in the back door with an empty laundry hamper with clothespins stuck up along the edge. She was plump with a frayed apron and very grey hair. She found her cracked cat-eye glasses on the mantel and peered at Harry.

"Well, hello there," she said in greeting. She held out her hand, "Polly Evans," she said with a decent grip.

Harry let that name wash over him. "Harry Potter," he said. The woman froze and looked him over very closely.

"My goodness, so you are. Wherever did these two dig you up from?"

"The ice cream store," Patricia said. "He's here visiting Lily's and James' grave."

"Well, my boy, sit down and have a spot of tea, please." She gestured at the dark flowered couch in the close sitting room. Harry took a seat with the sisters across from him. He studied the room; it had a few doilies but not an excessive number. Other than that it was perfectly ordinary.

"So what do you do?" Pamela asked, picking up a wooden coaster from the table and tossing it and catching it as though she always did that.

Harry fished for an answer. "I, uh, just finished school. I don't have a job yet," he hedged, not prepared to make up an acceptably close story and not wanting to lie to blood relatives.

"How do you like living with your teacher?" At Pamela's questioning look, Patricia explained, "He was adopted by his teacher rather than live with the Dursley's any longer."

"How long ago was that?" Pamela asked.

"About a year," Harry explained.

"That's all? You were stuck with that bull Vernon all that time." "And Petunia the Pill?" They both shuddered. Harry felt happily vindicated.

"I was in school most of the time the last seven years, so it wasn't that bad." Although, it had been, he thought.

"What school?" Pamela asked brightly.

Harry shrugged "A school in Scotland. You've probably never heard of it." Mrs. Evans came back in with the tea and moved everything methodically from the tray before sitting beside him and pouring for everyone.

"Sorry I've no biscuits; don't usually get visitors."

"I just had an ice cream, anyway," Harry said, sipping the strong black tea.

Patricia said, "Mum, ask him what happened that night. He wouldn't tell."

"Patty, have some semblance of manners," Mrs. Evans scolded. "I'm sure he was too young to remember."

Patricia said, "You know the Dursleys lied about him being there. Can you imagine?"

Mrs. Evans frowned deeply. "Yes, I can," she said quietly, making Harry wonder.

Conversationally, he asked, "Did you know my mum?"

Her eyes flickered up to him over her teacup. "Yes, my boy, I did." She gave him a wink.

Harry went quickly back to his own tea.

"So the end of the mysterious legend," Pamela said, sounding like she felt the loss of it. "My dad always swore he saw you carried away by spirits."

"One spirit," Patricia corrected. "A really big one, though, he said."

Harry put great effort into swallowing the gulp of tea he had in his mouth. Very casually, he said, "No, I was told it was a man on my father's friend's motorcycle."

"Why didn't he wait for the police?" Pamela asked in disbelief. Harry could only shrug that he didn't know.

Mrs. Evans said with a slowness that conveyed its own meaning, "You know we really have lost touch with things. But the last year has been much calmer the papers all say."

Harry tried to figure how to reply. "They are much calmer."

"They ever catch whoever firebombed your parent's house?" Mrs. Evans then asked.

"Yes. He came to see me at my school. I made him see things my way." Harry said.

"What are you two on about?" Pamela asked. Patricia looked warily curious.

"Nothing, nothing," Mrs. Evans said before reaching over to pat Harry on the back with more affection than he expected. "It is good to know you have gotten on so well," she added. "I thought about you now and then over the years. I think everyone did."

Patricia nodded. "The Mysterious Potter Baby," she stated.

"The Boy Who Lived," Harry corrected her.

"That what they called you?" Patricia asked in surprise. When Harry nodded, she said, "They still call you that?"

"No," Harry said, laughing.

"What do they call you now, my dear?" Mrs. Evans asked with a knowing look. Harry leaned over and whispered in her ear his title from the Chocolate Frog Card. She patted him on the back again as the sisters complained vigorously about not hearing.

On the way out, as he was escorted to the road, insisting that he could find his "car", they all urged him to keep in touch. Harry gave them his address and accepted Mrs. Evans'. "Come by for the holidays, if not sooner. I'm sure after Vernon and Petunia you could use a nice family gathering. Bring your guardian, too."

"Uh, I'll certainly invite him along, but he isn't really your type," Harry struggled to explain. "Uh, he's a little standoffish."

"Why'd you let him adopt you, then?" Pamela asked, sounding as though she disliked him already.

"I like living with him. And he keeps me in line," Harry continued to struggle.

Mrs. Evans said, "Remembering your father, that is worth a lot."

"So I've been told. Repeatedly."

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 55

Harry said goodbye and received hugs from each of the sisters who looked honestly sad to see him leave. Harry felt buoyant at the thought of his newfound family and fairly skipped back to the willow and his broom. After a check for anyone around, he walked back to the grave. "Thank you," he said, before kicking off and zipping away at top speed.

Back at home he found himself alone. He bit his lip and put his broom and cloak away before taking out the slip of paper with the address and putting it in his album upstairs, where it seemed to belong. Then he took it out and copied it into his notebook before returning it to the album. He needed a photograph of them, he realized. Next time he would take a camera.

Harry sat, flipping through his books without really reading them when Snape came to the doorway. "Hi," Harry said. "Guess what?"

"I do not know," Snape said, crossing his arms and leaning on the doorframe.

"I met my mum's cousins, purely by accident while I had a bit of lunch before leaving. They're very nice, although a little overly curious about me."

"Muggles, all of them?"

"Yes. Although Polly Evans, who married my mum's first cousin, whose name I don't . . . no, Edward, his name was, knew I was a wizard and that Mum was a witch. Her

daughters don't know, though." He put the album away. "I'm very happy to find them, though. My aunt and uncle never told me anything. They'd get angry when I asked."

"A good trip then?" Snape asked in a tone that made Harry wonder about hidden meaning.

"Yes," Harry said, feeling he had settled things with his parents for the moment. Still buoyant, Harry jumped up and said, "Can we do some distance Apparation?"

Snape's lips quirked slightly. "After tea." Harry followed him to the railing and Snape said, "I ordered your books for you while I was on Diagon Alley."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"You are going to know more about wizard law than even Albus did by the time you are finished."

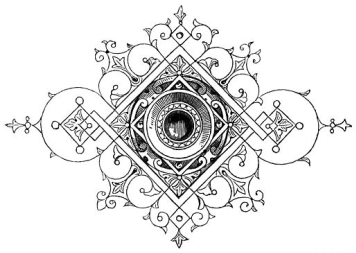
"I'll start forgetting before it gets that far," Harry returned.

Snape stopped at the door to the dining room, took a breath, and said seriously, "I realize, Harry, that I may not be everything you require in the way of family." He held up his hand to forestall Harry's protest. "I also realize now that you are not very clear on what you may be missing in order to ask for it. Nor, unfortunately am I likely to know either." After rubbing his brow, he added, "What I am getting at is that if you feel the need to spend time with the Weasleys or these new cousins, you should most certainly do so."

Harry nodded and quietly said, "All right."

"Now that that is out of the way . . . " He gestured for Harry to sit at the dining room table. "We can discuss localized steering, which is often necessary when arriving someplace from a distance."

Chapter 56.



Big Wide World

Harry, now all of eighteen but not feeling much different from seventeen, stepped into the workout room for Monday's training. Aaron was already there, lifting weights with the kind of concentration only he, out of the four of them, put into it. He greeted Harry, put down the mini-barbell and stood up from the worn, wooden bench. Harry slipped on a pair of fingerless gloves and sat down in his stead.

Aaron pulled something from his bag and, glancing nervously at the doorway, held it out. Reluctantly, he asked, "Could you do me a favor and autograph this for my mum?"

Harry gave him a very dubious look, but he put down the barbell and took up the offered item. Aaron quickly found a never-out quill, clearly not wanting to be discovered in this situation should anyone else arrive early. Harry asked her name and signed it quickly. He laughed as Aaron stashed it back away and breathed out in relief. "She's been making me nutters about that; thought she'd forget eventually." He picked up the larger barbell and hefted it to chest height. "She wants to know when I'm inviting you home for dinner," he breathed.

Harry laughed. "How does she cook?"

"My mum does not cook. She has a cook, who does a pretty good job. Don't humor her. Don't even joke about humoring her," he insisted, disgusted, continuing to lift and lower the weight.

Harry laughed again and adjusted his grip on the small barbell before starting another set of repetitions.

Aaron said, "You know, Potter, you're all right. If I were you, I'd be the most obnoxious bloke in London." He stood up to stretch his shoulders. "I'd walk around, like, yeah, I offed that bastard, Voldemort, you want a piece a' me too?" Between Aaron's goofy posturing and the odd voice he was using, Harry had to chuckle more. Aaron dropped his arms. "So why don't you do that? Seems like a wasted opportunity."

"I . . . " Harry shrugged.

"Come on, Potter. You out-dueled the most powerful wizard in the world and he wasn't one to fight particularly fairly."

Harry set the barbell down and unhooked two of the smaller weights from it to do a final set of light repetitions. He sat up and sighed. Sounds from the corridor made him believe the others were arriving imminently. "In actuality I defeated him with emotion," Harry explained.

"What?" Aaron appeared nonplussed. "What kind?"

A little sheepishly, Harry replied, "Love, mostly."

Aaron now looked horrified. "No, no, no. You can't do this to me," he insisted. "You can't destroy my fantasies like this." He sat down heavily on the other bench. "Ugh," he moaned.

Harry, thinking this was a little over the top, argued, "It was the only way."

The others came in then, ending the conversation.

This month they were doing less defensive spell work and starting on poison and venom neutralization as well as curse-averting potions. Harry, thinking he would be less bruised by this, eagerly settled himself at a bench in the crowded 'laboratory' that was really a large broom cupboard off the corner of the Auror's offices. His fellows seemed indifferent to the change in topic. Vineet sat opposite Harry with his dark fingers interlocked as Tonks explained the potions that were kept in stocks and what could be quickly mixed from them. They practiced mixing a few and then brewed some base potions as well. Everyone did well enough at this although Aaron was clearly bored by it and let everyone know it.

The day went by quickly. Harry pocketed the list of newly assigned books and headed up to the street. It was nice out, so he decided to walk to Diagon Alley. The pavements were crowded with people and the streets were full of cars barely keeping pace with those walking. The scent of coffee distracted him as he stood waiting for the lights to change at a busy intersection where the cars were aggressively pulling

onto a roundabout. Behind him was a coffee shop. It was only a few more blocks to the Leaky Cauldron, but Harry went in anyway, thinking it looked more welcoming and airy than the wizard pub.

Inside it was an oasis of quiet beyond the clatter of saucers and the hiss of steam. Harry took his order to a table in the window and gratefully sat down. He opened his bookbag and, with consternation, considered the title of the book he intended to read: Magical Mayhem A Guide to Current Laws of Wales. Casually, Harry pulled out his wand and tapped his bookbag with the spell Wodeidolon, then pulled out his now-safe books and placed them on the table.

An hour and two cups of tea later, Harry was still reading intently. The quiet chatter inside and movement of the people outside the broad window somehow made it easier to keep concentrating, maybe because, unlike at home, he didn't feel so cut off from the world. His change of books was interrupted by someone saying, "Harry Potter?"

Harry looked up and recognized the speaker. "Uh, Tara, right?" he said, remembering with a little effort.

Tonk's ex-boyfriend's date from Easter holiday appeared honestly surprised that he remembered her name. "Yes. How are you doing?" she asked slowly while looking him up and down once.

"Good," Harry replied. "Lots of studying for my program," he explained, gesturing at his stack of books.

Her brow furrowed. "You're studying Wodehouse?" she asked in confusion.

"Oh," Harry laughed. "Not exactly." He held the open book out to her so she could read the chapter title Lawful Interrogation Procedure.

"Cute charm," she said, glancing at the cover, which read The Butler Did It. She returned the book and excused herself to pick something up from the counter–something tall with whipped cream on top. She came back and hesitated before asking, "Do you mind?"

Harry did have the best table. "Sure," he said, pulling his books to his side of the round marble tabletop.

"Are you liking the Auror's program?" she asked after a few minutes of sipping her drink.

"Yes. Quite a lot." Harry set the new book he had just picked up aside, thinking that talking to someone sounded much more interesting just now than a chapter containing

just a long list of lawful truth potions and charms. "So, uh, how is Rick?" Harry asked.

She rolled her eyes and frowned. "I haven't seen him in a month," she admitted and her frown didn't disappear after another frothy sip of coffee.

"Oh. Sorry," Harry managed; although he didn't believe Rick would be good for anyone.

She looked far away a minute before saying. "Had to find a real job because I told him off, but I like it better where I am now."

Harry, grateful he hadn't utterly stepped in it, prompted, "And where is that?"

"I work for an N.G.O. doing fundraising," she explained, sounding like she really did enjoy that. "It helps to know a lot of people, which I do."

"Ah." Harry didn't feel like taking the hit on his pride that asking for clarification would involve.

She smiled faintly and said, "So, you . . . dating anyone?"

"Um. . . " Harry thought about Elizabeth, then thought some more. He usually enjoyed his neighbor's company, and she was nice about coming along for his birthday dinner, and his relatives properly incensed her. "Sorta, maybe, but not seriously," he quickly added.

"Oh," Tara said, sounding a little disappointed. "Do you like parties?" she eventually asked.

"Yes," Harry answered eagerly.

"Well, I sometimes get invited to some very nice parties but I haven't been going because I don't . . . have anyone to go with . . ." She struggled a bit. "I was just wondering if you might want to go, sometime?"

Her faint pleading seemed to be plucking directly at Harry's midsection. "I think that'd be fun. Owl me . . . and if I'm not busy – 'cause I study all the time – I'd certainly like to go." He pulled out his small notebook, wrote out his address and handed over torn-out page.

Appearing truly touched, she bit her lip and said, "Thanks." After fidgeting a moment, she said, "You know, you're really nice. I wouldn't have expected that."

"Someone else said that recently," Harry observed. "Neither you nor he has really seen me wound up."

She stirred her drink and waited for a revving lorry to go by on the street. "So what winds you up that badly?" she asked innocently.

"Uh, let's see . . . " Harry thought back and remembered flying off without regard to his own safety. "A complete misunderstanding with my previous girlfriend did."

"Tonks?" Tara prompted.

"Uh . . . no. It's like this: Tonks is my trainer, really my boss, and . . . we haven't ever dated or done anything; if you get my meaning?"

Tara actually grinned in amusement, relaxing Harry. "Yeah. I get it," she said, smiling and almost laughing. Harry felt great relief in not only admitting to the situation, but being understood.

Tara put her empty glass aside on an unoccupied table. "It was nice meeting you again," she said as she stood up. "I'll owl you if a decent party comes up. Okay?"

"Sounds good. I could really stand to get out a little more," Harry admitted.

She grinned and lightly shook her head. "Don't you get invitations to things all the time?"

Harry fell thoughtful and shook his head. "No. I get together with my friends, but they're really busy now; it is getting harder to arrange."

"I'll owl," she assured him. Then she was gone.

He watched her disappear into the stream of people outside on the pavement, noting at the last moment that she certainly dressed better than anyone else he knew.

Harry arrived early for his training because Kali had woken him that morning, restless in her cage. He had taken her down to breakfast, which had seemed to satisfy her, and she easily went back into her cage when he needed to leave. The Ministry corridors were quiet and Harry's footsteps echoed lonely. He stopped at the doorway to the workout room and stared down to the far end where the files were kept. After a long moment of indecision, he set his bag inside the door and walked down, glancing to each side to see if anyone was around to notice him. The rows of desks he passed were empty although he could hear a distant conversation.

Inside the records room he stepped by the hutch and the spinning Knight Bus orb. Some notes had been made by the Underage Magic Detector, but Harry ignored them

and went straight to the files. A quick glance at his gold pocket watch indicated he had fifteen minutes, at most. The label on the third cabinet in the first row read Ashford-Azeek. Harry pulled it out and scanned down to Avery's file.

Harry immediately wished he had brought his bag, which had a notebook in it. He found scrap paper and a battered never-out quill and jotted down the Death Eater's last known locations. Avesbury, Devonshire, Torquay. In the reports section of the file were one interview after another, of people the Aurors had talked to about where Avery might be hiding. Frustratingly, Harry could not get a sense from glancing over the notes of who might be hiding something. The last interviews were dated three months ago.

Feeling a little let down by the organization he was working hard to please, Harry carefully replaced the folder and closed the drawer. He pocketed the notes and walked silently back to the empty workout room.

That evening, Harry arrived home to find the articles from the American interviewer in the post, in a nice gold-foil, spell-sealed tube rather than an envelope. He took the long scrolls into the library to say hello to his guardian.

"How do they look?" Snape asked of the articles.

"I just opened them." Harry put his things down and sat on the lounger to read.

This reporter found Mr. Potter living in a modest home in a very small village just south of the Scottish border. He is intent upon the most obvious of careers: that of Auror, or dark wizard hunter.

More background followed, which Harry skipped over.

Mr. Potter has fashioned himself a family of sorts out of longtime friends and a teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts from the prestigious school of wizardry, Hogwarts.

Harry realized that he had ceased to care if anyone found that out. It felt completely normal now to consider not only Shrewsthorpe as his home, but Snape as his guardian. It seemed that far more than a year must have passed since he had moved in. And with a few distant cousins, he was really quite well set up and feeling proud of that. Harry lowered the parchment and watched Snape as he read from a large book at a tall, spindly-legged table. His hair had fallen forward as usual, leaving Harry only a glimpse of brow and aquiline nose. Through his hair, his eyes rose to consider Harry.

"Something in the article?" Snape asked.

"I . . . was just thinking the last year . . . seems much longer than a year." Harry shook his head as he gave up explaining and turned back to the long scroll in his lap. Maybe he just wished it had been and that made his feelings stretch back farther.

Yes, Mr. Potter is as pleasant and well mannered as some have reported. He never bragged to me once, although it was clear he was proud of his accomplishments, and the list is quite long for one his age. One would think the British Ministry of Magic would in the future allow him to retire seven years early to account for his previous years of service. This seemingly gentle young man leaves behind him a long trail of dead and captured dark wizards and witches, all of whom sought him out rather than the other way around.

After my visit and numerous conversations with British magic folk I have determined that they have no more understanding of Harry Potter than we do. Everyone who has met him, relates a different impression of him, overwhelmingly positive. The very few I could find who expressed dislike of him, did so I would say, based on mistaken information, or because it turns out they lost something when the Dark Lord was defeated and peace returned.

Harry read through to the end, surprised to find nothing offensive besides one quote from Percy Weasley that made it sound like Harry had been very lucky rather than being skillful. He followed that by accusing Harry of immediately currying favor with the new leadership at the Ministry. Shrugging it off, Harry read the last part again.

If I had to summarize my impressions, I would say that Mr. Potter is soldiering on well with his life. He will be an Auror because, like a soldier, it is all he knows. He appears confident in the path he is following and one assumes, given his skills and the rather protective guardian he has acquired, that he will most certainly succeed as he says, in "assuring that evil does not rise again."

Harry let the parchment roll itself up.

"Is it all right?" Snape asked. He was sitting back from the desk now with his arms crossed, giving Harry the impression that he had been watching him for a while.

Harry shrugged. "I thought it'd be worse. It isn't bad." When Snape held out his hand, Harry stood and gave the scroll over. "He had trouble digging up anyone who would say anything bad about me."

Snape unrolled the thick parchment. "Whom did he find?"

"Percy Weasley."

Eyes moving over the lines, Snape commented reassuringly, "I doubt Molly and Arthur subscribe to the Salem Gazette."

Harry considered that before understanding it, and he agreed that they would be the only ones hurt by Percy's comments, since Harry certainly wasn't.

Chapter 56

Wednesday, after a day of getting knocked around while they covered offensive blocking spells, Harry, rubbing a tender elbow, arrived home. The house was quiet, leading him to assume Snape was out.

Harry put his bag down in the library, truly not feeling up to any studying. He went down to the kitchen and took down the big tin of chocolate biscuits. Winky sat on a wooden bench beside the low fire, polishing silver with slow, methodical movements. Swallowing his second biscuit, Harry asked, "How are you, Winky?"

"Winky very good, Master Harry," she replied in a reassuring squeak.

Harry took another biscuit, closed the tin, and put it back on the shelf. "Do you know where Severus went?"

Her big eyes blinked once. "Master upstairs," she said with an odd keenness.

"Oh," Harry said. He took his uneaten snack up the half flight to the ground floor, then up to the first. Snape wasn't in his bedroom, but across the main hall one of the doors was ajar to the little-used rooms on the other side. Harry stepped around and pushed it fully open. The room served as a kind of attic to store older books that didn't fit in the library as well as trunks of unneeded things. Snape looked up from were he sat on one of the trunks that had been pulled to the middle of the floor, sorting through a crate of books.

"Hi," Harry said casually. Some other things had been rearranged in the room since Harry had last been in here, months ago. A spare door had been balanced over a trunk to create a makeshift table, though it had a sheen of dust now.

Snape nodded in greeting as he flipped through the index of the book in his hands. He put it aside and Harry bent down to pick it up. It shivered in his hand and squirmed as though to get away. Startled, he almost lost his grip on it. Fulsome Fascination, the title read when he managed to hold it steady.

"What are you looking for?" Harry asked. The book's index didn't hold much fascination for him, he had to admit; it seemed heavy on annoying hexes. All of the books here seemed to be of the darker variety.

Dismissively, Snape replied, "A book I remember acquiring once, but cannot seem to find."

Harry put the hex book down and stepped around to the horizontal door, noticing that it was splattered with something dark. His toe caught unexpectedly on a gutted-out candle melted into a mortar join in the floor. Harry stared then at the floor, at

the charcoal and chalk pentagram upon an apex of which he had stumbled. Chilled, Harry said, "I don't remember this."

Snape swept his hair back and looked over. "I didn't completely straighten up from the Beacon Spell I used to find you." Harry's chest twisted as he looked around again and realized the splatters on the dusty door must be blood. Snape was saying, "And apparently Winky has no interest in doing so."

Harry picked up a skull with a melted candle atop it from beside the rigid and academically straight lines of the diagram on the floor. He put the skull away on an empty shelf at eye level. Swallowing hard and feeling rather bad, he said, "I'm sorry, Severus." He could easily imagine the scene, that cusp of falling into the execution of black magic spell and he didn't like that imagining with anyone he knew, especially Snape. "Please don't repeat it."

Snape sighed and pushed the crate aside with his foot. "Minerva insisted that dark magic done reluctantly was not the same. I am not so certain of that." Harry turned from the skull and considered his guardian with a pained expression, prompting Snape to add, "It is all right, Harry. I certainly have no desire to repeat it, nor anything like it, so no harm has come of it." He fell deeply thoughtful a minute before quietly adding, "When I was your age I would have considered such a spell merely a tool, not a trap that can ensnare one utterly. Understanding of that danger is worth a great deal, I believe." A bit lighter, he said, "And I cannot be much of a Dark Arts Defense teacher if I have completely lost touch with the Dark Arts." He spoke with forced easiness that did the reverse of settling Harry's concerns.

Snape pushed the crate of books aside, stood, and with a flick of his wand, shifted the spare door to lean back in the corner where it had originally been. "Don't look so regretful, Harry. We all make our choices." He urged Harry out of the room.

"Do you want me to help look for the book?" Harry asked, curious what book it was.

"Hogwarts' library has a copy. Minerva has a copy. I shall simply borrow one."

Downstairs, Harry said, "Ron and Hermione were going to go out to a pub tonight. I told them I'd meet them there, I assume that's all right?"

"Of course," Snape said. "Return by 11:00, if you will, since you have training in the morning."

Harry nodded and headed upstairs to change into Muggle clothes.

Ron was most of the way through an ale when Harry finally found them. He boisterously welcomed Harry and pulled out a chair for him. "Shoulda brought a date, Harry," Ron teased him.

"I suppose I could have," Harry said, thinking aloud.

"Oh, do tell," Hermione said eagerly.

Harry told them about his visits with Elizabeth. She sounded more appealing in his retelling than expected and his friends gave him reassuring noises and insisted that he bring her next time.

"Or . . . " Ron suggested, waving for another ale, "You could bring the winner of the essay contest, though my mum swears the second runner-up sounds like a better match."

Harry accepted a glass of water from the barkeep and ordered an ale. "I haven't read them."

"You what?" Ron blurted.

"Skeeter picked the winner," Harry explained.

"Bloody . . . can't wait to tell Mum," Ron said laughing. "Thinks she has you all figured out from your choices."

Harry shrugged but didn't suggest Ron tell his mum to start subscribing to the Salem Gazette.

"Shall we eat here, or go somewhere else?" Ron eagerly asked.

Harry barely swallowed his first frothy sip. "I just got a drink. You just got a drink," he blurted.

"Just makin' sure we have a plan," Ron commented.

"I think you're getting a little round in the middle," Harry observed.

"He is," Hermione agreed with a frown.

"No!" Ron stood up and looked down at his abdomen, drawing it in flat. "Look."

Hermione poked him in the ribs and he lost his fine posture. "No, definitely a paunch coming in there," Harry insisted.

"Told you," Hermione said. "You are going to have to ease back on the eating or face looking like your mum."

"Yeah, and how will you dodge the goblins at Gringott's?" Harry contributed.

Ron sat down and considered his beer with a frown. "What else is there to live for but food?" he asked placatingly.

The next morning, Harry was pleased when Tonks stepped into the workout room rather than Rodgers.

"Well," she said with a grin. "I have you all for the next few sessions because we are going to be working on Metamorphia." Everyone made noises of interest at this and she grinned as her hair turned an exceptionally bright pink with long curved spikes. "We'll be working on this in session every few months and will expect you to practice on your own in-between. It takes a very long time to learn for those not naturally predisposed." Her grin broadened as her hair instead fell straight and zebra striped. "And some of you may never manage more than the simplest metamorphosis. So we will start with the very easiest and most useful ones. For you guys that will be mustache and beard-"

"Can't I learn how to charm on a beard?" Kerry Ann demanded, hands on hips.

"Ah, sure," Tonks agreed. She closed her eyes a moment and out of her face sprung a long flowing white beard of the stateliness Harry had only seen on Dumbledore. With the zebra hair it was quite a sight. "All right then," she said, moving along.

"You're keeping that on, are you?" Aaron asked fearfully.

Tonks stroked her beard thoughtfully. "I think I like it," she retorted. "Now, Metamorphia is less like Animagia than you might expect. Animagia is an external reflection in animal form of an inner enchanted spirit or personality. Metamorphia is a general form of Transfiguration specifically of a body part."

Harry frowned at that and tried not to wince. Tonks stepped up to him and Harry made his expression go neutral. "Now hair is the safest thing to start with, as it isn't alive and it grows back if things go really wrong. You can also safely practice on your fingernails and the surface of your skin." She walked by Harry to stand before Vineet. After staring hard at him, her hair went dark and short and her skin tinted nut brown to match the Indian's.

Vineet looked surprised then said, "You could have any suitable boy in my village looking so."

"Don't tempt me to take you up on that," she laughed, and Harry felt a strange heat in his gut which he forced himself to ignore.

Tonks changed back to her usual self and stepped back to the front. "So you can see the ultra-convenience of disguise being a Metamorphmagus provides." She pulled

mirrors for each of them out of a box and they all sat down to try out some spells on their hair.

By lunch Kerry Ann could turn a lock of her hair blonde, but the rest of them hadn't any success. Harry found himself thinking that if he could manage a mustache, he would think that a major victory. The three guys split off for lunch as Tonks and Kerry Ann were intent on a conversation about Metamorphmagus eyeliner.

Friday before settling into his studies, Harry thought he would very much like to get out of the house. It was not the nicest of days, so he thought he might like a visit with someone. Ron would be busy at work until evening, same with Hermione. With his cloak tossed over his shoulders Harry walked down to the Peterson house.

Unfortunately for Harry, Mr. Peterson opened the door. "Mr. Potter," he said levelly.

"Afternoon, sir. Is Elizabeth at home?"

"She is late returning from her lesson. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," Harry said, seeing no clear means to back out. He followed the man into the back of the hall where the piano sat. With the clouds the room was not quite so utterly white, more an unpromising grey. Harry remained standing because his host had not sat or suggested Harry do so.

Mr. Peterson was not one to mince words. "My daughter speaks of you quite often, but not in ways that make exceptional sense to me. I am curious, Mr. Potter, what exactly do you do?"

"Uh, I'm in training with the Ministry of Magic, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Peterson's brow lowered as he took that in. "Magical Law Enforcement," the man echoed, sounding doubtful.

"Enforcing magical law. I'm training to be an Auror, which is someone who hunts dark wizards or witches."

"Oh, yes, that Thrimbol business we had. With the uh . . ." he waved his fingers in the air.

"Dark Mark," Harry supplied.

"Yes, that. Bad business." He looked Harry over yet again. "From what I understand you were rather wrapped up in it all."

Harry admitted, "Yes, sir. Rather."

Another pause ensued during which Harry couldn't think of anything worth volunteering to a Muggle father. Mr. Peterson eventually said, "And you have been around here a few times these last weeks, visiting Elizabeth."

Harry scratched his chin and tried hard not to fidget further. "Yes, sir." He wondered with some concern how much later Elizabeth was going to be.

"My wife thinks rather a lot of you, almost a celebrity kind of worship. Knows all kinds of meaningless trivia about you."

"Really?" Harry asked, honestly disturbed.

"Implies I should be enamored of you as well," Peterson went on, looking vaguely disgusted in a polite kind of way. Harry started to defend himself, but fell silent when the man went on, "They insist you are the most famous of your kind in the world."

"Um . . . " Harry said, but then shrugged instead of replying.

"Are you?" the man asked, clearly not sure what to believe.

"I suppose," Harry replied.

"What does that mean, I wonder? You're never in those raggy papers they sell at the corner tobacconists as far as I ever notice."

Harry, trying a bit to sway the man, replied, "When I was traveling in Germany and Switzerland, everyone knew who I was. An American interviewer paid rather a lot of money the other day to talk to me. Is that what you mean?"

Mr. Peterson took that in. "Yes, that is what I meant. And your intentions toward my daughter?"

"Uh . . . having a chat now and then," Harry replied, since he honestly hadn't thought beyond more than that and wondered if it would be safe to.

Harry glanced back at the lights framing the door, but the movement he saw there turned out to be just the tree branches waving in the wind. Mr. Peterson wasn't finished. "And you are in the Snape household now . . . for some reason."

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"Professor Snape adopted me," Harry stated, feeling a bit of hard anger coming up. It stabilized him unexpectedly.

"That doesn't particularly recommend you, I'm afraid," said Peterson almost airily.

The room and Mr. Peterson zeroed strangely into focus suddenly, from the fine fabrics on the chairs to Peterson's slicked-back, thinning hair. The article the American wrote rolled through Harry like a slow water wheel. With barely suppressed anger he said, "Professor Snape is the only father I have really known. I lost everything, my parents, my godfather, the first sixteen years of my life to the battle with Voldemort. A battle that had been going on for decades before I was born. How I chose to piece together a life after finishing what hundreds before me had started but couldn't complete is my concern. It is certainly not your concern, sir."

Their eyes remained locked as Mr. Peterson said, "What you do with my daughter is my concern. I am not certain you are fit company for her, Mr. Potter, and while she lives here, on my money, that is my say."

Harry had an odd imagining, of Snape saying these things to someone, perhaps Tonks, and meaning them just the same. He imagined repeating this conversation to Elizabeth or even her mother and the difficulty that would cause. The second consideration brought his anger up short because he didn't wish to cause that kind of trouble. Harry shrugged with pretend dismissal of the issue. "Good day then, sir," Harry said, gathering his pride around himself. "I guess you won't be telling her I stopped by to say hello," he added before turning to let himself out.

Outside it had started to rain. Harry felt red anger threatening then retreating as though he balanced on it and with just a nudge, it could tip irrevocably either way. He slowly walked back home, even though it meant getting wet, half-hoping he would encounter Elizabeth on the way. He didn't and the spray from the passing cars was only making him wetter as he had to walk in the road alongside the train station.

Back home, he tossed his wet cloak down in the entryway and marched inside. He was standing in the hall balancing between righteous anger and pride when Snape came down the stairs.

"You look a little put-out," Snape commented, stopping before him on the way to the drawing room.

"It's nothing," Harry stated, clearly not meaning it.

"It is a little wet for a long flight; do try to keep it short."

"Thanks," Harry snapped at him, pride badly stung by the comment.

"Harry," Snape chastised, then immediately relented. "I should not have said that. Come and dry off, I'll start a fire." He gestured to the dining room. Harry followed on grudging feet and took the chair Snape placed close the hearth that, after a quick spell, was roaring high and emanating intense heat.

Snape stood in silence for a minute beside the hearth studying Harry before asking, "What is it?"

Harry shrugged, considered explaining, but instead sat even more slouched.

"You were in good, although restless, spirits when you departed just a short time ago. Did you encounter something unpleasant?"

Harry frowned into the flames. "Mr. Peterson."

"Ah," Snape muttered and pulled a chair over beside the hearth as well. "During your birthday dinner you did not give the impression that you had anything serious with Elizabeth."

"I don't," Harry snapped. "Sorry. He reminds me of my Uncle Vernon. And he doesn't like me."

"One in a million, then," Snape jabbed lightly.

Harry shook his head, tried to get angry, but found himself chuckling lightly. He crossed his arms and sighed. "I just went over for a visit. Nothing more," he argued.

"Perhaps he knows something you don't," Snape commented.

"Like what?"

"Such as Elizabeth's feelings for you."

Harry blinked in surprise. "You think?"

"I merely suggest it as a possible explanation for his strong reaction to you."

Harry pushed his chair back since he was overheating. "He doesn't think we're the right kind of people."

"We?" Snape queried, almost forcefully.

"Yep," Harry confirmed.

"Is that so?" Snape breathed, sounding distant. After a minute of silence he stood with a sweep of robe and set his chair back at the table. "Some people are not worth pleasing, as I am certain you are aware."

"I know. It bothers me though."

Snape leaned toward Harry over the back of the chair. "Only because you are so unaccustomed to it," he said snidely.

Harry started to argue, but then stopped himself. He finally said, "Everything a wizard would think is a positive, he believes is seriously negative. I don't know how to deal with him and don't like dealing with him."

Snape stood and stated, "Then don't," before departing the room.

As Harry read, distracted by wondering what his friends were up to and wishing they had all made plans for the weekend when they were out the other night so he wouldn't be sitting here reading, he grew hungry for dinner. The clock read almost half past 6:00. Harry rose to ask Snape if he was ready to have Winky serve dinner. In the hall, he found the door to the drawing room closed. That was unusual. Harry considered the latched door and listened to the silence before knocking.

"Come in," Snape's voice emanated from inside, reminding Harry of visiting the dungeon, something he hadn't thought about in a long while.

Snape stood behind his desk, intently reading an old book. "Do you want dinner?" Harry asked.

Surprised, Snape glanced up at the clock on a high shelf above the mantel. "Yes, indeed." He snapped the book shut and set it on the desk. The binding was too old to read at a distance.

Curious about the book, Harry casually asked, "What are you working on?"

"Spells," Snape said dismissively while waving the issue away with his hand.

"For class?" Harry asked as he followed his guardian to the dining room.

"Perhaps. I am not certain yet what use they may have."

Still curious, but reading Snape's ongoing dismissive tone, Harry dropped the subject.

When Tara's party invitation came by owl the next morning, Harry replied immediately that he would join her, mentioning it as a foregone thing to his guardian as he folded the note card over for Hedwig to take away. "I'm going into London for a party."

"With Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger?" Snape asked.

"No, someone else I've met a few times."

Harry read and gardened that day, and as well took a rolling ride on his motorbike. He considered taking it to meet Tara, then decided he was not familiar enough with London to manage that without getting lost, which he definitely did not want to do.

The address was in Soho, just down the street from the Floo node Harry had learned of from Tonks, and he had used it again tonight without getting noticed by the couple sitting close before the hearth in the room. Though it had ceased raining, the streets were wet and dark. Harry traced the many Muggle electric lights reflected in the pavement as he walked. Tara met him outside the private club hosting the party. She gave him a smile that didn't fade as she looked him up and down.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," she said as she hooked an arm through his and stepped toward the bouncer guarding a battered metal door. She showed her invitation and was invited to pass.

Inside it was loud. Red and blue lights flashed in fast sequence, illuminating many dancing figures in the center of the room. Around the periphery, people stood in groups talking and drinking. Tara waved to a few people as they navigated a path to the bar, all of whom peered curiously at Harry in the undulating light.

Tara yelled an order to the barman and leaned back on the bar to survey the room. When their drinks appeared she took a big swig and led the way to another room setup as a large lounge with low, square leather couches and tables. The sound was just tolerable here.

"So, what do you think?" Tara asked loudly.

"Of the party?" Harry confirmed. At her nod he replied, "It's a party," and shrugged. After a long silence he asked her about the place she worked. This turned out to be a good bet, as she went on about this for ten minutes easily, until someone interrupted to say hello.

"Fernidad Farnsworth," the man said, holding out his hand to Harry. "Everyone calls me Frilly."

"Your dad an accountant?" Harry asked as he accepted the hand.

"Yes. You know him?"

"We've met, very briefly." Harry skipped explaining that he was the boss of his adoptive father's girlfriend.

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"I didn't catch your name . . . " Farnsworth prompted.

"Harry, Harry Potter."

"Are you really?" the man said in excitement, making Harry better understand his nickname. He turned to Tara. "Good catch, girl!"

"Just a date," she insisted.

"Did you win the essay contest?" Farnsworth asked, all aglow all of a sudden.

"What essay contest?" Tara asked in confusion.

"Don't ask," Harry grumbled.

Farnsworth gestured broadly. "Get up girl; make the rounds with the Boy-Who-Lived. Come on!"

"I'm not showing him off," Tara snapped. "He really is just a date."

Farnsworth tweaked Harry's chin, freezing Harry in surprise. "If you were my date, I'd show you off," he teased. "I'll send some eyes your way then," he said with a wink and departed back to the room with the dance floor.

"I really didn't invite you to show you off," Tara insisted.

"It didn't seem like it," Harry said, rubbing his chin.

"Though, you are a very notable rebound date," she admitted.

"I'm feeling a bit rebounded myself," Harry muttered quietly, thinking of Mr. Peterson.

The two of them spent quite a bit of time dancing among the gyrating throng, in between getting to know each other a little, but at 1:30 Harry insisted he had to get going. The music had quieted just a little and more people were sitting or sleeping in the lounge area, but the dance floor was still crowded with layers of arms and heads flickering in the lights. Half-empty trays of food covered the boxy tables and the fine carpeting was littered with spilled food and drinks. Harry's fourth drink sat untouched in the middle of one of them. Three felt like plenty tipsy and he was not risking getting beyond that.

Tara followed Harry to the pavement when he put aside her entreaties to stay longer or to go on to a late dinner. In view of the bouncer and in the shadow of a tree below the streetlight, Harry said, "I really have to go. My guardian is very strict about curfew."

She frowned. "You are just a kid, aren't you?" It could have been an insult. Harry wasn't certain, but he shrugged it off nevertheless. "Well, all right," she gave in. "Thanks for accompanying me," She sounded honestly grateful, although she frowned again after a glance back up at the dark windows of the club.

"I had a good time," Harry said. It was true that dancing in a loud, crowded club was far better than sitting in the quiet library at home on a Saturday night.

"Can I owl you again?" she asked as he said goodbye and turned to go.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile.

At home, Snape was already asleep. Harry washed up and went quietly to his room and to bed, where sleep came over him almost immediately. Dreams woke him once, though, odd dreams about shadows moving in flickering red light. Since the light wasn't green, Harry shook them off and went back to sleep.

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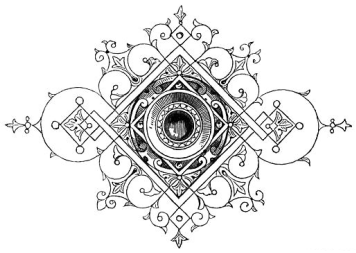

Transitions

"Harry! Come on in," Hermione said when she greeted him at the door. She led him into her parents' house and up to the first floor where Ron sat cross-legged on the rug, packing books into boxes.

"It's unbelievable," Ron muttered. "It's like she 'as every book Flourish and Blots ever sold!" He looked up. "Oh, hey Harry! Come give a hand, will ya?"

"Why don't you just use a Pack Spell?" Harry asked as he stepped in and around the many piles on the floor.

"Uh . . . Hermione's afraid of damage," Ron said, glancing carefully up at her.

"Is your Pack Spell any better than his?" She demanded of Harry, but in a teasing way.

"Uh, let me just . . . help Ron, then," Harry said. He took a seat on an already taped box to easily reach the teetering towers of books, presorted by size beside flattened boxes and a roll of tape.

Hours later, they hovered the last box down the stairs to a stack beside the front door. A distant rumbling sound shook the house, and Ron looked around in alarm. "It's just the garage," Hermione said with a laugh.

"Oh."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger came in from a side door. Mrs. Granger surveyed the many stacks of boxes. "Hermione, dear, I told you you could keep as much here as you wanted."

"I want them all with me, though," Hermione insisted sheepishly.

"Do I smell food?" Ron asked.

Mr. Granger waved two large paper bags. "We stopped for some take-away."

As they settled around the small table in the kitchen to eat, Mrs. Granger said, "So how have you been, Harry dear? We don't see you around nearly often enough, and I'm afraid with our baby . . . " She gave Hermione a half-hug. ". . . moving out, we probably won't get much chance to see any of her friends."

Hermione lightly rolled her eyes. "It is just too hard to commute, Mum. And we can't have the hearth put on the Floo Network. We've been over this."

Ron gave Harry a secret smile as Mr. Granger chastised his wife, "She's not a child anymore. If you can't let your kids go when they get a good job at a solicitor's office, when can you?"

Harry opened one of the little white boxes in front of him. A mass of transparent noodles filled it to the brim. Mrs. Granger handed him chopsticks and a plate. "I think I need a fork," Harry admitted.

"Me too," Ron also confessed. Hermione used chopsticks deftly to serve herself some rice and gave them both a superior glance. "I don't eat with wands," Ron insisted.

"So, are you still living at home, Harry?" Mrs. Granger asked, still sounding misty.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, what a dear boy," Mrs. Granger praised him.

Hermione rolled her eyes again as she ate a chunk of chicken soaked in thick brown sauce. "Mum, you are making me wish I'd moved out sooner."

"Hm. Well, it is awfully nice of you two to help Hermione get her things moved."

Harry was grateful for the hearty food, because by the end of the evening, he had carried more heavy boxes than he could count from the boot of Mr. Granger's car up three flights of steps. Hermione insisted they couldn't use any magic in such an open Muggle place. The one time Ron tried to cheat on this, a Muggle came down the building steps at a run and he had to stash his wand inside the box he had been carrying.

Eventually, the three of them collapsed between stacks of boxes in the flat. "Can we order more Chinese?" Ron asked hopefully.

"I'll make something," Hermione said as she pushed herself to her feet and wandered over to the kitchenette.

"Oh dear," Ron muttered.

"Hey, it comes out of a box, all right?" Hermione snapped, shaking the package of pasta. "I can follow directions as well as the next person, better even, I should hope."

"Can you bring Winky next time you visit?" Ron muttered.

"Are you moving in too?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding?" Ron asked disbelievingly. "My dad nearly disowned me just for hinting at that. Aye."

Harry arrived home in the darkened dining room five minutes after curfew. The hall was also near to darkness, with only two candles lit in the chandelier, high up near the ceiling. Harry crept up the steps past Snape's room, risking a glance inside, only to stop when he saw that his room was unoccupied. Harry looked across at the darkened rooms on the opposing balcony, then leaned over the rail and saw that light shined in a line under the closed door to the drawing room.

"Huh," Harry whispered to himself, but trusting Snape's assurance that he didn't wish to further pursue any dark magic, he continued on to his room and changed for bed.

A large box with a clothing company seal arrived in the post one evening. Harry took it from the three burly owls which were carrying it. One of them nipped him as he untangled the last of the string from its feet. "Hey, there," he chastised it.

He set the box on the table to open it, sucking his finger between attempts to unknot the twine. Snape looked up from his tea, pulled out his wand and tapped the box, which obediently untied and sprang neatly open.

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

"It amazes me what you do by hand," Snape commented critically as he tucked his wand away. "Especially considering that you are hardly lacking magic."

Harry studied the contents of the box; a set of black robes were neatly folded inside. Memory set in and he said, "It's my official Auror's robes," as he pulled them out

and laid them across his books. They were made of a black silky material with velvet edging. He fingered the strange thin gold chain that ran from each side of the collar to each shoulder. "Dress robes. Full Aurors have three chains. Tonks said we almost never have to wear them," he commented, thinking how odd they looked. When he set the box aside, he asked, "What's this?" of a black cloth bar spellotaped into the bottom of it. It had three bronze pips on it each with a very tiny pattern of stars.

Snape held his hand out for the bar and examined it. "It represents your three medals for special service to Hogwarts." He put down his teacup and stood up before the robes.

Harry took the pin back and looked at it again. The black cloth of the bar had tiny ridges on it and space for more pips. "Why would the Ministry give me this?"

"Hogwarts is operated for the Ministry of Magic, Harry, so they recognize that your service was to them as well." He took the bar back and affixed it to the upper left breast of the outer robe before holding it up to Harry. "Try it on."

Harry shucked off his house robe and pulled the new one on over his t-shirt and jeans. It had really looked too big despite being measured for him, but it fit perfectly. Snape tugged on the shoulders to pull it straight on him. "Come," he said, leading the way to the decorative mirror in the main hall. Harry's first thought was that the chains on the shoulder weren't as strange when he was wearing them. His second thought was that he didn't look like himself, really, much too broad in the shoulders and strong in the jaw, which was accentuated by the high collar of the outer robe. Snape stepped up behind and considered him in reflection. The memories and yearnings the scene churned up unbalanced Harry and he glanced away, down at the shiny fabric.

"What's wrong?" Snape asked.

"Uh . . ." Harry hesitated, shaking the material out even though it hung perfectly.

"Does the robe evoke something unpleasant?"

"No." Harry turned around to face Snape, putting his back to the mirror. Snape reached out, unhooked the bar and repinned it straighter. He again tugged on the dark velvet rolls at the shoulders to square it. "It fits you well. I assume it was measured to fit." he stated honestly.

Harry turned back to look at himself through the worn silvering of the old mirror. With a furrowed brow he observed, "It reminds me of the Mirror of Erised."

"It what?" Snape asked in near total disbelief.

Harry tried impatiently to explain. "The way you were looking at me."

"I wasn't aware that I was looking at you in any particular manner." Snape studied the scene before asking quietly, "You imagine this to be the Mirror of Erised?" as though stunned by asking. "You truly are that happy with your situation?" he asked quietly.

"I said I was and I meant it."

"What is wrong, then?"

Mind cast back in time to the attic at Hogwarts, Harry said, "The first time I saw the Mirror of Esired, my parents were standing behind me, looking at me the way you were, as though they were so proud of me." It had been the first time anyone had ever done that and that ache came back with the memory.

"Are you feeling guilty for appreciating this because it is me instead of them?" Snape asked, sounding curious only.

"No," Harry assured him. "It's not that." He sorted through the emotions straining in him, wanting to explain. He considered that there was no shortage of witches and wizards proud of him now, so he pushed the old memory aside. He met Snape's black eyes reflected in the mirror and spoke the next thing that loomed up inside him, the emptiness of losing that reflection when Dumbledore took the mirror away and the realization that it wasn't real anyway. "Having something just means . . . " He paused to shrug. " . . . that I could lose it." Speaking that fear made it too real and he wished he had kept it in.

Snape stepped closer, resting a hand on Harry's arm. "I do not intend for that to happen," he stated in all seriousness. "I do intend to be here for you, for rather a long while."

Harry bit his upper lip before saying sternly, "Intent hasn't helped much in the past." He tried to dismiss the issue even as it struggled for more acknowledgment. The ache in his chest signaled that he was losing the battle.

Snape slipped an arm around him, half covering Harry's dark new robe with his older, faded one. "I am used to surviving," he asserted in a low voice. "If doubt about my continued presence is your concern, please don't let it be."

Harry gave Snape's reflection a small wry smile. He wanted to feel secure but it didn't seem entirely possible to, even with the heat of his guardian seeping through the back of his robe. Too many bad experiences reminded him of the foolishness of

being certain. He straightened, thought, and pushed the unease from his expression. A different Harry gazed back at him.

Snape released him with a pat on the arm. "I am proud of you, Harry. I realize I do not say it often . . . if at all." He hovered, as though looking to see the reaction to his statement. "And your friends are correct: at the rate you are progressing you will make a superb Auror by the time you are finished. Just don't get overconfident by what you see here," he added as a warning.

Harry sat mixing practice potions in the Auror office. Behind him, Aaron was urging Kerry Ann to mix something odd for him to drink to get out of visiting his mum's for dinner that evening.

"Purple spots with green stripes?" Kerry Ann suggested, half-serious, as she sorted through the bottles and baskets before her.

Glumly, Aaron said, "She won't notice that."

"Um, boils are easy, but you won't want them on your bum, just your face."

"Did that as a kid," Aaron grumbled. "Worked the first four or five times, but I think she'd get wise."

Bottles clinked as Kerry Ann went through the stocks on the supply table again. "Take Harry with you, then she won't notice you're there."

Harry finally turned around. Aaron looked thoughtful before shaking his head sadly. "I like Potter too much to do that to him."

"You know," Harry said, "you need to visit Weasley Wizard Weezes for some real help."

"That place the hordes of tykes are always gathering in on Diagon Alley?" He sounded doubtful.

"I'll take you there this afternoon if you want. Fred and George will be thrilled to help."

"Can they charm me to turn into a man-sized chicken every time my mother utters the words, 'find a nice to girl to marry'?"

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"Uh. . . " Harry scratched his head, wondering if he should rein Aaron in before things got really bad, or just let the Weasley twins have a go. "Maybe. Be careful what you ask for, though," he felt obliged to warn.

"All right," Tonks said, rushing into the room. "We have to let you all off an hour early." She started to leave then stuck her head back in the door. "Don't get in anybody's way as you go out; everyone's on edge."

"What's going on?" Harry saw fit to ask before the door could close.

It reopened. "That would qualify as getting in my way, Harry," she chastised, then once again nearly departed but stuck her head back in. "But, someone's cursed the Bakerloo tube line, Muggles're trapped, it's a mess." She disappeared for good then.

Aaron tapped his fingers on the narrow bench before him and said in annoyance, "Think we'll ever be useful?"

Vineet calmly said, "Presumably after our three-month examinations, the field experiences will prove more meaningful."

"What?" Aaron said.

Vineet repeated, "We begin field shadowing in just a matter of weeks-"

"No, not that. I heard the word 'examination'." He sounded distraught.

Kerry Ann crossed her arms and considered him. "You didn't take some kind of potion to pass the application examination, did you?"

"No. I just hate examinations: revising, reviewing, cramming, cracking . . . caffeine. I thought I was done with that," he groused.

Harry hadn't remembered this either but he had not reread the training schedule booklet since it was first handed to him. "Let's go up to Diagon," he suggested, "since we are getting off early." Everyone agreed and they walked through eerily quiet offices to the workout room to collect their things.

Diagon Alley was at its sunniest yet and Harry was very glad he had suggested this. Aaron and Kerry Ann stopped before the Apothecary window just as they entered the alley. Harry and Vineet waited behind them. A fully laden shopper stopped before Harry and, in apparent shock, dropped all of her packages. Harry flinched, but

Vineet took it in with his usual detachment, picking up two parcels that had rolled his way as Kerry Ann and Harry helped. "Oh dear!" the witch, portly with very large glasses, kept repeating. Kerry Ann settled the packages back in the witch's arms and opened the wall for her.

Aaron patted Harry on the back. "I take it back . . . you are dangerous."

Harry growled and followed behind as they moved on slowly through the crowd. "Harry!" a familiar voice shouted, followed immediately by a unintelligible admonishment. Harry turned and found Suze at a table outside Fortescue's, her parents beside her, Mum leaning over to whisper something with an expression that put Harry in the mind of Aunt Petunia. Smiling, Harry crossed over to that side of the alley.

"Haven't seen you in a while. How are you?" Harry asked.

Suze grinned back. "Not bad. Bummed that summer's going so fast. Boy you've gotten tall," she observed, voice tinted with jealousy.

Harry, who had no desire to spawn such jealousy, moved to introduce Vineet. "He's in the Auror apprenticeship with me."

"These are my parents," Suze said. Harry shook each of their sober hands. "Want ice cream?" Suze asked brightly.

Mrs. Zepher began, "Suze, dear, I'm certain-"

"Sounds good. Great day for it." Harry turned to Vineet. "Ice cream?"

Vineet nodded solemnly and Harry pulled over chairs for the two of them. Aaron and Kerry Ann must have gone on ahead; Harry couldn't see them through the many shoppers. He pulled his chair closer to Suze's and waved to the proprietor, who came bustling over and insisted on bringing Harry his usual free sundae.

Mr. Zepher, an average looking man in above-average robes, cleared his throat. "Very honored to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter."

Harry was saved from responding to this proclamation by the ice creams arriving. He settled for a polite smile and nod.

Vineet intoned, "You will be corrupted by such special treatment."

Harry really could not tell if he was serious. "Um," Harry stared at the dish, at the faint smoke wafting off the freshly scooped spheres of white in their pool of black sauce. "It's melting; we'll debate it later."

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"So, um, Vin . . . eet, right? Where are you from?" Suze asked, seeming fascinated by him.

"Cuttack,"

"Ah. Where is that?"

"Very close to Bhubaneswar, which is very famous, so maybe you have heard of it."

"Nope. Sorry," she confessed and ate the last two spoons of her ice cream quickly. "So you are going to be an Auror too?"

"I do hope to manage this," he stated, sounding far less certain than expected.

"Don't let his modesty fool you," Harry teased and gave his companion a nudge with his elbow, which softened his stern expression. Harry, however, had learned to look for subtle clues in dark eyes, and saw the taint of doubt there. He frowned and said, "Vineet's taken me down many times."

"Only if you do not have your wand out." Vineet crossed his arms. "Which is rarely the case. My magic inheritance is not so powerful, you see."

Suze looked doubtful about this statement as she looked up at his dark countenance.

"Wondered where you'd got to," Aaron said, coming up from behind, Kerry Ann in tow, already with two big packages from Madam Malkin's.

"Aaron, come meet Suze," Harry said. "She's the Slytherin Seeker."

Aaron shook her hand vigorously and then pulled over yet another chair; it was getting very crowded around their table. Leaning far forward so they were eye-to-eye, Aaron keenly asked, "Thought maybe I recognized you. So, tell me about next year's team."

Suze's eyes fairly glowed as she explained each team member and her hopes for new replacements. Her parents smiled weakly through this. Finally, she wound down and asked, "Are you coming to the matches?" while her eyes darted from Aaron to Harry.

"Most certainly," Aaron replied gallantly. "Harry? Coming to watch Gryffindor lose miserably without you?"

Harry asked, "You've been going to all the matches since you finished school?"

"Nearly all. I rather like Quidditch and my house used to always win. And they will again, right Suze?"

"Oh, definitely," she agreed, grinning at Harry.

"How 'bout you, Vishnu?" Aaron asked. "You have the physique of a Chaser. Do you play?"

"I thought you said your name was . . . uh . . . " Suze said.

"Only Mr. Potter . . . and my father, refer to me by the name Vineet," he dryly explained.

Harry accused, "You introduced yourself to me that way."

"Well, it is my name, but it is not what I am accustomed to being called."

"Why didn't you say?" Harry asked, pushing the last of his melted ice cream aside.

Vineet hesitated, an unusual thing. "I did not wish to correct you," he finally replied.

"What?" Harry blurted. "Why not?" The Indian appeared suddenly quite uncomfortable. Harry couldn't accept that someone with the calm confidence of this man wouldn't just say what was on his mind. "Vineet, you . . . can say whatever you want to me." Harry balked simply at having to say that and at the same time, shook himself for still using his name. "It seems like an appropriate name for you though," Harry observed, half to himself.

"Yes," Vineet agreed as though Harry had said something more meaningful than Harry could grasp.

Aaron clapped them both on the shoulder. "Well, ice cream's finished. Let's get on to that store."

Kerry Ann laughed. "Everyone is overawed with Harry, except Aaron, who behaves like a boar."

Harry, shaking his head, stood, said goodbye to the Zephers and told Suze he would see her at the first Hogwarts' Quidditch match. On the way down the alley to the twins' shop, Harry glanced at Vineet and found him as calm and detached as ever. "Do you want me to call you Vishnu?"

"It does not seem appropriate now," came the quiet response.

"Okay," Harry gave in. They walked around an outside display of used broomsticks that took up half the alley. Eventually, Harry uncomfortable with the notion of someone he was a little awed of being in awe of him, tried to say, "You aren't . . . you can't . . . hmf." Harry remembered their very early conversation after the written test, when Vineet admitted he had been inspired to apply because of Harry himself. "Oh well," Harry said. They had reached the shop anyway.

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Fred was minding the store and he greeted Harry warmly. "And who are your fine companions today?"

"These are the other apprentices," Harry explained. "This is Kerry Ann, Aaron, and Vineet."

Fred leaned close to Harry's ear. "This isn't some kind of bust, is it?"

Harry laughed. "No."

"Ah, good," Fred said jovially. "'Cause if they are half as good as you, I'd just turn over my wand now."

Aaron leaned forward and said cockily, "We are all better at magic than Harry is."

Fred looked alarmed. "Dark magic will never be the same." He then smiled broadly. "But, what can I do for you?"

Grimly, Aaron said, "I require . . . assistance."

"Sounds intriguing," Fred breathed, rubbing his hands together. "I like a man with broad ideas about his needs."

Kerry Ann, who had wandered over to the joke magical-object shelves and was examining a joke Remembrall, quipped over her shoulder. "He just wants to fake illness to get out of dinner with his mum."

"Ah," Fred said with happy relish and swooped around to collect a box from behind the counter, which he presented like a prize to Aaron. "Let me introduce you to our Advanced Skiver's Snackbox." He flipped open the lid with a practiced hand, revealing wooden dividers with multicolored sweets in each. "Arrayed before you is the foremost collection of artificial illness concoctions available anywhere. Well, at least in Europe . . . we aren't sure about China," he added as an aside. "Each column affects a different part of the body. Depth of color affects degree. You may stagger, mix and match. Whatever's needed. All are rigorously tested to guarantee the minimum of negative side effects. That is, other than the ones you're trying to simulate."

Aaron leaned over the box and read the little brass labels on each column. "Hands, Face, Hair, Stomach & Tract . . ." Here he stopped to grimace. "Musculature, Skeleton, X-tra limbs." He looked up at Fred. "Seriously?" he asked.

"Oh, skeleton is not as hard as you might think. Nor as painful."

"I meant the limbs."

"I'll let you know a little secret. That column was the end result of the accidental combination of the previous two concoctions." Fred closed the lid. "Gets you out of anything though." He held the box out, politely with two hands. "Interested?"

Aaron sighed. "Yep, I'll take a box."

Fred swooped away to wrap it up in a nice bag. He dropped in a scroll as well. "Included is a free sample of our latest invention, Hidden Insult Letter Parchment. The first time the receiver of your letter reads the middle sentence of your missive they will believe it contains one of three random insulting phrases, but when they subsequently reread it, it will have disappeared forever. Custom insults are available upon request for volume orders." With a pleased grin he handed the bag over.

Aaron had pulled out the innocent looking sheet tied with a bit of blue ribbon and appeared terribly thoughtful. Kerry Ann hooked her arm through his and dragged him from the store. Fred called Harry's name as they reached the door and when he turned, he tossed Harry a bag of the watermelon sweets and gave him a little salute.

Out on the street, as they made their way back down the alley, Aaron said, "I remember those nutters from school. How did Hogwarts survive?"

"The twins quit early," Harry explained with a laugh and held out his bag of sweets. Aaron immediately accepted one. Kerry Ann declined with a look of alarm. Vineet hesitated while giving Harry a bit of scrutiny, then took one as well.

"Hello, Harry," a familiar voice said from behind him.

Harry turned to greet Ginny, then introduced her to the others. "You're here alone?" he asked, seeing her Hogwarts list in her hand and no other redheads in sight.

"Yep." With a sly look, she said, "You could keep me company . . ."

Harry chuckled, "I suppose. We finished early today, so I'm free now."

"They abandoned us, you mean," Aaron drawled.

At Ginny's questioning look, Harry explained, "Our trainer got called away for an emergency. They're really shorthanded."

"That's presumably why there are four of you," Ginny commented.

"We know that's why there are four of us," Kerry Ann replied.

Aaron was examining his hands. "Hey, this might work, and they taste great."

"Only five minutes of effect," Harry warned him.

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Someone bumped hard into Ginny as he passed in the crowd. "Excuse me," Ginny sarcastically commented.

The figure turned and Harry recognized Nott Jr. "If there weren't quite so much riffraff the street would be clearer," he muttered directly to Ginny.

What happened next, Harry almost missed by blinking. Ginny dropped her wand out of her sleeve and started to raise it but a blue sphere of light appeared to restrain her. She jerked her hand hard against the resistance and it was released, but Vineet was holding her wand. "Truly you do not wish to do that in such a crowded place?" he intoned with an undercurrent of threat.

Ginny was gaping at her empty hand. "How did you do that?" she asked in complete surprise. Nott too was considering Vineet with intent curiosity. Vineet handed her wand back without a reply. Harry and the other apprentices exchanged impressed looks.

With a glance at Nott Harry said, "I'll follow you to the bookstore. Come on." He waved goodbye to his fellows. Ginny pocketed her wand with a faint blush and a dark look at Nott before she stepped away with Harry.

At Flourish and Blotts, Ginny headed to the textbooks, while Harry wandered upstairs. On a small table at the end of a shelf Harry found Muggle-proof book covers – self adjustable to any size from tome to trade. Harry picked up a package of these and not finding Quidditch books as interesting as expected, headed back downstairs. He found Ginny crouching before a bargain bin that looked unlikely to hold books for any years past third. When she spotted Harry, she stacked the loose ones back in quickly and turned to the table of new releases, appearing flustered. She turned to Harry and after a moment asked, "Do you still have your seventh-year Potions texts?"

"Yeah. Do you want to borrow them?"

"Could I?"

"Sure. I'll owl them over or you can grab them on your way home."

She turned back to the table, turning a book called Quick Magical Meals over to stare at the back of it. "There are so many new books on the list this year," she said with a frown.

"You can borrow the Defense ones as well, or did you get those from Ron?"

"They're all different this year. Professor Snape said he found much better ones. . . but much better means . . . "

"More expensive?" Harry finished.

She frowned. "Yep." She flipped through the books in her cauldron and huffed. "Bill's buying a house and Mum and Dad gave them part of the money for that, and I stupidly said . . . well anyway, I thought I had enough."

"What other books do you need?" asked Harry.

"I don't want you to do that," she said, reaching for the list in her pocket, but not pulling it out.

"How about . . . as a birthday present," Harry suggested just a bit playfully.

It had the desired effect. Ginny blushed and curled her lips into her mouth. "I suppose . . . I need Tabor's Triumphant Intermixes yet."

"For what class?" Harry asked, taking the list from her.

"Potions. I swear if Lockhart had written Potions texts, Greer would be assigning them."

Harry peered into her cauldron. "You have everything for Defense, it looks like. Except the optional book." He went off to find Prodigious Protection by Basel Batterings.

Later, when they had checked out and stood at the store's hearth, Ginny held her hand out for the other shopping bag Harry was carrying for her. He withheld it and said, "You can stop by and get the others right now if you want. You need to start reading ahead."

"You must be a fun date, Harry," Ginny commented, but she dropped her arm.

In the dining room in Shrewsthorpe, Harry removed her books from the shopping bag that also contained his purchase and arranged them on the table by subject. "I'll fetch the others for you."

"Thanks."

As Harry's footsteps faded up the stairs, Snape stepped in. "Ms. Weasley."

"Hello, sir."

"Prepared for another year?" he asked, almost amiably.

"Yes, sir. Looking forward to being finished, to be honest."

A little airily Snape said, "We will try to make it worth your while." He noticed the books on the table and picked up the Potions one. "Is this what Greer assigned?" he asked in dismay as Harry returned.

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"Hello, Severus," Harry greeted him.

"Yep," Ginny confirmed. Harry gave her the other books he had, including his N.E.W.T. preparation books. "Too early to think about that," she groaned but picked one up to peruse it.

"Staying for dinner, Ms. Weasley?" Snape asked.

Ginny froze, mid-page turn. "Sure," she replied, mood immediately brightening.

As she served herself from the platter of roast chicken, Ginny dreamily said, "I have to have a house-elf when I get a place of my own. I'll just hide the thing from Mum when she visits."

"And your dad," Harry, sitting across from her, pointed out.

"Think so?"

Harry nodded knowingly.

"Piffle," she breathed. After several silent bites, Ginny said, "So, Harry, I gotta ask, why Ms. Fashion Queen?"

Harry froze, believing she was referring to Tara and utterly unable to fathom how she knew they had gone to a party together, although it had turned out to be a rather nonromantic evening. Snape too seemed interested in the answer to this. "What?" Harry managed to ask.

"Betty C., the winner of the essay contest?"

"Oh," Harry said and then huffed. "I don't know how to explain this. . . "

"I mean really," Ginny criticized. "So not your type. Come on, didn't the second runner-up just have you pegged?"

Harry bore the accusing look from his guardian, started to speak, but then heard something in Ginny's tone. "You wrote the second runner-up essay? I glanced at it; I'm certain I didn't see your name."

Ginny blushed fiercely. "I used a pen name . . . wait, you glanced at it?" Harry didn't reply. Ginny frowned and muttered, "I was going to win the contest and surprise you at the date."

"Skeeter didn't promise a date with me," Harry returned.

Ginny served herself seconds on potatoes. "She implied, I thought." She forked potato into her mouth, swallowed and asked Snape, "So what do you think of Romeo here?"

Snape lifted his chin and said, "As long as he stays out of trouble, he may do as he pleases."

Harry focused firmly on his bean salad. Ginny followed up with, "So what do you consider trouble?"

Sternly, Snape replied, "Harry is well aware of what constitutes trouble."

"Hmmm," Ginny hummed. "So funny to see someone keeping you in line, Harry," she mused with a smile. "As opposed to just the teachers at . . . oops, I guess that's still true."

After seeing Ginny off, Harry, despite great reluctance, went to the library to review. Snape followed and took a seat at the small desk in the corner and opened an unusual purple-covered leather book and began to read. The first book Harry had pulled out, one on the history of Wizengamot decisions involving detention, didn't hold Harry's interest. He reached down to the shelf where his new gold bookmarks were arranged, started to grab the one with an outline of a Welsh Green, but then decided on the Bulgarian Burcock instead. None of the books he needed to read from seemed all that interesting. Yawning, Harry decided to write a few letters instead. Because his nose was buried in his file of loose letters, Harry did not notice the odd attention Snape gave to this sequence of activities.

Harry found his most recent letter from Penelope. It was almost two weeks old, the longest gap in their correspondence yet. The letter was only one page and talked a lot about the changes of summer, which she observed more than most anyone Harry knew, or maybe in the mountains these things were more obvious. When Penelope mentioned at the end of her letter that her parents were off to Egypt for three weeks, his thoughts slid to Elizabeth. After visiting her rather often, Harry had stopped, and he wished he felt better about doing so. As upfront as she was, he missed talking to her. Or perhaps it was because she was so blunt and made others around him seem to be extra careful of his sensibilities. Well, except his guardian, of course.

Harry picked up a quill from the shelf beside him and penned a letter asking Penelope for advice. He dearly hoped she wouldn't be offended but once he considered it, he found he wanted her thoughts on the situation of his desire to avoid a conflict with Mr. Peterson. Just writing it all out seemed to help reduce his frustration, although he had probably not described his neighbor's father in a particularly fair light. He sealed the letter up and called Hedwig down to take it away. She hadn't gone any great distance lately, but she flew off agreeably, the letter clutched in her claws.

A barn owl arrived shortly after. Harry recognized it and found himself eagerly opening the letter from Tara. She wanted to know if he was free that Saturday.

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Doesn't give much warning, Harry thought to himself, as this was Thursday. Ron and Hermione had discussed getting together, but nothing definite. Harry mulled over being the odd one in a threesome versus inviting Tara along, which he resisted doing before he himself had gotten a chance to get to know her. In the letter Tara suggested visiting a castle followed by a quiet dinner in the village where she lived, which sounded very appealing. Harry penned a note back saying he would be happy to join her. Her owl took the note back out the window as though ordered by its mistress to return quickly.

Harry found himself not reading very much after that, but spending a lot of time staring at the page before him. He had to admit that having someone as attractive as Tara wanting to spend time with him made it easier to give up the battle with Mr. Peterson. He resisted weighing the two women in his mind since he didn't really know if Elizabeth liked him more than just friends. Well, he was looking forward to Saturday, anyway.

Friday, after helping Hermione and Ron assemble furniture–mostly bookshelves–for Hermione's apartment, Harry gratefully sat down to dinner at home with Kali on his shoulder. Ron's and Hermione's patience had grown short with each other and Harry had insisted that Snape wanted him home for dinner as a way of giving them some space.

The clouds hung dense overhead so candles had been lit on the table even though it was not particularly late in the evening. Harry liked the candelabra; it was a heavy, soot-blackened ironwork figure that made one think of flying serpents. His Aunt Petunia would have tossed it in the dustbin while wearing a thick oven mitt, just in case. Snape came into the room, and held out a letter addressed to both of them. It was from the Weasleys and it invited them to dinner next week.

"Sounds nice," Harry said, hoping they didn't feel obliged after they had had Ginny over.

"I will respond to them, then," Snape said, putting the letter into the pocket of his dressing gown.

As the meal arrived, Kali climbed down to perch on the back of the neighboring chair and sampled the scents from closer in. Harry fed her some choice strips of rare roast beef which quickly disappeared. Snape didn't seem to care that she was there; in

fact, he seemed distracted. Before the dessert course he went out of the room with purpose and returned as Winky carried in a tray with ice creams, including a tumbler with a teaspoonful, which the elf placed before Harry. "For the beast," she squeaked.

Harry laughed and held the small glass up to his shoulder where the now sleepy Chimrian was drooping lazily. She sniffed the tumbler curiously but didn't seem to grasp that it might be edible. Harry put the tumbler back down and reached for a spoon from the tray, which Winky had unusually left on the table and more strangely, had six spoons on it in a little pile. Thinking that he would never understand elvish behavior, he selected one from the bottom of the pile and dug into his ice cream.

Saturday, Harry carefully put on nice Muggle clothes, followed by his cloak to protect them, even though it was too warm. He had accidentally spent so much time getting ready that he was in a rush when he called out to Snape that he was going and wouldn't be back until late. Snape was ensconced in the drawing room as usual and Harry didn't wait to hear a reply.

Harry was in a hurry because he had to use the Floo to get to Twinkenham on the outskirts of London, then use a broom to get to the village of Appledown where he was meeting Tara. In Appledown, after a rushed flight, Harry landed in a shadowy alley and tried to straighten his wind-blown hair with his hand. He gave up with a sigh, put an Obsfucation charm on his broom and, just in case, set it upright beside a shop dustbin.

Just before the street, he backed up and tucked in his starched white shirt more carefully and shook out his cloak. He shouldn't be so concerned, one part of him insisted, but another part reminded him how smartly dressed Tara always seemed to be. With another sigh, he stepped onto the pavement and walked along toward the castle.

As he passed a pub with tables crowded up to the street, someone said, "Nice cloak," in a less-than-complimentary way. Harry turned, hesitated, and then fixed his gaze on a soft-fleshed man in his twenties, holding a cigarette and a beer glass in the same hand. His mates were chuckling. Without intending to, Harry studied each of them as though gauging whether they represented real trouble. They all sported red-rimmed eyes as though the drinking had been going on since lunch. Harry took in their clothes and appearance as he had been instructed: colors of hair, shirts, jackets, who had

facial hair or glasses, who seemed nervous. None of them looked bright enough to make any decent trouble, frankly. By the time Harry's careful scrutiny returned to the original speaker, the man looked wary. Harry scoffed and with a swish of his cloak, walked on.

At the gate leading to the museum, Tara greeted Harry warmly, all smiles. She had already paid the admission, so he simply followed her inside the grounds. They wandered across the lawn to a half-ruined tower, its fair stone lit attractively in the late afternoon sun. It wasn't necessary to read the cracked plastic signs as Tara was happy to impart all kinds of local history as they circled what had apparently been a dovecot. Harry found himself liking how unselfconscious Tara was about being outgoing, it was a nice change from how she had been before.

They crossed over to a white gravel path that led to a small fountain surrounded by a few sculpted shrubs. "I'm doing all the talking, I think," she finally said sheepishly.

"If you want me to give the tour," Harry teased, "it will either be very short or very silly."

With a bright laugh, she said, "Go ahead then."

They were just at the heavy oak doors leading into the main castle; only a smaller, man-sized door was actually ajar, built into the larger door at the seam. Harry stalled until they were inside, beside a grotesquely ornate, eight-foot high chest. Harry turned from the sight of it and the pained faces carved into the corners. Taking a deep breath, Harry began, "Well, who'd you say . . . oh, yes, the Whithershin's family crest, seen here . . . " He gestured at a faded wooden shield on the back of the massive door, composed of a rearing white dog beside three black blades. "Portrays the dreaded sword fighting Chihuahua-"

Tara's burst of laughter, quickly covered, echoed through the large hall. Another older couple turned from where they stood before a large red tapestry and gave them dismayed glances.

". . . that protected the family fortune, formally hidden in the keep."

They moved from the entrance toward the center of the hall, where a very long table surrounded by age-discolored chairs barely made a dent in the space. Tara forced a straight face and pretended to listen attentively.

"Unfortunately, the family suffered a serious blow in the fifteen hundreds, when the doves, which the Chihuahuas had been trained to not attack, carried the jewels away to a rival's kingdom."

The other couple had moved on so the two of them stepped to the tapestry which had been considered important enough to be printed on the ticket. It displayed a hunting scene with many dogs milling in a pack and one dashing figure on horseback large in the foreground with a horn just hovering at his lips. The trees behind him obscured the other riders.

"Then what happened?" Tara asked.

"Oh, well, the duke was forced to ransom all the attractive furniture to his rival; hence we are left with what you now see here. All but the famous . . ."

"Call to the Hunt," she supplied, fighting a grin.

"All but the famous Call to the Dogs which was the duke's most prized possession. For reasons that are unclear." Tara still looked expectant, so Harry went on as he thought things up, "The tapestry survived only because when his rival came to take away the home decor, it had been folded up to be used as a bed for the attack Chihuahuas. The rival's famous words are remembered to this day, That is a very big dog bed for such small dogs. But he was fooled, and we can be grateful that we can still enjoy this tapestry here today . . . rather than ten miles down the road at the next castle museum."

Grinning, Tara shook her head. "Okay, so I'll take over the commentary again . . . for a little while."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Really?" she said, laughing, "I didn't get that sense at all."

After seeing what Harry hoped was every last room of the castle, they sat outside on a stone bench in the fading light. Swifts dodged around overhead, black against the deep blue of the sky.

"The reservation's not for another half of an hour," Tara said, glancing at her wristwatch. "They'll light the torches when it gets darker; it is a really romantic spot when they're burning." Her gaze was far away as though seeing the scene in her mind.

Harry glanced around them and seeing no one watching, pulled out his wand and aimed an Ignitio at each of the torches framing the doors and the corners of the castle. Tara stiffened and glanced quickly around before relaxing with a chuckle. After Harry stashed his wand he looked over at her again, surprised to find her smile gone.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Nothing." She shifted as though thinking of standing up. "We can go a little early. . . "

"You didn't like me doing that?" Harry asked.

"No, it was really sweet of you to do that."

"Oh." Harry remembered Penelope's sudden sad turns and swallowed a sigh.

They sat in the quiet, flickering light until it was time to leave. Harry had toyed with the thought of shifting a little closer, but Tara seemed too inwardly focused.

She returned to herself when they reached the restaurant. It was finished inside with glass and wood and despite being rather elegant still felt boisterous. Harry forgot about her earlier funk, until she returned from the ladies room with a very dark expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She huffed, "He has no reason to be here."

"Who?"

"Rick. He's over at the bar, buying drinks for my oldest friends."

"Oh . . . ignore him," Harry said.

"Good idea."

After that, Harry imagined he felt eyes on him but he shook it off. Tara's friends came to the table. Harry was introduced to them all and they soon returned to the bar, taking their loud conversation with them. It felt quiet in their absence.

"He doesn't even live near here. . . " Tara griped out of the blue as they ate.

Chastising, Harry said, "Do I have to start giving you the history of this restaurant to get you to ignore him?"

Tara nearly spit out her potatoes, but her smile was worth it.

After the long meal Harry fetched his broom and re-met Tara on the pavement. "You've got it?" she asked.

Harry nodded. He was holding his hand behind his back so he didn't draw attention to his obsfucated broom. "I should get going. I have a bit of a flight to get to the Floo network."

"Don't go all the way back to Twinkenham. You should just take the Floo from my parent's house."

"If that's all right, it would be easier."

Strangely resigned, she said, "Come on," and gestured for him to follow. He did, until the end of the road where she stopped beside a Citroen parked before a shuttered bakers.

"You have a car," Harry observed.

"Yeah," she said, unlocking his door by leaning over inside. "Get in. My parents live two kilometers out of town."

Harry took the passenger seat, which seemed to wrap around him, unlike the big seats in either the Weasley-borrowed cars or his Uncle Vernon's car. "This is yours?" he asked conversationally, adjusting the little louvers for the air vent beside him. The car seemed full of little adjusters.

She put the key into the ignition, but dropped her arm without turning it. "I'm afraid, Harry, that you may be mistakenly thinking that I'm a witch."

Harry froze with his hand on a little knob beside the window whose little movements seemed to magically make big movements in the side mirror. "I might be," he admitted. He cast his mind quickly back and realized that the issue had never come up.

She breathed out, which sounded loud in the enclosed space. "I also am thinking that you probably wouldn't go out with a Muggle, or even a Squib," she stated slowly.

"Oh, no. I don't care," Harry quickly said.

She stared at him in the dim light. "How can the great Harry Potter not care?" she challenged.

"The what?" Harry asked, sounding dangerous.

Her mouth worked silently before she said. "You really don't care?"

He let go of the interesting little mirror adjuster after getting the headlights approaching from behind to not shine in his eyes. "No. I really don't."

She finally turned the ignition. "I should have said something sooner. I'm sorry."

"I think because Rick . . . well, I probably assumed. You never really implied that you were a witch."

She looked around them before pulling out of the parking spot. "True." They rode in silence until slowing on a quiet street where the houses were far apart. Tara said, "My

mum and dad are both magical, but not particularly so. They moved here because they wanted me to grow up a normal Muggle. I wanted horses when I turned twelve because I couldn't ride a broomstick, so they bought me and my brother one each even though I'm certain it was a strain to manage it."

"You have two horses?" Harry asked, glancing into the dark shapes that could be barns behind the house they had parked beside.

"I have three now. Do you want to come over and ride them?"

"I'd love to," Harry replied, remembering the beasts at the Freelander estate. Wanting her to not feel like she was missing out, he said, " In some ways they seem better than a broomstick."

"I'll owl you. I'd really like that; I don't get out here much I'm so busy. I keep expecting my parents to suggest selling them." She got out of the car and came around to Harry's side. Lights had come on in the front of the house. Quietly, she said, "Okay, second confession of the night. I did not tell my parents I was out with you, and I hope they don't utterly embarrass me, but I couldn't make you fly back to Twinkenham, so please bear with them."

She opened the front door of the house and a female voice from the back called out, "Hello dear. I didn't think you'd have time to stop by."

"My date is just going to use the Floo, if that's all right," Tara called out, gesturing quickly for Harry to go into the room on the right, which was small but nicely decorated with curly antique furniture. Harry moved toward the grey marble hearth along the side wall. Many ugly vases lined the mantle as well as a crystal ball and a family portrait taken in front of what must have been a Quidditch stadium although a Muggle might think it a Middle Ages fair.

The voice was closer, "Of course dear, but shouldn't you offer the young man some tea?"

Shouting back, Tara said, "No, he really has to get going." She whispered, "If I tell her you have curfew, that'd be worse." She kissed him quickly on the lips, "I had a nice time."

"Me too. Thanks for the tour," Harry said, fighting a flush. He propped his broom in the crux of his arm to take out his canister of Floo powder. He stopped rushing when a matronly woman came into the room, drying her hands on a tea towel.

"Well, dear, you should introduce us at least. You think your dear mother doesn't take an interest in your dates because you are moved out, but she does. Hello, dear,"

she said kindly, holding out a hand, which Harry shook after juggling the canister back into his pocket.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Her smile faded after her eyes roamed his face. "My goodness, you look . . . just . . . you are, aren't you?"

She hadn't released his hand and her grip had grown tight. "Yes," Harry admitted, relaxing his hand in the hopes that she would give it up.

"Mum," Tara prompted and Harry was freed. Harry expected some kind of impressed pleasure at her recognizing him, but it failed to materialize. Tara's mother backed into the hall with a polite smile and shouted. "Gerald, come down here." Harry at least found Tara equally confused. Footsteps sounded on stairs and then a very average looking wizard in a worn dressing gown, holding a smoldering pipe appeared in the doorway. "Yes, dear?"

"Come and meet Tara's date for the evening," she said evenly. She seemed to have recovered herself, because she did a proper introduction.

"My," was Mr. Terrance's reaction, also thoughtfully subdued.

Harry found himself going on alert, even to the point of feeling around himself for anything dark, although he only ever sensed things at random rather than at will. It seemed an ordinary house.

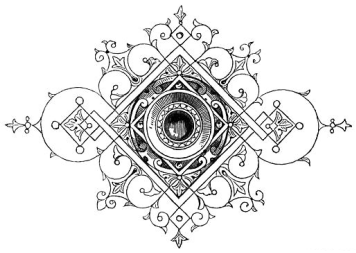
"Harry really can't stay for tea," Tara prompted.

"Perhaps next time, dear," Mrs. Terrance said kindly, sounding normal now. "Although it would be interesting to here how you met."

"At a coffee shop," Tara supplied at the exact instant Harry said, "At a dance club." He fell silent and let Tara amend. "Well, we did meet very briefly earlier this year at a dance club, but uh, we had more chance to talk at the coffee shop. Well, Harry needs to get going," she insisted, steering Harry around to face the hearth. "I'll owl you," Tara said as Harry departed.

An owl arrived from Tara the very next morning. She apologized for her parents and asked if he wished to go riding the last Friday of the month. She promised her parents would be on better behavior, that they somehow were under the notion that Harry himself could be dangerous. Harry sighed and replied on the back of her letter that he would love to try riding and sent her owl back to her.

Chapter 58.



Snapes Story

"You pick up spells very easily," Vineet commented to Harry as they practiced at the end of a long Monday's training.

Harry was feeling a bit proud of the Diamona Block he had learned that day but he was also sensitive to his new friend's limitations. Aaron he didn't mind beating out on nearly every new spell. "Not always," he insisted. "Some things, Transfiguration for instance, takes me a long time to learn."

"You are trying to be making me feel better, I think."

Harry grinned but didn't deny it. As Vineet used a Chrysalis to block Harry's Figuresempre, Harry glanced over at someone entering the workout room and brightened when he saw it was Snape.

"You are late getting out," Snape said. "I suggested Arthur not wait for us."

Harry glanced at the clock. "Ey, sorry," he said. "In that case, look at what I learned today." To Vineet, he said, "Give me a Figuresempre this time."

Vineet obliged and Harry put up his new block. "Sloppy, Potter," Snape criticized. At Harry's surprised look, he went on. "Wand at a 54 degree angle, flat to you. Focus more on the corners of the energy or it will not repel anything significant. Do it again."

Harry adjusted his wand as best he could and nodded for Vineet to hit him again. The yellow crystal around him did look brighter this time and glowed with harder edges.

"Corners," Snape reiterated. "You need to create the nodes in your mind for them to exist in the block. Your block is far too rounded."

"Excuse me," Rodgers said as he entered the room and stepped over. "But who are you?"

Snape turned to the trainer and gave him a close once-over. "I am Severus Snape."

"This is our trainer, Mr. Rodgers," Harry supplied, feeling static forming between the two men. "And this is Professor Snape, he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School." Rodgers expression narrowed rather than relaxing. "Are we released, sir?" Harry asked. "I have someplace to be."

Rodgers waved him off without taking his narrowed eyes off Snape.

Harry glanced at Vineet to nod at him in thanks. "I'll get my stuff," he said to his guardian and left the room.

"I don't believe it," Rodgers said in a low voice. After a long pause he added, "What are you doing with Potter?"

Snape crossed his arms. "I am picking him up; he has a dinner appointment," he replied flatly, as though the man might be dim.

Rodgers snorted. "You don't remember me, I suppose." He stepped closer to Snape's long nose. "What are you doing free?" he asked quietly. The other apprentices stopped practicing at that question and turned to listen.

Snape raised a brow but didn't respond. Aaron stepped closer and said, "Sir, he does teach at Hogwarts. I can vouch for that."

"I don't care about that beyond a passing interest in who the idiot was who trusted him around that many children," Rodgers said, still matching Snape's challenging gaze.

Harry returned, bookbag slung over his shoulder. He opened his mouth to say he was ready but paused; he hadn't seen a face-off like this one since Snape and his godfather had pulled their wands on each other at Grimmauld Place. With a quick stride Harry went over. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking between them.

Rodgers turned to Harry. "Why is this wizard picking you up?" he challenged.

Harry, startled, looked to Snape and back to his instructor. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't want him in here again," Rodgers said sharply to Harry before he turned back to Snape. "I don't know how you managed to stay out of Azkaban, but-"

"Wait a second," Harry interrupted. Anger filled him as he stepped forward. "Where do you get off . . . ?"

Rodgers grabbed the front of Harry's robe and pulled him short. "You don't know what he is," he breathed quietly. "I do."

Burning purpose filled Harry like it hadn't in a very long time and he didn't fight it. "Don't be ridiculous–of course I know," he snapped back at his trainer.

"I will not have Death Eaters in the Auror's training area," Rodgers snarled back. Behind the trainer, Aaron dropped his wand. He bent slowly to retrieve it. "They're all supposed to be in Azkaban, Potter," Rodgers went on angrily.

"Why haven't you caught them then?" Harry mocked him. "Why is one still free? Why did I have to help catch the last six?" Rodgers jaw tightened. Forcing calm over himself, Harry added, "Severus isn't who you think he is. Talk to Tonks, or Shacklebolt, or . . . Headmistress McGonagall. You're jumping to conclusions." With a frightening jolt Harry realized that the only person who had the influence to convincingly vouch for Snape was dead.

"Harry," Snape prompted from closer to the door.

Harry turned to him. As he did, Rodgers grabbed Harry's sleeve. "Why are you defending him? What is he to you?"

Harry jerked his arm free. "My dad." A wand hit the floor again. At Rodgers befuddled expression Harry added, "He adopted me over a year ago." Harry turned again and headed for the door, his thoughts churning crazily.

"I saw him in seventy seven," Rodgers announced loudly in a newly calm voice, a voice that hinted at power and righteousness. "I am pledged to cleanse society of those such as him."

Harry spun back, cloak flipping out behind him. He stalked back over until he was toe to toe with Rodgers. "How dare you?" Harry breathed. Pure white fury coursed through him now, masking his alarm and filling him with raw purpose. "Did you share Voldemort's thoughts for three years? Feel every strong emotion he felt, frightened when he was angry and utterly terrified when he was joyous?" Rodgers leaned back as Harry went on, building in volume. "Were you taken over by him and used as puppet against every fiber of your will until everything you cared about was gone? Did you steep yourself in his snakelike mind to make him experience every last ounce of pain you'd ever felt until he was too incapacitated to fight back so he could be killed once and for all?"

Rodgers took a small step back; Harry immediately shifted forward to meet him. "Did you inherit his inner vision of his servants?" Shouting then, Harry went on. "I have a green world in my head with a black shadow for every one of his marked followers, and you have the gall to assume I don't know when I am standing next to one?" Harry finally stepped back, breathing heavily. "How dare you stand there and judge him, and assume I don't know who he is."

After a long pause Snape said, "Harry, if you have left any bridges . . . at all . . . standing, you should perhaps not disturb them further."

With a last sharp look at his trainer, Harry turned, glancing around the room as he did so. The other three apprentices stood stock still, eyes wide as they tracked him. Harry shook his head in frustration and stomped out, verifying that Snape was close behind.

The lift began to move upward into the next floor and Harry hit the lever to stop it. He knocked his head back against the cage. "I lost it," he said, still short of breath, heart rattling in his chest.

Snape sighed. "So I noticed."

"I panicked," he whispered. "I realized the only person who can protect you is gone."

Calmly, Snape said, "At the risk of sounding like my father, that is not quite true." He pushed the lever back and they started moving again. "Though I have no desire to see it come to that. Still feel up to the Weasley's?"

Harry shook his head and said, "But let's go anyway. They're waiting."

They stepped out into the relatively quiet atrium. Harry said, "Where did he know you from?"

"It took me some time to recognize him, but I believe I remember him being sent by the Ministry to infiltrate the inner circle. He was not adept at Occlusion and it was immediately obvious to me what he was doing. Someone at the Ministry must have also recognized his lack of ability, because he disappeared before anyone else suspected. This was before I had gone to Albus," Snape added more quietly as he fished in his pocket for his small canister of Floo powder.

After a pair of witches went by, talking in low tones, Harry said, "This is something I've left lie and I wouldn't ask except I feel like we are under attack, but how long was that?"

Snape held the shallow canister out for Harry. "Five months," he replied casually, though Harry could hear unease in it. "Go on," Snape said to make him go first.

Chapter 58

Harry stood inside the hearth and said, "The Burrow," as he tossed the powder down. Many turns later, his feet slapped the hearth at the Weasley's. He stepped out quickly so Snape could follow, feeling uneasy about leaving him behind. He relaxed marginally when the flare sounded behind him.

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said in welcome as she came over and gave him a hug. She had on a horrendously mismatched dress and apron. Harry apologized for their late arrival and gave her a hug back, feeling the need for the external support. She said, "The others owled that they would be late as well. So busy those two."

Arthur Weasley stepped over from the dining table. "Well, there you are."

"Sorry to be late. Got, uh, caught up in something."

"Have a seat. Have a seat," Arthur invited, gesturing at the worn old, orange couch. "Hello, Severus."

Harry gratefully sat down and put his head in his hands as his emotions swung wildly. "Have you something strong to drink?" Snape asked.

"Of course." Arthur went to a strange crooked red bottle on the shelf running along below the ceiling. He took down three bright orange little cups and dusted them with his sleeve before pouring into them. Snape immediately handed the first one to Harry.

Harry shot him a pained expression as he took it. "My, my," Arthur said, "Care to tell us what the matter is?" Cup in hand he sat down beside Harry and considered him.

Harry took a swallow, choked violently and immediately took another. He held his little cup out for more. When Arthur didn't notice the hint, Snape handed him his serving with the admonishment, "Slower this time." Harry sipped it but still coughed.

"What happened?" Arthur prompted again.

"I yelled at my trainer after he threatened Severus," Harry said glumly and then blinked. "Do you think I can get kicked out for that?" he asked, considering, only now, the broader repercussions. Ginny came down the stairs then and stopped on the last step in surprise at those words.

Snape pulled over a rickety, straight-backed chair and sat down across from him. Molly stepped over and crossed her arms to listen. Methodically, Snape said, "In my experience with administrative matters, which is what any action to remove you would come down to, what is critical is how it would read if it were reduced to

a memorandum." He waited for Harry to look up before going on, "In this case the memorandum would read, Harry Potter, in parenthesis, THE Harry Potter, became incensed with his Auror trainer when the man questioned his judgment on a Voldemort-related issue."

"He what?" Arthur asked stridently. Snape held up his hand and Arthur sat back, looking intently between them. He sipped his drink and waited, postured as though at the theatre.

"Mr. Potter proceeded to detail for Mr. Rodgers, perhaps too forcibly but in his case, understandably, his personal experiences, mostly traumatic, with the aforementioned dark wizard. Mr. Potter should be familiarized with the rules for decorum and procedure regarding Ministry apprentices, etc."

Harry looked up at him with a grateful expression and a small crooked smile.

"What did Rodgers say?" Arthur asked, refilling his own cup, garnering a slap on the shoulder from Molly for doing so. "Easy day tomorrow, dear," he pointed out as he toasted her coyly.

"Do I get one?" Ginny asked, taking a seat beside her father. Her mother gave her a doubly sharp look.

Harry said, "He recognized Severus from his . . . real Death Eater days."

"Uh oh," Mr. Weasley uttered.

"Asked me why he was there looking for me. Said he should be in Azkaban. That even though he was my guardian, he still should be." Harry drank the last of his cup and didn't even cough this time.

Arthur sat back, cradling his drink. "Hm," he murmured in thought. "I can see why that would upset you, all right. But don't worry, Harry, the public relations battle would be over in a week, tops." Harry gave him a confused look, and he said with grin. "All you'd need is two interviews in the Prophet tearfully saying how the Ministry after all these years has decided now of all times to take away the only family you've ever known. Bam!, he'd be free. Guaranteed."

Harry stared at him mutely.

Arthur hit him on the arm. "You, my boy, have political capital to burn and you've studiously avoided spending even a Knut of it. It's all sitting there, like King Midas's riches, just waiting for you to need it."

"You really think that would work?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"I know it would," Arthur said with certainty.

Harry gave Snape a pained look, making Snape look down at the table between them. The Floo flamed and Ron stepped out, brushing the ash from his hair. Behind him Hermione arrived as well. "Sorry we're late, we-"

"Just in time, dinner is ready," Molly said jumping up to go into the kitchen as though she had forgotten something.

"You missed hearing Harry's troubles," Ginny chastised her brother.

"Wha?" Ron prodded.

Harry summarized as they settled around the table and other than Ron's suspicious glance at Snape, as though he may have been overlooking their old teacher's past, they reassured Harry that Mr. Weasley was most likely correct.

Harry looked over the faces of his friends glowing in the candlelight, and felt very grateful he had come tonight. "Thanks," Harry said to Mr. Weasley as he picked up his fork.

Arthur leaned over. "Harry, any Ministry employee who questions your judgment about Voldemort deserves to lose his job."

It was after midnight when they returned home. Seeing the dark, quiet dining room made Harry think about the immediate future and tomorrow's training. He leaned his head against the mantel and waited for the hearth to flare again. Finally, it did and Snape stepped out of it. "Are you all right?" his guardian asked.

Harry exhaled loudly. "I need to know what happened," he said reluctantly.

Snape stepped to the table and laid his gloves upon it before leaning against the back of a chair.

When he didn't reply, Harry said, "I know you have a meeting to go to at Hogwarts in the morning, but I'm having a hard time imagining going back to the Ministry tomorrow without knowing what I'm defending against."

After a long silence Snape said, "Sit down."

Harry shucked his cloak and took a seat at the table. Snape stepped to the hall and the steps down to the kitchen to ask Winky to bring tea. He returned and sat across

from Harry, but didn't speak right away, just examined his fingertips. Tea arrived. Winky looked uncertainly between them before taking the tray away.

"I was a sixth-year at Hogwarts," Snape eventually began. "Theodore Nott was a seventh-year I admired for his intelligence and because he was never, ever pushed around."

Harry dropped his head and stared at his own hands as he listened. He heard Snape pouring two cups of tea, and reached out for his without looking up.

"Nott would not have paid me any mind had he not needed assistance in Potions. He needed help especially to prepare for his N.E.W.T.s. I spent a great deal of study time tutoring him, was honored to do so. While this was going on, I became aware that I had fallen under an aura of protection from him. Not an overt one, in fact, more powerful because it was not." Snape paused to sip his tea. "In the end he used Legilimency to learn Potion techniques from me when my tuition wasn't clear enough for him. At the end of the year he suggested I learn Occlumency so no one else could do that. I had not known either existed until then."

"I spent the summer studying both Legilimency and Occlumency. I had to practice on strangers which forces one to become adept very quickly. The prospect of returning for seventh year without his presence was daunting. I owled him to ask his advice. In his reply he asked how serious I was about making something of myself, so a week before Hogwarts restarted I met with him. The transformation he had undergone in just the months since the school year had ended was phenomenal. He had such confidence, such an air of power. I wanted that, like I had never wanted anything before. Your tea is cold."

Harry shook his head at that transition. He topped up his cup and sipped it as he tried to pull himself back to the present. "I'm sorry," Harry said.

"It was hardly your fault."

"Still," Harry insisted quietly, eyes glancing away at the stone wall to the right.

"Nott introduced me to two others–a witch and a wizard who were reluctant to show their faces. It was clear Nott respected them though, despite this quirk. I returned to school and almost forgot the introductions, until Nott owled me with a request for Veritaserum. It isn't a difficult potion but it was forbidden to students. I brewed it in an attic that weekend and owled it back to him. He asked me to meet him at the Hogshead on the following weekend. He brought me a potions manual full of forbidden recipes, asked me to mark off the ones I could make."

"I was eager to please, so anything I thought I could work out, I checked off. He made a list of what he wanted. I told him I needed Galleons for ingredients. He gave me a purse-full. Told me to keep what I did not spend."

Snape looked up at the dining room ceiling, gaze far beyond it. "I learned more about Potions in the east wing attic than I did in any class. I needed other equipment so I started doing poorly in class, so that I could convince Professor Beezel to let me do extra credit. I recall to this day how pleased she seemed at my eagerness to improve my grade. That was the first time I realized how ignorant they all were. Or perhaps more generous . . . how trusting."

"Except the headmaster."

Harry grinned lightly and finally met Snape's eyes.

"Never said a word," Snape went on. "But I always sensed that he knew. Eeriest feeling in the world, that. You could never imagine what was going on in his mind because his motivations were utterly opaque."

Snape took a deep breath before continuing. "I finished school and, within a week, Nott paid a visit. My parents discovered the potions manuals and the Galleons and after a loud confrontation with them, they threw me out, which was a mistake on their part because it made my answer to Nott much simpler. Nott treated it as automatic that I would be accepted into the Dark Lord's organization, at some level. He groomed me for a few weeks while I stayed with him and then took me to the next Summoning."

"In retrospect, it was rather comical. Nott had been promising I would meet the Dark Lord. I never actually believed him. Ludicrous, I had thought, to just be introduced to the living evil bane of the wizarding world. Nor did I actually want to meet the most reviled wizard alive. Who in their right mind would? So I never argued the point or asked when exactly that might happen."

"One night he came to my room at one in the morning, told me to change into the hooded robe he had brought, and took me to Voldemort." He paused to refill Harry's tea before going on, "Perhaps you of all people can appreciate what it is like to be so utterly terrified that you feel nothing."

Harry nodded as he blew across his cup.

Snape laughed harshly. "I was praised later for my poise." He shook his head. "At the Summoning, the Dark Lord approached me. I remember Nott bowing and scraping, which was the first beginnings of my doubt, if you can imagine that. I Occluded my

mind and the Dark Lord asked me something and I answered–answered as though I were standing beside myself watching. They were easy questions to answer. Of course I wanted power. Of course I wanted to belong."

Snape stopped then. The teapot was empty. Harry swallowed consciously, unable to find any words.

Eventually, Snape continued, "I didn't mind brewing for them, by any means. One can easily get buried in an interesting activity and ignore that the result, somewhere else, is extortion, blackmail, torture, and even murder." Snape's tone fell darker, "There is no excuse for that, or forgiveness, for letting oneself be a pawn." He lifted his empty cup and tossed it violently against the stone framing the hearth.

The motion and noise startled Harry, who gripped his empty cup fiercely as though to protect it. The air beside the table sparkled and Winky appeared.

"It's all right, Winky," Harry reassured the elf.

Snape looked sharply at her and she said, "Winky not allow anyone to be hurt."

Snape's look darkened at the challenging tone in her squeaky voice. Their gazes locked for a long time. "Go," Snape finally ordered her.

She hesitated, clearly troubled by her conflicting impulses. Harry said gently, "He's only angry at himself. Go on."

She took a half step away as she twisted her tea towel in her hands. "That is worst, Master Harry," she insisted.

"Don't concern yourself," Harry said. "Don't try to help." When Snape's dark look redirected toward Harry, he explained. "She's offered before to intervene."

"In what way?" Snape asked angrily.

"I don't know. I simply told her not to."

Snape stood and faced Winky down as she was backing away toward the door.

"Severus," Harry said. "Please. Her instincts are to deal with someone like Barty Crouch Jr. You have to take that into account."

Snape straightened and turned away from her with a snapping motion. She hovered in the doorway. "I not allow Master to hurt another or himself," she insisted.

"We understand that," Harry said. "It's not going to happen. Go on." He motioned her away. She finally left, looking very unhappy.

Snape dropped back into his chair. "Where was I?" he asked in an annoyed tone as he rubbed his forehead.

"Pawns."

"Yes." He pushed his hair back. "At the next Summoning, I gave myself over."

"Why?" Harry asked in disbelief, pained at the thought.

"I felt I had no choice, which was clearly not true in retrospect. One always has a choice, even if it is an alternative of death." Snape paused again, looking pained also.

"After that I was trusted completely and given much more to do. I followed Nott and Malfoy as they went about their task of bringing down what was left of the Ministry power structure. I was alarmed at how little actually remained. No ordinary witch or wizard understood how dire things were. Ordinary paths of justice and administration had been hollowed out and were merely shells to be manipulated for the those with old influence or for our organization when needed."

"I was impressed with how careful they were about remaining invisible, even when it cost them. Nott frequently commented that if the Ministry were so weak it deserved to be torn down. He started to sound reasonable, in his own twisted way."

Snape fidgeted a moment before he went on. "But Malfoy and Lestrange were another thing. They loved it most when someone held out." He swallowed hard, looking unwell as he remembered. "Power and the right to torture those they saw as beneath them were all they wanted. The intricacies of the politics were a distraction to them. I was sent out with them one night to encourage someone to see things our way."

"I stood by and did nothing. Nothing. Except absorb the hatred and loathing of two perfectly ordinary people who had a thousand times more honor than I did."

Harry bit his lip. "That wasn't the Longbottoms, was it?" he asked with great reluctance, only because he knew the question would haunt him until it was answered.

Snape shook his head. "But it might just as well have been," he replied. "The next chance I had in Hogsmeade, after an ordinary drop, meaning giving money to someone in exchange for something they've collected that we wanted, I went up to the castle." He laughed lightly. "The doors were spelled. They would not allow me entrance."

Harry held his breath. "What did you do?"

"I went around to the gamekeeper's cabin. Realize that at the time I did not know Hagrid beyond his name. But he answered the door quickly enough, considering the

late hour. I told him I needed to see Dumbledore, which was very difficult because it meant I had failed, utterly."

"He said he would try his best, which was not the most reassuring at that moment. But presently he returned, told me to follow him, and took me up to the headmaster's office. I was shocked to gain such easy entrance. What if I had been sent to do him harm?"

Harry broke in, "You couldn't have touched him."

"At that time I did not realize how powerful he was. I always figured no truly powerful wizard in their right mind would settle for such a position. In any event, he listened to my story and then simply waited, for what I wasn't certain. I filled in more details and still he remained silent, and so bloody patient it was downright aggravating."

Harry grinned lightly.

"I finally simply apologized for having to be there, for being too bloody stupid to have fallen into the whole thing, for needing help at all. And he smiled." Snape shook his head at the memory. "He asked me if I really wanted to defeat Voldemort . . . threw his name out, just like that. When I replied, yes, he told me to unOcclude my mind."

"Having decided that the last time I had given myself away was a major mistake, it was very difficult to do so again. He told me that he understood and to return when I felt ready. I could not do that; I could not leave without some hope. So I did as he requested."

Snape clasped and unclasped his hands rhythmically before continuing.

"It was very different being suddenly beholden to someone who had no desire to have anyone be so. He said he would be in touch. I insisted he make some request of me and I will never forget what he said. He told me to preserve what was left of myself and hold it dear because I was going to need it."

Harry flipped the teacup around in his hands nervously. Eventually, turning it upside down to let the dregs seal it to the tabletop.

Snape went on, "Over the next month, he asked a few small things from me, informational things, which I willingly provided. Then that fall he suggested I seed the idea with Nott of planting a Death Eater within Hogwarts, which was a bastion they could not penetrate. Have something befall the current Potions teacher." When Harry's eyes went wide, Snape said, "With Beezel complicit in the scheme, since she

was considering retirement anyway. She mysteriously fell ill before the next school year and a replacement was sought in a hurry. It was made to appear that rather a lot of convincing was required to secure my place. At first I was a temporary fill-in and only after exemplary performance was I made permanent. Always I complained to my fellows about Dumbledore's lack of trust. Only McGonagall knew otherwise, although I knew she doubted me, nonetheless."

"How long did that go on?" Harry asked in pure curiosity.

"I am not certain. She was always grudging about granting me any leave, even after the Dark Lord's apparent demise after attacking you."

"She still is, I think," Harry commented, feeling the need for some lightness.

"It used to be worse," Snape said forcefully. He stared at the far wall for a long time, deep in thought.

New uncertainties were haunting Harry now but it was nearly two in the morning.

"You have more questions," Snape stated without looking at Harry.

"They can wait."

"I would prefer to get this over with," Snape said tiredly.

"Then they aren't that important," Harry said. He mostly wanted to know how much Snape had been forced to do in the spirit of remaining above suspicion, but at the same time, was afraid to know.

Snape broke the silence by quietly observing, "It is ironic that this should be coming back to snare me now."

Harry mulled that over. "You were putting it behind you?" he asked, hopeful that might be true.

In a surprised tone Snape said, "I have moments when I feel so–to which I credit you–so perhaps my mother was right."

"If that works for you, you may have it. I don't mind giving it," Harry said.

Their eyes met for a time. Snape finally said. "I have to admit, I sometimes feel as if I've won." At Harry's curious look he went on. "I cannot equalize the harm I did; it isn't possible. I cannot get even with your father, because he isn't here to confront. Nonetheless, I have been feeling free of it, as though I've risen above it and it no longer matters nearly as much."

"It doesn't matter as much," Harry confirmed.

"Is it possible I've won?" Snape asked, sounding as though he were addressing someone not present. "You, Harry, are in the unique position of judging if I have."

"Only you can, I think," Harry returned reluctantly.

Snape laughed lightly, but not in a totally sane way. "I adopted my enemy's son and treated him as my own. What more could I possibly have done to prove I am beyond the trap of my hatred for him?"

Harry didn't have a reply. That assertion was too tangled for him to dare address.

Snape went on, sounding very tired now. "And if amendment were possible for what I did, you are the only vehicle for it."

A little uneasy, Harry asked, "Is that why you adopted me?"

"No," Snape replied firmly. "I did it because I enjoyed your companionship and was tired of being alone. If that is a better reason," he added flippantly. "Mostly I did it because you seemed to need it and Dumbledore had faith that it was the right thing to do."

"That's an okay reason," Harry opined. "And I did need it."

Snape fell silent as though he had emptied himself of speech. Harry rubbed his eyes; his mind begged for quiet and sleep. He wanted to say something about his determination to protect Snape, but he could not find a way to do it without hitting his guardian's pride. Instead, he put a hand on his shoulder as he stepped by. "That's enough for me."

"You have some potion remaining, if you need it?"

At the doorway to the hall, Harry replied, "Yes. Good night, Severus."

Snape turned his head in his direction so it was in profile. "Good night, Harry," he said tiredly.

In his bed, Harry finally managed to slow his twisting thoughts and relax, although he didn't really sleep, nor did he feel like taking any potion since he wanted this time to think. He must have dozed lightly, though, because he was awakened by an approaching shadow in the green haze of his sleeping mind. Harry lay still, pretending to sleep, mostly because he didn't want Snape to think he had found his story disturbing enough to keep him awake. Eventually, Snape departed after hovering for nearly a minute.

When he was alone, Harry rolled onto his other side, wishing there was something he could do to change everything.

Chapter 58

The next morning, Harry arrived early for their first session. The other three came in soon after, eyeing him with surprise and wariness. Aaron sat beside him and leaned close. "Was Snape really . . . ?" he started to ask when Rodgers stepped in. The trainer looked Harry up and down once, and ordered with a frown, "Potter, a word."

Harry followed him out and down to his office. It was a shared space and he gestured that he needed to be alone and his only present officemate, Rogan, retreated with a nod of hello at Harry.

"Sit down," Rodgers ordered flatly.

As he obeyed, Harry replayed in his mind Snape's comment about the memorandum. Rodgers was a long time in continuing, but finally he said, "I spoke with Tonks, and Kingsley, whom you apparently know as well. They supported your assertions." Harry didn't react except to relax a little. Rodgers flipped through a file that had Harry's name at the top. "Mad-Eye, who did the background check for your application, was also apparently unconcerned about your living arrangements."

Harry wanted to read the notes Moody had scrawled crooked on the white parchment Rodgers held, but he didn't want to obviously lean over to do it. Carefully, Harry pointed out, "Moody was in the Order too."

Rodgers looked Harry over before saying, "I am bothered by doing nothing–bothered a lot. I cannot believe the W.F.C. let him adopt you. They refused to give me a copy of your one year review unless I had an investigation number."

"I can summarize it for you," Harry offered.

Smartly, Rodgers replied, "Don't bother. I can imagine you told them what they wanted to hear."

Very calmly Harry said, "I told them the truth. I don't have to lie to tell them I couldn't be happier to have him as my guardian. I wouldn't be here in this program if he hadn't helped put me back together." Harry gave his trainer a intense look as he said, "I needed someone who understood for that. Somone who understood everything, including being marked by Voldemort."

Rodgers winced. "I can't just leave it. What about a hearing–a closed one–before the Wizengamot? Let them hear his story and decide what should happen. Surely you must trust their judgment?"

Harry wondered at his trainer negotiating at all. Flatly, he said, "I was before them once. They were going to break my wand for defending myself and my Muggle cousin against two Dementors. At the last moment they moved the location of the hearing and the time, to try to keep anyone from coming to help me at it."

Rodgers' face twisted in a frown. "You have to work closely with them as an Auror, Potter, so try to dredge up a bit more respect than that. When was this?"

"The Umbridge Era."

Rodgers rolled his eyes. "Oh," he said with a frown of remembrance.

"What are you hoping to accomplish?" Harry asked. "Are you just trying to soothe your own conscience?"

Rodgers gave the question due consideration. "An annoying but fair question," he huffed. "You know what is ironic, Potter? I've been trying to provoke that reaction out of you since you started. I thought it'd be easy. I expected you to be the ultra prima donna, that you were playing it nice and that you wouldn't hold up under pressure. I had finally admitted I was wrong, when out of the blue you hit me with that tirade."

"You threatened the only thing I care about," Harry said darkly.

"You're serious aren't you?"

"Completely. I like having a father. It isn't something I'd ever thought I would have." Harry wondered if he should hint at the P.R. battle he'd start if necessary, but held back.

"And given a choice between this program and him?"

Harry raised a brow. "You have to ask?"

Rodgers tugged at his hair. "I'll lose if I take you on, I know that. You hang in the wings most of the time, but I have a sense you understand what power you really hold. I'd hate to lose you in any event; you're a marvel with a wand, and when you talk about dark wizards you sound like one of the twenty-year veterans in this office."

"I do make mistakes," Harry said.

"Everyone does. Surviving to not repeat them is all that matters."

After a pause Harry said quietly, "That's what Severus did."

"You know his whole story? And you can in good conscience live under the same roof?"

"Yes," Harry assured him.

Rodgers sighed in defeat. "All right, Potter. I'll let it go."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely, not hiding his relief.

"You were way out of line, though," Rodgers said stiffly. "You are on probation for a month. Don't step out again or we will have a hearing."

"Yes, sir," Harry said obediently, then stood when Rodgers waved him off.

"Whenever it bothers me that he's free, I'll just remember that you are keeping an eye on him."

Harry paused with his hand on the door latch. "He doesn't need it, but if it makes you feel better, consider that I am, sir." It was true that Harry didn't know everything Snape was working on. Maybe he would be a little more curious from now on, or maybe not.

Back in the workout room, drills had already started with Tonks in charge. Harry took up a pairing with Aaron, who gave him a questioning look.

"Did you work it out?" Tonks asked.

"Yep. A month's probation for stepping out of line."

"A month?" she asked in surprise. "Well, from what I heard, you probably deserved it."

At the end of the day, Harry was tired, but the house would be empty when he returned. He hung around the meeting room where they stored their bookbags until Aaron and Kerry Ann left. "Do you feel like dinner, Vineet?"

The Indian looked up in surprise. "You are inviting me out?"

"Yep."

"I am a vegetarian, do you mind Indian food?"

"Not at all. I'd prefer a Muggle place since it will be quieter," Harry said.

"There is a wonderful tandoori place in King's Court, but I am leaping ahead . . . "

"No, sounds wonderful."

They arrived at the restaurant after a short underground ride and a longish walk, which Harry enjoyed as a chance to clear his head. As they took their seats, the waiter greeted them warmly. "Vishnu, good to see you. The usual?"

"Yes, plus something for my friend. The lamb?" At Harry's nod, the waiter smiled broadly and departed for the kitchen.

The restaurant was sparsely populated and no one paid them any attention. Vineet sat quietly for a long time. After their samosas and beers arrived, he broke the silence by saying, "You are a mystery to me."

Harry bit into a steamy pocket filled with curried stuff and quickly drank his beer. "Me?" he asked in surprise.

Vineet nodded his head, looking very serious. "Your guardian, whom you defended so powerfully, once served the Un-named One. I cannot understand this." He sounded disappointed as well as mystified.

"It was only for a short time and it was a very long time ago," Harry pointed out.

Vineet shook his shiny-haired head more solemnly. "To be marked he had to give himself over. There is no path back from that."

Harry put down his beer and smoothed the white table cloth with a brush of his hand. Equally solemn, he said, "There is if I make one for him."

Vineet gripped his beer glass hard and gave Harry a very long look. "And you do this?"

Harry hesitated, thinking over the last year. "I have to," he replied, feeling unsteady with the realization. He was experiencing a clarity that felt mocked by this place of spiral carved wood and jeweled paintings of calm, contorted figures. "It's the path I am using as well."

In silence Vineet considered this at length. Harry waited for some kind of verdict from him, felt that he needed one. The waiter brought little metal dishes of roasted eggplant, tandoori lamb, and chickpeas in tomato sauce. Harry thought he had lost his appetite to emotion, but the scent wafting from the table made his stomach growl.

As they served themselves, Vineet said, "You are doing too much in one turn of the wheel."

"I don't get that."

Vineet shook his head. "It is not a Western notion," he said evenly. As he tore the naan and used it to scoop up sloppy chunks of eggplant, he commented, "I hope you make your path well to carry two on it."

"I'm not working on it alone, so I think it will be all right," Harry said, feeling lightheaded with these notions.

This comment seemed to make Vineet curious, but he let the topic go in favor of eating with a serious expression.

Later at home, Harry studied in the dining room so he could greet Snape when he returned from Hogwarts. He felt secure now and relished in it.

It was after nine when the hearth flamed green. "Hello, Severus," Harry said in greeting.

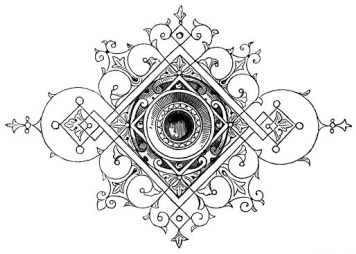
Snape, looking a little worn out, returned the greeting and sat across from him with bothering to remove his cloak. Like clockwork, Winky brought tea to the table. As he poured, Snape asked, "How did your day go?"

"I convinced Rodgers to let it go," he replied, forced to cast his mind back that far in the day.

"Thank you, Harry."

Harry took a chocolate biscuit off the tray. "You're welcome," he said easily before he bit into it.

Chapter 59.



An Unexpected Test

Harry sat down in the library to take some notes from his reading, which he always seemed to be a day or two behind on now. His quill wasn't with his letter parchments where he usually kept it. On the desk was a tin of six bright new white quills. Harry stepped over and selected one after a brief deliberation.

He was finishing up a chapter when Snape came in and sat down with a sigh, clasped his hands before him, and considered Harry as he scratched away with the quill. Harry closed up his books before addressing his guardian's silent gaze.

"I am actually all finished with Hogwarts business," Snape stated, tapping his fingers together idly.

"Congratulations," Harry offered lightly.

After a moment Snape inquired, "How are you doing?"

"Good. Yesterday we did rejuvenation potions and curse averting charms as well as cursed object recognition, which was very easy, and it was a nice break from getting kicked around practicing counter curses," Harry replied. Snape for once failed to ask if Rodgers was still being hard on him.

"Would you like to do something?" Snape asked after another long pause.

"Um, like what?" Harry asked, surprised by the question.

Snape shrugged and tapped his fingers more. "What would one normally do on a sunny Friday?"

Harry considered that. The world of possibilities was pretty broad if one considered it. "How about the zoo?"

Befuddled, Snape echoed, "The zoo?"

Harry considered that that was his favorite place as a child. "Yeah," he insisted. "Have you been to the zoo?"

"Yes, the one in Chester, a very, very long time ago. . . to get an ingredient for a potion." He shot Harry a haughty look.

"I won't ask."

"Just lion whiskers . . . and they were rather easy with an Accio spell. Woke the lions up for once; everyone was quite excited to actually see them moving."

Harry chuckled. "So the zoo, then?"

Snape pushed himself to his feet. "Why not, Potter?" he breathed, sounding put-upon.

"Come on. It'll be fun," Harry insisted, happily putting his books away to finish later.

On the second bus between Chester and the Zoo Harry wished they had ridden the motorbike. Getting to the old part of Chester by Floo had been very easy, but after that it was rather a hassle. Eventually though, they arrived at the entrance. Past the gates Harry stepped immediately over to the elephants. One stood very close to the tilted railing, dragging its trunk over the dusty ground to pick up stray bits of straw. After a minute Snape said, "There is much to see, this being the largest zoo in the country."

"Is it?" Harry asked, pulling himself from some reverie he had apparently fallen into. After passing over a bridge and stopping beside a small herd of what looked like donkeys, they were faced with signage promising far too many animals. One sign promised endangered dragons, of all things. Harry insisted on following that way. The dragons turned out to be of a very non-magical variety of lizard called komodo dragons, although the sign insisted that their bite was rather nasty and could result in a slow, miserable death. Looking the unmoving animals over, Harry figured that assumed you were dumb and slow enough to get caught by one of them

Harry let Snape lead this time and after long stops at the Orangutans and Chimpanzees, they stepped into the cool, dark interior of the reptile house. Harry stopped before the boa constrictor and waited for a group of loud pointing children to move

out of hearing. Snape had apparently moved on as well because he wasn't in sight either when Harry said hello to the snake.

The thick, coiled reptile raised its head and sniffed the air with its tongue. "My, you aren't talking to me, are you?" the snake asked in an accent.

"You must have been born in Brazil," Harry observed.

"Where else?" the snake asked, sounding a bit rude.

Harry shrugged and since a family with a toddler was fast approaching, chasing the youngster, Harry moved on. It required a bit of wandering to locate his guardian, but he eventually found him before the glass niche of the Asiatic king cobra. He seemed to be studying it rather intently, tipping his head to the side even.

"Your kind of snake," Harry teased.

"Yes." Snape turned away from the glass. "Make any new friends?" he asked a bit snarkily.

"No, actually."

"Pity."

Outside the reptile house, children were gathered around an ice cream stand. "That looks good," Harry said of the treats going by, gripped in small, happy hands. He fished in his pocket and came up with only Knuts and Sickles. "Got any Muggle money left?" Harry asked.

"You want me to buy you an ice cream?" Snape asked, sounding artificially put-upon again.

"Yeah."

"And you are how old now?" he jabbed, although he went over to the stand and returned presently with a chocolate-dipped treat on a stick for Harry and a lemon ice for himself.

"Thanks," Harry said, peeling the wrapper away and sighing at the wonderful frosty aroma inside.

"You could send Winky for such treats . . . "

"Not the same," Harry insisted dismissively. The treat was melting fast in the sunshine, so Harry took a seat at one of the nearby, umbrella-shaded tables. This also had the advantage of getting upwind of the camels. Snape pulled out the zoo map and sat across from him to eat his ice and peruse it.

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"I am thinking that given the size of the orchid collection that a bit of . . . ingredient collection may be in order."

"Can't take you anywhere," Harry scolded him with a grin and squinted into the sunny surroundings.

Snape's brow furrowed as he turned the map over. "Are you enjoying yourself, Harry?"

"Very much, thanks." Harry bit through half of the last of the treat surrounding the wooden stick and after swallowing, said, "You know, you seem . . . less like a parent and more like a friend now."

Snape considered him briefly before saying, "As long as you do not step out of line . . . "

Drawing the last of the hard chocolate and cream off the stick with his teeth, Harry muttered, "There is that."

Sunday, Harry with trowel in hand, was putting the finishing touches on a small repair to the garden wall when someone cleared her throat nearby. Quickly wiping wet mortar off his nose, Harry turned and found Elizabeth leaning on the gate. This reminded him that he had noticed last week that the hinges were coming loose from the wooden post, probably due to their excessive rusting.

"Hi," Harry said, trying not to sound too welcoming.

"Haven't seen you around," Elizabeth observed in a friendly tease.

"It's been busy." As he scraped off the trowel on the edge of the bucket, Harry fished for something to say. "How did your recital go?"

"Pretty good. Most people were impressed I'd even tried that piece."

There was not much time to get water into the bucket to rinse it before the cement set. Harry stared down at it, trying to decide how to approach this dilemma; he dearly wished to avoid trouble. "I have to get this washed out," he explained, indicating the bucket.

"Okay," she said brightly but frowned instantly after. When Harry reached the door, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

Harry turned back, scrubbing again at the smear of cement drying on his nose. "Nothing I can fix," he admitted.

"What does that mean?" she asked, leaning over the gate to see him better. "What's the matter?"

Waving the bucket again, Harry said, "I gotta go." He didn't give her a chance to speak further.

After cleaning up, Harry returned to the library. This time when he needed a quill he found the tin on the desk so densely packed with swan quills it itself resembled a kind of bird. He blinked at it, trying to imagine what would necessitate owning so many quills. Snape was busy with a letter and Harry, rather than interrupt, simply pulled one out. He didn't like that one; although he could not have expressed exactly what he disliked about it. It was brand new, bright and unused, just like the others. He selected more carefully this time and moved to sit back on the lounger, but Snape's voice brought him to a halt.

"Why did you choose that one?" Harry's guardian asked with an unexpectedly sharp edge.

"What?"

More slowly, as though Harry were a first-year again, "Why, did you select that quill out of a tin of forty quills?"

Harry looked down at the feather in his hand, at the clean, professionally cut nib at the end of it. It flipped easily around in his fingers as he tried to understand the question. "I don't know," he replied, even though Snape seemed adamant about receiving a good answer.

Snape stood suddenly and clapped the single, small drawer to the tiny desk closed. "Come with me," he ordered and strode from the room, pulling a bright purple book from a shelf on the way out.

Snape led the way upstairs to the first unused bedroom. "Stand there."

Harry glanced uneasily at the pentagram on the floor. "Here? Why?"

Snape's lips twitched ever so slightly. "Trust me, Harry."

Shrugging internally, but still uneasy, Harry complied. The room suddenly felt colder in a bone chilling way not caused by drafty architecture.

Snape opened up the purple book Harry had seen him with the last few days and began to read from it, "Fevered minds and Adepts both trod the plane which gives no consideration to distance as the spatial dweller experiences it."

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"Is this a spell?" Harry asked.

Snape paused and looked up. "No. Not yet, anyway. I am very curious about something."

Harry, unaccustomed to being the focus of Snape's studies, fell silent and watched his guardian's dark eyes moving along the words beyond the veil of his hair. He read silently for a minute before lowering the book.

"Close your eyes," Snape ordered. When Harry did so, Snape went on, "Do you remember the train ride through the Alps?" Harry nodded and Snape asked, "Do you remember the creatures you noticed in the depth of the rock?"

Harry did; he could not forget them, the sound of claws scrabbling on stone, the odd chittering. He gasped as he heard it again as though the creatures were right there in the room. Jerking in surprise, Harry jumped out of the diagram, heart rate escalating. He and Snape stared at each other until Snape calmly said, "Sensing them again?"

"Yes. Right over there." Harry indicated the nearby wall with a wide gesture.

Snape took Harry's shoulder and muttered offhandedly, "Well, that is southeast," as he steered him back into the center of the diagram. Harry swallowed hard and tensed, expecting that the creatures would return. Snape said, "Close your eyes again- do not fret so; they cannot reach you . . . I don't expect." After a pause he added, "Do not summon them, in any event."

"How would I?"

Snape, who had started to read again, paused and said offhandedly, "Well, you do not want them here, correct?" At Harry's vigorous nod Snape dismissively added, "Simply continue to wish them to be somewhere else." He went back to the book. Finally, he snapped it closed and said, "Close your eyes. Remember the Dementors' mind-web?" Harry nodded from behind his eyelids. "When you sense the Shetani-"

"Is that what they are?" Harry interrupted.

"It would seem so, your description is quite accurate. Nevertheless, when you sense them, is a similar web present?"

"No. With the Dementors I could feel the tethers; this is just like being in the same room or very close-by." Harry stood tense, eyes closed, dearly hoping he could not hear them chittering again.

"Remain as you are," Snape commanded. It sounded as though he were moving around as he spoke. Harry smelt burning wax, but he held still as instructed. A

moment later he heard something else, sounding like a cloak dragging over a rough surface, a Lethifold perhaps, which made him turn his head around, open his eyes, and look out the door of the room. But there was the ordinary hall illuminated by the large chandelier. Candles now burned at Harry's feet, at each apex of the pentagram.

When Snape saw his alarm, he said, "You are in no danger, Harry. What was that, by the way?"

"I don't know," Harry answered quietly. He wished to move out of this disturbing spot. "What are we doing?"

"I am most curious about something. Just a minute more. Close your eyes again and tell me what happens."

Harry did so. The room was quiet, only a distant car could be heard on the road outside. It was quiet enough that Harry could hear one of the candles flaming high beside his foot. Something shifted behind him, low through forest undergrowth, even though the stone floor was actually behind him. He didn't turn this time, but relaxed into observing instead. In a dizzying sequence Harry imagined a dense old forest, an isolated island battered by waves, an endless vista of dunes and finally an old cobbled street. "I . . . " he began to explain, then gave up for lack of words.

"What do you sense?"

Harry couldn't explain. Nervous with the strangeness of it all, he listened hard to the scrabbling movement behind him. But it wasn't the only noise, many other things around him made noises. The chittering of the Shetani was just one of many, he realized with a severe start. Things slithered, moaned, hissed, and worst of all, turned his way with queer, disquieting interest.

"Can I step out now?" Harry asked, voice wavering.

"Yes."

With a sharp exhale Harry stepped between the candles. The room returned to mundanity, leaving him dizzy with relief. Snape considered him expectantly. "That was really strange," Harry said.

"What was it?" Snape asked, ducking to snuff the candles.

It was easier to speak without Snape's eyes upon him. Harry said, "At first there were all these places, like stone streets, deserts, seas. Then it was just dark and all of these things were around me. I don't know what they were. The Shetani, but also something like a Lethifold and lots of other creepy things. Hundreds or more of them," he added, voice faltering again at the very notion.

Snape stood straight and placed the candles on the shelf where Harry had put the skull. With the purple book in hand, he turned to Harry and said, "I am not certain how to tell you this."

Thinking that sounded as though Snape were going to pronounce him to have some kind of terminal illness, Harry held his breath while prompting, "What?"

Snape sighed, appeared to consider flipping open the book but tucked it again under his arm instead. "You show signs of not only Astral but also temporal vision."

"What does that mean?"

"Out of three bookmarks bearing various sleeping curses you chose the weakest. Out of six spoons you selected the only one not holding a cold metal charm. Out of six quills you selected the only one taken from a bird still living. Out of forty you still managed the same."

Startled, Harry asked, "You've been testing me?"

"Yes. And you passed them all without conscious awareness," Snape went on, sounding impressed and concerned in equal amounts. They considered each other in the dim room a long moment before Snape solemnly stated, "You are growing very powerful, Harry." Mouth dry, Harry did not speak as he contemplated that in silence. Snape pushed his straggly hair back and said, "You are gaining deep magics, the old kind which Albus insisted you had potential for, usually when one of the staff would question his actions regarding you, either his overprotection or his complete lack of protection."

Harry pushed aside old memories that comment brought up. He knew he was very good at Defensive spells and all of the subduing spells, but he did not understand what this other power meant.

This time Snape did flip open the book after examining it. "Your experience with the Shetani induced me to order this book. It is a reprint of one written four hundred years ago. Most consider it to be irrelevant to so-called 'modern magic'."

Harry's mind worked fast around the words Snape was saying. "You don't think the Shetani sensed . . . you know, some kind of remnant of Voldemort?"

"No."

As much as Harry disliked imagining dark creatures trailing him because he carried some scent of the Dark Lord's essence, it was worse to consider that they were attracted to him without.

Snape gave him a half-smile. "You are capable of sensing the plane they are on, which exists with only loose regard to this world's notion of place or distance. That is why you sense so many at a time."

Harry calmed a little. Snape's clarification at least explained why the room had seemed so very crowded with dark creatures; he was sensing a whole world's worth at once.

Snape flipped through the book, his gaze beyond the pages. Regretfully, he shut it suddenly and said, "I cannot guide you through this . . . at least not with what I know at present. And unfortunately, no one has taken this sort of magic seriously in a very long time, so it is unclear where you might find guidance."

Gesturing at the floor, Harry said, "But if I don't step into a device, then . . ."

"You were not in one on the Swiss train, but you were in their territory," Snape interrupted. More forcefully, he said, "No one, but a Mage Adept could, without a complicated spell that would require a week of research in an extensive library, detect which quill out of forty was from a bird still living. The book suggested that test and I so doubted you would sense an anomaly in the feathers, I very nearly did not conduct it. I tested you twice because I believed you had beaten chance the first time." He gave Harry yet another quirk of the lips and stepped closer. "Imagine my surprise when you dropped that feather with dismay and selected, from thirty nine others, the Radiant one, as this book refers to it."

Harry pointed at the book. "Can I borrow that?" Snape immediately held it out. It was a heavy one for its size. Harry tucked it under his arm, pretending it was as light as it should have been. "Is there something, you . . . want me to do differently?"

Snape gestured for them to leave the room. "As always, be watchful."

The dark creatures were the watchful ones, Harry thought with a shiver. On the stairs Harry said, "If I start seeing these things all the time, what should I do?"

"Get used to it, I would think," was Snape's dry reply.

Monday, Harry returned home from the Ministry and picked up his post from the table, including a reply from Penelope. When opened, it turned out to be longer than the last few letters from her and for a moment he feared she had indeed been

offended. Instead, her tone implied she was touched to have been asked for advice about a potential new girlfriend. Harry decided that she probably didn't mind reading about his having difficulties. She suggested he work out how to get Mr. Peterson to know him better, which did not appeal to Harry. Penelope didn't seem to believe that anyone could dislike Harry for long.

Her other point, which reminded Harry of yesterday's encounter, insisted that he be at least somewhat honest with Elizabeth, rather than avoiding her, which was very unfair. Harry again found that twist in his middle that strongly resisted causing a fight between father and daughter. She was right though; Harry would have to figure out something to tell her. Perhaps he should just tell her about Tara so that she would not harbor any romantic notions. Although, that might not make any difference to Elizabeth's father.

Carrying the letter and his bookbag, Harry stepped into the library to find Snape packing books into a small trunk. The date hit Harry hard as he realized August was fast drawing to a close.

"When do you return to school?" Harry asked, stashing the letter in a folder with others to be answered.

"I need a few days for last minute class preparation, so this upcoming weekend at the very latest."

Harry considered that he should tell Ron and Hermione he wouldn't meet them on Wednesday in order to spend more time with his guardian before he departed. Snape's continuing interrupted his thoughts. "Minerva has indicated that she will cover my House for me so that I can return more weekends than I normally would–perhaps once a month or so."

That didn't sound very often to Harry, but he didn't comment. Snape stood straight and rested one hand on his hip. "You will stay out of trouble, correct?"

"I'll do my best," Harry returned in a difficult tone. Snape turned back to his packing and Harry sat down with his books and tried to read, without much success.

When Snape headed out to shop for some potion stocks, Harry set his book aside and rested his chin on the heel of his hand. He had a home now, he considered, as well as an elf to take care of most everything. Really, he was doing quite well, he argued with himself.

Harry had just reopened his book when Snape reappeared with a stack of small brown boxes which he placed in the trunk. He then stood beside Harry and said, "Have you truly only read two pages in all this time?"

"I took a nap while you were out," Harry explained flatly without looking up.

"Ah," Snape said, apparently satisfied with that.

Harry's silence at dinner eventually prompted his guardian to drum his fingers impatiently on the table while waiting for pudding. "This grim mood is not because I am departing, is it?" Snape challenged. When Harry merely shrugged, Snape said, "There isn't any choice."

Harry flipped his fork around in his fingers. "I'm used to having someone around to get spell help from," he complained, ignoring his better sense to keep quiet.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "You may owl me at any time."

"I'm not looking forward to coming home to an empty house."

"Winky is always here and you may have friends over whenever you wish."

Harry put his fork down. "True. Even overnight."

"You are supposed to be avoiding trouble," Snape commented sternly.

"Yeah, but how would you know?" Harry taunted.

Snape chastised, "Now you are behaving as a Slytherin, Harry."

Harry dropped his napkin on the table and left, skipping the cobbler. In his room he started rearranging the books in his nightstand, something he needed to do more often. He had finished with that and was making some random, messy notes for training out of a book on curse reducing amulets when Snape stepped in. Without speaking, he placed a plate holding a large square of cherry cobbler on the nightstand as well as a fork.

"You missed dessert," Snape stated.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"I'm beginning to believe this separation will be good for you."

Harry took a bite of the cobbler, which had apparently been reheated for him, and said, "Yeah, I really should get back to remembering what it was like not having a parent."

"Hm," Snape said. "I suppose I should be grateful I don't see this side of you often."

"What side?" Harry demanded smartly.

"This difficult and selfish side."

"The Slytherin side?" Harry taunted, putting his fork down rather loudly against the plate.

"Not precisely," Snape said, his mouth flickering into a strange smile.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"You are behaving like your father," Snape calmly observed.

Harry, without much thought, reached out to throw the plate at the far wall but his arm was caught and held firm before it reached the china. Still gripping it, Snape sat before him, also on the edge of the bed.

"It is difficult to know how to manage you when you are upset about something as striking as my departure." When Harry gave in and relaxed, Snape released him. "But it is best for you; you are hanging onto odd aspects of childhood, I believe, to prolong needing a parent."

Harry frowned, feeling embarrassed, prompting Snape to say, "That is more like it. At your age you should be railing against my presence, against my expressing any advice."

"Who's going to help me with my complicated blocks?" Harry complained. "And my seeing weird dark things around me."

"There are any number of Aurors to assist you," Snape pointed out.

"It isn't the same."

"I am just an owl away for advice and I believe that Christmas will be upon us far faster than you expect." Snape sat straight and added, "You are a perfectly capable young man and it is time you proved it."

"Yeah, I know. I just . . . I haven't had enough chance . . . I don't know." Harry tossed his hands as he gave up explaining.

"A little time on your own at your age and you will be grateful to be unsupervised, I believe. But, please, do remain in control."

Harry gave in. "I'll try."

During training the next day, they did leapfrogging drills. Rodgers, who now treated Harry with an equal brusqueness that he used with the others, paced before them and

said, "So, you are entering a building occupied by dangerous opponents. Each member involved in the engagement must advance separately under cover of the ones behind. At a clear sign from the leader, the farthest back will then advance, leapfrogging ahead. He had drawn a diagram on the board with arrows like a Quidditch play. "Let's give it a try in the corridor out here. I've warned everyone we are drilling.

They went up and down the corridor many times until everyone remembered to only move on signal, and only move one at a time. Aaron had a habit of forgetting he wasn't the last person and Vineet wasn't much for staying low.

Rogan ribbed Harry a bit when he was briefly crouching in the doorway of the office. Harry just shrugged, refusing to be embarrassed. "Chasing Voldemort down the corridor, Harry?" Rogan prodded.

"I've chased Voldemort through the Ministry, thank you," Harry replied primly. Vineet passed him, leaving just Kerry Ann behind him. Practice was helping him keep track of everyone without effort.

"True," Tonks agreed, stepping in and patting Harry on the head as she went by. With him crouching this was an easy thing to do. "No teasing the trainees, Rogan," she chided.

Rogan pushed his chair back just as Kerry Ann passed, running well in a crouch, and asked, "When do we get to duel them? That's what I want to know. We just hear them bumping around in the training room all the time."

"You want to duel Harry?" Tonks asked Rogan with a laugh. "Harry?"

"Anytime," Harry breathed eagerly and at Aaron's hand wave upward, he dashed away.

At lunch, the four of them sat around the workout room and ate, relaxed and warm after their running about. Aaron had taken to looking at Harry for long periods of time when Harry wasn't looking back. As they ate, it was one of those times. Harry met his far away stare. "What is it?"

Aaron sighed. "I've been remembering all those times at school when Snape would lay into someone for a screw-up and as first or second year s that would scare us whiter than the Bloody Baron." He took a sip of his juice and went on, "But later, we'd laugh at ourselves, at how easily intimidated we were. Not that we stopped doing exactly what he said . . . Do you remember that?" he asked Kerry Ann.

Kerry Ann, looking sheepish, quietly said, "I never stopped being intimidated by him. No offense Harry. I was always really grateful I did well in Potions so that he ignored me."

They fell silent. Aaron eventually said, "But he really was . . . eh? What was he doing at Hogwarts then?"

"Spying for Dumbledore. Keeping track of Voldemort's inner circle and their plans."

Kerry Ann crumpled up her paper bag; the noise of it was unusually loud. "He got marked just to help the Order?"

Reluctantly, Harry said, "Not exactly."

She hesitated in tossing the brown paper ball into the corner rubbish bin. "That's freaky, Harry," she said, sounding judgmental.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he thought of a retort. "Uh, oh," Aaron said, distracting Harry, who immediately backed off on his anger.

"It's hard to explain," Harry apologized. He glanced over at the silent Vineet, who was rolling up his empty lunch sack, face void of expression.

"Well," Aaron said, standing and stretching his arms over his head and to the side, "I can't tell you, of all people, to feel differently, but I keep getting the wobblies thinking about it all those years at school."

"You don't know him very well," Harry insisted.

"As I recall, he isn't easy to get to know," Aaron pointed out. "Even as a Slytherin, if we asked him anything personal or said anything friendly to him, he would just sneer or glare, or worse yet, take you down with a biting insult." He pushed his desk aside to clear the floor. "Hard to imagine anyone getting beyond that. He isn't like that anymore?"

Harry stood and pushed his desk to the wall as well. It vibrated loud on the wood floor. "He can be. I look past it."

The week went by very quickly. Harry peppered Snape with questions about all kinds of things, from should he check the post for bills, to could he move some other books to the upstairs room to make space and could he use the desk in the drawing room. Snape sent Winky off and two hours later, Harry had a desk of his own in his room by the window. It was an old roll-top, its varnish darkened warmly with age.

"Thanks," Harry gratefully said when it was in place.

"We should have gotten you one sooner," Snape insisted.

Harry pulled the top closed with a dull thud. "It's going to be really quiet around here."

"Invite friends over," Snape said as though that were obvious.

"If I actually have all of my reading done . . . I'm going to miss getting help with my spells and my reading," Harry went on, sounding down.

Snape spun with a swish of his robe. "You will survive," he announced, as he departed the room.

Harry was dreaming. He dreamed that he was wandering through the graveyard in Godric's Hollow, desperately looking for something. The place was empty of people and the air hung utterly still. The rows of stones appeared small and forlorn, their print too deteriorated to read. The frosted grass crunched underfoot as he walked toward the tall, iron gate at the entrance; fog snaked around the black metalwork, obscuring half of it. Harry passed through and onto the narrow, misty road. "Severus!" Harry called out, wondering where Snape was. His voice sounded faint, even though he believed he shouted loudly.

His cousins, Pamela and Patricia, stood in the road as he reached the crowded houses of the village proper. They argued that he shouldn't be looking for Snape; that he wasn't an appropriate guardian for Harry; that there was something not right about him. They told him that he should go back to the graveyard. Harry argued with them, but they continued to insist. When Harry looked up and down the road, they quieted and watched him cautiously as he decided what to do. All the streets were now lined with tall black iron gates, leading to houses, leading to stone walls. The tops all read something different but none of them made any sense. One read King's Cross and another Hogsmeade.

"Why won't you help me look for him?" Harry argued, hurt because he had thought they cared enough to do this for him.

"The legend should remain," Pamela declared, as though in explanation.

Harry called out again as he walked away from them. Pamela's small children stood before him in the road, holding bundles of wands in each hand, almost too many to grasp. They watched him approach without any change in expression.

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The sound of pounding feet woke Harry at the same time a furious scratching from one of the cages did. The door to his room flew open. "Harry?" Snape asked in concern.

Harry grunted and shifted the stifling covers down. The dream flickered through his mind. "I was dreaming," he explained groggily.

Snape reached the bed and turned up the lamp a little. "Oh," he muttered, sounding relieved. Across the room Hedwig fluffed herself and put her head under her wing. Beside her, Kali was clawing at the air through the bars, though she quit after a moment.

"Did I wake you?" Harry asked sleepily, rubbing his scalp.

"I would say," Snape intoned dryly. He took up Harry's dressing gown from the bed post and donned it over his shrift before sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry," Harry murmured.

"No matter," Snape said dismissively. "Were you having a nightmare?"

Harry thought over the dream. "More a dream than a nightmare; I just couldn't find you."

"That would explain your calling my name."

"Uff, sorry." He fluffed his pillow and set his head back on it.

"You already apologized." Despite his snide tone, Snape reached a hand out and rested it on Harry's shoulder. "You are all right?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulder under the warm hand. The uneasiness from the dream hadn't let him go yet and he was grateful for the contact.

"What was in your dream?" Snape prompted.

"I'm looking for you and it's very important that I find you. I'm walking around Godric's Hollow and my-"

"You were looking for me in Godric's Hollow?" Snape interrupted in disbelief.

"Yes, and my cousins won't help me look for you." Harry left off the part about them believing it better for him not to find Snape. "I don't know why I was dreaming it all," Harry added. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's all right," Snape said in a dismissive and tired voice.

An Unexpected Test

Sleep tugged at Harry, making him close his eyes. After a span of silence from his guardian, he put the dream aside in his mind, relaxed and allowed his head to fall to the side. The lamp glaring in his eyes went dim, down to a corona around the edge of the wick. As sleep pulled him down, vestiges of the dream made his arms convulse. The hand lifted from his shoulder and a moment later fingers pushed the hair back from his temple, then trailed again through his hair.

"Hogwarts is not so far away, Harry," Snape intoned quietly.

Harry grunted in response, nearly asleep.

Snape sat back and considered his charge. The oblique orange light from the lamp gave the muscles in Harry's shoulders and neck strong definition, accentuating the effects of his training, which, along with his solid jawline, made him appear fully adult. It also perhaps explained why so many otherwise sensible young women would wait forever it seemed, for him to make up his mind. Snape could imagine feeling jealous, but after seeing his father's petty jealousy, he was no longer tempted to it. Pride was what one was supposed to feel at this and it was surprisingly easy to with this reminder of Harry's dependence on him. He brushed at Harry's errant fringe again, and the young man didn't stir at all.

Quietly, Snape said, "I never imagined, Harry, that we would reach this." Harry's over-attachment was the sort of thing Snape would have expected to resent, but did not. He was beholden to Harry and it all seemed to balance out. Even though he could recreate old memories and feelings, he could not truly imagine things different than how they were now. The past was only a dim shadow of existence, and not worth considering as a possibility for the present.

The wind picked up the corners of the thin curtains on the window and seconds later, hard rain began splattering against the sill. Snape raised his wand and lowered the sash. Lightening flickered on the droplets spattering the panes and a rumble rattled them. Harry made a sound in his sleep and shifted as though dreaming again already.

Thursday morning, the day before Snape was to depart, Harry didn't communicate much, mostly because he could not think of anything to discuss. He kept thinking of things they should plan to do like museums, or Quidditch, or the theatre, which were now not possible. Frowning, Harry finished his breakfast and collected his scattered books together.

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"Have a good day, Harry," Snape intoned as Harry stood before the hearth.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled before departing.

Snape watched the green flame retreat, sputter a few times around the grate, and then disappear for good. To himself he could admit reluctance to ending the summer; by next year Harry truly would be an independent adult, perhaps even moved out of Shrewsthorpe to more convenient London. Next June felt very far away indeed.

That evening, Snape finished rechecking his packed files and closed his trunk, hopefully for the last time. By hand he tugged the handle to drag it nearer to the door to the dining room and his stomach reminded him that it was well past dinnertime. 9:00 the tall clock in the hall read. Well past. That morning, Harry had not said when he was returning; Snape had assumed that like every other evening that week, Harry would forgo other activities and return straight home.

At 9:30, Snape went down to the kitchen for a cold sandwich. Winky made one up in short order and handed it to him on a tray. When he reached the balcony before his room, Snape could not resist checking Kali's mood. Harry's empathetic Chimrian was grooming herself calmly. At his approach her head snapped up and sniffed the air interestedly. Snape gave her a chunk of cold roast which she eagerly devoured. This made Snape wonder why, if Harry was going to be late, he had not feed her at breakfast. Considering that if this were an ordinary evening, he wouldn't have thought twice about Harry staying out late, Snape pushed his concern from his mind and retreated to his room to eat and relax with a book.

After 1:00 a.m. and another check of Kali, who was sleeping rather soundly, Snape began to feel anger. Harry's quiet and abrupt behavior that morning now seemed a prelude to some kind of plotted difficulty. This felt in complete keeping with the Harry of the past, the one whose inability to conform to the most basic rules had many times put Harry himself, his friends and even the entire Order at risk. Severely angry now, Snape stalked back to his room and went to sleep.

Morning came on, bringing Snape's owl to the window with a letter from Candide. Snape had put her off to, he expected, spend the evening with Harry. The note wished him a good school year and promised to make it into Hogsmeade as often as she could manage.

Harry's bed had not been slept in, but Kali slumbered peacefully on. Hedwig fluffed herself and chewed on the wires of her cage, an entreaty to be released for a morning flight. Snape fetched her fresh water, but left her in her cage. Down in the kitchen Snape confronted Winky.

"Do you know where Master Harry is?"

"I not knowing, sir," she squeaked as she added wood to the fire.

"Can you find him?"

Winky shook her head and wiped her hands nervously on her tea towel. Her large eyes seemed to ask for forgiveness for not carrying out that order. "Master angry, but Winky not know. Winky not mean to be bad elf."

In the dining room fury threatened to take Snape. He paced once, breathed out deeply and took up a parchment, intending to warn McGonagall that he may be late. Instead, he tossed the quill aside and paced several more times. Taking up the Floo powder instead, he contacted the Ministry Aurors office and insisted on speaking with Tonks, the only one there he felt willing to attempt to explain to.

"Hey, Severus," Tonk's head greeted him.

"Good morning. Have you seen Harry?"

"This morning?" Tonks asked, clearly confused.

A tiny cinder was pressing into Snape's kneecap and impatiently he snapped, "Since last night."

"No," she said, implying further confusion. "Come over here where we can talk."

Snape appeared in a hearth in the atrium, since he could not travel directly to the secure hearth the Aurors used for communication. As he stalked to the lifts he began to have the first inklings of doubt.

"Harry didn't come home last night?" Tonks asked through the cage as the lift came down to her level and before the gate could be opened.

"No."

"Let me get a hold of the other apprentices, see if they know where he was off to."

Snape waited with thin patience as Tonks used the office Floo to contact first Vineet, who insisted that Harry had been asking Kerry Ann's advice about what shop to visit, then Kerry Ann. The apprentice Auror witch looked to have been woken up, but she squinted in thought as she floated in the magic fire and said, "Yeah, Harry wanted to buy a gift for his guardian . . . oh, hello sir. Uh, I suggested Manfred's."

"On Knockturn Alley?" Snape returned sharply.

"I go down there during the day sometimes. It is just the second shop in. How could Harry have a problem?" she explained, sounding a bit defensive. She looked between them. "Do you need me to help look for him?"

"Yes," Tonks said. "Come down as soon as you can."

Tonks stood and considered the cold hearth in silence before saying, "Odd." She then fetched Shacklebolt, the only other Auror on duty who was in the office.

"He didn't show up at home yesterday afternoon?" he confirmed in surprise.

Snape, unable to find words to defend his only taking action now, nodded mutely.

Snape and Tonks walked up and down Knockturn Alley. Harry had indeed gone to Manfred's and had been sent off with a gold-tinted, non-reactive, ultra-low-expansion glass cauldron. The shopkeeper behind the counter gestured at another just like it on a tall metal stand. Snape felt as though he had been kicked in the chest. Tonk's voice sounded far away as she asked in a mostly routine voice, "Did he say where he was going next?"

"Hm," the older wizard muttered as he expansively rubbed his roughly shaven chin. "Mighta said somethin' 'bout finding proper gift wrap, whatever that means. Pretty sure he headed back out to Diagon." The man gestured with his thumb in the vague direction of Gringotts.

After five hours of this, and all leads exhausted, Tonks insisted Snape return home to see if any messages had arrived and to take a needed break.

At home, there were no owls waiting and no post of interest. Kali was awake and blinked at him groggily before shaking herself and flapping her wings to get to the pedestal at the top of the cage. Snape opened the door, thinking that if she were still a juvenile, she might have grown antsy from the separation and lead him to Harry. She had no interest in leaving the cage and almost seemed disoriented. The doorknocker nearly made Snape jump when its tapping sounded from downstairs.

Snape went down to the door and yanked it open. A young woman he didn't know stood on the slate path. Another woman, most likely her mother given the similarity, stood beside the gate with her arms crossed.

"Excuse me," the young woman said. "Harry Potter lives here, correct?"

"Yes," Snape murmured, trying to get a handle on her thoughts, they slipped away strangely.

"My name is Tara Terrance, I'm a friend of Harry's. He was supposed to come over this afternoon for a picnic, but he didn't show . . . "

Snape's eyes narrowing may have brought her to a halt, because she stopped and closed her mouth. "Come in, won't you?" Snape invited in a not particularly welcoming tone. The woman at the gate leaned on the wall, apparently prepared to wait

without concern. As he led the way into the hall, Snape asked, "When did you last see Harry?"

"Yesterday evening, said he needed to find some silver and green gift paper." Snape scoffed oddly and she hesitated before going on. "I ran out to Harrods for him and met him at the underground with it. He said he was in a hurry."

"What station? No, just a moment. You should tell this to one of the Aurors."

"Aurors? Is Harry missing?" she asked in shock.

Snape crouched before the hearth and said, "Yes," in a pained voice.

Moody, unfortunately for Tara, was the one to appear. Tara backed up a step when she caught sight of his broad, rough form coming out of the hearth and glanced at Snape in alarm.

"She has a bit more on Harry's last whereabouts," Snape explained before pacing away to let Moody take over.

In halting speech Tara repeated her story. Moody listened and then fixed her with his magic eye. "You a squib my dear or just a Muggle?"

Snape turned suddenly at that in surprise, as Tara said, "I'm a Squib. Both my mum and dad have magic, though not very strong."

Snape rubbed his head while shaking it. He was certainly not going to make it to the staff dinner and needed to owl McGonagall. Digging out a quill from the stand on the sideboard, he jotted out a quick note and went to fetch Franklin to take it away.

"You done with her?" Moody asked.

Snape turned and with a last glance over Tara, said, "Yes."

Moody showed her to the door where she halted and asked the Auror. "That's Harry guardian, right?"

"Yes," Moody replied in a tone that made it clear only limited questions were allowed.

She swallowed. "Do you think he's angry Harry's dating me . . . I mean, someone without magic?"

"I don't think 'e cares about anything 'cept finding Harry. You think of anything, owl the Ministry or here, whichever is closer."

With a sad mouth she nodded and stepped out the door. Moody closed it again on the scene of Tara's mum putting her arm around her daughter. "Constant vigilance," he muttered.

Chapter 69.

Enemies and Friends Part I

Harry lifted his head from the hard surface it rested on. His temples pounded as he did so, making him wince. Feeling as though he were badly hung-over, he raised himself and sat back on his knees, trying hard to keep his swimming head level.

Light came in through a high window, illuminating a long, empty cellar, empty except for the bars spanning floor to ceiling, boxing him into the corner. Harry blinked into the gloom and recalled his last memories. Black cloth and a choking struggle were all he could remember, that and a painful, failed attempt to Disapparate. Harry fingered his neck and found a thick necklace there. He felt an aversion to it that made him believe it was cursed. Its links felt oily in an unhealthy way and it did not have a catch. Harry listened and not hearing anything tried again to Disapparate, imagining the alleyway beside St. Mungo's as a destination, since he last remembered being in London. A searing jolt like high voltage electricity went through him and the cage stubbornly remained around him. Gasping, he stayed on his hands and knees until he stopped shaking.

The Floo flared as Snape sat at the dining room table. He glanced up so fast he almost pulled something in his neck, but it was McGonagall bending and entering the room.

"Your note was most abrupt, Severus. Am I to understand Harry is missing?" she asked in a speaking-to-an-errant-student voice.

Snape nodded and returned to perusing the last few days' issues of the Daily Prophet for any kind of clue.

"Goodness." She pocketed the note and stepped up beside him to read over his shoulder. Snape rested his head on his hand and gazed unseeing at the wrinkled parchments before him. McGonagall asked, "What happened?"

Keeping his face down, Snape explained, "He didn't come home last night. I . . . assumed he was being difficult. He had been during the week . . . was unhappy about my departing." He pounded his forehead once. "I did not imagine that he was in difficulty." He finally sat up and waving his arm upward argued, "His Chimrian has been perfectly calm. She reflects his every mood and I assumed. . ."

McGonagall clamped a hand over Snape's shoulder. "Severus, calm down. Start at the beginning and this time, no self remonstration." Snape managed the first part, but not the second and at the end, McGonagall said, "You don't know this young woman though?"

"I have not met her before. This was to be only their third date. She did pass Moody's scrutiny."

"Well, that is a fairly difficult test. Not sure I would pass it." She pulled out the chair across from him and sat down as though intending to stay a while.

"There is no reason for you to-" Snape began.

"Clearly, you are in need of company, Severus," she interrupted him. "Have you tried the Beacon Spell again?" When he shook his head, she asked, "You said it worked last time."

"It did, but I have not tried again."

"Why not?"

"I cannot repeat it," Snape growled impatiently. At her curious look he said, "Firstly, though it worked last time, I botched the spell and twisted the magic." Snape thought back to the dark room, the phosphorescent pentagram glowing as though already activated, a beacon of darkness, beckoning with unreined power. "I do not even know if it was my blood or the Chimrian's that effected the magic. Or even a combination."

"You used his pet?" She asked in surprise. "I hadn't considered that."

"It used me."

"That would have complicated the spell all right."

The memory of Kali's screech when he nicked her still made the hair on the back of his neck tingle. Please don't repeat it, Harry's voice replayed to him, a plead from someone who could look into the darkness the way everyone else looked into a cellar. Standing suddenly with the need to move, Snape whispered, "I cannot approach the dark that closely again."

In a most serious tone, McGonagall said, "Forget I suggested it then. Harry needs you to come back to."

With a flinch he said, "It may in the end be the only way . . . "

The Floo flared again and Tonks entered. "Well, I just came from Malfoy Manor."

"And . . . ?" Snape asked dangerously.

"I honestly believe they don't know anything. Draco answered all my questions, that is, after he had stopped laughing hysterically at the notion of my errand. He wasn't hiding anything, I'm quite certain." She paced once along the end of the table and stopped before the much taller Snape. "I'm sorry I don't have anything positive to report. The entire Auror staff and apprentices are out looking for him as well as every Weasley available. We are trying to keep this quiet if we can, the press are going to go bongo when they find out; I'd rather not put you through that, or Harry when he returns."

Snape crossed his arms. "I appreciate that," he stated. "If I were to help look, where would I best start?"

"We need you to stay here in case he contacts home." At Snape's deep frown she paused and argued, "Someone may need to respond to that instantly." Tonks touched his arm. "I know that doesn't sound like much, that it sounds like doing nothing, but it is important." When he didn't respond, Tonks went on, "If we don't find a real trail by tomorrow, we have to go to the press, because at that point we are going to need their help. We are going to have to appeal to everyone who may have seen him. Fortunately, he is easily recognized and anyone who saw him last night would remember."

Snape acquiesced by sitting down, though he felt vaguely lightheaded doing it.

"Holding out, Severus?" Tonks asked in concern.

His only reply was a quiet scoff. Tonks took her leave after a shared frown with the headmistress. Snape rested his forehead hard on his hand again, feeling the weight of past actions he had chosen to forget until now.

McGonagall asked, "Have you eaten?" Snape replied with a very small shake of the head. "Well, I like to keep my strength up in a crisis, do you mind if I request something of your elf?" Snape waved her toward the door without looking at her.

She returned presently with a plate of beans and toast.

"You truly need not stay," Snape repeated. "I know for certain you have pressing duties."

"They are unimportant. Not that I would have admitted that yesterday, mind you." At his doubtful expression, McGonagall put down her fork and said meaningfully, "Unlike you, Severus, I have not repaid Harry for what he did. I cannot in fact imagine doing so. Standing vigil with you for a few hours is the least I can do." She picked up her fork and stabbed a few beans on the end of it.

Snape, for his part. ate the bitter memory of mocking Harry's godfather for being stuck in precisely this position.

Harry paced his small space a long while before relenting and sitting down to wait. Nothing happened for several hours. The sunlight faded to grey shadow in the little window high on the wall, leaving him in uncertain dimness. Harry began to suspect that this was part of his first apprentice testing somehow and started to relax and try to guess what was coming next, certainly not a snake, he expected. Having exhausted every crazy idea for escape, he was resting against the corner wall when footsteps and a spill of light came down the steps at the other end of the narrow space.

Harry's brow furrowed as he recognized the man approaching.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Rick Rothschild said in suave greeting.

"Rick," Harry grudgingly returned but didn't stand up.

"Ah, you remember me. I am so pleased by that." He grabbed the bars and pressed his face through them. "Do you like my little nook? I had an expert make it, just for you."

"Oh, that's nice," Harry said, sounding as bored as possible.

"You would be the ungrateful sort," Rick snorted as he stepped back and paced nervously.

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"What do you want?" Harry asked, making it as rude sounding as possible.

"Oh I have what I want." Rick grinned then and turned a sideways look at Harry. "You are missing a date, aren't you? Tsk, tsk, and Tara so does not like to be stood up."

"That isn't what this is about, is it?"

Rick laughed. "You should have stuck with Tonks; she was much less caring about a canceled date." He waved his hand as though to dismiss Harry. "The elf will bring something to eat and anything else you might request . . . that won't allow you out." He stalked away back up the steps.

Early in the morning, Hermione and Ron arrived in the Floo in Shrewsthorpe. Snape still sat at the table, alone, as McGonagall had departed a few hours before to get some sleep.

"Morning, Professor," Hermione said. "Is it all right if we wait here for any news? We were out all night looking and need to rest our feet but we can't bear to go home and wait."

Snape slowly lifted his head before gesturing abruptly at the other chairs across the table. Ron gave Hermione a very worried look at the state Snape was in. Hermione took out a map of London to study, while Ron put his head on his arm to nap. A quarter of an hour later, Winky brought breakfast plates and set them down. Snape shoved his away; Winky caught it at the table edge before it could spill and took it away in silence.

After an hour of resting, the pair departed to return to the search. "It will turn out all right, sir," Hermione said as Ron stepped into the hearth ahead of her. "Harry is always very lucky, you know."

"Fools and children," Snape muttered cryptically. "He is no longer a child."

"Is it all right if we come back later?" Hermione asked carefully, ignoring Ron's dissuading glare. When Snape waved his hand ambiguously, she said, "See you later then, sir."

As they walked across the weekend quiet of the Ministry atrium, Ron said, "Snape didn't look so good. With his hair all crazy, looked a bit like he used to."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "You know, I'd thought Harry had gotten more than his share out of the adoption, but seeing Snape just now . . . maybe I was wrong. Just as well Tonks told him to stay put."

"Maybe that's why he isn't doing so good," Ron commented. "I wouldn't want to be sitting and waiting."

Harry spent a cold night with a single blanket. He had talked the house-elf into a charmed chamber pot as well as a wash basin so he at least was basically comfortable. When he had tried to convince the elf that it should talk to his own elf Winky, it had begun banging its head on the bars. Harry had to tell it he had changed his mind to get it to stop. Now in the dimness he thought that a good sign; it meant the elf was tempted to help and had to punish itself for the temptation.

Bored, Harry had taken his shoelaces out of his shoes and thought about weapons or tools one might fashion from them. He imagined Lestrange sitting in Azkaban, collecting things from which to fashion a wand. Harry didn't know how to make a wand. Vowing to learn the first chance he got, he unbraided his laces yet again and shook them straight. Picturing home with longing, he wondered what Snape was doing right then, as he was supposed to have left for Hogwarts Friday for a staff party. Harry wondered if he had, assuming Harry was just off somewhere. Harry dearly wished he had told Snape exactly when he was coming home from the Ministry. The last minute present idea had turned out rather poorly. Apparently Rick had followed Tara from her flat, or so Harry assumed.

The elf brought a snack, making the tray materialize inside the bars with a snap of his fingers. His oversized eyes looked very worried.

"What's your name?" Harry asked as calmly as possible. With its lips pressed tight together the elf shook its head and whined a little. "Do you know an elf named Dobby?" Same basic response except a bit disapproving. "So you've been ordered not to talk to me?" A nod. "Have you met Dobby?" Another nod, along with a frown. "Kind of a bad elf, I think," Harry opined, guessing the creature's thoughts. Another nod, a bit more emphatic. "Good elves always do as their masters say," Harry commented. This time the house-elf didn't respond, although he looked regretful as his ears drooped.

The elf must have heard something because it suddenly cocked its head and disappeared. Harry was just thinking of repeating some of Dobby's comments about how much better off house-elves were with Voldemort gone, thinking maybe he could blur the notion of master a bit. Maybe when it brought dinner.

Chapter 69

Ron and Hermione returned to Shrewsthorpe first thing the next morning at Hermione's insistence. "I think Professor Snape needs looking after, honestly," she stated. Ron frowned and stopped arguing.

Snape stepped in as soon as they arrived. "I don't suppose there is any news?" he asked, not sounding particularly hopeful.

Hermione shook her head. She didn't want to explain how frustrated the Aurors had become with all their leads extinguished. Hermione honestly had thought she and the Weasleys had been given something to do just to get them out of the way, but when they had returned yesterday evening, Tonks had grilled them for details in a sadly desperate manner.

As soon as they sat down, Winky brought breakfast, big plates of steaming potatoes, bangers, toast and butter, and roasted tomatoes. She arranged them on the table and departed. Ron expressed utter delight and began eating with his usual vigor. Hermione looked across at Snape, staring blankly at a point beyond his plate. She had a feeling he hadn't eaten at all since Harry had gone missing. Swallowing past a lump in her throat, Hermione tried to think of something reassuring to say, but all of the optimism of yesterday morning had leeched away, pushed out by the ache in her feet from the miles of walking around London.

"The press will descend shortly," Snape stated to no one in particular. "That will certainly improve the situation," he sneered.

"Tonks seemed to think-" Hermione began.

"Yes," Snape interrupted, "she seemed to think we needed a circus."

"I don't think there is any choice, Professor," Ron piped in.

Hermione had not had the guts to say that. She hoped he didn't say anything else about how negative the Aurors had grown as the clues had run out. She put down her fork and dragged Ron back to the Ministry as quickly as his plate emptied, needing to move.

Tonks, stuttering from too much pepper-up, gave them an assignment to go along the streets in Knightsbridge asking anyone out this early if they saw Harry Friday evening or night. Same as previous days, they were given copies of both Muggleand wizard photographs to show to people. Exhausted but energized by being given a concrete task, they headed back out to the streets.

Enemies and Friends Part I

The next morning, stiff in the joints from the cellar chill, Harry stood up and paced to work out the kinks in his body. Rick came down, fairly skipping with pleasure.

"Are you just going to keep me here?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I have so many ideas for what I'd like to do to you, that I just can't choose between them. I will soon; have patience," Rick assured him.

"You broke up with Tara," Harry said, disgusted.

"She tossed me. Got some odd ideas from somewhere. Seemed to think she could get by without me. That men could be nicer than I, more attentive." Rick's mood shifted severely. He stepped closer to the bars where Harry stood in his cage. Harry carefully avoided giving away that he was considering snatching his hand out to grab the man and perhaps pull his head forward into the bars as the elf had done to punish itself.

Rick did lean just a little farther forward as he said, "I own her. Every bit of her success was my doing. She's ignoring that. Pretending. Parades you around like a prize . . . I was almost satisfied with that, I have to say," Rick added with a queer laugh. "Especially since you couldn't even see it." Harry must have given away his thoughts of doubt, because Rick sneered, "Yes, you aren't dumb, are you? Just don't get around much apparently."

Harry forced his gaze to harden. It was true that he did not like what Rick was saying. The denials didn't come to mind as easily as he would have liked. Harry, pretending more distress at that, leaned heavily on the cage.

"Poor Mr. Potter; finally the seeing the trth"

Harry snapped a hand out through the bars, just brushing Rick's Italian sportcoat before a jolt of paralysis froze him and he sank to the floor, the world tilting helplessly around him until it fell still when his cheek rested on cold, gritty stone. Something snarled in the darkness beyond his vision before falling quiet as though to avoid detection.

Rick had jumped back, but he stepped forward immediately and crouched on the other side of the cage. "You can't take any action, Potter. Didn't I tell you this was created just for you? You can't Disapparate, you cannot strike out. You fooled me though. Not many people manage that." He stood then and brushed his suit flat. "I have to be at the club soon, acting normal. I will see you this afternoon."

That prospect didn't appeal much to Harry. Drawing upon his frustration, he used the bars to pull himself to his feet with no little effort and snapped, "What? You're just walking away? Let's just settle this now." Pleased with how strong that came out, he put on an appropriately challenging face in time for Rick's turning around.

Rick ran his hand over his coat front. "This is an Armani; I don't want to get blood on it."

"It would be yours if you did," Harry countered.

"No. I like having you here to toy with, Potter. I'm not ready to give that up to short-lived satisfaction just yet."

The door to the cellar closed and a half a minute later a door farther away. Growling to himself, Harry stalked to the corner and with a groan settled down. His limbs still vibrated from the jarring spell that had incapacitated him. The odd snarl he had heard reminded him of standing in the pentagram; he assumed that at the moment of the curse engaging, he was seeing the Dark Plane again. Harry chewed his lip as he meditated on that in the dank silence of his prison. The book said that his vision of that plane existed outside normal distances. Could he convince one of these creatures to take a message for him, he wondered. The idea had an appeal in that Rick certainly would not expect it. His severe aversion to the creatures kept him from attempting anything more than thinking it over. He had no desire to owe them anything; he would rather owe Rick.

Ron and Hermione had never spoken to so many Muggles in so few days. They were nearing the end of one of the last streets leading to the underground stop Harry should have departed from after he rendezvoused with this Tara person who had brought Harry gift paper. Hermione wanted to meet this mysterious person whom Harry had never mentioned. She thought that she should have asked for a photo of her as well as she pulled Harry's out for the hundredth time and showed it to a small round man busily carrying plastic crates of drink bottles into a very small shop.

"Good morning. I wonder if you could help me . . . " Hermione began tiredly. The man stopped and looked down at the photograph she held out. "Did you happen to see this young man Friday evening or night?"

The man shook his head and hefted another crate. They didn't look heavy but maybe the man had moved too many already. Inside the shop a very similarly shaped woman yelled, "What they want, Elmer?"

"Lookin' fer someone," he yelled back to her, even though they were only five feet apart at that point, about as far apart as one could get inside the shop. "See anything Friday night, Gladys?"

She waved a hand in the air as though fanning away a fly. "No. Oh . . . that funny lamp from the box at the kerb; show them that, Dear," she yelled, which at least made some sense as he was all of ten feet away at the pavement now, hefting another crate.

"They don't care 'bout no lampshade," he grumbled. "Lookin' for some boy, they is."

Ron and Hermione considered each other with shared pain. There wasn't much else on the street, but Hermione started to back away and thank the man, saying they needed to move on.

The lady inside was bent down over a large pile of wrinkled printouts. "Nice paper though . . . think I'll save it for Christmas," she said, pounding ferociously on a small calculator as she flipped through the crispy invoices.

Hermione froze, mid-step. "Can we see the, uh, lampshade?"

Ron looked very miserable as Hermione held up to the sunlight a sliver of the gold-tinted glass from the fancy cauldron Harry had purchased that night. And half an hour later, after the Aurors had gleaned what they could, she gingerly placed the box on the desk in the drawing room in Shrewsthorpe. Ron had flinched from that half of the errand, so Hermione had sent him home to sleep. She wished for his support, but not his witnessing, as Snape reacted to the package. He beat out Ron for misery as he carefully placed one of the larger curved pieces of glass on the table before him before collapsing back in his chair to stare at the ceiling.

After a very drawn out minute Snape said, "Fancy a bit of dark magic, Ms. Granger?"

"No, sir," she immediately replied, then wondered what he meant by that. She didn't want to ask, though, since he was making her quite uneasy.

He sighed and quietly commented, apparently to himself, "I thought not." He pulled himself together and said, "You took this to the Ministry, I assume?" At her nod he waved her away.

She stopped at the doorway, trying to find something worthwhile and encouraging to say. Snape's eyes came up to scrutinize her without his head moving. "Harry always gets out of these jams, you know," she said, finding herself worried about Harry in

a much broader sense than she previously had. Snape didn't reply, just returned to fingering the jagged gold glass.

Hermione, not really fancying Snape in this mood for company, let herself out. She didn't see Snape force the snaking curved edge of the shattered glass to bite the skin of his finger, nor did she hear the answering screech of Kali in her cage directly above him.

Harry spent the very long day alternating between sit-ups and push-ups as well as makeshift exercises using the immovable bars of his cage. He spent a long time reexamining the mortar of the stone wall while the light on it was good. It was freshly reworked and very hard, given that his only scrapping tool was a fingernail. Sitting down in the corner in the one spot where no points of stone pressed into his back, Harry made himself again recount every conversation he had had with Tara where Rick may have been mentioned, even in passing. The list of facts from this was short: Rick worked at a bank with his father, he moved in the same circles of people that Harry had met at a few parties. He thought much of himself and his family but not in the pureblood way of a Malfoy, more in a money-is-power way of a Muggle.

There must be a way out, Harry insisted. He imagined that if Snape knew he were missing he could repeat the Beacon spell. Immediately the chill from the pentagram device filled him and Harry dearly hoped Snape did not attempt it. Harry would sit here for quite a while to have his guardian avoid that.

"What is this?" McGonagall demanded when Snape had ignored this question the first go-round.

Snape was kneeling, precisely rechalking the floor in the upstairs room. She had had difficulty finding him at first; the elf had to tell her where he was. "You will not do this," she snapped vehemently. Snape ignored her and began studiously sharpening a new cylinder of phosphorescent chalk on a board with sandpaper nailed to it.

"Severus!" She snatched the chalk out of his hand and gripped it tight enough that the sharp edges crumbled.

He considered her with a hooded expression. "So you will do the spell, I suppose?" he intoned.

She looked to be considering that. She glanced at the diagram on the floor and considered the chalk and her glow-dusted fingers.

Snape said almost in a taunt, "It is a well-tuned node. When Harry stands here he senses the Dark Plane."

She exhaled, apparently in release of a long-held breath. "No one is doing the spell." She pulled out her wand and obliterated the lines on the stones, scattering coal and chalk dust to the edges of the room.

With chilling calm Snape said, "I do believe it was your idea, originally. Was it not?"

"I believe I misunderstood the spell. Come, Severus." She gestured to the door. "All other avenues have not yet been exhausted."

They sat down at the dining room table; the crystal ball she had brought perched between them on a chipped, black ceramic stand.

Hands clasped before him, Snape said, "This is beyond exhausted avenues."

"Give me a chance, Severus. I did rather well at this in my own school days."

Taunting now, Snape returned, "So well that this is the first time you have taken out the quartz orb since then."

"Perhaps. How did you know that?"

"I guessed," he scoffed.

She held up her hand for quiet and then passed it over the sphere three times. Snape waited while she peered into the light-speared depths of the orb, first leaning forward with her nose close, then back as though relaxed.

"See Harry yet?" Snape mocked when a decent time had passed.

"No, but I think I see where I dropped that earring of my grandmother's I couldn't find." At Snape's derisive look, she said, "At least I'm getting something. Sybil'd be telling us Harry is-" She cut herself off.

Snape crossed his arms. "Yes, do go on," he sneered.

"Well, she always sees gloom. Can't help it apparently."

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Fingering the slithery chain around his neck for the hundredth time, Harry wondered if he could transform out from under it. It was a risky thought. The debilitating zap he had received from an earlier hard tug on it confirmed that it was the magic behind his limitations. It was too short to accommodate his Gryffylis form and he flinched as he imagined getting garroted by its magically indestructible links. Frustrated and with nothing to take it out on, he returned to sit-ups.

Rick appeared in the evening, disgustingly buoyant. "Want to see?" he asked as though bursting with needing to share something. When Harry didn't react, Rick unfolded the copy of the Daily Prophet that he had hidden behind his back and held it up for Harry to see.

Missing! read the very large headline. At the top of the column was printed, Family, friends, have not seen Wizard Hero for three days. Below was a photograph in front of his house showing Rogan and Rodgers interviewing Snape and someone who looked to be Elizabeth. The scene had a lot of movement in it considering the setting. Snape turned from Rogan and found the camera with a fierce, determined expression.

This cheered Harry rather a lot. Everyone, but everyone was looking for him. Rick pulled the paper around and read out loud, "Distressed girlfriend Elizabeth Peterson states that Harry is not the type to run off without leaving word. Now isn't that interesting . . ."

"She's just a friend. A neighbor," Harry stated.

"Really?" Rick laughed mockingly. "What will Tara think when she reads this?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not lying. My guardian or Elizabeth herself will explain," he said calmly, making Rick frown. "You'll be amused to hear that her father severely disapproves of me."

After a long pause Rick said, "You are joking of course."

"No. But you don't have to believe me."

"Tara's parents must have loved you," Rick said.

Harry wasn't so sure, but he didn't say that. As bored as he was, he wished Rick were still off somewhere else.

"They liked me, at first. Fickle sort they were." Rick sounded angry now. "You don't have a problem with fickle people, do you? Everyone loves you."

Tiredly, Harry said, "No, they don't."

Challengingly, Rick demanded, "Name one person who doesn't."

"Draco Malfoy. Everyone in Azkaban. That's a lot of people." Bored with this meaningless conversation, Harry turned away and sat against the wall.

"I'm not done with you yet."

"I'm done with you," Harry retorted.

"We'll see about that," Rick muttered and stalked off.

Harry dearly wished Rick had left the paper behind. His memory of the photograph was pretty good, but he wanted to see it again. He wanted to see Snape looking ready to blast through an army of Trolls to come after him. It made him feel gratified and whole, even as he stared at the unyielding bars before him. When the noises upstairs quieted, Harry yet again prowled and shook every bar mount for any sign of weakness in his cage.

By dinner, the Snape dining room was full of guests, Harry's friends attracted by the article. Snape wandered down and was startled by how many more had arrived since only an hour before. Suze gave him a shy smile of greeting when his eyes fell down to her. The room became quiet as they noticed him standing in the doorway and the newcomers murmured, "Professor," in greeting. He balanced between annoyance and a kind of uplift at knowing he didn't worry alone.

The door knocker sounded and Snape went to answer it, beating out Hermione, who had apparently appointed herself hostess. Hermione returned to her seat beside the hearth with a blush. Tara was at the door, speaking to her mother beside her. "I'll owl you when I need you to come Floo me home," she was saying. "Professor," she turned to Snape. "May I wait here for news?"

"Everyone else is," he said tiredly and gestured for her to com in. Tara's mother gave her daughter a hug before Tara followed Snape inside.

"Oh," Tara said at the door to the dining room. Everyone turned to curiously consider the newcomer.

Snape gave her a light push. "Have a seat, Ms. Terrance," he intoned before departing to the sanctuary of the drawing room.

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Tara made her way through the crowded chairs to the corner beside a bushy-haired girl. "Hi," Hermione said. "Have we met?"

"I don't think so," Tara replied, glancing around the room a little uneasily.

"I can introduce you," Hermione offered. "How do you know Harry?"

"We've gone out a few times."

Hermione found this very interesting. "You're dating Harry?"

"Yes. What do you mean by that?" Tara asked. Hermione grabbed up the copy of the Prophet to stash it away, at the same moment Ron grabbed it up to show it to Tara. "I've seen that," Tara said to cut them off.

"Oh." Ron sounded disappointed. "That's Elizabeth over there," he said, pointing her out by the window. Tara considered the other young woman before shrugging. Ron said, "I don't remember you from Hogwarts. . . "

"I went to a day school in London."

"Huh," Ron said, "You and Elizabeth are the only two witches I've ever met who didn't go to a wizardry and witchcraft school."

Tara started to speak, but then simply explained, "I went where my parents wanted me to go."

"That would explain why you know how to dress so nicely," Ginny offered from beside Ron, sounding a little jealous.

"The average witch or wizard does have trouble getting that quite right," Tara agreed before falling broodingly silent.

The Floo flared and Candide stumbled out, obviously in a hurry. "My," she breathed at the group. "Where is Severus?" she asked.

"Drawing room," Elizabeth supplied and started to stand to show the woman where, but Candide had already gone into the hall.

"Severus, why didn't you owl?" she demanded in the drawing room. "I thought you were at the school."

"Something came up, obviously," he snarled.

"My." She looked Snape's disheveled self over once again. "Anything I can do?"

"Do you have any ideas where Harry might be?"

"No. I wish I did."

"Then no, I don't believe you can help," he stated dismissively.

She stepped over to him. "Severus, I'm sorry. What happened?"

Reluctantly, Snape explained, even about his delaying. She plunked down in a nearby chair and sighed loudly at the end of it. "Don't blame yourself," she said. "Like you said, he's run off before. Are you certain he's in trouble, even now?"

"He would not run off this long, for any reason."

"Okay, so you've gone through his list of enemies. . . the ones not in Azkaban?"

"Many, many times," Snape replied tiredly. "There is nothing you can do. You should go."

"Severus-"

"If you wish to see me at my worst, by all means, do stay," he sneered.

"Severus, I just-"

"There is nothing you can do," he snarled again.

With an annoyed frown and roll of the eyes she stalked off. "I'll be at my parents. Owl me if anything happens, or if you do want company."

Harry curled up in the dimness, his arm for a pillow, thinking that if it were not time for bed, at least he could pretend. Candles flickered feebly in a wall niche across from him, which kept utter darkness at bay but it wasn't bright enough to keep him awake. Despite the hard floor and the thin blanket wrapped around him, he fell into a light dose, to be awoken by dinner sliding through a gap at the bottom of the cage. A crossbar reinforced the gap, so Harry had already dismissed it as a weak point. Rick stalked away without comment. Harry thought it a little strange that the house-elf had not brought the food, but it woke his stomach, which hadn't eaten since dinner the previous day.

The meal was a little salty, so he drank all the water in the pewter carafe, even though it tasted metallic. He considered the empty jug, wondering at its potential as a weapon whenever Rick returned. The hammered metal seemed to swell and shrink as he studied it. He blinked his eyes and rubbed them but the effect only grew worse.

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A ear-pounding clattering let some part of his mind know that he had dropped the carafe, but he honestly could not remember letting go of it. The suddenly colorful floor heaved the same way, making him instinctively duck down to avoid being tossed by it. His hands told him it was still and solid, despite his eyes telling him otherwise, a distressing disconnect.

Harry crawled backward frantically until he cracked his head against the stone wall. The bars were undulating, breaking loose and snapping at him with dragon heads that had spouted from their ends. He fought them off with his hands until he was too exhausted to lift them and fell unconscious.

McGonagall sat in the drawing room, keeping Snape company, an increasingly difficult task. Snape paced incessantly and tugged hard at his now-wild hair. A screech brought him to a halt. They both ran to the stairs where Snape fiercely ordered back into the dining room, the few guests who had also heard Kali.

In Harry's room McGonagall shut the door behind her and held her hand on the knob. Kali screeched again, although it ending in a mewling. She fluttered inside her cage, throwing herself against the bars. Worried she would injure herself, Snape opened it wide. The Chimrian launched herself out of the cage but fluttered to the floor, unable to fly. Her head turned from side to side as though startled by things the two of them could not see.

Moving very slowly so as to not disturb her farther, Snape reached down to pick her up, ignoring McGonagall's admonishment. But Kali was beyond them, it seemed, and didn't notice who was holding her. She screeched weakly again and he stroked her vivid violet back to calm her. He closed his eyes and cradled Kali with immense care as he took in the implication of her state.

"Now I must do the spell," Snape stated. He turned to place Kali on the bed.

McGonagall was upon him. "Severus-" she began to argue, obviously troubled with needing to.

Snape held up the Chimrian. "Don't you see this?" he asked, voice unsteady.

"I do. And believe me . . . " she paused for control. "It pains me immeasurably. But if the dark abyss is so close, it cannot be risked."

Snape cradled Kali when she cried again, stroking her until she quieted. "It is not your place to decide this," he said angrily.

"Harry would not want you to risk it, no matter what was happening to him," she stated firmly. "I know that for certain and I'll defend that in his absence."

"I must . . . do something," Snape whispered.

"Calming his pet will help him," she said. "Their moods are tied both ways."

Not only had the Chimrian calmed, it had fallen asleep in the crook of Snape's arm. He stood still for a long while, staring at the trunks stacked in the corner of the room. "You were right."

"I was? About what?"

With a strange smirk Snape said, "About the things happening to him driving a parent mad."

McGonagall stepped closer and brushed his housecoat sleeve with her fingers. "You've done marvelously, Severus, and you must realize how hard it is for me to say that to you."

Snape laughed in a huff, but fell dark again. "I made a grave error this time. It may not matter at all."

Fiercely, she said, "All of it always matters." She stepped away, flustered by her own vehemence. "Keep hold of the animal as long as it will let you. That will help him."

When McGonagall returned to the room later, she found Snape asleep, propped up on Harry's pillows with Kali curled on his chest. Loath to disturb him, she tiptoed out and closed the door with a quiet click.

Morning came with a mixture of bad and good senses. Harry felt both queasy and sick as well as oddly relaxed and rested. Rick stood beyond the bars, looking amused. "You should have seen yourself. That was really quite brilliant." When Harry didn't even so much as flick his eyes to his captor, Rick went on, "Ever have that? It's called Raving Splendor, by the purveyor, who requests that he remain nameless. Bloody popular with the dance crowd."

Harry wished he could empty his sour stomach on Rick's shiny brown shoes, but they were beyond the blasted cage. Barring that statement, he did not wish to move at all, since that would make his brain slosh painfully in his skull.

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"Effing brilliant, watching the great Harry Potter crawling around like a panicked cockroach." Rick laughed breathily, bent down and pushed a plate and another pewter carafe through the bars. "Here, have some breakfast, on the house," Rick invited cheerily before skipping away.

The dining room had emptied out overnight of everyone except McGonagall. Snape sat across from her before an untouched plate of breakfast scramble and toast, Kali curled in his lap. The Chimrian also refused to eat, even the softest strip of bacon fat from McGonagall's plate. She turned her tiny fox-head upward to Snape and whined at him. In response Snape pulled her more comfortably into the crook of his arm.

Harry sat miserably in the corner of the dank cellar, his whole body aching. He longed for solid sleep on a real bed with a real pillow, longed for it dearly. The chill that filled his bones from the cold stone had become a constant, ordinary companion, as had the feeling of defeat that he found himself unable to will away. To be caught and toyed with like this by an incompetent wizard after everything he had managed to survive made him groan miserably into the cloudy greyness leaking in the small window.

Snape's words returned to him about not letting his guard down. Harry had failed in that, he supposed with a sigh, even though he had only been walking along an ordinary street just steps from an underground entrance. He certainly couldn't have been expected to see this coming, he argued defensively, even to himself. He imagined Snape's disappointment when he finally did get home and hoped it was tempered somewhat by relief at having him back safely.

Harry managed to doze part of the morning despite his discomforts. When he awoke, thirsty and hungry, he again espied the tray and carafe just inside the cage. Harry never imagined before what torment could be caused by such a simple object as that carafe. His fuzz-covered tongue and hairy throat cried out so for water, but he simply could not risk drinking it. At least the droplets of enticing sweat had dried from the hammered pewter as the water had warmed; those alone had nearly driven him mad with thirst.

Enemies and Friends Part I

Voices roused Harry from a dull state that may have constituted meditation in one inclined to it. The cellar door opened and footsteps, two sets, made their way down accompanied by Rick's entertaining voice. "I do believe you will be pleased," Rick was saying. Harry watched as the person he would least like to see in the world at that moment stepped across the cellar, surprise flickering over his usual scowl. Draco Malfoy came to a halt well shy of the bars. "Come, come," Rick invited him closer.

"You do have him," Draco said in clear amazement. "Quite a catch," he opined with what Harry heard as unease.

"Eff off, Malfoy," Harry muttered.

"Smashing, isn't he? Just a charm," Rick prattled on happily. "And a real enemy, Potter, you were right," he said, indicating his companion. "Railed against you all the way here. Truly despises you."

Draco stepped up to the cage. "How did you manage . . . ?"

"Oh, well. I admit, I spent a few pounds. Show him the Gratatorq, Potter." When Harry didn't react, he clarified, "The chain." Harry, having nothing else to do, hooked a thumb under the oily necklace and held it up from his collar. Rick went on. "A pretty penny for that, I'll admit. Potter looks like such hell because he can't resist testing and retesting its power."

Draco said a bit snidely, "So you didn't actually best him."

"Well," Rick began defensively. "What does it matter if I bought a bit of an advantage . . . ?"

Harry, seeing lingering horror in the bright blue depths of Draco's eyes, determined that he might just be able to get him. At least he was freer than the house-elf. "Does to Draco," Harry commented.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that, Potter the rotter," Draco snipped back.

"Gloating Draco? Just because you once beat me in a duel without extra help . . . "

Draco blinked at that, his mind working that discrepancy. "Did you?" Rick asked Draco with great interest. "Do tell where you learned to duel?"

After a significant hesitation Draco said, "My father taught me."

"Ah, yes, Malfoy . . . " Rick said, "that name does ring a bell somewhere."

Both Harry and Draco favored Rick with disgusted expressions, neither of which the man noticed. "Of course you have heard of my father," Draco snapped.

"Have I? Well, yes, of course, such an old family, Malfoy." Rick still looked thoughtful.

Harry, unable to take it, demanded, "Why do you think I hate him so?" From his seat on the floor, Harry gestured at the blonde young man. "His father was a Death Eater. More than that, he was Voldemort's Lieutenant," he explained in annoyance.

Rick now gave Draco an alarmed looking over. "Aye," Harry muttered. Draco in return gave Rick a smug smile. "Who did you think would be my enemy?" Harry snarled at his captor.

Draco looked over the cage with a keen eye. "Really quite interesting. Is the Torq absolute?" he sounded as though he were shopping for one.

With crossed arms and a superior tilt of the head, Rick replied, "If you mean will it kill him should he manage to escape? Yes."

Harry bore the bright blue eyes again, unable to gauge them. He pushed himself to his feet with effort and staggered over to them. Draco actually stepped back from him, making Harry wonder how wild he appeared at this point. "Everyone is looking for you," Draco said.

Rick laughed, "Yes, ghastly fun, isn't it? I usually only make headlines in the financial pages when Dad's bank has an announcement. The front page, even of just the Prophet, is much more entertaining." He put his face up to the bars, letting the metal press into his cheeks. "Poor orphan Potter, no family to rely on, no one to give him a leg up in life," he said with a pout.

Harry swung out to smack him and actually managed a weak slap before the necklace dropped him to his knees. He fought it though, with every ounce of will he had, he fought the muscle quivering effects of it and lunged again at his captor, who despite his apparent proclivity for buying magic, did know how to use a wand and an instant later Harry was tossed back by an arc of flame.

Back heaving against the searing pain on his chest, Harry didn't get up again right away. He did lift his head when he could to favor Rick with a dark look of hatred, that he kept from overwhelming him. That worked; he didn't hear anything scrambling in the dark around him. Rick recovered from his unsettling need to spell Harry. "You don't learn, do you Potter?"

"Stubborn damn idiot," Draco agreed. With a forced smile, he said, "I have to admit that, despite the amusement of seeing Potter reduced to this, I really do need to return home for an important luncheon." Harry rolled his eyes and scoffed as he patted the seared skin beneath a blackened cut in his shirt.

Rick apparently was not ready to lose his audience. "Must you? I could give him a wand and you two could duel. I'd like to see that."

"Perhaps next time. I think Harry has . . . found a better teacher than he had before." He turned to leave without looking back at Harry, who desperately wished to know if there was a message hidden in that. "If you could show me out?" Draco asked, sounding haughty and bored.

Chapter 61.

Enemies and Friends Part II

Draco arrived home by Apparating into his own foyer. He felt disgusted, both by Rothschild's simpering highbrow attitude, unearned, in Draco's mind, but also by the state Potter had been reduced to. It was one thing to plot and attack a rival regularly, but to capture and work upon them with no chance for their recovery lacked all sport.

"Hello, dear," Pansy said as she crossed through the hall in a flowery Japanese-inspired dressing gown. Draco's mother had insisted Pansy move in as a companion for her with the expectation that her son would marry her in due time. Draco himself remained undecided, although the situation had grown on him far faster than he would have imagined, perhaps because not only did he have regular companionship, but he now lacked most of his mother's.

"Interesting errand?" Pansy asked from the door to the sitting room where she had paused, posing slightly. Draco had apparently spent the last three minutes simply standing there, deeply in thought.

"Yes. And I have another I must run before lunching."

"Must you?" she asked in an almost simpering disappointment.

He nodded distractedly and Disapparated on the spot.

The doorknocker sounded at the house in Shrewsthorpe. Snape, assuming Harry's friends were again congregating for the day, was surprised to find his former Slytherin student in the garden instead.

"Professor," Draco muttered, seeming in a bad mood.

"Mr. Malfoy."

"You look like hell, sir, if I may say so," Draco commented after looking him up and down.

Snidely, Snape asked, "Something I can do for you?"

"Most likely not," Draco muttered. "But you look in need of assistance. . . aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked, very put-upon. Snape stepped back and let the haughty blonde boy into the entryway and then the hall. Draco looked around. "Humble but acceptable."

Snape rolled his eyes. "If you are here to insult me, I do hope you can manage better than that."

"Potter means that much to you then?" Draco asked, sounding honestly mystified, if not a little nauseated.

Snape didn't reply, just stared down his nose at the young man.

"I have to say, it's a struggle, but pathetic wizardry steeped in Muggle money rather than grand magical tradition galls me more than wrongheaded, raw magical power."

"What are you on about?" Snape snapped impatiently.

Draco sighed. "I know where Potter is."

"You what?" Snape asked sharply.

Speaking slowly and clearly, Draco said, "I don't intend to be involved beyond telling you what I know. Suffice to say, I wasn't involved. I may hate the sniveling little hero but I would express it by flattening him with a well-timed spell and letting someone scrap him up to haul to St. Mungo's, not the continuous beating down he is presently receiving. Pathetic, really."

With a voice of deep, dark danger Snape asked, "Where is he?"

Draco explained about his odd morning, the invitation by owl, his visit to an outlying area of London. As he turned to leave, he added, "Oh, and the Torq is a fatal one. I suggest you approach very carefully if you wish to have anything to take to St. Mungo's."

Chapter 61

Four Aurors and one very insistent Snape Apparated onto the property beside the Rothschild house. Rodgers had only grudgingly spoken to Snape during their hurried meeting at the Ministry, and was shooting him vaguely baleful looks as they assembled. Their little assault group was hidden from the view of the elderly witch who lived there by two massive, untrimmed willows. Moody hobbled up to the tall hedge separating the lawns and stuck his head through a gap.

Snape stood with his wand out, ready to rush the place, held back only tenuously by a fast-weakening will. Rodgers stepped sideways up beside him, severely testing Snape's limits, although Snape didn't give any indication of this. Moody was taking his time, it seemed. Quietly, Rodgers said, "I suppose you think you could train Harry better."

"Reggie," Tonks hissed.

As though speaking to a simpleton, Snape stated in an even more hushed voice, "If I believed I could better train Harry, I would be training Harry."

"Hmf." Rodgers' eyes narrowed as though looking for the trap in that. Moody continued to show them his cloaked backside.

Still quiet and a tad malevolent, Snape said, "I could have turned you in. I had no reason not to. Lestrange would have used you for torture practice . . . if you were lucky."

Tonks glared at Snape. Shacklebolt whispered, "I know a really good muting charm."

"We may need it," Tonks threatened, hands on hips as she looked sharply between the two of them.

Fortunately, Moody returned at that moment. "Loaded all right that house is. Layered alarms and traps. Looks like the work of at least four skilled wizards, some of whom didn't like each other , I'd guess by the looks of it. The charms are almost at odds. Kind of like these two," he added with his usual distorted grin.

Snape held out as the Aurors argued about the best approach, aggravating him into a kind of madness of inaction. Moody said, "No one is getting close without setting off the spell alarms. They'd catch a warlock, a babe even they are so sensitive. Any person."

"Any person?" Snape interrupted.

Enemies and Friends Part II

With his finger Harry traced and retraced the bright, gemlike quartz vein in the stone beneath his hand. His utterly bored mind seemed capable of latching fiercely onto anything of even vague interest. The air was dank; the candles had gutted from that morning, leaving the air without their warm honey scent. Achy beyond memory, Harry shifted yet again to find a comfortable position to sit in.

Across the room something fell to the floor, slapping lightly. Harry blinked and tried to look into the dim corner beyond the dusty air flowing in the ray of light from the high window. A held breath later, a faint scuffing sound emanated from the left of the stairs and a sleek black serpent slithered into view. It moved with purpose, straight for Harry, who gaped at it in shock. It passed between the bars and stopped. They eyed each other, black eyes on green. "Severus?" Harry managed to whisper.

The snake cruised effortlessly over to him, lifting its head to eye level, revealing a tan throat, tongue flicking out. "Good to ssssee you," the snake hissed. Harry reached out to brush the smooth scales by the second band, unsure if he were hallucinating. The snake bumped his arm awkwardly.

After checking that there was no immediate sign of Rick, Harry said, "I'm so glad you're here."

The snake hissed like a laugh, "Sssstrange to understand you this way. I assssume you would like to go home?"

Harry's eyes burned at the very notion and he only risked nodding. His mind was working again, though, despite the pounding headache that had only come on strong since morning. He stood and scooped the weighty snake up in his hands. "Hide beside the steps over there. I'll lure him down." Snape, released, slithered over to the shadow of the staircase.

"Hey, Ricky Rothy!" Harry taunted at the darkened steps.

After a pause a voice from the doorway at the top said, "God I hate that name. What do you want, Potter?"

Harry studied the dark outline of the snake turning and curling in the shadows. "I've been thinking about what you've been saying about family."

Slow footsteps descended into the cellar. "Have you now?" Rick drawled in a toying manner. He walked right up to the bars, smirk firmly intact. "And?"

"I'd like you to meet someone."

Rick glanced around the cellar, almost startled. Not seeing anyone, he scoffed. "Who?"

"My adoptive father." Harry gestured with his chin for Rick to turn around again.

With another scoff Rick did so, but then leapt backward into the cage bars at the sight of an eight-foot, banded Egyptian cobra, hood wide and mouth hissing. "Yah!" he exclaimed and tried to scramble away, but like a shot, the snake lashed out. Harry, who had not imagine Snape would actually do that, had to replay the lightening-fast strike in his mind. Rick grabbed his wounded thigh and fell, writhing, onto the floor. An instant later Snape had morphed above him, wand extended. Harry considered he should definitely ask later how he had managed that.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rothschild," Snape sneered. "You have fifteen minutes to live, give or take." It was not clear whether Rick had heard any of this over his piteous groaning. Snape felt around in Rick's pockets, taking his wand. Louder, Snape demanded, "Where is the key to the cage?"

Rick actually sobbed once in extreme pain and gestured up the stairs. "Mantel, in the silver chest . . . please . . . " he pleaded as Snape dashed away. He put his head down on the stones in abject agony to wait. Snape returned in less than a minute with a miniature set of silver rods set on a crosspiece. He tapped this against one of the bars, setting up a musical vibration in the key. A section of bars swung loose.

Snape immediately returned to his victim. Harry started to come around to assist. "Don't!" Snape ordered him frantically, holding up his hand, palm out. Startled, Harry stopped just inside the door. "Release the protective spells on the property," Snape demanded. When Rick ignored him in favor of harsh gasping, Snape impatiently fished a tiny bottle from his pocket and forced a droplet between Rick's lips. The effect was immediate. Snape handed him his wand, while pressing his own to aim at Rick's heart. Snape said, "You haven't been given enough remedy to survive more than an extra ten minutes, or worse, a whole extra hour of flesh consuming misery."

Rick, appearing defeated and angry, waved and muttered a series of cancellations. From upstairs came the sound of the front door opening and many footsteps scurrying. Snape grabbed Rick's wand back away and gave him the bottle of remedy, which the man frantically tipped into his mouth while uttering whining noises.

"Harry!" Tonks greeted him and rushed forward to restrain Harry from stepping up to meet her. "Stay there, kiddo," she said with worrisome uneasiness. "Whegh, you need a bath."

"Sorry," Harry apologized tiredly and got a pat on the arm from Tonks.

The other Aurors were taking things out of a small trunk they had brought down. "Get him a chair," Moody growled and Rodgers went to fetch one. When he returned

with an exotically carved one, Harry was made to sit, just inside the cage. Moody leaned his scarred face close to examine the chain with his roving glass eye. "Hmf," he muttered. "Burning it's the best, I think."

"What?" Harry asked in alarm.

"Get the dragon-proof collar out," Moody ordered, ignoring his question. Too many people were moving around Harry for him to keep track of, and they were all talking about him in the third person. Someone held out a padded flame-proof collar from a dragon training suit which was slipped under the chain and fastened around his neck.

"Just peachy, Harry," Tonks said reassuringly. "What do you think?" she asked Moody, "Just cut it?" Murmurs of debate went around.

"That will take care of it," Moody said with a grunt that spoke of inherent undesirability.

"Better idea anyone?" Someone asked. Harry just wanted to go home. To be stuck at the threshold to freedom like this strained his fragile nerves. "This might hurt a bit," Tonks said. "Hold yourself."

Fingers touched Harry's left hand and he moved his eyes–all he could move–to see that Snape had crouched down to reach him through the mob. Harry gripped his hand as everyone braced for the chain's reaction to being attacked. The ignition was rather spectacular for something so small. A blinding light and heat flared against Harry's face and the collar jumped chokingly tight for an instant before the chain broke into pieces.

The remainder of the chain floundered on the floor, sizzling like a firework until Tonks stamped it out and hovered it into an evidence sack.

"Would've taken him out for certain," Moody stated darkly and gave Rick, who was bound against the wall, a look of utter disdain.

Tonks handed the sack to Rodgers and stalked over to her former boyfriend. "Well, this about tops it," she growled at him disgustedly. Harry did not care one ounce for the man at this point, perhaps because Snape had gotten even for him, at least partially. "Can you take him in?" Tonks asked Moody. "I might kill him just for the heck of it." Moody hesitated in case she might change her mind before hauling Rick to his feet and growling at him.

Harry had to hold back a grin at Rick's alarm as he took a proper look at the old Auror. "What makes you think I won't?" Moody asked.

Chapter 61

"We need a debriefing, Harry," Tonks began, "down at the Ministry."

"He needs a Healer . . . " Snape began.

Harry held up a hand to stop him. "It's all right. I'm okay," He insisted, although his head was still pounding from the hallucinagenic potion and lack of water. He felt obliged to give it a good show in front of his future colleagues and stood unsteadily with his guardian's hand on his arm.

"We'll keep it quick," Tonks assured him.

Even though giving his version of events should have been easy, it felt like a kind of torture to the utterly exhausted Harry. Snape hovered in the background in the Auror meeting room, looking ready to pounce on anyone, even Harry himself. Moody frequently grunted in doubt as Harry tried to explain what had happened.

"I was thinking about other things. I think I heard a boot scuff on the pavement and I was starting to turn and pull out my wand, and then I couldn't move. Or it hurt to move and something was around my neck."

Harry considered that Vineet for all his meager spell power, would not have bothered with the wand, and would have left Rick as a heap on the ground without even breaking a sweat. Tonks lifted the evidence sack and dropped it on the table. Harry hadn't actually gotten much of a look at the necklace when it was on him; it hadn't been long enough to pull into view. The few remaning tiny blackened links were odd hoops with a crosspiece fitting into the next hoop.

"I don't want to go around . . . " He was going to say that he didn't want to go around as paranoid as Moody himself, but he changed his mind and closed with, " . . . always worried I'll be attacked. It was Muggle London."

Moody grunted again disapprovingly. Harry bolstered his pride as best he could and listed what had transpired during his four days of captivity. It worked best to isolate himself from the memories as though speaking of someone else's experience. He finally arrived in his telling at the moment Snape had appeared, and gave his guardian, who was still hovering impatiently behind Tonks, a grateful look.

"You are a mess, Harry," Tonks finally said. "We have enough for now and you really need a bath," she complained.

"I can't help it," Harry retorted.

"Ah, there's that temper," Tonks playfully pointed out. "Severus, why don't you take him home."

Those words could not have been more welcome. After repeated words from everyone about how good it was to have him back, Snape led him to the lifts and up to the quiet atrium. The few people they met along the way gave him extensive greetings and asked where he had been. He waved them off and waited for Snape to disappear in the Floo.

Snape appeared in his dining room, which was again full to the brim with all manner of guests. They all looked up with sad hopefulness at his appearance. Snape did not speak, just reached back when the hearth flared again to offer Harry a hand into the room. He took it gratefully as he was feeling dizzy from the journey. When he straightened up, he gaped at the room, filled with his former housemates, some neighbors, many Weasleys, and Hagrid, who was using a large trunk as a seat.

"Harry!" the room erupted, setting his frayed nerves on edge. Hermione ran around the crowded table and gave him a hug. "Sheew!" she exclaimed with a wrinkled face.

"Let me get a bath," Harry insisted, fending off the others who descended on him. Snape cleared a path to the hall for him and he gratefully followed.

Safely in the toilet, he peeled off his clothes, kicked them into a corner , and suggested that they be burned. Snape was adjusting the taps and when he turned, noticed the blistering burn below Harry's collarbone. "I'll get you a poultice for that or the water will be quite painful."

Harry lowered himself into the blessed bath while Snape pawed through the cabinet and began quickly putting something together at the sink. Harry added copious bubble bath to the water and started to wash up. "It's all right, Severus," Harry said, although as he did, a wave of water splashed the flaming line and he changed his mind. "Thank you for coming to get me, yet again," Harry said with crushing gratitude. Snape glanced back with a pained expression and Harry went on, "I didn't know you'd managed to become an Animagus; you didn't let on at all. I would have helped you with it, though you apparently didn't need any. It's a useful form," Harry added into the silence, blathering, perhaps for lack of having anyone to talk to for days.

Snape finally spoke in a lecturing voice, "We needed to get through the spell barriers, which were extensive." He came over with a shallow bowl full of a green paste. Harry leaned back and let it be dabbed onto the stinging red line that wrapped around his shoulder. "Let that set before getting it wet," Snape instructed him and placed the remaining portion in easy reach. "Need anything else?"

"Dinner. Water. Lots of water."

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Snape went to the door just as it opened and Winky stepped in, delivering a tray. Harry drank thirstily from the glass even though he had had two at the Ministry. Dinner was a thin chicken stew, the scent of which made his stomach grumble fiercely. Snape still hovered after Winky departed. Harry hungrily spooned stew into his mouth before halting before his stomach rebelled. He noticed Snape's furrowed brow. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Snape snorted softly. "I did not do well by you, Harry."

"Seems like you did to me," Harry countered, setting the soup aside to let his stomach settle. He picked up the cloth and washed his arms again.

"When you did not come home in the late afternoon, I assumed you were being difficult. The search for you should have started twelve hours before it actually did."

Harry squeezed out the washcloth and resoaped it to stall. "I shouldn't have been behaving so badly last week. I'm sorry for that. I had a lot of time to think during the last four days. A lot of time." He rinsed the cloth out again without using it and again rubbed soap into it before holding it between his hands. Staring at the quickly dissolving bath bubbles and the bright pink of his knees showing through, Harry said, "You're a wonderful guardian, Severus. Having met your dad, I'm guessing that's why you need to hear that."

Snape's frown didn't disappear but he did straighten from his deep slouch.

Harry went on with deliberate calm, "I've gotten so much out of being with you, beyond even your willingness to bail my bum out of the bad situations I seem to get into."

Snape's dark eyes considered that before his lips twitched slightly and he moved to the door, opening it a crack. "I will let you finish."

Harry peered up at him, finally taking the time to really look at him. "You look like hell, Severus."

"Fell completely apart," Tonks said, as came through the bathroom door, taking the handle right out of Snape's hand. "Hasn't slept. Hasn't eaten. Not a thing. Go on," she ordered him, pointing around toward the kitchen. Bowing his head, Snape quickly strode away.

Harry cut himself off from watching Snape depart with concern and instead fumbled with covering himself as the bubbles had faded to the tub edge. "Tonks!" he complained, reaching for and knocking the bubble bath bottle into the tub with him. She

fished it out and added a copious amount before running the water again. It foamed nicely and he relaxed.

Quietly, she teased, "Not like I haven't seen it before. . . "

Harry, blushing until his face felt hotter than the tub water, snapped, "Still."

She chuckled. "I just wanted to talk to you a bit before heading home for a long sleep," she said with affection. Harry relaxed as the bubbles had reached chest height now. He dunked his head and began washing his greasy, gritty hair. Tonks said, "You weren't stuck there real long, but I want to make sure you understand what can happen to someone held captive like that." Harry stretched his neck to one side. He didn't want to think about it, really, but Tonks plowed on, "Mostly I want to make sure you don't withdraw, which is a common reaction."

Harry sank down into the suds until only his head was exposed. "Is that why I feel like curling up into bed about a hundred times more than I want to go back and see my crowd of friends who are waiting?"

"Yes. Resist it. Visit with your friends for as long as you can stand. Everyone's been deucedly worried about you, Harry," she added somberly.

"I've been bloody worried as well. Rick is a lunatic."

Tonks rubbed her long pink fluffy hair back. "I'm really sorry about that, Harry." They both fell silent and Harry started washing his feet with great fastidiousness, just because he could. "Tara is here by the way. Just found out what happened to you, although no one knows the connection."

Harry froze with the cloth between two toes. "I'll have to talk to her," he breathed.

"One thing at a time," Tonks said. "Maybe I will wait for you. I'll see you upstairs," she said as she departed. Checking up on him, Harry thought with a little annoyance.

The door opened again as he bundled himself in soft, lovely, clean towels, but it was Snape this time, simultaneously eating a biscuit and carrying fresh clothes. "Thanks," Harry said, "forgot to ask Winky." He accepted the t-shirt off the top of the stack and slipped it on.

"Are you certain you do not require a Healer?"

Harry nodded. "I'm fine," he insisted, glad to be able to say that. A little food had rendered him almost normal feeling and the hot water had eased his aches. Just some sleep and he would be back to himself, he was certain.

Chapter 61

Fully dressed in marvelously clean clothes and in his favorite maroon dressing gown, Harry let Snape lead him out with an arm around his shoulder. "You should say hello to your friends," Snape commanded as they made the steps to the hall.

The hall was a welcome sight with all the lamps lit, the center of what he considered home, and he was finally warm from the bath all the way to his stiff joints. "You're taking orders from Tonks," Harry accused him. "There shouldn't be two of us doing that." Snape's lips twitched every so slightly upward. Flush with gratitude for being home and with affection for the steady hold around his shoulder, Harry quietly said, "I love you, Severus."

Their footsteps stuttered to a halt halfway across the hall floor. Hermione came to the doorway of the dining room, face flush with a smile. She must have sensed something because she hung there, hesitating, with her hands on either doorframe. Distress flickered over Snape's features before they relaxed. Softly, he said, "Come, Harry, your friends have been most worried about you." His easy tone was in contrast to the fiercely tight hold he had on Harry's shoulder as he steered him toward Hermione.

His much shorter friend stood on her toes to give him a hug. Behind her, others came to their feet to greet him as well. "How did they find you? Tonks wouldn't say," Hermione complained.

Harry looked to his guardian and Snape didn't reply. "Severus, you didn't-" Harry began with concern, but was interrupted by all the others coming over to welcome him back.

The bunching around him finally eased when the Weasley twins gave up congratulating him gregariously and repeatedly. Beyond them stood Tara, and beside her, Elizabeth. Harry blinked, recovered his poise, and said, "Hi," to both of them before pulling a rather pained looking Tara aside.

"Look, I-" she started to say before Harry cut her off with a whispered, "Don't worry about. It wasn't your doing."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "He didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

Harry, very aware of the attention the full room was giving them, said lightly, "No. Not really."

Winky came in with trays of small sandwiches and squares of cheese. "Wow," Ron whispered. "How'd she know I was hungry?" He grabbed Harry and sat him down at the table, before the tray and beside Ginny. "You look like you haven't eaten. First dibs."

Harry took a sausage sandwich and looked around the room. "When I'm an Auror and out. . . doing something dangerous, you aren't all going to sitting here like this worrying, are you?" he accused them all.

Tonks stepped over beside him and took up a stack of three little sandwich triangles filled with marmalade. "Yes, Harry, I think they are," she said sympathetically, patting his shoulder. "This just came for you, by the way." She held out a letter.

Harry handed it to his right, to Tara, to have it opened, since he had a sandwich in his hand and eating seemed more important. Elizabeth leaned over to look at it curiously. It was then that Harry realized how very surrounded he was by girlfriends past and potential, and he dearly hoped they didn't get to talking together too much.

"It's from the Minister of Magic," she said. "You want me to read it?"

Harry thought that over, but before he could answer, Ron grabbed the letter away and began reading aloud. "Dear Harry . . . Wow, the Minister refers to you as 'dear?"' Ron marveled before going on to the generally grinning room. "So very glad to learn that you have returned home safely. Awwww. . . "

Harry grabbed the letter away and stashed it in his pocket. "I wanted to hear that," Hermione complained.

After eating enough to feel unwell from it, Harry listened dully to his friends' low chatter and fell into a pleasant stupor. He was bone tired though, and soon rested his head on his folded hands on the table.

"Is he asleep?" someone asked.

"Might be," Hermione whispered.

The entire room grew silent as Snape stepped around the table and lifted Harry's arm over his shoulder. "Come on, Harry. Time to go to your room."

Harry's eyes fluttered open and immediately closed again, heavy as lead. "G'night," he muttered at the doorway and it was echoed by his friends who were now gathering themselves to depart.

In his room, Harry sat on his bed and watched through a veil of half-sleep as Snape brought his pyjamas over to him. Harry stared at them, wondering where the energy to don them might come from.

"Do you need anything else?" Snape asked.

"You repeated that spell; didn't you?" Harry said a bit accusingly. "I didn't want you to do that." He frowned deeply, feeling guilt without real reason for it.

Quietly, Snape said, "I didn't, although I also wished I had, seeing your condition. I used that explanation with Ms. Tonks, but she did not believe me, I think, partially because I knew more than your location. Nor did she insist on the truth since she was far more interested in locating you."

Sitting straighter on the edge of his bed, Harry thought that over with his slow brain. "So . . . wait, don't tell me . . . Malfoy?"

Smiling faintly, Snape nodded. "But at his request, no one is to know that."

"Oh. All right then." Remembering his rival's dropped hint, Harry decided he should have been confident that Draco would go for help. He hoped though that he didn't feel Harry owed him too much; he couldn't bear that. While getting changed into his soft pyjamas, his tired mind conjured some dates. "Tomorrow's the first," he realized aloud. "You shouldn't be here," he insisted in some alarm.

Snape grinned inwardly. "I do need to leave tomorrow but the students won't arrive until evening on the Express. It will be fine."

Finally changed with his clumsy hands, Harry clamored under the covers, deeply anticipating a night in his warm bed. Before he lay back though, he said, "You can go tonight. I'll be all right."

Snape balked and approached to stand directly beside the bed. "As welcome as this sudden streak of independence is, I will depart after breakfast."

"If that'll work out." Harry straightened the duvet, relishing its soft cover and plump warmth. "I realize . . . " he began, keeping his head down. After a hesitation he continued, "I realize now that it doesn't matter if you're at school; you'll come for me if I need you."

"Of course," Snape softly said.

A tad sheepishly, Harry said, "I guess I knew that before, but now I really do. I thought maybe you'd already left for school and didn't know I was missing."

"What? Harry . . ." Snape scolded.

Explaining quickly, Harry said, "You said you were leaving, I didn't know you would worry enough to think something bad had happened. I figured by Monday the Ministry would notice."

Snape appeared disappointed and dismayed even, as he sat on the edge of the bed. "I worry about you constantly," he admitted quietly.

Harry's face wrinkled up and he said, "That's a tough job."

"Yes. And I wonder sometimes how Albus managed to retain such an appearance of aloofness from his concerns for you. I do not even have Voldemort to worry about," he added in chagrin.

Harry, feeling a burst of honesty, stated darkly, "I want to get Avery."

Snape fell thoughtful before saying, "Do work though the Ministry on that. Please don't go it alone."

"I also want to clear Sirius' name."

"You may have an easier time with the first." At Harry's confused expression, Snape explained, "The first the Ministry can trumpet; the second will only cause controversy. NOT . . ." Snape went on quickly when Harry started to complain fiercely. " . . . that I don't agree that it should be done. I am simply explaining the reality to you." He brushed his unkempt hair back and said, "You know I had thought that you and I had gotten to know each other, but I am discovering many things, including a girlfriend, that I did not know about." He didn't sound angry, only mystified. "Do try to keep me somewhat informed by owl if you will."

"I'll try."

Snape stood. "And if you have difficulty sleeping tonight, do come fetch me."

"I don't think that will be a problem." Harry punched the soft, goose-down pillow behind him. "I've been fantasizing about my bed for four days running." He plopped back on it with a sigh.

"Sleep well, Harry."

"You too."

Harry slept so soundly that he didn't stir even a breath any of the three times Snape came to check on him. The third time, at just before 4:00, Snape hovered longer, taking advantage of the exhausted sleep that kept Harry from rousing to the dark inner vision he must be having of him so close. Snape was not one for flights of fancy but, standing there, he wished dearly that his charge no longer saw him that way, that somehow his shadow could be torn from that green world. He fretted also about the future, when Avery had finally been captured and only he himself was the very last free, former Death Eater. Would Harry's grace about this remain the same?

Unaware of his guardian's musings, Harry slept deeply on as though anchored to it, if one could be so, by plush bedding. Snape stood straight and considered that if Harry chose to withdraw his forgiveness, then that was certainly his right. But as long as he needed his guardianship, it seemed unlikely.

Chapter 61

The morning began bright and sunny. Harry, though loath to leave his wonderful bed early, did so to have a long breakfast with Snape.

"Owl to tell me about the new students, all right?" Harry said as they discussed Hogwarts during hash on toast. At Snape's nod, Harry added, "I want to make sure the Gryffindors are making enough trouble for you."

Appropriately grim, Snape stated, "No fear of that."

Revelling in ordinary, future plans, Harry said brightly, "I'm going to go to the Quidditch matches with Aaron, so I'll see you at the first one if not sooner."

"Minerva would almost certainly want you to stay for dinner in that case. I expect to return for a weekend before that."

Finally, Snape was ready, his small trunk beside the hearth. Harry gave him a quick hug. "Have a good school year. Don't sneak around the castle as a cobra too much; it's an unfair advantage over the students." Snape smiled with his eyes, but refrained from comment. Harry added, "Unless you're going to scare Filch, then it's all right." Harry realized that he was stalling and stepped back, forcing his ongoing comments to cease.

"Do behave, Harry, and owl every day for the next few days, if you would."

Harry nodded only and watched Snape take up his trunk and depart, accompanied by a whoosh of flame.

After breakfast the owls began arriving, as well as a scattering of friends from the night before, the ones who could get away from their other responsibilities. Winky gave them breakfast and most had to depart soon after. Harry wandered to the sideboard where the owls had been dropping the post. A few packages were there, including one from Candide. Harry unsealed the box from Honeydukes and ate a few. Everything seemed to taste a lot better than he remembered. He penned a quick thanks to her along with reassurances as to his state of mind and sent Hedwig off with it.

When he was washing up, Harry noticed that his burn had begun to sting again. Most of the blistering streak on his chest had turned white, but two sections of it were still a flaming pink. The wound looked angry, as though it would leave a scar. The leftover poultice beside the bath had dried up, but ten minutes of hunting in the library produced the instructions for Creamed Barbadensis Hydrating Plaster. Ten additional minutes later Harry had it mixed from the ingredients in the bath cabinet. The relief was instantaneous and, satisfied that he could continue to do without a Healer, Harry confidently continued getting dressed.

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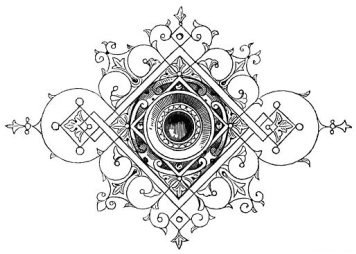

Field Work

The house was silent. Harry tried to get used to the routine of the silence and at first found that it allowed him more opportunity to think, but later in the day, the stillness itself became a distraction. He propped Kali's cage open so that she could follow him when she wished and return to it when she didn't. Her occasional interruptions worked well to keep the empty house at bay. His impromptu time off was only one day; hopefully his pet would go back into her cage tomorrow when he needed to leave.

Mid-afternoon, Harry headed outside to work in the garden, since the sun was intermittent and he yearned to get some on his skin. A few residual aches in his back made bending repeatedly a bit unpleasant so he pulled out his wand and thought a bit. A Scourgify took care of the leaves that had collected between the plants and the wall. He didn't know a spell for weeding though, so gritting his teeth lightly, he crouched to pull the worst of them up by the roots.

"Hello," a pleasant greeting came from the road. It was Elizabeth.

Harry returned the greeting, stood and brushed off his hands.

"How are you doing?" she asked, sounding as though she very much cared about the answer.

"Not bad. My pride hurts more than anything else."

She grinned. "The Prophet has been pretty easy on you. Have you read it?"

"Merlin, no," Harry breathed miserably, making her laugh lightly.

Chapter 62

"They have taken an offended stance aimed at Rothschild not respecting Wizardry's indebtedness to you."

Harry scratched his head. "Have you been studying a bit?" he asked carefully.

With a blush she admitted, "A bit. Michalmas term starts in a month."

"Ah." Harry glanced around the garden and put his wand away.

"Hopefully your pride can recover," she said helpfully. Harry wasn't certain if she were teasing. She went on, "The Prophet didn't say where the Torq had come from. I was curious, so pulled out one of my old magical history books and found a chapter on them."

Without thinking ahead Harry asked, "Your dad let you read books about the history of magic?"

She laughed, "Are you kidding? He encouraged it once he realized how miserable most of the history is."

"Goblin wars," Harry stated sagely, making her laugh again.

"Giant wars. Don't forget those," she contributed. After a pause she fell serious. "Don't feel too bad. Torqs were used to keep magician slaves you know. They use your power against you, so it doesn't matter how powerful you are." At Harry's interested look she asked, "Do you want me to bring the book over?"

Harry thought he would prefer to forget about it for the time being. "Maybe some other time."

She gave him a chastising tilt of the head. "What did the Torq look like?"

Harry shrugged. "I only saw it after it had burned up. But it did look a little odd."

A tad impatient sounding, she asked, "Well, what ward was it composed of? You know, was it made up of ankhs or five pointed stars-"

"It was an ankh shape," Harry interrupted, realizing now what the links had looked like.

"Nile Valley. They made the best wards," she stated knowledgeably. "When I was young, I was fascinated by Egyptian Wizardry: whole tombs protected by a few powerful carvings, so many mysterious objects they've dug up and they don't know what they do, or how to recreate the ones they've figured out."

"Rick said he had the Torq made for me," Harry stated thoughtfully.

"Huh. That must have cost him."

Harry brushed the drying dust off his hands again. "It did."

Field Work

The next morning Harry rose early and sat at the table perusing the Prophet until breakfast appeared. He had been away from training long enough that he felt excited at the prospect of it and arrived at the Ministry early. He strode across the atrium, returning a rash of greetings from everyone in his vicinity. He was feeling good, relaxed and strong, not to mention blissfully free to walk around where he wished. Just before the lifts, a saccharine sweet, though somehow harsh, voice brought him to a scuffling halt. Harry turned slowly, drawing confidence into his posture as a shield against the prospect of facing Rita Skeeter.

"Mr. Potter," she said again. A flash went off; he held himself from blinking repeatedly in its wake.

"What do you want?" Harry asked with his own false sweetness.

"An interview, of course." She blinked her long lashes coyly, although from her the effect was counterproductive.

"I'm due in the Auror's office in two minutes. I'm terribly afraid I haven't the time."

"Two quick questions in that case," she insisted while looking in her robe pockets. She swore lightly when she pulled out her cigarette case first, and then her notepad. "How did they find you?"

"A complicated spell," Harry replied. Given the work he had had to do on Draco, it certainly seemed like a magical spell.

"Which one?"

Harry put his hand over her notepad and pushed it down away from the quill. "Telling you brings up difficult questions for people I'd prefer to protect."

"So, I won't bring it up if you give me a longer interview."

Harry tilted his head and looked at her. "Is it worth that?" he asked plainly.

She frowned at her notes. "Probably not. Second question, when is the hearing?"

"I haven't gotten a notice yet."

"You're ruddy helpful. One more then. Were you injured?" She waited expectantly, short, sharp quill poised.

"I got burned. Here." He drew a line over his robes with his finger. Giving in with a sigh, he added, mostly because he really didn't want her mucking around finding out

about Draco, "And he slipped me a hallucinogenic potion. That was ghastly." He jostled his head at the memory of the transformed world attacking him. "I have to go," he begged off.

Before he could reach for a lift button, she said, "Good to have you back, Harry," with something approaching sincerity.

Harry turned his head and said, "Thanks. Goodness, you'd have to find something else to write about," he commented in mock horror.

She laughed lightly and stepped away, photographer trailing obediently.

After everyone had assembled in the workout room and Harry lived down his fellows' ribbing, Tonks said, "I have your examination results . . ." and proceeded to pull out a long sheet.

Harry made a noise of dismay and when Tonks turned to him, he asked, "You gave the first examination?" When he received a nod, he quickly challenged, "Was it yesterday?"

"Yes. You seem to have missed it," she said, writing the results on the board for the other three. Vineet seemed to have done the best on the written by a wide margin.

"Can I take it now?"

"No." She went on writing.

Stung by this, Harry complained with vehemence, "What am I to do then?" This seemed grossly unfair.

Tonks turned and considered him. "I think you need another day off, Harry." Harry banked his anger and denied that. "You're certain?" Tonks asked kindly. At Harry's vigorous nod she appeared doubtful. "You were waived through the exams. Complaints?" she challenged.

Harry shook his head and noticed that Kerry Ann appeared to have just beaten out Aaron in blocking, making him suspect that she was holding back during drills.

Tonks departed and as they waited for Rodgers, Aaron said, "You would have failed in the escape test anyway, Potter."

"Was there one?" Harry asked, honestly curious.

"NO," Kerry Ann snapped sharply, her anger aimed at Aaron.

Vineet who had sat silent until then, his intricately painted wand sitting before him on his small desk, said reassuringly to Harry, "Mr. Moody did not believe your situation to be escapable."

Moody, off all people, believing that did make Harry feel better. Turned out it was just as well he hadn't gotten out, since the necklace would have killed him. Sighing a bit, Harry sat back and they all waited for Rodgers to appear. Harry found an unexpected new capacity in himself for waiting, as one quiet minute stretched into the next. He considered that he certainly wouldn't be waiting four days, probably four minutes, which wasn't really very long and relaxing would make it seem to go by quickly. Aaron and Kerry Ann whispered gossip about various Ministry officials, trying to top each other with inside knowledge.

Rodgers finally hurried in, set them to doing drills, and disappeared again. Harry paired with Kerry Ann for counter-curse practice. This was growing a rather dull, frankly, since they hadn't added any new ones lately. Rodgers didn't reappear after they were finished and Harry suggested they move onto offensive spells.

"Harry's favorite," Aaron teased.

"No, they aren't," Harry retorted as Aaron pulled out the hard rubber dummy which hung from a metal hoop on top of its head. It was faceless with no hands or feet and with worn maroon paint covering it.

"Sure seems like it," Aaron countered. The dummy swung to and fro as its platform was positioned. "Ol' Stubby here thinks so too."

When the platform was locked to its bolts in the floor, Harry aimed and hit it with a moderately hard blasting curse. It blew straight out, and rocked hard against the bolts when the dummy swung back.

"Well, maybe," Harry conceded, finding pent up violence within himself, most likely from his imprisonment. He proceeded to take it out on the dummy, and the others allowed him longer turns at it without comment.

Rodgers returned, apologizing for the delay in a rare display of contrition. "We really need to get you through this so the rest of us can catch a break." He stepped over to Harry and handed him an official looking envelope. Before he returned to the front of the room, he was already lecturing from the readings. Harry slipped open the spell-sealed envelope and found what he expected: a hearing notice for a week from then. He quickly folded it back away and listened more closely to the discussion of layered illusions.

During lunch, Harry begged off eating with his fellows, saying that he wanted to run an errand. The others headed off to the exit and Harry, notebook in hand this time, returned to the file room, intent on taking better notes from Avery's records. He

didn't have an excuse to be looking about, so he snuck down quickly and shut the door behind him. It was unoccupied, the only movement from the Knight Bus orb.

Harry found the correct file and opened it on top of the lowest cabinet. Thinking again, he closed it and took it up, tucked under his arm back to the empty Aurors office. He sat on the floor, out of sight behind the last desk and borrowed a never-out quill from the absent Shacklebolt.

Not five minutes passed before footsteps and voices approached. Harry rolled his eyes at his poor luck. They had all left for lunch not ten minutes before. The voices stopped in the corridor, speaking low. This in itself caught Harry's attention. Without trying he listened in as Tonk's said, "I know. I agreed with his acceptance. He is exceptional on nearly every other factor."

Rodgers followed with, "I was overconfident. I thought it was a detriment we could fix, but it's clear he is already compensating more than I would have thought possible."

Harry sat in complete stillness, wondering, with a bit of trepidation, who they were discussing. He should have finished all of the reading last night, a voice in his head chastised him. Tonks sighed, a long one. "I'd feel rather sorry if we had to send him off. He has such, I don't know, faith in his own destiny."

Harry felt a tingle in his chest as though it might refuse to breath should he try to. All kinds of minor difficulties he had been having lately now loomed large as he sat there, staring at what looked like a mouse hole under the desk, against the opposing wall. He swallowed hard.

"Destiny as a Muggle perhaps. He doesn't have much more magical power than one," Rodgers commented.

Harry's chest didn't feel much better upon realizing that they were discussing Vineet.

Tonks said, "Let's wait until the six-month review. Give him a little more time."

Their voices moved away. "It isn't going to make any difference," Rodgers pessimistically stated before they were out of range.

Harry stood up off the floor, expecting to be stiff from the hard surface, but found that he wasn't too bad. When the path was clear, he slipped back down to the file room.

On the third of the month an owl arrived, one of the brown school ones. Snape had sent a long letter, although the small angular hand indicated it had been written rapidly. He mentioned that Minerva hoped Harry was recovering well from his ordeal. He summarized the new students, good, bad and indifferent. Harry smiled at the vision of intimidated first-years huddled in the Defense classroom, in awe of the simplest demonstration. Snape also discussed the new Transfiguration teacher, Mr. Cawley, brought in because McGonagall had decided to only teach sixth- and seventh-years. Harry started to write out a reply but had to stop because he was late leaving for the Ministry.

"Next Friday will be the first field training for two of you," Rodgers explained when they settled in at the Ministry. He pointed at Harry and Kerry Ann. "And that Saturday, the other two of you. Now, don't get too enthralled, this is just routine patrol you will be shadowing. Rare is the evening when anything happens and your Auror won't be called to anything dangerous unless it is absolutely necessary and you may be taken to a safe house or sent back here instead of being allowed to follow to anything significant."

Despite their trainer's playing it down, Harry was very much looking forward to Friday. So much so that he goofed up his invisible ink mixture that afternoon and it came out sparkling like a Muggle electric marquee. Well, Harry considered, his fellows seemed like they needed a good laugh.

That Saturday Harry had Tara over for dinner. He had picked her up outside the Leaky Cauldron and brought her home in the Floo. She was quiet all through eating and no amount of cajoling, joking, or blame-taking would draw her out more than an inch. Winky even made duck for the occasion.

When he escorted Tara back and they stood in the dim crowded wizard pub, Harry said, "Every thing's all right, really."

"I feel really bad about what happened . . ."

"I'm used to it," Harry insisted. People were taking an interest in them, so he stepped toward the back alley where it would be quieter. She resisted, tugging toward the front door instead.

"I'm not supposed to be in here," she breathed. At his questioning look she explained, "When I was a child and with my parents, it was okay."

"You're with me, no one will bother us about it." But he glanced around at the people eyeing them, including the barman, and led her out the door to the pavement.

Outside she said. "You shouldn't have been put through more on my account." When he tried again, she said, "Look, I'll owl you." She gave him a light push back toward the grimy pub door.

That didn't sound so good, but Harry had already argued himself out. "Good night then," he said wearily before ducking back inside the obscure wooden entryway.

Harry stood outside the door of Courtroom Ten, idly studying the soot-coated dungeon walls. Tonks had sent him off early to Rick's hearing and now he waited, getting annoyingly nervous as the minutes passed. He reached for his pocket watch, despite promising himself that he would not pull it out yet again. Wear had dulled the edges of the golden wings to a mat finish. He fingered it without opening it, thinking how very perfect a gift it had been at exactly the right moment, a pleasant thought that took him nicely away from the here and now.

The large iron bolt on the door clunked over, pushed from the other side. Harry stashed the watch away, stood with his hands at his sides, and tried to relax. An elderly witch in fancy black robes gestured for him to enter and Harry did so. The tiered seats on the sides were three-quarters full and the benches on the end where the Wizengamot lorded even more so. The scuffling and murmuring stopped as Harry stepped across the floor, following the witch who had let him in. Rick sat in the hard-edged wooden chair in the middle of the floor. He appeared to want to cross his arms but the chains wouldn't allow it. He could just interlock his fingers over his lap and they hung in the air, clenched and wiry. He ignored Harry's entrance and continued to stare at the floor beyond his knees. A nicely dressed, portly man with a ferret-like expression stood near him–a barrister, Harry assumed.

The witch took up a seat at floor level, where she apparently was monitoring a dictation quill. The long transcription parchment already had many feet of roll filled up. Harry stopped short of the little table there and looked up at the benches. In the front was Minister Bones and her assistants with stacks of files and notes. Harry also recognized Marchbanks and a few others. On the bench above the Minister's sat McGonagall. She gave Harry the smallest of smiles but didn't lose her usual serious disposition.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones began, sounding slightly pompous. "Thank you for coming. Let it be recorded that Harry James Potter of 23 Tottlywold Road, Shrewsthorpe was present to give testimony. Mr. Potter, the court would appreciate you recounting the events of August the twenty seventh through August the thirtieth of this year, if you would please."

She sounded dismissive almost, as though asking him to recall what he had had for breakfast. Harry dove in though. He had been thinking through everything since last night, cutting into his sleep in an effort to recall details as well as plot out how best to gloss over Malfoy's involvement. No one interrupted him as he summarized getting taken by surprise in Knightsbridge nor his initial observations of his cage, and he held the blush of embarrassment at bay during the worst of his story, when he had drunk the hallucinogenic water.

"Just a moment, if you will, Harry," Bones interrupted him. She sounded normal now, almost sympathetic. "We don't have a charge for deceptive administration of a psychotropic potion on the sheet, do we?" she asked her assistant.

The witch beside Bones found the right parchment as the dictationwitch unrolled her own to look back to where the charges had originally been read. Harry leaned slightly over to see it better, trying to determine if Rick had already mentioned Draco in his own testimony, as Harry was not keen on getting into a conflict of facts. He had believed he would be present for the whole proceedings, but it turned out he was only called down for his own part. Uncertain, but hiding it as best he could, Harry waited while they sorted out the exact charge to add.

"All right then. Please continue, Mr. Potter."

"Well, the next day was pretty much the same as the previous ones, except I was afraid to drink the water provided and the wash basin had been taken away so there wasn't any other. I don't know how much later it was, because it was hard to keep track of the time, except in general by the sunlight coming in the window. But in late afternoon, rescue arrived. Um, my guardian, Severus Snape came past the property spell barriers in the form of a cobra."

Rick's eyes came slowly over to Harry, his brow furrowed in faint confusion. Harry was certain he was wondering why Harry had skipped over part of the story.

A middle-aged wizard with a large birthmark on his balding head asked, "Is he a registered Animagus? I don't remember that we have a anyone currently living who takes the form of a serpent."

Harry hesitated, "I don't know. He only mastered it in the last few weeks." Harry had been so concerned about Draco that he completely failed to consider that he might

end up telling the full Wizengamot that his guardian was an unregistered Animagus. He pretended that nothing was amiss, but inside his thoughts had picked up speed. The barrister beside Rick was jotting something down on a small notepad in his hand. Rick still looked calculating. Harry quickly tried to gauge if leaving Draco out was to Rick's advantage and whether he could be expected to leave it be if it weren't already too late.

"And then what happened?" Madam Bones prompted.

"Severus, my guardian, bit Mr. Rothschild and then forced him to bring down the barriers . . . in exchange for the antidote to the venom." Some shuffling occurred at that. Harry looked around the benches and was very surprised to find McGonagall fighting a grin. Harry himself tried to smile at the sight of it. He cleared his throat into his fist to cover. "Then the Aurors came in–took the Torq off of me–cut it off with a dragon-proof collar to protect me when it burned." Harry sighed in relief at finishing.

Bones went over the pile of notes with a furrowed brow, stopping at a sheet occasionally before moving on. She appeared to be looking for something in particular. "Mr. Rothschild in his questioning by the Aurors, not under any coercive potion, I'll add for the record, mentioned something about 'showing off to Potter's enemies,' or something of that nature, the notes are not clear. What does that mean to you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt he owed Draco a good try at loyalty, even though Harry himself believed it was in the other's best interest that everyone know what he had done. Perhaps in his own circles it would get him expelled, and for Draco, the right circles were probably rather important. With a hint of sheepishness Harry asked, "May I have a quick word with the Minister?"

Bones appeared taken aback, but recovered quickly. She stared at him with her widely spaced eyes as she considered that. "Take us off the record Madam Scribner, if you will."

The official quill was plucked from the air and held, twitching. Harry stepped around and up before the first row of raised benches. It probably wasn't a normal place to be walking, given that it was only a half a shoe wide. Bones looked up at him with an expectant expression. Harry leaned over and whispered, "The person who is actually responsible for my rescue does not want it known that he is involved, and I feel obliged to honor that." He straightened slightly to better see her expression. She appeared dubious but it quickly dissipated. McGonagall just before him, looked ready to give him detention.

"Who?" Madam Bones mouthed.

Harry leaned forward, much closer, and whispered, "Draco Malfoy."

"You are quite serious?" she asked, befuddled. Harry nodded soberly. Quietly she breathed, "Who knows what goes through that boy's head. All right, then."

Harry turned and saw that Rick and his counsel were conferring. Walking carefully back along the ledge, Harry went back to the steps and returned to the floor. He looked around at the side tiers and found some familiar redheads, who waved, as well as Skeeter, quill moving busily. The dictation quill was returned to the parchment.

"I withdraw my question from the witness," Madam Bones announced when the quill was in place. It scratched that out. The audience murmured for a few seconds before falling quiet again, but the room now felt tense in a new way. "Does any other member of the court have a question for this witness?"

The barrister stepped forward a half stride. "I do." He had a deep rolling voice that oozed confidence. Sounding a tad patronizing, he said, "Mr. Potter, during your stay in my client's cellar, did you at any time feel that your life was in danger?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Not until later when I found out the Torq would have killed me had I managed to escape."

The man shuffled his broad feet as though dusting the floor. "My client did not fully comprehend the power of the magical object he had procured from North Africa. He couldn't even comprehend the language on the packaging."

"W-" Harry began. He had been about to ask the smug man why it was that Rick had told Draco that it would kill him. He closed his mouth. Angry now, partially at himself, Harry stated firmly, "He let that thing torture me. Many times. Bragged about how he had bought it just for me. And when I did start to fight it significantly, he used a flame spell to knock me back."

The man's mouth twitched every so slightly. "Precisely my point; my client didn't believe himself safe should you have broken through the bars."

Harry gave them man a disgusted look and stared him down, truly tempted to try a little delving into his beady eyes. Harry regrouped and tried for something incontestable. "He wasn't very concerned with my well-being."

"So, after this dire affair you must have required treatment then? St. Mungo's perhaps? Or at least a Healer house call?" The barrister didn't look anything like a snake, but his mind sure moved like one, Harry thought.

"No." In the man's gleaming gaze, Harry added, "My guardian was the Hogwarts Potions master for twenty years. He made up a poultice for my burns. Otherwise, yes, I would have required a Healer."

The barrister paced with that floor-dusting motion of his feet. "Mr. Potter, how many of my client's girlfriends have you dated?"

Harry crossed his arms. "Former girlfriends. And two."

"And how many did you sleep with?"

"Is that relevant?" Harry retorted.

The barrister turned his wide brown suit to the benches. "I intend to demonstrate that Mr. Rothschild was driven mad with jealousy. So I request that the witness be forced to respond."

"Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones prompted.

Harry's stomach dropped a few inches. "One." Harry dearly hoped anyone present from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement believed that he were referring to Tara. Out of the corner of his vision, he thought he could see a few of the assembled smiling at his discomfort. He felt he had been exposed and pushed back with, "If Rick were mad with anything, it was loss of control over those he was accustomed to keeping under his thumb. He is not a very nice boyfriend."

"That is hearsay, Mr. Potter," the barrister chided him. "Unless you are asserting that you have also dated my client?"

"No, I haven't." Some small chuckles echoed off the old stones. Harry wished he were better at this, wished it were a duel of spells rather than words.

"Other questions?" Madam Bones asked after a pause.

The room remained blissfully quiet.

When he returned to the Auror's office, Harry found, upon quickly pulling out a quill and scrap of parchment, that his hands were not entirely steady. No one was around in the office and he could here banging and sizzling in the workout room. He jotted out a quick note to Snape warning him that he had revealed his Animagus status. Maybe he had registered already, or sent in something, Harry hoped, as he folded the note while heading down the corridor where the two staff owls were caged. Neither were there. Harry headed around the corner and much farther along until he came to the Muggle Artifacts office, his fingers mentally crossed.

"Harry!" Mr. Weasley greeted him happily, even though he appeared to be literally buried in paperwork. "How'd it go then? Out already?"

"I'm finished, the hearing is still going on. I need to borrow an owl. Kind of an emergency, although a personal one. The department ones are out."

Mr. Weasley jumped up and squeezed Harry's arm as he passed and led the way down to the narrow cupboard beside the file room where the supplies were kept. "Here, let's see," he muttered while looking through stacks of yellowed old envelopes. "Ah, here we are." He held out an envelope that bore the label Official Use Only by Reg. 453 Subsec. C Para. 2. "Put 'er in there and airplane it up to the mailroom and they'll send it along."

Harry stared at the staid envelope. "Er, the issue is already one of getting in a bit of trouble with the Ministry."

"It'll be all right. Send it on." When he saw Harry's hesitation, he asked, "What's the matter? It didn't come out that you're bunking with the Minister's niece did it?" he teased and hit him on the arm.

"No, thank goodness," Harry breathed in relief, thinking of Tonks.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley blurted, sounding quite concerned in contrast to his jesting seconds before.

Harry waved him off. "It's about Severus." He stared at the envelope. "Maybe Minerva will warn him," he thought aloud.

Soberly, Mr. Weasley asked, "Warn him about what?"

"When they came to get me away from Rothschild, Severus and the Aurors, Severus slipped through the spell barriers as a snake. He just worked it out and I don't think he's registered." Harry waved his arm in the direction of the lifts. "I just told the entire, full . . . assembled . . . purpled, Wizengamot that!" Harry rubbed his brow, hard. "I didn't see it coming. I am not very good at that kind of thing."

Mr. Weasley took the envelope away and began addressing it. "That, my boy, unlike magic, requires a lot of practice."

"Magic requires practice," Harry countered, not sure if he had heard him right.

Mr. Weasley took the note to Snape put it in another smaller envelope, addressed it Prof. Snape, hesitated, then added only with several underlines. "Not for you I hear," he teased. He put this envelope in the other, sealed it and handed it to Harry.

It was addressed to Ginny Weasley, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, Hogsmeade.

Chapter 62

When Harry arrived home, feeling as though two full days had passed rather than one, he found a sizable pile of post waiting. He set the letter from Penelope aside, feeling that was too much to take in on top of the rest of the day. The others looked to be from the tail end of well-wishers, probably spurred by notices of the hearing that were in the Prophet. He stacked those neatly as well and left them on the sideboard. The box of half-eaten Honeydukes still rested there as well. He carried it to the table and proceeded to eat all but two of them.

In the evening a barn owl arrived with a letter from Snape. It was short. Assumed that was going to come up. Registration paperwork at Ministry already.

"Could've told me," Harry complained to no one, but he felt acutely relieved.

An hour later another arrived–a long-eared owl with an orange face. It insisted on handing the letter directly to his hand personally before flapping back out the window. The letter was from Shacklebolt. It read: Tonks has been out in the field all afternoon, but she told me to be sure to tell you the verdict. The full Wizengamot found Rothschild guilty on most of the charges and sentenced him to seven and a half. –Kingsley. Harry frowned lightly and wondered what the result would have been if he hadn't been protecting Draco. Seven and a half years was a long time, though, and Harry would be a well-practiced Auror by then. Harry considered with twisted relish the notion that Rick might come back and try something.

Friday was slow arriving, but it finally did, and Harry reported to the Ministry twenty minutes early, since he could not just sit at home waiting for the clock hands to move. Kali had picked up his anxiety and bounded about his room in a maddening manner as he wrote a quick note explaining his upcoming day to Snape. Harry, rather than cage her for the afternoon, had simply shut the door to his room. That may turn out to have been a huge mistake, but as he stood in the corridor waiting to find out his assignment, he didn't care.

Kerry Ann arrived five minutes later, looking equally eager and decked out in very stylish Muggle clothes. Between the parties and being out on patrol, Harry was thinking he should save his allowance and start buying some nicer things to wear.

"The moment we've all been waiting for," Kerry Ann announced when she stepped up beside him.

"Definitely."

"Potter, what are you on about? Haven't you been involved in just about everything up 'til now?"

"Not really," countered Harry, who was just checking that he indeed had his wand and observing that he still had not gotten the damage on it repaired from his fight with Malfoy senior at Hogwarts. He polished it up a bit on the corner of his cloak before stashing it away.

"Not really," she echoed mockingly. She shook her head as if to clear it and came to a kind of attention as the office door opened before them.

Tonks and Shacklebolt seemed a little surprised to find them there. Shacklebolt chuckled and said, "Well, not lacking in willingness; that's good. Kerry Ann, you're with me."

Harry broke out in a grin, then bit his lip to quell it. "Come on then, Champ," Tonks said, tugging him down the corridor by his sleeve. The unexpected thrill of getting to shadow Tonks was piling onto his excitement, leaving him exuberant and very aware of her fingers on his arm. By the lifts, Tonks paused and said, "Okay, some ground rules. . . are you listening?"

Harry, taken aback, said, "Yes. Don't I look like I am?"

"You look a little far away, frankly."

"No, I'm listening," Harry insisted as he checked yet again that he had his wand in his pocket. "I'm really happy to have drawn you to shadow," he explained a little shyly.

Tonks put her fists on her hips and stared at him. "Harry," she began in a disbelieving voice. "I drew you. Everyone wanted you as their shadow. There are old, semi-retired Auror's here like Mad-eye, who don't have to take any apprentices out, who joined the draw for you."

"Oh."

Tonks tugged on her ear and, shifting to an official tone, said, "Rules for tonight: first off, no taking action without my specific instruction. Got that?" At Harry's nod, she went on, "Now, obviously if things got very bad and I was out of action, then you'd be expected to act on your own, but that isn't going to happen. Second, I do all the

talking. Third, I want you always just behind my left shoulder–so I know where you are without looking–at all times, keeping it zipped."

Harry's brow lowered but he nodded to that as well and, just in case, didn't comment.

"Let's see. Those are the most important. Well, let's stick with three rules for now. Any questions before we head out?" When Harry hesitated in thought, Tonks chided, "You can talk right now, Harry."

"Where are we going tonight?"

"Liverpool. We're just going to circulate and ask a few questions of some people I haven't followed up with lately."

Harry nodded and as they rode up in the lift, regretted that it wasn't Devon where he might hear something about Avery. After arriving by Floo powder in the hearth of an unused room at a place called the Black Horse, Tonks took something out of her pocket and made a note on it. Harry wanted to know what it was, but didn't want to demonstrate that he couldn't be silent for all of two minutes. Tonks then Apparated both of them to an alleyway where she lightly kicked the sole of a homeless man sleeping there.

"Shafer, hey there," she shouted. Harry quickly moved to stand just off her left shoulder, which was the best place anyway, as it was upwind.

The man raised blood stained eyes to squint suspiciously at the two of them. There was an empty bottle clutched in his left hand, partially covered by a heavily wrinkled paper bag.

"Whatcha wan'?"

"Seen anything bad in the last week?"

"Las' week?" he guffawed. "You think I remem'r the las' week?"

"Seen anything bad?" she repeated plainly.

"Huh, le's see . . . " he gave this due consideration. "Freddie was complain'n abou' gettin' hovered without 'is consent. You know how they is."

"Okay, we'll check that out. Thanks." She strode purposefully away, Harry following quickly behind.

"Can I ask a question?" Harry prompted when they were a distance away but not yet to the street.

Tonks stopped so fast, Harry ran into her. "Sure."

"So, what about Freddie?"

"Harry, there isn't anyone named Freddie."

"Oh." Harry considered that while looking over a stack of broken pallets beside a wide door. "So, why were you trying to get anything out of him?"

"Because no one assumes he sees anything, but he has eyes."

"Why didn't you just Legilimize him then rather than . . ."

"I did."

"Oh."

"Rule four, no make that rule twenty-five–I'll fill in four through twenty-four later–if I go all glaze-eyed while talking with someone like him, just carry me off and get a shot of something; I'll come right around."

Harry blinked at that. "All right," he answered uncertainly.

"Any more questions?" she asked, hands on hips, although she didn't seem impatient otherwise.

Harry shook his head and followed when she turned to exit the alley. He was thinking that Tonks had not previously seemed like the rules sort. This kept him from having to wonder how he could have been so confused about what Aurors did.

They circled downtown, talking to various witches and wizards slouched in tucked-away smoky pubs or living above hidden little shops all around the city. Hours later when they returned to the Ministry, Harry with a serious yawn upon stepping into the quiet atrium, it felt like a wasted evening.

"Did we learn anything?" Harry had to ask as they took the lift down to the offices.

"Nothing specific. It's all patterns, Harry. Sometimes, someone will say something, usually in normal conversation, that will make some ongoing mystery fall into place, or sometimes we'll be having a meeting here and I'll remember some otherwise meaningless observation that helps someone else's investigation. You have to keep your ear to the ground. Otherwise, every investigation would have to start from scratch."

She yawned as well as she dropped into her desk chair. With her head tilted way back to look at the ceiling, she said, "Go get us coffees. I have to show you how to fill out reports."

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It was late, nearly one in the morning, when Harry finally made it home. Winky came up from the kitchen to ask if he wanted dinner. Harry's stomach, which had only received a random bite or two of poor pub food all evening, readily agreed to a real meal. Before eating, though, he desperately needed to shower off the city grim. He then fetched Kali who, other than taking a liking to clawing the old curtains, had not done any real damage while left to herself.

As he ate, Harry hoped that field work got a little more interesting, otherwise being an Auror might bore him to death–if it didn't wear his feet to the bone first. Kali curled up on the next chair and slept, bored by these thoughts as well.

Harry began living life through letters. That weekend they poured in, including a Muggle post one from his Polly Evans. The letter was full of standard hopes that he was faring well and it closed with an invitation to visit anytime. Harry folded that one and put it in the photo album, folded between the last two pages.

Ginny's letter was full of excitement over the new school year, for which Harry was glad; he didn't think she should waste it, academically or otherwise.

Tara wrote a short note saying she was taking a trip to Brussels for her job and expected to be gone a few weeks, at least. Harry sighed aloud, making Kali raise her head curiously; Tara had said she was planning to avoid that assignment. A few angry retorts came to mind and he was tempted to send them off in a letter, but resisted. He really should be more patient, after all, they had only been out a few times, and unlike his school days when that was quite significant, he was learning that it no longer necessarily was.

Penelope wrote as well, a letter that read like a lighthearted diary entry about her job and her family. Harry found himself again pulling out parchment and explaining his dating predicaments to her. Doing so made him feel hopeful that something could be resolved.

Alone now, Harry became diligent about things he noticed needing to be done around the house. That weekend he weeded the front garden and actually went clothes shopping. Since he had to go into London to exchange Galleons for pounds, Harry went to Marks and Sparks. Although the mannequins looked fashionable, Harry found that the racks of those particular clothes put him off. He ended up with three

white shirts and two brown trousers–brown because otherwise he had headed all the way into London to buy Hogwarts uniforms.

He met Ron and Hermione at Hermione's flat for dinner. Hermione had apparently taken past critiques of boxed pasta to heart, because she had attempted a roast this time. Ron sawed away gamely at his piece and declared that it tasted great as he jawed away at the bite.

Hermione frowned at her plate. "I didn't imagine it would turn out so tough. How does your mum do it?"

"Slow roasting," Ron said, still chewing.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked. "I didn't have time. I thought if I turned the oven up a bit I could quicken things."

Harry cut a very small piece to avoid chewing. The potatoes were good and he said so. Hermione sighed. "At least we'll be eating out in Spain."

"Spain?" Harry prompted.

"'Mione and I are going on holiday, you didn't hear?" Ron said in excitement. When Harry shook his head, Ron said, "I've always wanted to go to Spain. We're leaving next weekend."

"Sounds great," Harry said, finding odd bits of jealousy rising up, but he forced them down.

Hermione said, "It will be good to escape the parents."

"Haven't you?" Harry asked.

"Somehow, no," Hermione replied, sounding mystified. "So, how are things with you, Harry? Getting by on your own?"

Happy to have a chance to explain his multiple friends-who-were-girls dilemma, Harry went on in a rambling manner about Tara and Elizabeth, ending with, "Tara has been really hard to get through to since the Rick incident. She says she feels bad."

After a pause Ron said, as though stating the obvious, "She feels guilty."

"Apparently," Harry agreed. Ron and Hermione shared a look. "What?" Harry demanded.

His friends proceeded to have an eye-to-eye, silent argument about who would explain. Finally, Ron said, "Harry, you remember after Sirius fell through the veil?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, not sure where this was going and a little wary of the direction.

"Do you remember how guiltily you felt? You let it overwhelm everything. Well," he thought farther, "that's when you weren't blaming Snape. But anyway, you . . . were really hard to get through to."

"What Ron is trying to say," Hermione stated in her factual voice, "is that you have to be patient. Some things people have to work out for themselves."

"Oh," Harry said. He didn't feel like reliving those memories all that closely, even to glean anything helpful for dealing with Tara. "You'd think she'd get over it. None of it is her fault."

"Yeah, exactly," Ron said. "Like that."

Harry gave him a disturbed look and Ron returned to sawing his meat into too-large bites.

Harry spent most of his evenings studying in the library, his books and papers slowly taking over the large room. As he was trying to organize things, he found the purple book still on the desk where he himself had placed it with the intent of reading it the next chance he got. He was beginning to wonder if it didn't have some kind of repelling charm, because he never went near it. That thought alone made him to pick it up and flip through it while taking a seat on the lounger.

He almost immediately knew why he hadn't read it earlier; it made him feel a bit queasy and not particularly better-prepared. Phrases like emotive cleaved pathways to the dark plane and mentally distressed visions of land crustacia and amphibia hybrid animates left him little desire to read on. He pressed on for ten pages in any event, his mind wandering to other things constantly as he did so. The text was full of strong warnings and admitted guesses about what it called Interstitial Magical Forces. With a heavy sigh, Harry closed the book and put it back on the small desk with a dull thud.

He clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the over-full bookcases on the other side of the room. He wished Snape were there. In his last owl his guardian had mentioned that he would be home in two weeks time. The clock ticked loudly in the hall, reminding him how very quiet it was.

Field Work

At the Ministry, Harry and Vineet sat on one side of the workout room behind a temporary floating curtain while Aaron and Kerry Ann worked on the other. They had a crate of discarded objects from around the Ministry, including old dented or even melted tea kettles, broken quills, and something that looked suspiciously like shackles, but they would have to go on a Troll they were so large.

"How about a yellow teapot?" Harry suggested. Vineet nodded and tapped the kettle with his wand to add that illusion. "And the shackles?"

Talking low also, he said, "Perhaps change the size down to human?" When Harry shrugged, Vineet tapped the heavy rings with his wand but they only shrank marginally. The Indian frowned and stiffened. Harry added the illusion himself, brushing off his fellow's failure to do so. He felt bad, but didn't let it show at all.

"Let's leave half of them normal to confuse them," Harry suggested. "We're finished," he announced to the room.

They tested each other's skill at illusion negation by exchanging crates. Aaron and Kerry Ann watched in amusement as they removed each item. Harry pulled out a hot pink, drastically oversized tea cozy and complained, "No double illusions."

"It isn't," Kerry Ann countered.

"Oh." He held it up to Vineet. "What do you think?"

Vineet held it at arm's length and considered the quilted, floppy thing. He tapped it with his wand once and it turned into a standard chair pad, albeit a hot pink one.

"Brilliant," Harry happily said. "That's one for us."

"Darn," Aaron complained.

In the end he and Vineet won handily. "It's not fair," Kerry Ann complained, "they left most of theirs untransformed."

"Nothing wrong with that," Rodgers stated. "Clever of them, I'd have said."

Harry grinned and gave his partner a wink, but Vineet still sported a faint frown. He had to know, Harry thought, that he wasn't meeting the trainer's expectations. Harry's smile faded as he took out a blank parchment and quill for their review session. He liked Vineet and didn't want to see him go, but didn't know how to prevent that.

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Friday arrived with no field training scheduled and with his friends on holiday. Harry considered looking up some other friends. He went up to his room and opened his notebook. As he flipped to the pages of addresses, he passed his old notes about Avery.

Friends forgotten, he went and grabbed his broom, stood in the hallway a long time deep in thought, then instead put it away and went out back to the motorbike. With its cover removed it gleamed in the low morning light. Harry packed up a lunch, put on his warmest cloak and rabbit-lined gloves, and skillfully took off from the small, back garden.

Harry ran the machine flat out so that it only required three hours to arrive on the cliffs above Torquey. He parked the bike and looked down at the lush trees and grey sand of the beach. The wind was cold off the sea and Harry thought it just as well Ron and Hermione were in Spain rather than one of the blanket-wrapped, picnicking couples on the shore.

He rolled into town with the roar knob out just enough to be convincing. As he parked it beside the railing of the quay itself, he realized he hadn't thought this through. Well, he would just have to do as Tonks showed him–wander around and talk to people.

Within an hour Harry discovered that nearly everyone there was from somewhere else and many asked him questions about his motorbike that he couldn't answer. The explanation that he had inherited it seemed to satisfy even the most ardent admirers and further explanation that the departed godfather who had left it to him was too dear to sell the bike took care of the few who seemed ready on the spot to purchase it.

Parking the bike back where he started, Harry wandered into a game room where a few otherwise difficult looking young teens were playing. Two younger ones, who were dressed less nicely than the others around town, were playing together on a machine that had four colored sets of knobs and buttons. The little blips of light on the screen took a minute to resolve into a little green figure shooting arrows like Robin the Hood and a brown Norseman throwing tiny axes. Large numbers of small trolls were pouring into a corridor on the screen and at the same rate being killed and disappearing. This equilibrium continued rather a long time.

"Behind you!" the boy shouted, startling Harry, who just resisted turning around as the warning was for the girl whose figure spun to shoot arrows of light at two trolls

sneaking up from the other side. Eventually the trolls were overcome and the screen scrolled as the figures ran through a doorway. The boy wiped his hands on his pants during the pause.

"Do you live here?" Harry asked.

"Got a pound coin?" the boy asked.

The girl didn't answer so Harry assumed he himself was being addressed. "Yep."

"Put it in then," the boy insisted. The slot that ate coins was lit and Harry slipped in the pound. The machine made an electronic swallowing noise. The boy asked, "Want to join? You can be the knight."

"I'll watch." After a pause he said, "You get a lot of tourists here."

Some grumbling. "That's all we get here. Including you," the boy pointed out.

"No natives you'd rather not have around?" Harry teased, fishing.

"Sure, loads," the girl finally piped in. The figures were opening a treasure on the screen and distributing weapons including something labeled Magic Potion. Harry thought maybe this game looked like fun after all. More trolls died in vast numbers. The electronic sounds became urgent and the boy swore. He then said, "Got another pound?" Having not found anyone else to ask questions of, Harry fished in his pocket found another Muggle coin amongst the Sickles.

"Thanks," the boy said. The music became happier. "You looking to move here or something?"

"Something," Harry said. Even after following Tonks around for uncountable hours, he found himself uncertain how to make requests that didn't give away his motive. By no means did he want to warn Avery that he was looking for him. In the end he spent half of an hour and two more pounds, making small talk and bantering with the rather fowl-mouthed youngsters.

The electronic quest was still going strong as Harry made ready to depart. "Is there an evil wizard at the end?" he asked.

"There is no end," the girl replied flatly, hands never ceasing on the colorful plastic knob and buttons.

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That evening, tired from his long journey, Harry heard a knock and glanced at the clock, surprised that anyone would call so late. He went down and found Candide at the door. "Hi," Harry said. "Come on in." As she stepped into the entryway and removed her heavy cloak, Harry pointed out, "You can use the Floo if you wish."

"I didn't know if you'd mind."

"I don't mind, but Severus isn't here this weekend, you know," Harry informed her.

"I know. I wanted to talk to you." Her voice had an unusual flatness to it.

Harry led her inside to the dining room and stoked up the fire to warm the room. "I'll tell Winky to bring some tea?"

"Thank you," she said as she settled at the table.

Harry returned from the kitchen and sat across from her. The fire felt good on his legs as it roared in the hearth. "What do you want to talk about?"

She frowned and hesitated. "Has Severus said anything to you . . . about, uh, me and . . . the future?"

Harry thought a moment to be certain, but then shook his head. With a sigh she sat back and clasped her hands. Harry said, "That doesn't mean much. He rarely says much of anything personal, really."

"No, he doesn't," she agreed with a dismayed laugh.

Winky came in with tea and a bowl of bonbons, bowed and departed. Harry poured for both Candide and himself. "What do you want to know?" he prompted, wondering about the mega-chocolate treats and the expected need for them.

She laughed lightly again, but it sounded defeatist. "I've been sort of expecting . . .hoping perhaps, that he's thinking . . .you know." Harry blinked at her before shaking his head that he still didn't understand. She clarified, "That perhaps he was thinking soon of asking me to marry him."

"Oh." Harry stirred more sugar into his teacup. "He hasn't said anything about that."

Yet again, she sighed. Harry asked, "Is there a reason you don't just ask him?"

"If you ask a man too soon. . ." She waved her hand dismissively and added knowledgeably, "It isn't good. Can derail everything. Even if it might have worked out in the end."

"Oh." Harry ate a bonbon.

Long moments of silence later, she confided, "My real problem is I don't know how to answer anyway."

"Uh, why not?" Harry managed to return, feeling well out of his depth but having to stick with it.

She looked a little sad then. "This woman I work with, Roberta, she says the most horrid things about Severus." Candide winced and went on, "Started bringing in old Prophet clippings when I didn't believe her. Not that the Prophet is the most stellarly factual publication."

Harry straightened in his chair and added yet more sugar to his tea, sipped it, then added more tea, just for something to do. He was leaving her hanging, but he didn't know what to say.

Finally, she went on, looking pained, "I'm trusting you, Harry. You, of all people, have entrusted Severus with your well-being. I can't put that together with what Roberta insists . . . "

A little sharp, Harry asked, "So what does Roberta insist?"

Candide hesitated, "That at Hogwarts, he . . . practiced dark wizardry. That he was friends with known servants of Voldemort–wizards who died in the final battle, in fact." Her eyes were searching Harry's face, although he wasn't giving anything up, his flat look may have been sufficient.

"Harry?" she prompted, pleading.

Harry placed his cup and saucer back on the tray. "You have to speak with Severus about this."

"Why won't you talk to me?" she demanded.

Harry exhaled hard, fishing for a good reason. "Because everything I have is hearsay." This was a bit of a lie, but it sounded good; it was a word the legal books used a lot. "You need to talk to him."

Looking downcast, she said, "So you're saying it is true. I don't get this."

Harry stood and repeated firmly, "I'm saying, you need to talk to him, not to me."

She grimaced lightly and stood as well, cueing Harry to go and fetch her cloak. "Take the Floo from here," he suggested.

After hooking her cloak around her neck, she dropped her arms heavily and gazed at him. "I trusted you, Harry," she said accusingly.

"I didn't tell you to do that," Harry retorted, feeling anger now, at the way things were, more than her insinuations specifically. Harry went on, "Severus is very important to me, but I can't be his proxy when you have accusations to level. I'll defend him as an adoptive father all day, but I wasn't at Hogwarts when your friend and my father were and my father died before I could possibly ask him any questions about Severus." An unwelcome desperation was trying to take hold of Harry. He fought it off as she considered that.

"He'll be around next weekend, right?" she asked, sounding unhappy.

"Yes. That's what he told me."

"I'll come back then," she stated and, moments later, she was gone.

Hunting Avery lost its appeal for Harry that week. He had been plotting how to get to Devon for a few hours and now when he thought about it, it seemed likely to be fruitless. He threw himself instead into working on Sirius' case. During a long lunch break one day, he pulled all of the related files and borrowed a desk in the Auror's office to spread them out and compose a summary as Tonks has suggested when Harry had pressed her about how he should start.

Staring at the old files, clippings, interviews, evidence photos, and wanted posters, Harry felt that this was the most important thing he should be doing. It wasn't right that his godfather, of all people, was still officially considered Voldemort's associate.

Harry was just starting to jot down a few notes when the owner of the desk returned. Shacklebolt looked over Harry's shoulder with interest. "What are you up to?"

"I want to clear Sirius' name. You knew him. Don't you think he should be?"

"I have to admit I hadn't thought about it before. But as I do so now, I certainly think it should."

Harry collected up the files and moved to Tonks' desk. By the end of lunch, if nothing else, he felt he had a much better feel for how to read case files as well as how to read various Aurors' handwriting. Moody's was definitely the worst, a shaky bit of

work that was always crooked at a thirty-degree angle, even when horizontal lines were available as a guide.

In the file room, with Moody's handwriting on his mind, Harry quickly restowed the documents in their proper drawers, and even quicker, headed down to Portnoy-Pterido and pulled his own file. It wasn't the right file though, not the one Rodgers had with his apprenticeship paperwork. The one in the drawer here was from his hearing for underage wizardry and misusing magic in the presence of a Muggle. It looked just like one of the other case files: coversheet with basic description; notes from investigators, including Umbridge. It was a thin file at least, he considered as he put it away. Unlike all the others, which were heavy and thick with repeated investigations.

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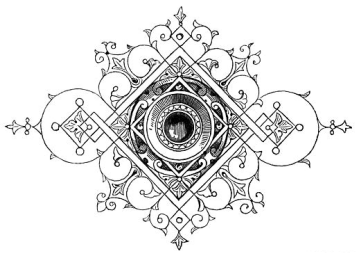

Haunted by the Past

That Friday, Harry and Kerry Ann again waited in the corridor outside the Aurors' office. They were both a little more confident today, their eagerness tempered. Tonks and Shacklebolt came and collected each of them.

Shacklebolt said, "You want this one?" to Tonks as he held out a parchment.

"Either one," Tonks waved the sheet she had. "Harry's familiar with Mungo's, right Harry?"

"I've been there," Harry replied, mystified by the question.

"I'll take the hexing report then," Shacklebolt said. "Come along, Ms. Kerry Ann, we have a real assignment this afternoon." They stepped down to a lift.

"Do we have a real assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Tonks nodded. "We do, an easy one. Can you Apparate to St. Mungo's?"

Harry nodded and a moment later they were in the incoming area in the cellar. Harry followed Tonks, careful to stay just to the left of her back all the way, even up the lift to the fourth floor. He began to recognize where he was when they reached Ward 49.

"I'm looking for Healer Strout," Tonks said to the first official-looking person they encountered. The small old witch with a volunteer's badge on her robes gestured that they follow her and at the end of the long corridor she knocked on an office door.

When the door opened, a witch working at a desk immediately looked up and said, "Ah, they did send someone. Come in. Come in. Have a seat." Tonks led the way

in and closed the door. Harry took one of the old straight-backed chairs before the desk, looking around at the colorfully painted office. The shelves beside him held a collection of strangely and even impossibly shaped glass vials and bottles, some that turned in on themselves so that one could never pour anything into them. When he looked back to Healer Strout, she was gazing at him, befuddled. "The situation doesn't warrant such, uh, attention does it?" she asked, looking between him and Tonks.

Tonks, who had toned herself down to grey-blue hair and blue robes, said dismissively, "Mr. Potter here is just following me around, pay him no mind."

Strout thought that a very odd suggestion, based on her glazed look. "All right," she agreed anyway, sounding confused.

Tonks had a little notebook out. "So, tell us what happened."

Strout clasped her hands before her and said, "Well, at around five this morning Mr. Lockhart simply walked out."

"What?" Harry blurted, suddenly very alert. "Sorry," he immediately apologized to Tonks.

"Familiar with Mr. Lockhart, are you?" Tonks asked him.

"Just a bit," Harry returned darkly.

Strout spoke into the gap after that. "Note, that we normally don't allow our patients to just walk out. There are spells to keep them in and a night nurse. The night guard downstairs, as well as the greetingwitch on duty at the time, said he seemed to be a perfectly normal late visitor who just needed directions out."

Harry thought of commenting about how odd that was, but kept quiet. Tonks scratched out some notes. "Can I see his records?" The Healer handed over a file that was lying out on her desk. "Did he have any visitors in the last week, last month?" Tonks asked as she flipped through the thick folder.

"The staff said he hasn't had any visitors for months. Witch Weekly sent a reporter for some sort of Where are they now? article in June. That is the last anyone remembers."

Tonks handed the file back. "You deemed it suspicious?"

"This kind of sudden recovery after this much time is very unusual, and the hospital director remembered him as having an unsavory past. Although I've always considered him charmingly harmless."

Tonks stood. "Let's take a look at where he's been staying."

They followed Healer Strout down to the ward. Inside, the faint scent of deteriorating lethargy made Harry breath shallowly. Tonks looked around and under the one empty bed. Posters of Lockhart, yellowed at the edges, waved from the wall behind it. Harry watched Tonks look around, crouching to look under the bed when she did. Tonks then attempted to interview the occupant of the next bed, who apparently believed he was a broomstick, because he would suddenly stiffen, put his arm up, go completely deaf and would make a noise like rushing air, which Harry assumed meant he was flying somewhere.

While Tonks worked at this, Harry looked down to the end of the ward where the Longbottoms had been last time. Mrs. Longbottom, looking far older than Harry remembered, was sitting on her same bed, holding something tan and fuzzy, stroking it methodically. The bed beside hers held a curled-up figure that didn't stir. Harry wanted to go down there and say hello but he remained where he was, diligent for the moment, just off Tonk's left shoulder.

Tonks finally gave up and seeing the blank gaze of the other nearby bed's occupant, sighed. She jotted down a few notes and then stared at the notebook in thought.

Harry asked, "Do you mind if I go down to the end?"

Tonks' gaze turned to the last bed's occupant, who appeared to be gazing at them, or perhaps just through them. "Think she can answer questions?"

"No," Harry admitted. When Tonks shrugged, he went and stood at the foot of the last bed. Mrs. Longbottom didn't look up at him. "Hello," Harry tried, feeling pained by the scene. He could see now that she held a small stuffed lion and, without looking at it, was brushing its fuzzy mane back.

Tonks came quietly up beside him and they shared a sad look. When Harry turned back, Mrs. Longbottom was holding the lion out to him. "No, you keep it. Thank you, though." She held it out another moment before tucking it close, gaze still very distant.

On the way out, Harry tried to shake his glum mood. Tonks was quiet as well.

Back in the offices Tonks pulled out a fresh parchment and asked Harry to go check for an existing file. Harry went down the quiet corridor to the file room. The lights were down so he took up a lamp from beside the door and pulled out the drawer Liechtenstein-Lovery. Sure enough, there was a Lockhart, Gilderoy there, a relatively thin one. Harry perused it on the way back. It held an identity sheet, a letter from

Dumbledore, and a mental health assessment that ran five pages. The letter from Dumbledore was in pretty couched language.

Mr. Lockhart, it seems, has been deceiving the public about his skills as a dark arts defender. He is reported by two of our students to have made threats of the most heinous kind in an attempt to perpetuate this deception. I expect that his current state renders his previous actions null and void.

Tonks read over the pages. "Who were the two students, do you know?" she asked, sounding strangely like she did not expect him to know.

"Ron and I," Harry replied.

She sat back and perkily asked, "Oh, well, do tell."

"You don't know what happened when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?" Harry asked, surprised.

She glanced at the report. "Ninety three is before my time, although this is sounding familiar from stories people in the Order used to tell about Malfoy. Something about a cursed diary, right?"

Harry proceeded to explain what had happened and how Lockhart was going to let Ginny die and wipe his and Ron's memories. The memory made Harry more angry now than he remembered being at the time.

"Well, no wonder you don't like the guy," she commented, making more notes. She flipped her battered quill back and forth over her chin thoughtfully. "I don't know what to think of his disappearance. It doesn't seem dastardly, just odd." She proceeded to write up a report for their visit to St. Mungo's and when she finished that started another one on the events at Hogwarts. Harry felt very odd being formally interviewed after all this time. The memories of it came back clearly, though, after he started in on them.

When she ran out of questions she finished filling out the forms, dating, spelling, and organizing them into their folders, which she handed to Harry to file.

When he returned he said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What is that thing you have in your pocket? You write on it when we arrive somewhere it seems."

"Oh. Just this." She pulled out a small battered slate tablet framed with wood. After more fishing around in her pocket, she pulled out a white stick. "I use it to check in.

I'm pretty bad about that but if I say when I arrive in a new city, they lay off me about it. I can also use it to sound an alarm by drawing a star on it followed by a message." Quieter, she leaned closer and said, "Usually when I have an emergency, I don't have two hands free to write out a message about it."

It was six; too late, Tonks thought to head out again on patrol. Harry was a little reluctant to go home, but he said goodnight rather than ask what she was doing that night, as he was sorely tempted to, and collected his things.

At home it was raining hard. Harry stared at the streetlight-highlighted droplets on the window and wondered exactly when Candide planned to visit. Snape hadn't returned yet, his owl indicated it would be long after dinner, but not exactly when. Harry now thought he should have stayed in London, it would be better than sitting here in his room feeling doom settling around the house. His mood was topped off by Snape's note that morning saying that he hoped Harry was free to visit his mum's coven on Sunday.

The rushing sound of the Floo emanated from downstairs. Harry methodically put his things away and stepped down. Snape was in the drawing room, exchanging some files from a small trunk. His cloak was tossed over the chair and Harry caught a whiff of Hogwarts castle on it.

"Good evening, Harry," Snape greeted him.

The door knocker sounded. "I'll get that," Harry said.

Candide was at the door, very wet. "Come in." He didn't repeat that she could use the hearth. He led her into the dining room where the fire was already burning high. "Wait here, let me break him into this."

This startled her. "Thanks. But don't ruin it for me, if you can help it," she pleaded lightly.

Harry rubbed his hair as he walked back to the drawing room. "Uh, Severus . . . " he started, but then stalled. Snape's brow furrowed as he turned, gazing at his charge through his hair. "What is it? Who is at the door?"

"Candide." Snape stepped toward the hall, but Harry restrained him. "She stopped by last weekend," Harry explained quietly before he closed the door and Silenced it. "She had a lot of questions that Roberta brought up. Ones I told her she should ask you." Harry regretted now not having owled Snape with at least a warning. Snape moved slowly as he took that in. His hand dropped to the chair back beside him by measure and eventually gripped it. Harry went on, "She thinks you may be considering marriage-"

"What?"

Harry flinched at the tone and realized he had blundered in where he had been specifically warned not to go. "She just wanted to know if that might be true," he attempted to recover. Snape looked essentially appalled. "That's what brought up the other questions," Harry went on quickly, mentally chiding himself.

Snape's eyes dropped to the floor before he straightened and said, "Well, let's see what they are."

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Harry asked before Snape reached the door.

"No. I'll do it." He sounded fatalistic.

Harry trailed a distance behind Snape. He felt he should follow because he couldn't simply go up to his room and hope for the best. In the dining room Candide sat with hot cocoa, which she put down when they appeared. "Severus," she greeted him.

Snape stepped in and leaned on the back of the chair across from her. "Harry informs me that you have questions you wish to have answered." Harry frowned at the tone that sounded similar to one used with his House students.

She looked as though she regretted being there and Harry wondered if he should have just tried to explain, but he hadn't wanted to have a hand in convincing her to break up with Snape. Candide asked, "You remember me mentioning Roberta before?"

"Yes," Snape replied. Harry marveled that he could put that much derision into a single, small word.

Candide rubbed her hands together, glanced at Harry, who managed a look of sympathy, and finally said, "I need to hear you say a few things aren't true."

"Such as?" queried Snape after a delay. The two of them appeared to be opponents suddenly, rather than lovers. A painful transition to observe, making Harry drop his gaze to his toes and just listen.

With feeling Candide said, "I'm trying to preserve something here; at least help a little, Severus."

Coldly, Snape returned, "You've already made up your mind."

"I don't want to believe these things, but why would the Prophet print . . . " She winced. With more certainty, she asked, "Were you friends with someone named Nott when you were in school?"

"Yes."

"You were friends with wizards who ended up serving Voldemort? Including one who killed himself rather than be captured during the final battle?"

"Yes."

"Is there ANYTHING that isn't true?" she demanded, distraught. More quietly, she said, "I've spent months defending you." Gesturing, she said, "You have Harry Potter, of all people, with you . . . how can . . . ?" She frowned and challenged, "How?"

Snape held completely still for a long time, staring her down. Finally, he said, "Potter, you've been taught a Protean Charm correct, and the Indiceffector?"

Harry froze, skin chilling. They had covered that spell but had only practiced it very briefly on pre-charmed ink blotters with hidden messages. He didn't respond.

Snape turned his dark, hooded gaze back over his shoulder at him. "Potter?"

"I won't use it."

"Are you an Auror or not?" Snape snarled at him, as nasty as Harry had ever heard him.

With a hard swallow Harry shook his head. "Not if you ask that of me." When Snape huffed in disgust, Harry insisted, "It isn't who you are."

"What do you know about who I am?" Snape demanded, although he sounded like he really didn't want to be arguing.

Harry stepped over beside him, desperately searching for the right thing to say. Across the table, Candide stood transfixed with faint horror. Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve where his mark would be if it were revealed with the spell he was demanding of Harry.

"I don't get it," Candide muttered, pained.

"Don't get what?" Snape taunted her. "You've been in denial," he pointed accusingly. "You have wanted to be."

Her mouth worked before she said, "You weren't . . . aren't really . . . ?"

"Really what?" Snape demanded. Candide appeared very sad then. Her eyes took in Harry without reaction. In a low voice Snape mocked, "You can't even say it."

Her jaw ground then before she angrily asked, "All right, then. Were you really a Death Eater?"

"Yes," Snape returned, sounding cruel.

Her fiery anger vanished again, "How could you?" she whispered in pain. "How could you?" she demanded of Harry.

Snape appeared to take more of an affront at the second. "Let me talk to her alone, Severus." Harry urged, taking him by the arm and tugging in the direction of the door. "Please," Harry pleaded.

Snape tugged his arm away and stalked off. In the distance a door slammed.

"I trusted you," Candide whispered accusingly.

"So keep trusting me or make up your own mind in the first place," Harry countered angrily. "I don't appreciate you hurting him," he went on, pointing at her to emphasize.

"Hurting him?" she mocked. "What could hurt a Death Eater?" she asked, mouth twisting at the words. "Merlin, to think I was hoping he'd want to marry . . . " She cut herself off and appeared rather sad.

Harry leaned over the table and stared her down. "You don't understand anything," he spat at her. "About him or me."

"Clearly," she returned, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Bloody Merlin," she whispered, grabbed up her wet cloak in a bundle, and brushed past him.

Harry couldn't let it go at that. He followed her out to the garden and into the rain, which pounded straight down in grey-brown sheets. In the road he grabbed her sleeve and pulled her around. Following her, he had prepped his story about Snape healing him because he understood, but in the wet road, reflecting the headlights of the passing cars, what he said was, "I thought you cared about him. What, were you just pretending?" He was furious, he realized, perhaps dangerously so, because the reflected headlights looked green now, rather than blue-white.

"I can't keep caring for someone like that," she said retorted. "I don't know what kind of spell he has you under."

"None!" Harry snapped angrily. "If you only knew," he muttered, forced to stop by what might have been a chittering sound, although over the torrential rain it was hard to tell. The swirling water in the road appeared to hold eel-like shadows that moved against the reflections on the surface.

"Harry!" she shouted in alarm. He had stepped backward into the road as a car approached and had to leap back to the relative safety of the gravel at the same time the headlights swerved.

"Go," he ordered in fear, not sure what was real around him and what was rain, not sure what might find passage through his anger from the dark plane as the purple book implied could happen. "Go!" He insisted, and she hurried off with a worried glance back. In it, Harry saw great concern and it made him feel rather badly about how messed up things had gotten.

Back inside, Harry realized how very wet he had become. Snape stood silhouetted at the end of the entryway, face in shadow. "Sorry," Harry muttered as he peeled off his dripping jumper and hung it up without bothering to ring it out. Control came only with putting the last few minutes aside and he did that, with effort. With nothing else to say, he stalked by Snape, leaving puddles of rain in his wake on the stone floor.

Breakfast was the quietest Harry could remember. Snape ate sparingly. Candles lit the table because of the heavy grey sky outside. Harry's circling thoughts kept generating arguments he should have used with Candide. Perhaps he would owl her after Snape departed. On the other hand she seemed to have ruined his weekend with Snape and that made him think it not worth the bother.

Around noon Harry carried the wizard chess set into the drawing room where Snape sat working his way through a pile of post. "Would you like a game?"

Snape looked only at the board in Harry's hands, already set for play. "Perhaps. When I have finished with this."

"All right." Harry hesitated as he searched for words that were out of reach. Earlier in the week he had had all kinds: about his first field experience, about the purple book, but they didn't fit in now. He had hovered too long and forced himself to turn. Snape's voice caught him just outside the doorway, "It is all right, Harry."

Hurt anger flowed into Harry as he turned. "No, it's not. It isn't fair to you."

Snape sat silently before sighing and saying, "As you yourself have pointed out, it is impossible to make someone understand difficult events for which they were not present, no matter how familiar one is with that person otherwise." He shuffled the parchments before him with a dismissive air although it didn't look entirely convincing.

"Don't you like her?" Harry pressed, thinking of all the times, although infrequent, she had been over or Snape had gone out to meet her. "Seems like you must."

"It is no matter," Snape replied. Then after another pause, "Give me half of an hour and we can play a game."

Haunted by the Past

It was with a kind of dread that Harry came downstairs early the next morning. Facing the duel drag of the memory of Friday night and the prospect of a visit to Snape's mum left him unenthusiastic about the day. Snape sat at the table, however, looking pretty much himself. Harry wondered at his taking something like that in stride, or perhaps he was just too used to being treated that way.

"Still want to take the motorbike?" Harry asked, since a light drizzle was falling.

Snape stood and snidely asked, "Don't know any repelling charms, Potter?"

"I know several now, thank you very much, and I think you are reverting to speaking to me like I'm one of your students."

Snape straightened and patted Harry's arm. In a concessionary tone he said, "You can provide the charm then, and we'll take the bike."

The flight took less than an hour, even at a speed slow enough to let the charm work effectively against the oncoming mist. Harry, feeling ungenerous, put the Roar knob at halfway, which, in the quiet of the countryside, was rather loud. An entire contingent of the curious waited around the rose gate when they landed in a burst of damp dust and a loud thunk and clatter. Pretending that there was nothing out of the ordinary, Harry put down the stand and dismounted after Snape.

Ratta and Princess, a little taller but still rail-thin, gaped at the bike from either side of their mother. Beside her, Anita, Snape's mum, appeared more appalled than the rest, who wore wide varieties of expression. The Covenelder's voice cut through the silence. "Welcome back," she said graciously, giving Harry a wink as she towed him inside by the hand.

The furniture in the community building had been rearranged to support a group luncheon because of the rain. Fruits, most not normally in season, were already set out in bowls. Harry tried to say hello to the young girls but they were stiff and formal with him, and he suspected it wasn't his entrance. He tried crouching to talk to them, to be closer to their size, but he couldn't get more than one word answers out of them and lots of fidgety shyness, no matter the question. Their large eyes appeared almost disappointed as they took him in.

Introductions went around as everyone took a seat. Harry sat beside his guardian and across from Anita. After general small talk, Anita said, "So, Harry, rumor has it you were kidnapped."

Nearby heads snapped up at that. "You've been following the news a bit," Snape offered. "Just for our visit?"

In an unfathomable tone, Anita replied, "I was thinking it would be nice to have something to talk about with visitors for once."

"Not a rumor," Harry replied easily. "Girlfriend's former boyfriend."

Caroline quipped, "One reason not to have any men around."

"Women can be just as bad," Anita countered, making Harry wonder whether she always took opposing sides, and as well, just who she was referring to. Harry took a deep breath and served himself more mashed potatoes, working to avoid being baited. He fervently hoped Snape did the same. Anita sighed. "Four days though. No one could find you?"

Harry tried to decide if he were just reading things in where they weren't. After further reflection he decided her tone was just a little wrong. He met her dark brown gaze levelly. In a voice that came out with far more depth than he expected to hear from himself, Harry said, "There is so much to what happened that you cannot know, especially not from reading the Daily Prophet, that I have to warn you that treading suggestively into it, isn't going to gain you anything but the reverse of what you are hoping for."

Beside Harry, Snape calmly put his utensils down and wiped his hands. "You need not defend me, Harry," he stated softly.

"I sat in that cold cellar hoping you would not attempt to find me, because I knew what it would take for you to do so." Harry caught Anita's shifting gaze, and clarified, "The blood spell it would take to do so."

Her gaze flickered and she started paying more attention to her plate. Beside her, the covenelder asked, "So the business of hunting dark wizards is still profitable . . . that's good," she stated cheerily as she topped up his tea with her shaky hand. "Gives you something to keep busy," she added as though discussing stamp collecting. Harry found his lips curling into a reluctant smile.

After the meal Harry tried again to draw out the two girls. He sat with them in the corner of the room while they worked at drawing with chalk on the tan tile floor. "What's that?" Harry asked Ratta.

"It's a witch on broom stick, silly," she replied. Harry cocked his head and finally saw that, glad he hadn't guessed that it was a tree and a lake.

"Do you talk to snakes much?" Princess asked, drawing one in white chalk.

"Not much call for that, really," Harry admitted. Explaining that he had last talked to Snape that way, didn't seem wise since Anita would shortly hear about it.

Princess kept up the questions. "Do you do lots of magic?"

"All the time. We practice at the Ministry nearly every day . . . hours at a time."

"Show us something," Ratta cajoled.

In another part of the room, someone had taken out some sort of homemade stringed box instrument and was apparently tuning it. The first few sounds didn't bode well. "What would you like to see?"

"Well, obliterate this, so I can try again."

"Not my snake," Princess snapped, leaning over to guard her drawing with her arms.

Harry took out his wand and carefully cleared away the purported witch. Ratta blew a few times to clear the remaining dust before starting again on a remarkably similar drawing. "Teach us a spell. A Hover spell," Ratta suggested.

"Sure," Harry said, happy to comply, happy also that they were losing their stiffness around him and being their cheerful, demanding selves. A crude wooden ruler sat on the floor. Harry moved it and demonstrated the spell a few times, showing them the flick at the end in particular that made it work. "Want to try?" He offered his wand.

"Harry!" the sharp voice of Snape came from over by the bookshelves where he stood chatting with Caroline, Anita and a few others. Snape shook his head once, very sharply. Harry, confused, withdrew his wand from Ratta's approaching grasp and with his eyes, asked for clarification from his guardian. Snape didn't respond.

"Just a second," Harry said to the girls. He stood and went over to the group. The various expressions didn't make much sense. "What's wrong?"

Softly, if not a touch stridently, Snape explained. "They do not want either of children touching that wand . . . or, more specifically, one which has been used to cast an Unforgivable curse."

Harry stared at Snape as he took that in, then looked down at the dull finish of his wand, at the gouge still marring the handle. He shrugged and stashed it in his pocket, although something inside him rebelled. "All right," he muttered, feeling strangely betrayed as well as confused.

He returned to the two girls who were adding wings to the snake to make it into a dragon. "No spells," he explained when Ratta looked at him questioningly.

"We learn them all the time," she countered, sounding confused as well.

Harry exhaled, "Not from crazed Aurors," he said, very quietly.

Ratta had good ears though. She looked up at her mother in a way that indicated she knew boundaries were being laid down and that she might chose to push them. Changing to grey chalk, she went back to adding puffball clouds around her witch and the dragon and didn't say anything for a while.

Harry was still feeling rather ambivalent when they departed. The mist had lightened, so he ran the bike flat out after making altitude; until Snape tapped him on the arm. Harry throttled back to the pace they had used outbound, but Snape tapped him again. Harry slowed farther yet, until the wind was low enough to hear over.

"What's wrong?" his guardian asked, his hand gripping Harry's shoulder harder when a gust of wind struck.

Harry stared off across the rich green quilted landscape. Cars snaked along on a major road below them. In the far distance a slice of sunlight hit a lush hillside that was free of the usual stone walls that cut up most of the landscape. Anger rose as he found words. "They think I'm stained," he said over his shoulder.

"They think your wand is," Snape countered.

"There isn't any difference. You believe it too," Harry accused, pinning down the feeling of betrayal.

Snape leaned closer and spoke normally since he was just beside Harry's ear. "By no means do I think that. I simply understand their concern and did not consider it something worth debating, unlike many other of their narrow-minded assumptions."

"It bothers me," Harry turned his head to say.

He felt rather than heard Snape sigh. Snape's free arm tightened around him reassuringly. "I don't want you to think I am not on your side, because I am. We should discuss this when it is easier to do so."

Harry throttled the bike up, forcing Snape to tighten his hold severely. His voice rang in his ear against the wind, "Do not nurse this anger all the way home, if you would."

By the time they landed and parked in the back garden, Harry felt numbly angry and still vaguely betrayed, although not by Snape, which was just as well, because his guardian was blocking the path to the back entry. "Look at me," Snape ordered. Harry grudgingly raised his gaze. "I was sharp with you–don't look away–because I

have read a bit about covens of that sort and the purification rites they might have considered using had they deemed the girls in need of it."

Harry backed off on his anger and let it flow out if him as though it were water. "Oh."

"You are not soiled. Your wand, however, does have a shaded history-"

"Yeah, I just shared minds with Voldemort and see the dark plane on occasion," he snapped sarcastically.

"That . . . has nothing to do with it," Snape retorted.

Harry laughed darkly. "No?"

"It doesn't and you know it," Snape argued. He shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Potter, you have me wishing I knew what Albus would say about now. That . . . is a first."

Harry laughed despite himself.

"Harry, you are so far from evil you wouldn't even cheat at a game of chess." Snape grasped Harry's upper arm and urged him inside since it had started raining again.

Frowning, Harry asked in true curiosity, "Why would anyone bother playing chess if they were just going to cheat at it?"

"Precisely," Snape returned. Inside the hall, he turned back to his charge and said with unusual feeling. "Please do not let it wear at you. You are the very epitome of good wizardry."

"Why would it matter then?" Harry asked, still finding annoyance at the whole episode. "And besides, what did they want? Someone had to destroy Voldemort. What, they want that bad wizards should stick around until some other bad wizard and they happen to kill each other at the same time?"

Snape took Harry's shoulders firmly in hand. "Stop it." Harry looked away, still discovering twisted emotions rising up in himself. "You are so far from being dark, you don't even qualify as off-white. Let it go. There is a reason they live in a coven . . . it is to escape the real world and the real choices and sacrifices it presents. You, of all people, have sacrificed too much to let them get to you."

Harry's shoulders relaxed in Snape's grip and he let go. "Much better," Snape uttered before stalking away.

Harry took out his wand, the twin to Voldemort's, and studied its worn and marred surface as he rotated it around before stashing it back away in his pocket.

Chapter 63

That evening in his room, Harry took out the last Muggle letter he had received from Polly Evans, the widow of his mother's cousin. It occurred to him now that he could have dropped in for a visit on his way to Torquey, had he thought of it. Since the trip had not been useful otherwise, he now regretted the oversight. He sat down and penned a letter back to her, warning that he may take her up on her offer that he call anytime. After the day's visit to the coven Harry felt in need of reassuring relatives, and the memory of his last visit to Godric's Hollow still made him feel warm inside.

He stashed the letter in his bag to post from London the next day, but then wondered if that were the best idea. Pamela and Patricia might wonder why the letter came from nowhere near where Harry lived. He would have to step out in the morning and post it from the box outside the train station.

Snape departed that evening, seemingly in a vaguely dark mood. He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder before taking down the tin of Floo powder. Harry watched him flare away, not sure who to be angry with but wanting to pin it on someone, otherwise he would feel helpless. Candide seemed a good candidate, but by the end of a long evening of finishing all of his readings, Harry found to be Anita a better reason for his dismay. When he finally did crawl into bed, he fell immediately into a hazy, dream-filled sleep.

During morning drills the door opened and one of the senior apprentices, a small man by the name of Augustus Munz, slipped inside the workout room followed by Rogan and Shacklebolt. Rodgers turned curiously their way. "We're just watching," Shacklebolt insisted.

This morning they were practicing the nine standard physical counter-curses for heating, freezing, overwhelming olfaction, disorientation, static charge, muscle weakening, blinding, deafening, and short term memory loss. Given the number of spells to choose from, one had to pay careful attention to one's partner. Initial wand motion gave most of them away, but Kerry Ann was getting clever and changing spells part way through her cast. Harry had already suffered quivers and the gagging stench of sulfur so he was concentrating pretty hard.

Rodgers eventually called a halt after they had been at it long enough to get bored with the drill. "Something up, Gussie?" he asked the older apprentice.

"They wanted to, uh, see how things were going," Munz replied with a shrug and a crooked smile that dominated his small face.

"They're looking for a duel," Harry supplied. When Rodgers gave Harry a disapproving look, Harry added, "Ask them."

Rogan was smirking and Shacklebolt had crossed his arms as he leaned back against the wall with easy confidence.

"Are they, then?" Rodgers said. "Trouble is, I don't want to have to explain later to Madam Bones what happened to our fine, young apprentices."

"Just apprentice. Just Harry," Rogan explained.

Kerry Ann crossed her arms, wand angled out. "Yup, we're chopped liver."

Rogan went on, "It is tormenting to hear the sizzle and crack of spells at one's desk all day long without getting a chance to play a little as well."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes before saying, "Tristan, really, I can't risk a real duel. You want to come help with drills a few minutes–that's fine."

Shacklebolt used his broad shoulders to push away from the wall. "Drills then. Well Miss Kerry Ann of the chopped liver, let's see what you have."

The two of them moved into opposing positions and the rest stood aside to watch. Kerry Ann gave a snort of confidence as she raised her wand. After Shacklebolt counted down from three, Kerry Ann ran her usual trick, starting with an ice curse and changing to a stench one at the end of the motion. Shacklebolt turned his head as though he could escape the odor and had to regroup to finish a fire curse which Kerry Ann had plenty of time to counter.

"Hm," Shacklebolt muttered but another curse was flying his way already and all he could do was block, but he was fast on the rebound, faster than his opponent expected and ice crystals crackled into existence on Kerry Ann's sleeves and the tips of her hair as she barely used a heating charm on herself in time.

"Drills, Kingsley," Rodgers criticized. "A little less power if you would."

Kerry Ann was snapping the ice out of her hair and looking dangerous. After another countdown she simply fired a blasting curse, which was easily blocked although the floorboards rumbled with the aftershock.

In a teasing voice Shacklebolt said, "Remind me to stay on your good side." He let her use him for target practice for three more rounds before holding up his hand to call a halt. Kerry Ann looked annoyed that she hadn't gotten through.

"Potter next?" Shacklebolt asked hopefully.

"Potter last," Rodgers said, and gestured for Vineet next.

Harry tried not to bite his lip as the Indian, stepping with his usual light muscular power, changed places with Kerry Ann. He and Shacklebolt exchanged a few sensory curses which even if they had hit Vineet, he would not have let on. When Shacklebolt said, "Something with a higher hazard quotient then?" Harry stiffened. A flashing barrage flew between them, until Vineet's wand, struck by a Snaking Wind charm, flew out of his hand and skidded across the floor. Harry picked it up, noticing the worn, onion-shaped gold filigree that decorated it. He pretended to look it over to give his fellow apprentice a chance to catch his breath. From the look of the faded red and green and perhaps yellow paint, he realized that it must have been completely painted originally, as opposed to just highlighted as he had assumed.

"This is really old," Harry observed as he handed it back.

Vineet accepted it and said diffidently, "It was my great grandmother's who got it from her grandmother who told her it was from the most famous Bengali wand maker." His face had the usual sheen of sweat from exerting himself and he seemed willing to take advantage of the break.

"It must have been really beautiful when it was new. British wands don't look anything like that."

Exhaling as though he had finally caught his breath, Vineet said, sounding a little difficult, "They aren't anything like this one."

After a few more rounds, Rodgers called a halt this time. Vineet stepped to the wall beside Aaron, who gave him a light punch on the arm as a gesture of solidarity.

"My turn," Rogan insisted. Aaron stepped up and faced him, looking determined. Rogan began to count down from three but Aaron cast at him somewhere around one and a half. Rogan just managed a block with a few backward steps to catch himself.

"You want to play it that way?" Rogan complained.

Harry had always thought jumping the count a Slytherin dirty trick, but when it was his cohort pulling it, it seemed less so and he grinned as Rogan shook his head disgustedly before counting again. This time he matched Aaron at the two with a shiver curse that made Aaron drop his wand. "Happens to everyone," he excused himself as he picked it up. He didn't even look as though he had done it on purpose.

Harry's turn finally arrived, along with a brief argument between Rogan and Shacklebolt.

"You drilled with two already," Rogan complained.

"I have seniority," Shacklebolt countered.

"I'll duel both of you," Harry offered.

"No, you won't," Rodgers snapped.

Harry shrugged. He stood in position and waited, holding his wand lightly at his side with just his fingertips–ready to aim and gesture a number of spells that tugged at him like leashed animals eager to be released. Rogan finally won out and Shacklebolt scuffled over to the others and leaned back against the wall beside Vineet.

Rogan counted down and Harry let his instincts battle for him. It was easy that way, his hand and mind working together to throw a blinding curse, strong enough to make his opponent blink, even though his counter was on time, followed by a modulated block for a shiver curse. With real danger not a concern he let himself fall into an almost meditative rhythm of block, cast, block, cast. He jolted himself out of it when he saw something different flicker across the Auror's brown eyes. Rather than wait for the beginning of the oncoming spell, Harry put up a modulated Chrysanthemum block and immediately reinforced it. Something resembling sideways driving rain streaked like comets of light through the air and hammered at his block, which began to dissolve and clearly wasn't going to hold through the end of the barrage. Desperate, Harry cancelled that block and immediately cast a Titan, all forward, with as much power as he could put behind it. In the gap, balls of energy sizzled through and struck him, stinging his arm, shoulder, and a dozen other places, although the pain faded quickly. The Titan rushed forward as a wall and exploded, taking the rest of the onslaught with it. The room was silent in their wake.

Harry didn't even take a breath before he aimed and shouted, "Rhuumitai!" One of the spells Fred had used on him at his birthday party. In that instant Harry was aware of his trainer opening his mouth as though to chastise Rogan, who looked puzzled by Harry's incantation. The next instant all of it was blotted out.

Fred had not put this much behind the spell. The light in the room dipped to a coal red and a column of one-foot-long, red, green and gold dragons streamed out of Harry's wand. Still on instinct, Harry cancelled the spell with a jerk of fear that he didn't actually know what the dragons would do, as they had not reached him the only other time he had seen this spell. Rogan tried an icing counter, but it didn't slow the creatures down and they swarmed over him as though they were actually liquid and wanted to encase him. Rogan fell, struggling, and Harry started forward, panicked now as he had no idea how to counter the spell's causetum. Fortunately, he didn't get two steps before the effect vanished.

Chapter 63

Coughing, Rogan sat up straight and felt about himself as though to verify he was whole. Both Shacklebolt and Rodgers had reached his side. "Well, you deserved that," Rodgers said, "for using a Flamesickle on an apprentice."

"Sorry," Harry said as Rogan was helped to his feet.

"What?" Rogan asked, confused.

Harry didn't want to explain that he had not only unwisely used a spell he couldn't cancel completely, but whose effect he didn't even know. He shrugged as though he were gamely apologizing. Rogan brushed himself off and accepted his wand from Rodgers who had picked it up for him. "Should have let Kingsley have him," he grumbled as though through wounded pride. At the door he turned and asked Rodgers, "When do we change shadow assignments?" while sending a calculating glance back at Harry. Just before the door close, he conceded, "Fair win, Potter."

Harry didn't think so; he thought he should be more careful.

The next day they were off an hour early again. Aaron, with his usual spirit, organized another Diagon outing after they had finished all their drills without supervision. He insisted with a chuckle that they leave a note on Rodgers desk promising that they would use the extra time for readings. This seemed to amuse him no end, enough that Harry was amused by Aaron himself. Kerry Ann headed off her own way saying this was a good time to catch her mum before she left for work.

The remaining three of them stepped through the wall after Apparating into the Leaky Cauldron and into the clear sunlight, which only seemed to show the grime better. Aaron stopped before the owl emporium and peered in the window. "I need a new cage," he said. "I want something a little nicer than these though. I should just find a Muggle bird catalog, I guess."

Harry looked in as well and was about to suggest going inside to look, when he turned and found himself facing Draco Malfoy, cloaked to his ankles even in the heat.

Aaron said, "Well, look who it is," in a less than welcoming tone.

Draco turned a haughty expression to him before his light eyes returned to looking beyond Harry. "Leave us alone a second," Harry said to Aaron.

"You sure? You and a Slytherin?"

"Aaron, you are looking at the Wizarding world's only honorary Slytherin. It's all right."

Aaron stepped away, taking Vineet with him. Harry could see them both glancing back as they sauntered to the next store and stopped before an outdoor rack of marked-down, dented cauldrons.

"Thanks," said Harry quietly to his former nemesis.

Draco snorted a little laugh. "I don't want you owing me, Potter."

"Oh, good," Harry quipped, trying for brightness. "I'd prefer that."

Draco half looked behind him in the direction of the cauldrons. "Those your little Auror friends?"

"Yep."

"The Ministry must be desperate." Draco smirked. "As usual."

With his own snide expression Harry countered, "They only need to be better than you, Draco."

Draco smiled strangely before he dropped into seriousness, exhibiting that fast mood shift of his father's. "Grateful, Potter?" he asked in a keen hush.

Evenly, Harry replied, "Yes, I am."

"Hm." Draco moved as though to depart, but stopped to say, "Don't expect me to bail you out every time."

Almost laughing, Harry replied, "I won't. Believe me."

Brow raised in a vaguely disgusted manner, Draco stepped away.

Harry released his pent up breath and joined his friends. "How is Mr. Malfoy?" Aaron asked sarcastically.

"I get the sense you don't like him," Harry teased.

"Hm," Aaron murmured, still watching Draco weaving his way down the crowded alley as though to make sure he didn't try anything.

Harry fingered his wand inside his pocket and had a sudden thought. "You know I need to make a visit to Ollivander's. Come along with me," he urged his friends.

Aaron seemed far away still. "I think I will try Eeylops," he said and headed that way.

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"Want to come along, Vineet?" Harry asked, trying for innocent. Vineet didn't reply right away, and had he been Snape, Harry would have reinforced his Occlumency. Before the other could ask anything, Harry took out his wand and held it up to show the gouge, now worn and well-soiled along the bare, unvarnished cut. "Draco's father did that," Harry explained, remembering. "I keep meaning to get it repaired." He tilted his head invitingly, "Come on."

Vineet followed in silence with a shuttered expression. Harry, if pressed, would have guessed he was actually angry. Harry, for his part, was determined to test his inkling.

The bell on the door rang musically as they entered the dim shop. Harry had forgotten just how high the full shelves were, and just how many wands they held. Vineet even seemed to be distracted as he looked around.

"Ah . . . my dear Mr. Potter," Ollivander said with feeling as he approached the counter from the back. His light eyes considered Harry in detail as he almost methodically placed his hands on the counter and leaned toward him. "Wand still treating you well, I hope?"

"The magic is fine, but I need a bit of a repair."

Ollivander accepted the wand and, handling it with a delicate touch, turned it this way and that, peered down the length of it, appeared to stare through it even. "So much power from such a simple thing," he observed softly. After a slightly longer examination of the damage, he smiled and took it aside to a crowded little work area with a large lamp and lots of tools and bottles and rags.

Harry waited with poor patience while Ollivander worked. He had to force himself not to stand on tiptoe to try to see better what the sparkling spells in yellow were all about. A small crate of fine wood chunks in various odd shapes was perused and a sample selected and more sparkling spells ensued. Ollivander stopped and bending down, blew on the wand, as though to hurry the drying of glue. Bottles were opened and various vapors assaulted them in an eye-watering succession.

Presently, the shopkeeper straightened in the midst of fine polishing. When he finished, he presented Harry's wand back to him from the depth of a red velvet polishing cloth. Harry blinked at it in surprise; it was so clean and shiny he barely recognized it.

"Thank you," Harry said honestly and, after turning the like-new wand over yet again in his fingers, pulled out his coin purse.

"Four Sickles," Ollivander said, as though pained at the notion of charging him.

Harry plunked the proper coinage down on the counter.

Ollivander slid the coins to his edge of the counter and held them there with his long, boney fingers. "And your friend here?" he prompted.

"I have a wand," Vineet stated dismissively.

"He has a really interesting one," Harry quickly said. "A really old one."

Ollivander tilted his head almost birdlike and considered Vineet. He clasped his hands at his chin, making his sleeves fall away from his pale, age-spotted arms. "Yes, you would have a Jaina wand then, no?"

Vineet shook his head before relenting and handing it over from his pocket. "It was my great-grandmother's."

"Of course, of course," Ollivander said, oddly reassuring, as he studied the wand. "Kshatriya then," the shopkeeper murmured thoughtfully. "A Jaina wand makes very little sense, in British context."

"I agree," Vineet said. He had lost his cold edge and now seemed interested in the shopkeeper.

Ollivander held the wand before himself, in both hands, pinkies outward. "Are you in the market for a replacement?" he asked neutrally.

"No," Vineet replied stiffly. "It would dishonor my family to consider such a thing."

"Ah," Ollivander uttered, as though that were something he didn't know. "You do realize that it has been altered from its original . . . incarnation, shall we say?"

This was clearly news to the Indian. "How is that?"

Ollivander held up the end of it. "It has been re-cored, I am quite certain. Mixing budrose and unicorn mane is most unusual." He said this in a way that implied it was to be avoided. "I suspect it originally was cored with something more appropriate."

"Such as?" Vineet asked, truly curious apparently, and as Harry had hoped, completely pulled in by Ollivander.

"Dragon spine, perhaps. Let's see," Ollivander said, glancing up at the high shelves. He placed Vineet's wand reverently on the counter before the Indian and hopped up on his sliding ladder and, with surprising ease for one his age, climbed up to the far corner above the door and, after some searching of labels, withdrew two long boxes from the very bottom of a very tall stack. He returned with them and spent some time deciding between them without opening either one.

"Manticore heartstring," he announced and paused to evaluate that statement with Vineet.

Vineet didn't take his eyes off the slim, dusty box.

Ollivander opened it. "Thirteen and three quarters inches . . . approximately. Sandalwood." Harry's eyes went wide. The wand Ollivander held was brightly painted red and yellow with gold filigree. Ollivander glanced at Harry and explained, "Years ago, I had a flying carpet salesman who used to supply me with these. Not much call anymore. Immigrant Bengali children want British wands, and since they seem to work well enough for them . . . " he shrugged his boney shoulders and held out the wand to Vineet. "Care to try it?"

Vineet started slightly as though he had just arrived via Apparation. He reached out for the wand and appeared quite surprised as he grasped it, although there wasn't an outward reason for it. His eyes roamed over it, still surprised.

"Give it a go," Ollivander suggested casually. "Give it a wave, or hover that old chair in the corner or something."

Vineet, with a long glance at the old worn wand on the counter, aimed, swished, and flicked. The chair smashed into the high ceiling and wood chips rained down. Harry put his arm over his head to protect himself.

"That seems to be your wand, young man," Ollivander stated dreamily.

Vineet was in shock and didn't move. "How much?" Harry finally asked.

Ollivander didn't take his eyes off Vineet. "Eh, ten Galleons."

"That's all?" Harry, with a glance at his immobile companion, took out his own purse and handed over the gold coins.

"I am more pleased to have found it a good owner after all this time," the shopkeeper said, pocketing those coins along with the previous Sickles. He turned to Harry and asked with a gesture at the counter, "Do you think he would like this one, uh, tuned and re-cored?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him later," Harry said dismissively and took up the wand himself. "Thank you, Mr. Ollivander."

"Anytime, my dear man. Anytime." With a last concerned glance at Vineet, he disappeared into the back of the shop.

"Vineet?" Harry prompted, in serious concern.

Vineet blinked slowly and said quietly, "I would have refused. For anyone but you, I would have refused. I knew what you intended." With a long sigh, he lowered his forehead into his hand. "I have worked so hard . . . "

Harry was very grateful that they were alone in a quiet shop because Vineet looked ready to break down.

"It's all right," Harry tried.

Vineet, head still bowed, looked the wand in his hand over again. In an almost empty voice, he said, "It was a ruse . . . always overcompensating some other way. I have been loyal to my magical ancestors, why have they no reward for that?" He wasn't asking Harry; it wasn't clear if he expected an answer, but he fell silent as though waiting for one.

Harry resorted to shaking his friend. "Hey," he said sharply. This finally brought Vineet around.

In an unsteady voice Vineet said to him, "I am humbled by your-"

"Stop that," Harry ordered him. "You're standing there, telling me about high expectations you can't imagine living up to, a dead family legacy you can't argue against . . . you're telling me that?"

Vineet straightened up as he considered those words. Harry held out the other wand for him. Vineet put them side by side in his hand and pocketed them. After a soft exhale he said, "I am looking forward to tomorrow's training . . . more so than usual."

Harry laughed. "Just be careful not to kill anyone or take out any large blocks of London between now and then all right?" He led him to the door. "You've been forcing your power through that mismatched wand all this time. Goodness knows what you've boosted it up to."

"I have never had a spell with too much power."

"You did just now," Harry said, as they were stepping out, indicating the remains of the chair.

"I should be paying for the chair," Vineet said, turning back.

"It was an old chair," Harry assured him as he took him by the arm and steered him into the now, too-bright alleyway. They didn't find Aaron, which disappointed Harry. "Should we take you back to the Ministry now?" Harry suggested.

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"I will wait until morning," Vineet said, much closer to his usual calm.

Harry, buoyant with the knowledge that Vineet would easily pass his six month review–as long as he left the Ministry intact in the meantime–grinned and suggested an ice cream to celebrate.

As they ate–Harry double chocolate, Vineet boysenberry–Vineet fell into a deep, inward silence. Harry didn't interrupt it, just watched the shoppers as he spoon cold goodness onto his tongue. He was enjoying the fact that fewer people became startled upon seeing him there. Only one child squealed and pointed until shushed by an apologetic parent.

Vineet pushed his empty bowl aside. "You have been most patient with me."

"You are a slow eater," Harry stated, deliberately misunderstanding.

Vineet shook his head but a faint smile played at his lips. "There are many more possibilities now."

"I'm glad for that, Vineet. I like having you around." Harry wiped his fingers again and tossed the serviette into the pool of brown milk in his bowl. "You are really good at illusion detection."

"Such things are no effort. I was hoping that we would cover barriers as well before the next review. They are also being easy for me. Although I do not think it would have made enough of a difference, no matter how rare a skill it is."

Harry fought a frown but pushed it away with thoughts of tomorrow morning. Thinking of the note Aaron left their trainer, he stood and made his goodbyes with a last admonishment, "Be careful heating your tea."

Vineet replied before they parted, "I generally use the stove anyway."

Harry arrived very early for training the next morning, but he still found Vineet in the workout room when he arrived. The Ministry was still quiet and the department corridors empty. Harry yawned and put his bag aside.

"Let's see what you've got," Harry challenged.

The dummy was still set up from the previous afternoon. Vineet stretched his shoulders back and aimed a blasting curse at it. The stout metal beam of the stand bent a

few degrees with an animal-like squeal and, rather than rock up, the dummy snapped out straight as though it were hollow and light before crashing back on its hook and shuddering.

Harry twisted his mouth and reluctantly asked, "That was the lightest you could manage, wasn't it?"

Vineet stood thoughtful, brow low, and didn't respond. The door opened into the silence and Rodgers stepped in before looking up at them in surprise. "You are both rather early."

Harry, who had been anticipating this previous to that last spell, now felt a little uneasy about the forthcoming revelation. "We've, uh, been working on Vineet's spell power."

"Oh," Rodgers said as he arranged some books on one of the desks. "That's good. Any progress?" he asked in an informational tone.

"Uh, a bit too much, in fact," Harry admitted. Vineet seemed content to let Harry do the explaining.

Rodgers shifted his attention to them and closed the book he had opened. "Too much?" he confirmed doubtfully. He left the books and stepped over to them, almost immediately noticing Vineet's wand. Rodgers face went a little dark. "I do remember suggesting that."

Vineet held up the blond wand with its yellow and red rounded diamonds outlined in gold. Harry supplied, "He took a little convincing."

Very quietly, Vineet admitted, "I have difficulty saying no to . . . " He nodded at Harry. " . . . the destroyer of the Un- Voldemort."

"Ah," Rodgers muttered. "Well, let's see something. Try a freezing spell on the dummy."

Vineet lifted his arm and aimed his pale wand, but held back on the spell. Rodgers was patient through the long seconds the Indian hesitated. Finally, Vineet cast the requested spell. With a crackling roar, ice grew in a wave to encase the dummy, stand, the floor leading away to the wall. A frozen waterfall formed up the wall behind the dummy and even spread out onto the ceiling. The air felt a little chilled as the ice crackled quietly to itself.

"Ah," Rodgers muttered again. "Some kind of power attenuation is definitely in order." His eyes traced the mass of ice before them. "No drills for you for a while." Without another word, he went out.

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Vineet held his wand at arm's length and stared at it. "It is odd to realize that one is not who one believed one was."

"What?" Harry asked. Vineet shook his head rather than elaborate.

Rodgers returned with a box of feathers. He pulled one of the desks aside, sat Vineet down, placed a feather before him and told him to practice hovering it. The first feather shot to the ceiling and fell in a crumpled ball back to the floor. Rodgers said, "Working on that is your assignment for today." Then as though to soften that, he added, "I'm sure I don't need to ask if you've memorized the readings . . ."

"Congratulations, Vineet," Aaron said when the others arrived and everything was explained. Vineet was concentrating on a less-than-average abused feather and didn't react to being slapped on the back. When this one kamakazied into the ceiling, Aaron jested, "Maybe you should get a half-working wand."

Rodgers, arranging things on the front table said, "That will probably only prolong his learning to control his power. But . . . if it comes to that."

The other three of them went through their usual discussion and drills. Vineet worked on feathers through the day until their afternoon preview of the next week's training.

"Any luck?" Rodgers asked as Vineet moved his desk back into the group. When Vineet shook his head and kept his eyes far away, Rodgers said, "Give it time. It's something most people learn naturally as their power grows."

They broke for the day. Aaron departed with a reminder to Harry that the first Hogwarts Quidditch match was that weekend. Harry insisted he couldn't forget that. He was slow packing away his things into his bookbag and eventually only he and a rather somber Vineet remained.

"There is a saying . . ." Vineet began. Harry hoisted his bag and waited for him to continue. "I believe it is something about careful wishes."

"'Be careful what you wish for,"' Harry supplied.

Vineet's shoulders fell a little. "That is the one."

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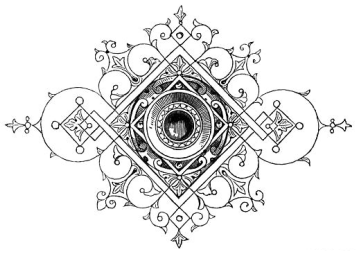

Just Visiting

Harry met Aaron in the Hog's Head. He had suggested meeting there mostly because he expected that it would be less busy on a Quidditch weekend. Harry found Aaron at the bar, talking gregariously to a stranger shrouded in a brown hooded cloak. Harry, a little alarmed by this, stepped quickly over.

"Hey, Aaron," Harry said casually, looking over the other figure, or what little he could see of him or her. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know his name," Aaron admitted. "I didn't catch your name," Aaron said to the figure. The figure simply shook its head.

"Aaron," Harry said, hitting the other man on the arm, hard enough to be noticed. "You haven't traded anything with this man, or played any games of chance, have you?" The figure turned its head as though to listen better but didn't raise it enough for Harry to see any of the face.

"He did suggest that for later," Aaron replied easily.

Harry stood dumb an instant. "Aaron, you cannot be this naïve. Please tell me you aren't."

"What's the harm in a game of cards?" he asked, sounding defensive.

"I don't even know where to begin," Harry groaned, half to himself. "Come on, let's get seats a little early."

"You don't want a butterbeer? I want to finish mine." He resisted Harry's pulling him away from the stained and greasy bar.

"Take it with you," Harry insisted, hauling hard enough to get the other to move off his seat and into the midst of the tables. He left him there and returned to the obscured figure still slouched at the bar. Leaning close to the hooded ear he said, "No gambling with Aurors."

The figure turned enough that Harry could see a pointed chin with a light brown, scruffy beard. "Who are you to order me around?" the man mocked in an oily voice.

"Harry Potter," Harry snapped. A glass smashed to the floor at the corner table.

After a pause the figure said, "Oh. All right then." Then after a pause: "He didn't have anything worth taking anyway." He held out his hand with something in it. Harry cupped his hands and caught the leather pouch that dropped into it.

At the door Aaron asked, "What did he give you?"

Harry held the pouch out. "Your wallet."

"Oh." Aaron accepted it, peeked inside, then pocketed it. At the gate by the lake he said, "That is really quite embarrassing. Why did you suggest meeting there?"

"Haven't you been there before? That place is always quiet and I didn't want to cause a stir."

"Well, you did that anyway," Aaron observed, sounding moody.

A few ducks swam in the shallows of the lake as they walked by, a long tentacle following stealthily. "You were a Slytherin," Harry said. "I assumed you could take care of yourself."

The stadium came into view over the lawn, banners alight in a stream of sunlight piercing the clouds. Other visitors were walking alongside now. Aaron quietly said, "Contrary to you, Potter, I've led a pretty protected existence. Not by choice." He took out his wallet again and looked through it before putting it back away.

Harry relented on his chastising tone. "Well, don't trust anyone who hides their face. That's a pretty straightforward rule."

"I thought he had a deformity or something," Aaron defended himself.

"That's awfully sweet of you to believe, but that usually isn't the case."

They reached the arch that led into the arena. Harry followed up to the visitors' section which was only sparsely populated this early. Aaron went right to the very front row and took a seat; Harry followed, enjoying the breeze, the sound of the banners snapping, the scent of the lake and freshly cut grass.

"Missing Hogwarts?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied, surprised by his companion's observation.

"I recognize that look." Aaron sat back and breathed in deep. "I considered flunking seventh year, just stay longer. Often later wished I had."

Grinning broadly, Harry teased, "Severus must have been glad to see you go."

Aaron sighed. "His threatening me was probably the reason I didn't repeat a year, just for fun. I'll never forget him telling me I should have more pride. I had barrels-full of pride, I just didn't care about some things."

"Grades."

"For example."

The game began soon after the teachers filed into their stands. Harry resisted waving until he saw Snape's eyes searching the stands in their direction. Snape nodded in return and beside him McGonagall waved as well. The teachers made for a motley assortment in their section with Flitwick about one fifth the size of Hagrid two down from him. Sinistra wore some kind of glittery gold band around her forehead and Trelawney's diaphanous robe kept trying to float over the edge of the stands beside her.

Finally the teams came out. The match was Slytherin against Hufflepuff, leaving Harry little dilemma about who to cheer for. Suze looked good. Only slightly taller than last year and just as thin, she moved like a razor around the pitch. The game went on a long time, making Harry wonder if they hadn't gotten a better Snitch just for the match. Harry didn't catch sight of it until Suze did and then only because she veered towards it. The final score of 220 to 20 left the Hufflepuffs slumped as they made their way off the grass.

"Should have held them scoreless," Aaron criticized sagely as they stood to depart. "The Keeper better get better than that before the next match."

Down on the grass Harry walked away from the departing crowds and into the arena, where the green-clad Slytherins were congratulating each other. Snape, towering over Suze, put a hand on her shoulder and leaned down to speak to her. Her eyes shifted to far away, bright with victory. Harry forced down a twinge of complicated jealousy just as Snape's eyes came up at their approach; at least, Harry hoped he had managed in time.

Snape's look did soften just a micron as he said, "Hello, Harry. Ah, Mr. Wickem," he greeted the other in flat, doubtful tones. To Harry he said, "Minerva is expecting you for dinner."

"All right, I'll meet you there." He congratulated an ecstatic Suze before the Slytherin team moved to the changing room and Snape joined the teachers congregating near the base of the tallest arena tower. Harry walked with his fellow Auror apprentice. When they were on the lawn and apart from the others, Aaron asked, "Do you get to sit at the head table?"

"I don't know," Harry replied uncaringly, because Aaron sounded jealous.

"Hogwarts dinner sounds nice. I have to go to dinner at my mum's."

"Again?"

"Every weekend," he grumbled.

Harry didn't think that so bad. "That's nice." Aaron gave him a vague look of disgust. Harry said, "I wish I had a mum to visit for dinners."

"Potter, are you trying to make me feel guilty for wishing the hedge-hags my Mum imagines in the shrubbery were actually after her?"

"No," Harry immediately denied, then thought again, "What?"

Putting on a falsetto voice, Aaron said, "So nice to have an Auror in the family, then I can call someone to clear the ferocious nymphs out of the hollyhocks." He quit the voice. "Honestly." They stopped where they needed to split up for Aaron to return to Hogsmeade.

"Do you want me to come to dinner with you next weekend?" Harry offered.

Aaron fell thoughtful for a long time. "She would leave me alone about that then– just won't give it up. I'll let you know, I suppose. Give into that, who knows what she'll ask for next." Aaron headed off over the freshly mown green, looking glum. He turned and said, "See you on Monday, Potter. Have fun."

The teachers exited the arena, keeping a stately pace. When they came upon Harry, who stood waiting for them, McGonagall greeted him with, "Good to see you, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced over the familiar faces, encountering one new one, an ordinary looking wizard with short brown hair. Harry's scrutiny drew him forward just as McGonagall introduced him. "This is our new Transfiguration instructor, Cathal Cawley."

Cawley eagerly shook Harry's hand. "Honored to meet you, Mr. Potter," he said breathily, reminding Harry suddenly of Quirrell; although, the man didn't stutter at all.

"Likewise," Harry returned, trying to shake old memories.

During the walk to the castle, Harry found himself eyeing the new teacher as though trying to see through his disguise of normalcy. Snape interrupted Harry's visual interrogation. "Did you enjoy the match?"

"Yes," Harry replied, then in a low voice, he asked, "Did the headmistress approve you using a professional Snitch?"

Snape's eyes glittered. "She did authorize a slight upgrade in school equipment, yes." He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, looking almost relaxed.

"Making sure Suze gets her shot at going professional?" Harry teased.

Snape didn't reply, just kept walking, a smug look upon his face. Harry turned away with a grin and found Cawley disquietingly close at his shoulder.

"Mr. Potter, so very good of you to visit. The staff do so speak of you in such fondness."

"Do they?" Harry asked in disbelief. Glancing around, he found the teachers otherwise occupied in conversation, with Greer pointedly ignoring him, and Snape still looking straight ahead.

Cawley almost sounded hurt, "You sound surprised."

Harry considered all the times he had been caught, and not caught, at things that he had previously been assured would get him sent home. A little loudly he proclaimed, "Their memories must be failing." This perplexed Cawley more. Harry took the opportunity to ask, "So how long have you been teaching?"

"Just started," he proclaimed in excitement. "I studied for three years under a Yoruba witch in Brazil and I thought I was ready to move on, even though I rather fell in love with the country. Ever have a capiriñas?"

"No, can't say that I have," Harry replied, uncertain what that might be.

"Ah," Cawley sighed, apparently remembering one just then.

They had reached the Entrance Hall, but it was still an hour before dinner. Harry followed Snape to his office where he said he needed to do some work. As Harry closed the door behind him, he said, "I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Of course not . . . have a seat," Snape said in a welcoming tone he never used with students. Harry did so, clasping his hands over his stomach, relaxed. He wanted to ask if Snape had talked to Candide at all, but decided against it.

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As Snape graded he asked, "So, what did you do in training this week?"

"We started on illusion negation."

Snape paused to look up. "Interesting. Are you learning to see through an invisibility cloak?"

"That's one of the last things. But few manage that, we've been warned. Right now we are working on detecting basic changes like color, size, or shape." Harry rethought that and asked, "Why, hoping I'll teach you?"

"Hm." Still marking with his green quill and flipping rapidly, Snape asked, "And is the topic presenting any challenge for you?"

"No, it's easy."

"That's good," Snape opined, although there was something odd in his tone.

"So what about this new teacher?" Harry asked.

"He seems acceptable, but I have not delved into that in any depth. I will have to at the end of the first term when he has a performance review."

Harry stared out the window. "He seems suspicious."

Snape lifted his quill and looked up with brows low. Very doubtfully he asked, "How so?"

Harry shrugged. Thinking aloud he said, "He seems too normal." Then he added after further thought, "No new Hogwarts teachers are ever what they seem."

"Few of the old ones are either," Snape pointed out. "Except perhaps Binns."

Harry chuckled.

They arrived early in the Great Hall. McGonagall insisted that Harry sit beside her with Snape on the other side of him. As they took their seats, she said affectionately, "It is very good to see you, Harry."

"Thank you for the invitation, Professor."

She leaned close. "Please, do call me Minerva. And how is your apprenticeship?"

They talked until the hall filled with boisterous students. McGonagall asked, "Shall I publicly welcome you?" she asked.

"Oh. That isn't necessary," Harry said. "I know everyone."

She smiled and a moment later platters of food appeared on the tables. Harry hadn't caught the signal and his stomach rumbling distracted him from wondering what it had been. The meal went quickly and soon the empty, soiled plates vanished. As things wound down, more students looked up at the head table, eyeing him he assumed, since McGonagall was always there.

As they waited for pudding to appear, a small student in a blue uniform hesitantly approached their table. He had a bushy head of curly brown hair that dwarfed his small face, although even its bulk couldn't compete with his wide eyes. The head table sat on a raised platform, forcing the boy to rock up on tip-toes to peer up at Harry.

"Come on up, Mr. Van Eschelon," McGonagall invited.

The boy was so small he had to climb rather than take a large step up. Harry wondered that children started Hogwarts so young.

"M- Mister Potter," the boy managed as he clutched his hands together. He glanced back at the Ravenclaw table as though for advice. More wide eyes there and the smaller students made motions to urge the boy on. Harry tried hard to find a friendly feeling face to calm the boy's obvious fear.

McGonagall cut in smoothly. "Harry, this is Erasmus Van Eschelon, a first-year, if you had not recognized that."

"Hello, Erasmus," Harry said in the lightest voice he could manage.

Erasmus shot worried glances at Snape and the headmistress before saying, "We . . . uh, hi, uh, we wanted to welcome you to Hogwarts . . . "

Welcome? Harry almost echoed in disbelief.

" . . . and, uh . . . " Another glance back at the end of the Ravenclaw table where many small faces wore pained expressions. " . . . and we are really, really honored to have you here . . . "

Harry now realized that he should have allowed McGonagall to make a little speech at the beginning of the meal. The gap between himself and this dear place took a bounding spread as the student went on, leaving him less homesick and more adrift.

Erasmus' eyes dropped to where his feet fidgeted fiercely. Harry didn't dare interrupt and lengthen the boy's torment. " . . . and we think you are a really great wizard." He was speaking to the platform now, but utterly unaware of it. "Well, and we all owe you a lot." His head finally lifted. "Well, that's what I . . . we wanted to say."

Harry wasn't ready for his turn in this. "Well, thanks. I appreciate that."

Released, a relieved and flushed Erasmus ran back to his table looking strung out, as though he had faced . . .well, Voldemort. Harry turned to his left. McGonagall picked up her chalice of mead and said, "In just over a month you have reached legend status around here."

Harry said, "At least the teachers-"

"I was referring to the staff," McGonagall interrupted him. "The students are yet another matter."

A bread pudding had appeared before Harry and he pulled it closer and picked up his fork. He didn't want to be a legend; he wanted to have this place, this first home, as a kind of refuge. He had forgotten that it wasn't static; that it had a life all its own. Beside him, Snape patted his arm. Harry turned to him and he said, "I do try to point out to them how truly awful you were at Potions, but they just get angry with me."

"I appreciate that," Harry said. The gulf between himself and the room full of school chums had yawned too wide. He swallowed his first bite hard and pushed his plate away.

"All right there, Harry?" Snape asked softly.

Harry nodded. Very quietly, so that McGonagall couldn't hear, he said, "I didn't come here to terrorize first-years." After further thought, he added, "I didn't realize how small they were now."

"Same size as always. Some come smaller . . . such as you."

"I was smaller than him?"

"Yes."

Teasing, Harry said, "And you were still cruel to me."

Snape crossed his arms and leaned back haughtily. "You should not have taken it so personally."

Harry pushed his chair back and shook his head. "Think I'll go visit with some friends," he said eagerly. He stepped along the staff table and around down to the Gryffindor table. Overhead, above the thousands of floating candles, the ceiling raged in darkening blue without a single cloud. At his approach Ginny brightened and made space beside her. Harry quickly fell into conversation with her, the Creevey brothers, and the others he knew well. He was greatly relieved to find them the same as before, if not a touch taller and bolder.

Harry's training the next week was difficult and wearing. They learned countless illusion charms, some for things as large as a building that required many witches or wizards work together by combining their magic. Harry had assumed that this would make a spell easier, the way having someone to help carry a couch made that easier, but it didn't. In actuality it made the spell much harder because the other person's magic was much more likely to disrupt your own. Getting the spells to combine rather than interact required intense concentration.

Vineet participated only marginally, since he was still working on control. But he was suprisingly good at adapting his own magic to another's. Most of the time during training, he had a variety of Hogwarts first-year tasks before him, some transfiguration, some charms. He patience with himself seemed to be growing thin finally. While the others packed up for the day, Harry went over to Vineet's corner to try and cheer him up a bit. Unfortunately Rodgers followed suit, so Harry toned down his own reassurances. "You look frustrated, Vishnu," Rodgers observed. He gave Vineet space to respond which went unused. "Do realize that we will give you a lot of time and help to work this out." He sounded unusually concessionary.

Vineet frowned as he stood and collected the various half destroyed little objects into a box. "I am not accustomed to lacking discipline," he explained unhappily.

Rodgers turned to Harry. "Anyone at Hogwarts specialize in teaching attenuation that you know of?"

"I can ask," Harry said eagerly. "I'll owl right now, in fact."

Rodgers nodded, looking displeased about having to ask, which Harry attributed to the communication going through Snape. When they were alone, Harry said, "Vineet, go a little easier on yourself." When Vineet appeared surprised, Harry explained, "I read you like a book, you know."

"The possibilities seem to have closed as fast as they have opened," Vineet observed.

"Everyone's going to help," Harry insisted. "It will work out. Someone at Hogwarts will be able to help, or Headmistress McGonagall will know someone who can." Harry wished a bit that Dumbledore were still there to help, but squashed it immediately.

Vineet picked up his things to depart. "You are all being very kind."

In the corridor Harry went down to the end and around to where the large Department owl cage sat. He dropped his bag, and examined the quill provided in the tin beside

a pile of scrap parchment. It felt cold and strangely slippery and he knew from that feel of it that the bird that had given it was dead. Wondering at such a pointless skill, he opened his bag and took out his own quill. After brushing some scattered downy feathers aside, he leaned over to write to Snape in the small space before the cages.

When the short letter was finished he put it in an official envelope. As he penned the address, an unfamiliar voice approached down the next corridor. He slowed to listen to what sounded like someone speaking to themselves.

"Ay, the Ministry wouldna made the Bludger rule change if it hadna been for that incident in Yorkshire." "Overreacting, I'd say." "As usual." "Hey, can we see the Department of Magical Games and Sports?"

"That's down a few levels." That voice Harry recognized: Mr. Weasley. "We'll get to it if you wish. Not really much to see . . . although the trophy room is nice, except uh, last year, when the trophies all went invisible in protest over not getting polished up for a while. They're all there now though . . . we're pretty sure."

Harry fanned the envelope to dry the ink and grinned at that

"Eh, what's the male squad then?" The strange voice asked and the footsteps stopped.

"What? Oh, that's Ms. Tonks. Uh, I mean, she changed the sign again. It is supposed to read Magical Law Enforcement Squad." Harry hadn't noticed that vandalism and grinned more as he opened the cage to hand over his letter to whichever owl seemed more eager to take it.

"Eh, the Auror's office must be here as well, then?" "Oh, dark wizard hunters." The voice said, still sounding a bit double on the personality.

"Yes, just around the corner," Mr. Weasley explained, sounding the tour guide again.

The other voice dropped lower. "Oh, does that mean . . . Harry Potter is here?"

Harry's eyes went to the ceiling. The footsteps were moving again "Well, yes," Mr. Weasley was saying, sounding confused. "He's in training with us." Harry glanced at the distance back to his own corridor, then thought he should say hello to Mr. Weasley and his guest. Torn, he shut the cage door and the remaining owl tried to peck him before he got his hand clear. The other owl had gone out the other side of the cage and into the darkness of the ventilator shaft leading to the roof.

"Ooh, what's 'e like then?" "Dangerous, eh?"

Harry shook his head, still hoping that someone at Hogwarts knew something about teaching attenuation. Everyone here at the Ministry returned a strange stare when

asked as though the notion of reducing one's magic had never before occurred to them.

"He's very nice. Really," Mr. Weasley insisted. They were about to turn the corner. Harry toyed with the notion of taking his wand out, then decided that would be childish, although potentially amusing.

"Oh," Mr. Weasley said, coming to a halt. "Ah, hello, Harry."

"Oh, you're funnin' us-" A very redheaded, freckle-faced man of about thirty stopped and let his mouth fall open. He stood beside another identical man who looked equally surprised. An older, rotund woman in a pink coat with a huge flowery purse in her arms stood beside them.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

"How are you, my boy? This is my, uh, Great Aunt Milli and her grandsons Vincent and Cuthbert."

"More Weasley twins?" Harry couldn't help asking. The very notion unseated him.

Mr. Weasley smiled. "Well, yes, but . . . much better behaved then, uh, Fred and George."

"I would say," came the haughty proclamation from Milli.

The stunned and perhaps fearful expressions hadn't relaxed on the twins.

"Just sending an owl, then?" Mr. Weasley asked, clearly to change the topic.

"Yep." Harry was tempted to add, thought I'd drop my Death-Eater father a note, just to rattle the highly rattleable a bit more. "Nice to meet you all," he said automatically. "I should get going home."

"'Course, my boy. Family picnic this weekend if you'd like to come." While Harry tried to formulate a reply, Mr. Weasley added, "There'll be a Quidditch match or two, of course."

"Oh," Harry said, solidifying his decision at that prospect. "Great. I'll try to make it."

One of the twins found their voice. "You're . . . you're coming to Arthur's house?"

Feeling cruel, Harry said reassuringly, "I promise to only invite one Death Eater along."

"Oh, can Se- . . . I mean, uh . . . " Mr. Weasley struggled, while his relatives gaped for real now at both of them.

"I doubt he's available, but I'll owl him," Harry stated easily.

Mr. Weasley recovered himself. "All right, then. Love to have him." He gestured for the aunt and twins to follow. "Still lots to see." The troupe followed slowly, eyeing Harry as they passed. Mr. Weasley said, "And here are the Auror offices, right here." As they made it to the lifts his voice carried back, "Goodness, with our luck we may even get to meet Madam Bones." Harry put his quill away into his bag and shouldered it, waiting for sound of the lift to descend and take the whispering away.

Harry arrived home exhausted; he had diverted to do some much needed shopping, and even though he was rather beat, he wandered outside in the low evening sunlight to check the front garden. The roses, small and wildish, were blooming yellow and faint pink. Rather than weed or trim, he sat down on the rarely used stone bench and leaned back against the ivy-covered wall of the house. After the last few days training, just staring at the tree limbs rocking in the breeze, the birds flittering about, the cars going by, seemed a worthwhile way to spend some time.

Harry thought he heard something by the side wall, a high-pitched kind of chattering. He sat straight and looked that way in concern. A few leaves shifted as though something passed under them and then stilled. A bit alarmed by the thought that, in his exhaustion, he had let something through from the dark plane, even though he didn't sense it otherwise, Harry took out his wand and watched the shadowed areas of mulch between the plants for any signs of movement.

"Hey, Harry," Elizabeth greeted him. "I was thinking you might be out on a nice day like this."

"Huh?" Harry asked, startled and worried about her safety.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Harry leaned forward to look around the plants better, wand still at ready. "I thought I saw something."

"Probably just a gnome."

Harry stood and stalked over to the corner of the stone wall. "A gnome? This garden doesn't have any." Harry thought he saw another leaf move so he issued a narrow blasting curse at it. A squeal sounded and a tiny figure, like a mutated potato, came barreling out, shaking its fist at him before stalking off. Embarrassed, Harry dropped his wand hand to his side. "That's the first one I've seen."

"My mum has a heck of a time with them. That and fire salamanders and iridescent bottle beetles. But that's because she insists on using magic to garden. Since you don't, I'm surprised they come around."

"What?" Harry asked in surprise.

"They aren't attracted to gardens where no magic is used. Didn't you know that?"

Harry put his wand away. "I didn't know that. I used a little the other day."

Sounding overly knowledgeable, she said, "If you stop, the magic will fade and they'll lose interest again."

Harry watched the leaves of ivy move in series as something crawled around under it. "Maybe I'll do that. It was just one Scourgify." He turned to her finally with his full attention. She was wearing all pink today, jumper and long pleated skirt; it was a bit much on the eyes. "How are you doing?"

"Good. Just one more piano lesson before term starts. How are you doing?"

Harry shrugged. "It's too quiet," he admitted. "I'm not used to being alone, I guess."

"I don't like being alone either," she volunteered.

"Sorry," he said, shaking himself. "I'm behind on my reading and really need to catch up, so I should get back to that."

"Cheers then," she said, "All right if I write you from school?"

"Of course. I'd like that."

She smiled and put her hands in her skirt pockets and walked away.

"You're in luck, Harry," Tonks said when he arrived for his field shadowing on Friday. "It is so busy today, we have to go out on a call. Here," She handed him a little wood-framed piece of slate; a thin white stick adhered to the frame by a charm. "You should have one of those in case we get into trouble."

Harry barely got it pocketed before she grasped his arm and the Ministry flickered away. They stood in a field, a few sheep grazed near the far fence, considering them curiously. Harry waited to be told where they were but knew not to ask. Tonks was too distracted to give details and led them quickly away after glancing at a crumpled parchment. She pulled her wand out and unfolded her sleeve down to hide it. Harry followed suit, glad to have worn long sleeves. His heart beat faster, just holding his wand in the middle of the unknown.

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She stepped on the electrified fence and gestured for Harry to step over. He turned and did the same for her. They walked along a path beside the field until they came to a round stone house. A brooding old village was visible over the crest of a green hill. The front door of the house was ajar. Tonks circled the structure once before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Harry followed behind and felt as though he moved through an invisible curtain. The air felt strangely oily and clingy. He breathed in, expecting to smell it, but all he smelled was yesterday's stew and old candle smoke.

Tonks stepped through the first arched doorway on the left and stopped. When she moved aside, Harry saw what had attracted her in that direction. A witch lay on the floor, grey robes spread behind her as though she had fallen in the middle of dancing. Her black hair obscured most of her pale face.

"Is she . . .?"

"Dead? Yes." Tonks stalked around the room like a bloodhound, looking at everything without touching anything. As she roamed, she went on, "You can tell when you walk in. That oily feel to the place. Look for a wand in the other rooms. Don't touch anything."

Harry recovered from the surprise of Tonks stating exactly what he was sensing. As he turned away, Tonks cast a few spells, one of which made the floor glow white with ghostly dark footprints, hundreds of them. Harry longed to stand and watch spells that they had not yet learned, but he did as he was told and hunted around the main room for a wand. There were a lot of figurines around the place, of cats, bats, rats and a few birds. All of them tall and elongated; some functioned as candlesticks and had old wax adhering to them. He didn't find a wand.

Voices sounded outside the front door. Harry rushed that way and found two children before the front step. Their conversation abruptly stopped at his appearance. They were dressed as Muggles but Harry was certain they recognized him. Thinking quickly, Harry asked, "Were you here earlier?" They immediately became evasive, eyes shifting. "Did you see someone here?" Harry then asked.

The boy and girl looked at each other. The boy reluctantly said, "We didn't see anyone today. But the witch who lives in the forest there . . . " He pointed to a dark range of trees in the distance. "She was here yesterday and there was a big fight."

"What are your names?" Harry asked. After a hesitation they gave these up and Harry forced them into memory. "Go on home," he said. "We may have questions for you later." He waited and watched them depart with many curious glances back.

Inside Tonks was still at work. "What'd you find out?" Harry relayed what he had learned and she commented, "Kids often have the best memories and they notice everything. Wand?" Harry shook his head. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the body. "Could be a good thing. The person who killed her may have taken it. Ollivander always remembers and it makes for good evidence, although circumstantial. Let's seal the house and check out this lead before taking her in. She isn't going anywhere."

In silence Harry followed her outside where she put a strong, but short-lived, barrier on the small house. "Have to love stone," she commented. "Holds spells so nicely once you find its resonance."

Harry almost asked when they would be learning barriers, but swallowed it for later. They walked down the road a quarter of a mile to the copse at the end of the sheep fields. It was a nice day for a walk, but Tonks was spending it watching the ground around the way, casting the occasional spell to reveal footprints.

A small path led into the trees just beyond a stone wall. Darkness enveloped them as they entered. Within the trees it was starkly quiet and the air ripe with leaf decay. It wasn't far to the shack, which looked all the size of a large privy on the outside, but inside went on for room after room of dusty clutter. The sliver-shaped hole in the shack door was replicated hundreds of times around the walls, letting in curved shafts of dusty light.

Tonks circled around and came back a while later and huffed, "Nothing."

On a table, a box had been knocked over and some gaudy jewelry had tumbled out. Harry reached for a bracelet that, unlike the other silver things, wasn't tarnished. He tilted it to see the diamond cut pattern on its surface.

"Harry, are you touching things?" Tonks asked, part surprise, part chastisement.

"She's dead," Harry said, feeling a slipperiness on the metal that seemed to vibrate with something of its recent and frequent wearer.

"What?" she asked, stepping over to him across the crowded floor.

Harry held up the bracelet as though that might clarify. "The owner of this is dead." Tonks didn't reply right away, just studied him. "You don't believe me?" he asked.

"No, I believe you. I didn't know you could tell that."

Harry turned the bracelet in the light. It had a row of little blue stones along the median, one missing. "I didn't know regular objects could be radiant," he said distracted by that new knowledge.

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Tonks put her hands on her hips and looked around the room again. She pulled out her little slate and jotted something on it with annoyed motions before stashing it back in her pocket. "Well, where is she?"

Harry, forgetting to be silent, and thinking aloud said, "Maybe that was her at the cottage."

Tonk's face twisted in an intrigued manner. "You're right. We don't know who that is." She glanced around the cluttered room. "Wonder if there's a photo around here."

"Who would keep a picture of themselves around?"

"Maybe if someone else were in it. Someone handsome," she said suggestively. With the both of them looking, it only took a few minutes to find a small silver frame with a very old photograph of three people in it: a woman and an older couple, posed like parents behind a woman. "It will have to do." She grasped his arm and they reappeared outside the cottage. A man paced before it, agitated. A few others, including the boy and girl who had come to the door were also standing in the middle of the lane, looking skittish. They all stared at Harry as he and Tonks approached the house.

"Do you live here?" Tonks asked the man.

"Yes, but I can't seem to get in." He sounded annoyed.

"That's because we sealed it. You didn't contact the Ministry?"

The man shook his head, looking mystified. Tonks pulled out her sheet and frowned at it. The man took Harry in for the first time. "Are you really Harry-"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"What's going on?" the man asked.

Harry silently waited for Tonks to reply.

After hours of questioning and evidence collection they left the Reversal crew in charge of clean up and returned to the Ministry. Harry wrote out reports while Tonks dictated because she insisted his handwriting was better than her dictation quill and besides he could amend as he saw fit while writing. Indeed, Harry discovered when she reviewed the first report, she didn't really care what he wrote, nor that he left off his observations about the bracelet.

It was eleven by the time they had finished and Tonks was yawning an average of once a minute. She took the parchments from him and stuffed them into folders. "So, what do you think?"

"About . . . what happened?" Harry asked.

She sounded deceptively casual, as though she may be testing him. "Yeah. Bit of a conundrum. Tell me what you think happened."

"I thought we weren't supposed to guess," Harry hedged.

"Hypothesizing, as long as you are willing to throw it away at the first sign it is in error, is all right." She waited.

Harry rubbed his brow and said, "Uh, there were different versions of what the fight was about, but maybe the witch, Bernice, set Mr. Doormouse up by going into his house and killing herself there." After he had said it, he wished he hadn't.

Tonks appeared thoughtful, however. "Fits the facts, as unlikely as it seems. Any other theories?"

Harry shrugged. "Someone else who knew they were fighting yesterday set Doormouse up and killed Bernice there to set him up. He seemed honestly confused although I didn't particularly like him."

She took her feet down off the desk and rubbed her eyes. "And he didn't seem like he had had a Memory Charm, which is one way to show up at a scene of your own crime." She yawned. "I remember back when I thought this was the start of the evening around this time. Must be grown up when you look forward to going to bed."

Harry blamed the long day for his finding the insinuation in that. The thoughts that followed were not conducive to criminal reports. He rubbed his eyes too.

"Harry?" she prompted, voice lower than her professional one. Harry froze on the cusp of even more distracting thoughts until she went on, "Any other strange skills you're hiding from us?"

With a glance around her desk and the nearby ones Harry pointed at her blotter, "That's cursed. The door is cursed. Rogan's tread cleaner is cursed. Your earrings are cursed. . . why are you wearing cursed earrings?" he asked in confusion.

She fingered the left one. "They're charmed for beauty," she countered.

Harry examined each of them again. "No, they're cursed."

She plucked one of them off and held it up. "No wonder I look so bad in them. How can you tell that so easily?"

"Things just feel wrong, sliperry and unclean and I'd like to get away from them or get them away from me."

"Hm. Good skill to have." She tossed the earrings with a musical clinking into the rubbish bin. "Others?" She asked in a tone that implied she expected he would hold back if given the chance.

She knew him too well. "Can we talk about the other over a drink?" Harry asked. "A Hagrid-sized bucket of mead sounds really very good."

"No," she replied.

"Damn." He swallowed. "Promise you won't kick me out of the program?"

Her face shifted to half-amused and she propped one foot back up on her desk. "What? You're still seeing Voldemort in the afterlife?"

"Not exactly."

Her propped up foot hit the floor. "Not. Exactly? What are you seeing?"

Harry, reluctant, but feeling obedient, said, "I see the Dark Plane. And once I time-travelled with my mind I think . . . " He trailed off because her expression of shock was too much to talk through.

"What exactly is the Dark Plane? It's been awhile since I've heard that term." She sounded befuddled and it hurt to have her of all people be so about him.

Harry quoted the book for lack of a better description, although he found the description lacking, "It is the alternative existence for the most evil subset of creatures. You know, like Lethifolds, or the Shetani, or Black Skanks. Things that crawl out of the cracks in the wall but you don't know how they do that. They do it by entering our world, our plane, at that point."

She stared at him thoughtfully. "You see these things? Is this because of the Dementors–because you were part of them?"

"I don't see the Dementors in the Dark Plane. Mostly I see Shetani, which are African demons and apparently plentiful." To assuage her odd look, he quickly added, "But I only see them when I'm very angry or I'm in an expertly-diagrammed node." He left off about fearing that they could enter this world through him; he couldn't bring himself to say it.

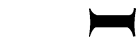
She put the files together on the desk and handed them to him. "If it gets out of control, tell someone, all right?"

Harry straightened the files a bit more before carrying them away. "Yes. Of course," he agreed.

Being in the file room reminded him of past filings, so when he returned to the office he asked, "What's happened with Lockhart?"

She was chewing on a sweet from her desk and held one out to him. "No one's seen him," she replied around the chewy stuff in her mouth. "Surprising really, given his mental status before." She pushed the drawer closed with her knee and hooked her cloak around her neck and made it turn hot pink to match her hair. "Some posters are up, no owls yet that have led anywhere. I'll let you know if anything comes up, since you have a personal interest."

"Thanks," Harry replied, wishing he could be a little more involved and did not have to wait to be told things.



The next morning, Harry rose very early, just after dawn, ate a bite and dropped a quick note to the Weasleys saying he wouldn't make the picnic, dressed warmly, and went immediately out to the back garden to uncover the bike. A narrow-minded determination had overcome him from the day before and he had to take action. He pulled the map out of the pannier and flipped through it. County Devon was easy to locate, and Godric's Hollow was just off the best route. Devon was also dauntingly large. More determined than dissuaded by the size of the task he had set himself to, Harry stashed the map into his jacket pocket and stood the bike up off of its stand.

The flight gave Harry a lot of time to think as he skirted along just below the low clouds. He grew short of breath up here, but it didn't make him dizzy as flying higher could. Below him the hills stretched out in a mutely colorful patchwork with the occasional spot of glowing green where the sun managed to cut through. Flying silent and fast, Harry arrived over his first stop in just an hour and a half. Using a broom compass, he had kept his path straight and direct and that helped the time rather a lot. He landed hard on a remote two-track, that from the air he could see connected to a narrow blacktop road that led into the village. Even as he rode along the ground, he kept the bike silent, not willing to destroy the peace of the place. It was a rather nice day, he considered as he parked at the end of the street that led to Polly Evan's property. Just enough breeze moved the leaves in the alcove of shrubbery where he left the bike. Before going along the grassy path, though, he walked back down the narrow lane and knocked on Pamela's door. No one answered and the gardens felt quiet as though the next door neighbors were out as well.

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At Mrs. Evans' house the door was answered promptly. "Harry dear. I did so hope you would drop in," she welcomed him. "Come in, come in." Big pots were boiling on the stove and a metal loop of cage with hinges sat on the small counter beside it filled with steaming empty glass jars. "Just putting up a bit of jam, don't mind me." Her beefy arms raised another cage out of the boiling water and she set these on the small, stained table across from the stove. "And how are you?" she asked as she worked.

Harry shrugged but then realized she wasn't looking. "All right. Rough day yesterday," he confessed.

"Girl troubles?"

"Murder," Harry returned.

"Oh my. What exactly do you do, young man?"

"Do you know what an Auror is?" he asked, very happy to be free to explain. She shook her head and shifted a pot full of bright red soupy strawberries to a different burner. "It is a dark wizard hunter. A magical law enforcer."

"Is that what you do?" she asked in surprise, pausing to retie her apron.

"I'm in training to do that. Takes three years. But we have field work days where we follow a full Auror on duty and sometimes, even though they try to keep their assignments easy while an apprentice is with them, they can't always manage." Harry remembered that oily feel of the house and rubbed his cheek as though to clean it off. "After battling Voldemort all those years, they're short of Aurors at the Ministry."

He watched her use a metal funnel to pour some preserves into each of the many, many jars. She was efficient at it, as though well practiced, and her arms, while they looked soft and fleshy, were apparently quite strong because she didn't rest them until the pan was empty. Using the same cage contraption, she lowered little metal lids into the boiling pot and shook it. While she waited for these, she considered him thoughtfully. "Surprising occupation for you to have. I don't remember your father nearly as well as your mother. I suspect he would approve. I don't know about Lily though."

"They aren't here to complain," Harry pointed out.

"No. Tragically, they are not." She raised the cage and using a clean, though worn, white towel, placed each sterilized lid on a filled jar, adjusting them so the seals were perfectly aligned. "So what did happen that night we lost James and Lily?"

"Voldemort came."

"That the one whose name some wouldn't say? I remember your father complaining about something like that."

"Yes."

She dipped screw top rings into the boiling water next, then stirred the other pan filled with what appeared to be blueberries, presumably destined for the remaining empty jars. Harry's mouth watered at the thought. "What did this Voldemort want with Lily and James anyway? What could they possibly have done or had that would have driven this . . . wizard to such destruction?"

"He didn't want them. He wanted me."

She looked doubtful. "A baby?"

Harry laughed lightly. "There was a prophecy that said I would destroy him. Well, actually that someone born at the end of July of parents who kept defying him would destroy him. It could have been another boy that I know, but it wasn't."

"And you did destroy him?"

Harry nodded.

She used a towel to pick up each jar and tighten down the lid and then set them on the far end of the counter in a little warm, bright red line. "And rather than settle down into some well-deserved peace and quiet you are out chasing murderers."

"Essentially. Peace and quiet makes me nervous."

She laughed this time. "Ever since you visited, I've been going back over those days. At my age memory makes for pretty good company, even ones that ended up tragic. I remember your mother as so full of life. Headstrong. Wouldn't take no from anyone when she wanted her own way, brought everyone around to her thinking instead so they forgot they had disagreed in the beginning. She and Ed, my husband, were playmates on and off as children. Ed knew she was a witch and when we met and he was writing to her at that school, he told me. I'd never been so surprised." She chuckled. "I was jealous of her, I think, I remember it made me feel better to believe her beauty and ability to get her own way was some kind of magical trick. Thinking back, I don't think it was, actually."

Harry stood silent, watching her finish up the blueberries. He had been drawn into her memories and didn't want to return to the present until he had to. Eventually

all the jars were sealed and lined up, except one that was only a quarter full. She set that one on the table. "We'll just have to eat that now."

Over toast, heavy with butter and runny blueberry topping, she asked, "So you are out from under that terrible prophecy now, right?"

"Yes, thank Merlin."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Well, I'm sorry you missed the girls. They went on a shopping expedition for the day."

Harry wiped his hopelessly sticky mouth and fingers. "I'm glad we got a chance to talk, though." He glanced at the time. "I should get going, I have to go to Devon."

"On broomstick," she asked, sounding half teasing.

"On motorbike . . . a flying motorbike. Did you ever meet my godfather, Sirius?"

She thought a long time before shaking her head.

"A friend of my father's from school. Anyway, he died a few years ago and left me this wonderful bike for my eighteenth birthday." He stood up and tried to collect up the dishes before being waved off.

"Sounds like just the right toy for a boy like you," she teased and followed him to the door. "Come again soon, Harry. And bring that guardian of yours."

"You're certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course. Come for dinner when everyone is here."

Harry tried to imagine Snape in that environment, then shrugged. "Owl . . . or write and let me know when," he corrected himself.

"No pet owls here," she teased and waved goodbye as though he were already at the end of the property.

The remaining flight to Devon went by very fast and again he landed on a deserted narrow lane, this one surrounded by trees. After canceling the disillusion charm, he pulled out the map again and studied the road network into Exeter. He memorized his route and pulled away, remembering at the first turn that he had better adjust the Roar knob for realism.

Harry rode in the thickening morning traffic, feeling confident about his riding as he steered between two cars slowing for a stoplight. More people were rising and getting on the roads as he journeyed toward the city center. So many of them. Feeling

daunted, Harry pulled into the car park for one of those chain restaurants Dudley had always begged to be taken to. He parked in the corner and closed his eyes, trying to let the fatigue from rising early pull him into a doze.

"You all right there?" A voice very close asked.

Harry jerked straight and looked at the scruffy man in faded coveralls getting into the car two spots down.

"Oh yes. Thanks. Just, uh, resting my eyes. Late night."

"Yeah, I know 'bout that. Nice bike."

"Thanks."

The car pulled away. Harry pulled out the map and held it open in his lap before dropping his head and trying again. No one bothered him this time as the familiar haze of green pulsed into his mind. A light wind tickled past in the vision in a different direction than the real one tugged his jacket. Harry woke up completely, stretched his neck and tried again. That in-between state was hard to maintain, but he wasn't going to give up. This time he got a glimpse of something dark and ephemeral in that world, off to his left, a little distance away. Uncertain if direction meant anything, he started the motorbike up again and rode northeast, intent on finding out.

Harry repeated this for many dogged hours before being forced to stop for an early dinner. His neglected stomach complained bitterly as he waited at the counter of a snack shop for his order to be assembled. He took it over to a table beside a forlorn city tree at the corner of a quiet side street. A group of children in rough clothes were playing football with great enthusiasm and much shouting. A car approached and they quickly collected their ball and stood as an honor guard might while the vehicle rolled past before returning to their game as though uninterrupted.

Harry closed his eyes and let himself doze. The shadow, which he found more easily this time, didn't seem any closer. Sighing, Harry bundled up the paper from his meal, tossed it in the rubbish bin, and decided on a walk down the shop-filled street he could see across the nearby large intersection.

Putting Avery out of his mind for a while, Harry wandered along, looking for things his friends might like, or that even he might like. Most of the shops were full of discounted and disarrayed things, but at the corner a display rack of fingerprint-marred sunglasses caught his attention. Excited by a sudden notion, he hunted through the rack for the nicest pair with mirrored lenses and found a very stylish pair with bright mirroring and a nice aerodynamic shape. He paid for them plus a hard-sided case in which to

store them. Humming happily to himself, he walked on, determined now to have a good look around.

The beginnings of sunset were showing themselves on the sky when Harry finally returned to his motorbike. The long flight home seemed too much at that point. It occurred to him that London was closer. Hermione had offered to let him stay at her flat on many previous late evenings. In his mind Harry took her up on the offer as he rode the bike out to a deserted narrow lane lined with stone walls and twisted the altitude throttle.

As he approached the lights of London, Harry strengthened the Obsfucation charm upon him and considered that he also knew where Tara's place was. After circling down over the right area, he had to find the underground stop and then follow along above the rooftops to her street. Buildings were odd things from above, covered in looming metal structures of unfathomable purpose and great hazard to someone flying low. He carefully circled her building and decided which windows must be hers. Orange light filled the curtains inside. Harry carefully lowered the bike to window height and pulled out the Roar knob just a tad. This wasn't sufficient to generate any movement of the curtains and it attracted glances from below that looked puzzled before looking away. Harry pulled out his wand to make the Obsfucation charm on the bike itself as strong as possible while allowing her to see him. "Tara!" Harry shouted.

After a long pause the curtains moved and then moved aside. She looked down through the glass, so he shouted again. Her eyes came up and went wide. She worked the window open and demanded in shock, "What the devil are you doing?"

"I wanted to see you," Harry explained. "Want to go for a ride?"

She looked down and back up at him, gauging the distance to the ground. "Um. Why don't you park that and come up instead?"

"Okay," Harry agreed amiably.

"Harry you are crazed," she said as she let him in the building door.

"Why?"

"Why? What if someone saw you?" she demanded.

"No one but you could," Harry said.

At the door to her place, she said, "No? You can do that?"

"Yep, Aurors need to do it all the time so they can see each other but no one else can easily."

She sounded satisfied as she said, "Oh." Her place was three rooms. She gestured that he should take a seat at the table. "I was just making tea; do you want some?"

Harry felt sleepy from the long ride. "Sure. Thanks."

She pulled her hair back before she checked the flame under a kettle already heating on the stove. "You startled me."

"I didn't mean to," Harry said, just thinking that if he didn't return home tonight that no one would know.

She pulled out cups and milk. "You know, Harry, I wouldn't have thought of myself as old at twenty-two, but I think I'm too old for you."

"Why?"

"Because you should date someone who wants to go for a midnight ride on a flying motorcycle. I think I'd have to work myself up to that."

Harry watched her rinse the cups with tap water and considered that Ginny probably would go with him. He could fly up to Hogwarts and even if McGonagall were standing there ready to give her a month of detention, she would hop right on. Tara took out a box of tea bags, revealing a row of boxed pasta, one of which tried to fall out when the cabinet door was opened. Harry said, "People without house-elves eat a lot of that."

She smiled as she poured kettle water into the cups to heat them before shaking them out into the sink. "Yes, we do."

As he sipped his tea, Harry considered what his friends had said about dealing with someone else's guilt. He wasn't sure he could wait it out, nor did he know what to say. "I like you a lot," he tried. Her eyes dropped. Wrong thing to say, but that meant there might not be a right thing.

Harry tried to take the roads to Hermione's flat, but it was far too tedious to wait for even the light nighttime traffic and streetlights. He pulled into an alleyway, did a quick spell to check for lurkers, applied several layers of Obsfucation and Illusion charms to himself and the motorbike, and took off straight into the air. At nearly roof level and accelerating, he clipped the right handle on the metal bar of a curved guard for the permanent ladder that led to one of those metal monstrosities so many roofs had. The loud clang echoed up out of the alley and the bike tilted crazily when the handlebars twisted with the blow's force. Fortunately for Harry his excessive acceleration upward bought him enough time to right things and only the rubber

wheel squealed eerily against the sheet metal of a large exhaust hood as he managed to get level.

Breathing heavily, he hovered just above the dark roof until he recovered himself and his heart slowed down. Probable headlines in the Muggle paper flashed before him Mystery Flying Motorbike Crashes in Central London or more hopefully Foolish Hotroder Rides off of Five-Story Building. Flying now with paranoid and meticulous care, Harry steered his way eastward, very grateful the bike was behaving normally despite the mishap. When he arrived near his friend's flat, he patted the empty front tank to express his appreciation for its hardiness and dipped lower to land where the light was least concentrated.

Hermione greeted him at the door, very pleased to see him.

"Gotta beer?" Harry immediately asked, forgetting to say much more than hello.

She laughed. "Sure. I think so. I shopped just yesterday. Good thing you didn't drop in before then; even the mice have been complaining about the empty kitchen."

Crookshanks winked his glowing eyes from his usual perch atop the bookcase. Harry closed the door behind him and toed his shoes off. "Thanks," he said, accepting the cold bottle she handed him. After a refreshing swallow he asked, "Doesn't your cat get them?"

She was quickly straightening the room. "You mean the mice? No. Turns out he makes friends with them, pushes catfood under the counter for them if you don't watch him. It was only Pettigrew he thought worth hunting."

"Good Crookshanks," Harry praised the furry thing as he passed under its watchful gaze. He dropped into a worn squishy chair and tried to relax. Hermione watched him take another sip of beer before giving in and getting herself one as well.

Harry leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling a long minute before remembering that he was a guest and should probably not fall asleep. "So where's Ron tonight?" Harry asked. Hermione made a small face in reply. "Something going on?" Harry then asked, looking for more subtle clues this time.

"Nothing new." She scoffed and looked unhappy and tapped the bottle with her fingers. "It's just that he won't consider moving out of the Burrow. We have little . . . ongoing arguments over that, and since we had one after the picnic, he didn't want to come over."

"Oh." Harry considered that sounded likely of Ron all right. "I wouldn't want to move out either, even to live closer to the Ministry. The ride in the Floo can be a

little long and sometimes I swear I get diverted past some strange area where the fireplaces all smell like the have burnt offal in them, but I like living at home."

"That isn't the same, Harry." She sat back and looked at him, straight in the eyes, which Harry found disconcerting, or maybe he just wasn't used to it. "You just got a family. It'd be odd if you gave it up already. And besides you're alone now anyway."

Harry bounced his feet before crossing them at the ankles to stop it. "Yeah."

"Not liking it?"

"Takes some getting used to."

"I like it," she stated with relish. "I spent all evening just reading." With a wave, she indicated the stack of books on the cardboard box beside the couch which still served as a side table.

Silence descended again. Harry eventually said, "I could Floo home from here and come back for the bike tomorrow," although he didn't feel like getting rocketed and spun around for long minutes as tired as he was.

"You can sleep on the couch. 'Course it isn't the most comfortable."

"I can transfigure it into a bed." He eyed the space. "There's room, if you don't mind."

"I want to see you do that," Hermione challenged. She stood up and gestured for him to go ahead.

Harry didn't move. "What?" he asked, confused.

"I want to see you do that–a bed that lasts more than five minutes."

Harry shrugged, stood, and pushed the short squishy chair he had been sitting on out of the way. He pulled his wand out of his enlarged inside jacket pocket and incanted, "Dormilanequoris," while gesturing in wide wand sweeps. The couch stretched, shifted and flattened into an ordinary bed. It even had sheets, all tucked in with sharp corners. "Hey," Harry said, "I could use that spell to pretend my bed was made. Are there any bad magical side-effects to turning a bed into a bed?"

"Uh, I don't know. Where did you learn this spell?"

"Oh, Aaron, one of the other apprentices. We sometimes get left to ourselves when things are really busy and last week, we took turns showing off our favorite spells."

Hermione bounced her hand on the bed. "You've never done this spell before? This is the first time?"

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 64

"Well, I have a bed a home. The need hasn't arisen." He sat down hard, testing it. "Not bad. He said it would last six hours at least. 'Course he sometimes makes things up and says the opposite of the truth to suck people in, but, we'll see," he stated pleasantly, simply glad the spell had worked when challenged by his old friend.

Hermione was giving him a strong glare. "Harry, I can't believe you just did this spell for the first time!"

"Oh, come on," Harry retorted. "You who always got everything in class before everyone else."

"Well . . . " she hemmed.

"Now, for example, Flitwick never showed us how to detect illusions and you have a big charm to hide the four boxes stacked beside the bookcase."

Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up her wand off of the brown-board side table. She waved it. Tried again. And then finally got up to tap the invisible boxes directly, making them flicker into view. "Hm," she muttered, looking at her wand. "I was pretty proud of that. Took me an hour to get it right before my parents visited. I didn't want them to see I hadn't found space for everything I'd insisted on moving out. I didn't want to leave anything behind; it didn't seem like moving out if I did that."

She sat on the end of the bed. "What else have you learned?" she asked, sounding vaguely melancholy.

Harry, happy to show off a bit, crossed his legs on the bed and said. "Okay, this might not come out quite right, but watch this." Harry closed his eyes to concentrate, and tapped his chin while muttering, "Aspecticedo." He then rubbed his chin to feel if it had worked. A grizzly beard now indeed sprouted there.

"Hey, you look good like that," Hermione said. "Did Tonks teach you that?"

Harry scratched at the beard as though it were a rash. "Yeah, but she is too good at it to be really good at teaching it. Don't tell her I said that though."

She stared at her wand before stashing it away. "I haven't learned anything new in months. No, I learned a how to control a note-taking quill." More quietly, she

added, "It's not really a spell though." She sighed lightly. "So what are you doing in London?"

Harry frowned and adjusted himself on the bed. "I stopped in at Tara's flat. She . . . wasn't really in the mood for my company."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said in sympathy.

"No. It's all right. I don't really know her all that well." He shrugged. "I still kind of like her though."

Even more sympathetically, Hermione said, "You flew all the way to London to see her?"

"No," he admitted, and only because this was one of his oldest friends did he add, "I was in Devon . . . hunting Avery."

Hermione gave him a level look. "Does the Ministry know you're doing that?" When Harry shook his head, she huffed. "Why don't you at least tell them?"

"I'm only a trainee. I'm not allowed to do anything."

She crossed her arms and appeared to be considering chastising him. "So, find out anything?"

"No." Harry tossed his wand in the air and caught it again. "I got my wand fixed and cleaned by Ollivander." He held it out. "Looks like new, doesn't it?"

"You're changing the subject."

"No, I didn't find out anything. I even went around trying to fall half asleep to sense him, but I couldn't zero in at all on him."

She picked at her nails a little nervously. "You . . . can see him though?"

"I think so."

A silent moment passed. "Does Severus know you are doing this?"

"I told him I wanted to." Harry put his wand aside on the cardboard box. "He told me to work through the Ministry."

"Which you aren't doing . . . "

Harry shrugged. "I'm useless at looking for him–even though I can sense him sometimes. Maybe he is still lying low."

Hermione looked vaguely uneasy as she considered that. She finally uncrossed her arms and stood up. "Well, I have to do some things in the morning. If you don't mind . . . it is a little late."

"No, that's fine," Harry said agreeably. "Thanks for letting me stay."

She shrugged and smiled, looking like her old self, which made Harry realize that for the most part, she didn't. With more emotion than it warranted, she added, "You're welcome anytime, you know. Why don't you use the toilet first?"

Later, when she went into the bedroom and closed the door, Harry slipped off his shirt, belt, and socks and got into bed. The transfigured bed felt very solid, not at all like it might change back at any moment. Deciding it was best to assume it wouldn't, Harry closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The traffic noises outside kept Harry awake for a while before exhaustion took over. As soon as it did, Harry snapped back awake with a start. Footsteps sounded and Hermione opened her bedroom door. "Harry?"

"It's all right," he assured her. He rubbed his hair back a few times and felt it bounce back up in all directions. Remembering the sense of a shadow hovering, Harry said, "Avery is in London. He's much closer to here than I sensed him in Devon." He sniffled and lay back down. "Sorry to bother you."

She stood there in her frilly nightgown, the sound of her breathing eventually slowing to normal and falling silent. "Don't apologize, but please don't go after him alone."

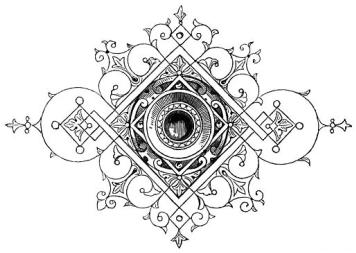
"I'll come fetch you then . . . when I find him," Harry sleepily offered.

She snorted. "I don't think I'd be much use to you."

"Sure you would." Harry rolled over and curled up slightly. "You'd say, 'Harry don't be stupid–owl for someone else to help'."

Her laughter filled the darkness. A car went by and its lights traced over the ceiling and wall as it turned. "Good night, Harry," she finally said, and went back to bed, leaving the door open this time, making Harry wonder that everyone he knew thought he needed looking over while he slept.

Chapter 65.



Mum Galore, Part 1

Sunday, Harry put on the nicest non-dressy clothes he owned. He had first tried on his Muggle suit, but that looked inappropriate for Sunday dinner at a friend's mum's house. He wondered how it was that no matter how many clothes he bought, nothing in his cupboard ever seemed quite appropriate.

He met Aaron at the underground stop, the last one on the line. His fellow Auror trainee looked a little nervous. "Thanks for coming. I told my mum I'd invited you but didn't tell her you'd agreed. I didn't know if you'd come to your senses at the last and back out."

"I really don't mind," Harry insisted, still not understanding how anyone could not appreciate Sunday dinners with his mum. Aaron carried a narrow sack which might contain a wine bottle and his other hand held a bundle of bright yellow flowers. Concerned, Harry asked, "Should I have brought something?"

Aaron held out the flowers. "You did bring these," he said.

"Cheers then," Harry thanked him, taking them.

They walked nine blocks before reaching a nice house at the edge of the village. A white enamel cast iron fence ran around the property and one very old tree shaded things nicely. On the broad porch Aaron used the doorknocker, looking pensive. Harry, not used to holding bunches of flowers, held them behind his back because he felt like a bride holding them in front of himself.

The door swung open quickly and a plump, dark haired woman in a flowered muumuu greeted them with a broad smile. "Oh, my! Look who it is." She tore her gaze from

Harry over to her son. "Aaron, my dear boy, good to see you, and in such esteemed company, no less." She held out a hand, not so much to be shaken but palm down, fingers half-curled. Unsure what that meant, Harry freed a hand from the flowers and managed a strange handshake. Her gaze was affectionately intent, and she smiled as though nearly crying.

"Where are my manners?" she proclaimed loudly. "Come in. Come in. Please!"

She hadn't let go of Harry's hand, so he had no choice but to follow. In the beautiful front hall with its glowing marble floor and bright rugs she stopped and said, "You are much taller than I imagined, Mr. Potter. You don't mind if I call you Harry do you?"

"Not at all," Harry replied, getting a hand squeeze and an extra affectionate smile in return. "These are for you," Harry remembered the flowers in his other hand.

Surprisingly, this didn't get his hand freed when she accepted them. "Oh, my dear boy, how sweet. Mr. Plumley!" she called out.

A dour man in a tuxedo with a pointed nose and disproportionately heavy face stepped in as though just waiting to be summoned and accepted the flowers with a very small bow. In a formal tone he said, "I shall retire these to nice vase for you, madam."

Mrs. Wickem turned Harry toward her for further inspection, apparently, and patted his captive hand with her now free one. "Well, you have turned out rather handsomely, haven't you?" she asked, looking him over with an appraising eye. To Harry's utter amazement, she reached up and patted him on the cheek as she said, "But you certainly look like you need a good meal, you poor thing. Come. Come." She finally released him but this was only to better wrap him up bodily and lead him away to the next room as one might an invalid. They entered a parlor with high windows and a marble and iron table set with a staggering array of glass and tableware, like nothing Harry had seen before. The yellow flowers were already in a blue and gold Asian vase in the center.

Harry turned back to shoot a teasing look at Aaron and found that his companion appeared pale and horrified. Harry gave him a questioning look to no avail. The parlor was huge and it was a long walk to the table in the center. Mrs. Wickem took it with a slow stride, soft, broad arm firmly around Harry.

"You know, Harry," she said in a soft voice. "I so clearly remember that fateful day seventeen years ago when the papers declared that evil had been banished. They seemed quite unable to explain exactly how that had come to be. The only possible

explanation was that an infant somehow defeated him." She paused and hmmed in memory. They had reached the table. Harry was beginning to anticipate manipulation, so when she turned him to face her, her soft cheeks reminding him only vaguely of Aunt Marge, he didn't resist. She went on, "I thought to myself, that must be one strange boy. And one so simultaneously fortunate and unfortunate."

She gestured at a chair and graciously said, "Please have a seat, and I will see what the progress is on lunch."

Harry thanked her and pulled out a surprisingly heavy iron chair. Aaron took a seat beside him, adjusting the beaded cushion a little impatiently. He still looked mortified. When they were alone, he put his head in his hand and said, "Ugh. She's worse than I could have imagined–and I thought I could imagine a lot."

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Aaron gaped at him. "What's wrong? You just went through that, and you ask what's wrong?"

"I don't mind," Harry laughed. Which was the truth, though more than an afternoon of it would be a different thing. At Aaron's utter shock, Harry tried to explain. "I can take being doted on. Really. I had a dearth of doting as a child." Aaron seemed to accept that, but he still looked strained. Harry, wanting to reassure him more, went on, "My Aunt Petunia used to dote on my cousin Dudley all the time when we were little. Kind of like that," he said, gesturing at the door Aaron's mum had disappeared through. "Made more of a point of it in front of me, in fact. All the while telling me how useless I was, and not feeding me enough, and pretending I didn't exist whenever they could. So really, I don't mind a little make-up doting," he finished with a grin.

Aaron sat back, looking vaguely sympathetic. "I still need a bracer," he said and reached for a crystal decanter full of a dark red liquid that was just one of a veritable forest of fancy containers taking up the fourth place setting at the table. "Want some?"

"No. Thanks though."

"Pour out the Sauternes instead, my dear boy," Mrs. Wickem chided brightly as she swept back into the room followed closely by Plumley carrying plates.

"Mmm," Aaron murmured, as a plate was placed before Harry. "Goose liver paté. My favorite. You've outdone yourself, my man."

The butler opened a bottle of peach -colored wine and poured a splash out for each of them. Before he could turn completely away, Mrs. Wickem said, "Plumley, did you see whom dearest Aaron has brought for luncheon?"

Chapter 65

Plumley, looking bored, glanced around the table as though noticing for the first time that people were actually sitting at it. He blinked several times at Harry. Mrs. Wickem prodded, "Surely you recognize Mr. Potter?"

Plumley's face underwent some sort of distorted metamorphosis, or perhaps it simply was too unaccustomed to holding any expression. Stunned, he held out his hand and Harry shook it. "Most . . . thrilled to meet you, sir," Plumley breathed. He clasped his hands before him formally and stood straight, gazing around the table as though he had just woken up. A bit unsteadily he announced, "Yes. Perhaps, I shall go prepare the next course, then."

When the door had swung itself closed, Aaron said in awed tones, "That's a first. I don't think he's ever been thrilled about anything." He and his mother shared a shocked look before they started eating, and Harry followed suit, immediately thinking that he could put up with lots more doting for food like this. Winky cooked well but this was something else. There were soft warm onions draped over the cold paté and a streak of something fruity and red beside it for dipping and the wine, while almost sickly sweet, went down very well between bites. He must have been making unconscious noises of appreciation because Aaron broke out laughing. "Enjoying it?" he asked.

"It's really good," Harry insisted, wishing the plate were a little fuller. He ate slowly to savor it.

Harry soon learned why the first plate had seemed sparse. Uncountable courses followed that first one and he fast filled up. During a pause, Mrs. Wickem asked with great feeling, "Harry, I am curious about something and perhaps you will be able to answer this for me."

Harry adjusted the napkin in his lap and gave her his attention. Sunlight was now slicing in through the top of the window and sending shattered beams of itself off the crystal on the table. "Of course," he replied, expecting some difficult question about Voldemort or Ministry politics.

She put a broad hand on Harry's arm and asked, "How is my dear Aaron doing in his apprenticeship?"

Harry smiled and suppressed a laugh. "He's doing fine. Why do you ask?" He looked between them. Aaron had sunk back into mortification with a frown.

She replied, "I can never know what his answers mean. In school, he always said he was doing fine, always seemed happy, but he was not, in fact, doing so well."

"He is doing fine," Harry repeated, feeling odd assessing someone five years older than himself. Somehow it seemed Aaron did not agree with his marks and began fiddling with one of the oddly shaped spoons above his plate whose function Harry had no clue about. Aaron was biting his lip awfully hard too.

"Well, that is good to know." She gave her son a soft look before standing with unexpected lightness. "I'll just see to the pastries."

The door swung closed behind her. Aaron was still biting his lip and slouching as though to examine the spoon better. Harry asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm not doing that well," he pointed out, sounding peevish.

"What makes you say that?" Harry thought over their training. "You do fine on all the spells. You did fine on the review examination."

"I stink on readings. You always know the answers."

"No, I don't. Vineet always does, and then Kerry Ann. You and I are in the bottom half of that."

Aaron huffed and confessed, "It is so hard for me to do the readings. Ten minutes into it and I'm totally bored and going nutters. It's like torture. No, actually, I would take a Crucio most days rather than finish the readings."

"Well, why don't you have someone read them out to you. A girlfriend or something."

Aaron's face twisted in thought. Harry considered that he was like Ron in that his mental impressions went right to his features. "That's a thought," he said, sounding upbeat. He arranged his silver more neatly and said, "How did you get through everything you've faced being so damn nice, Potter? I would spit spells in every direction I'd have been so angry."

"I had moments like that, believe me."

With a half grin Aaron asked, "Similar to the time you took Rodgers down a few?"

"A bit like that. Not as articulate. I trashed Dumbledore's office, for example." Harry's heart picked up a bit; he had never told anyone that.

"You what?" Aaron was stunned, and impressed, most likely.

"All those little machines and balanced globes and things? Threw 'em everywhere." The memory made Harry hands clammy.

Aaron made a noise of surprise and put his hands on his head. "I so haven't sussed you, Potter. I can't even picture it. What did he do?"

More quietly, Harry said, "Nothing. He just sat there, said he didn't care about any of the things."

"Wow."

"I'd had a very bad day. The worst day of my life, I think. Or close to it."

A long pause ensued where the sound of organizing small plates could be heard just outside the door. Aaron said, "If you're trying to make me feel better, Potter, you're succeeding."

Their hostess returned with the butler, carrying stacks of pastries that made Harry's stomach feel like it might split just from looking at them.

An hour and numerous bear hugs later, Harry was allowed to depart. Aaron walked him back to the station. "Thanks. You really made her day," he said, rocking on his toes with his hands in his pockets, looking oddly shy.

"It was nice. And the food was great. I'll see you tomorrow."

Aaron gave him a wave before walking away.

At home, Harry settled in to read but ended up napping on the library lounger instead. He hadn't eaten so much since the last Halloween feast at Hogwarts. Later, as he settled in with a pot of tea to try his readings, Harry wished his guardian were there, but Snape wouldn't be visiting for at least two weeks, he had said. Harry pulled a sheet of parchment across his book and wrote out a note asking Snape if he thought there were only two revelation spells for charmed animals, like his text said, because it seemed like there ought to be more. It was a silly question, but Harry needed an excuse to write yet again. At the bottom he almost added that he missed him, but didn't.

Harry brought one of Snape's letters with him to training on Monday. In it, he stated that Sinistra had in the past taught attenuation and was more than willing to assist Vineet. Since her classes were in the evening, she suggested that afternoons were better.

Rodgers perused the note and said, "Ask if you can bring him up sometime this week, then. Tomorrow, if possible."

Mum Galore, Part 1

Harry wrote two letters at lunch, one to Professor Sinistra about Vineet and one to Snape about arranging a visit for dinner at his relatives. Even though he himself had reservations about the plan, he presented it as something foregone. Upon rereading it, he wondered if Snape would see through that, even though his words covered his uneasiness pretty well.

When he arrived home, Harry had two replies waiting in the window box. Sinistra was indeed willing to begin tutoring Vineet tomorrow, making Harry think his description of the Indian's current magic must have alarmed her. The other was from Snape, in it he said, After dragging you to the coven enough times, it cannot be within my rights to decline. Harry wrote to Polly right then and even stepped out into the fast-cooling evening with Kali on his shoulder to post it at the train station. He dropped it into the cold steel mouth of the post box and looked around the quiet village. As awkward as he imagined it would be to have Snape and himself at dinner with Pamela, Polly, Patricia and family, he found he really wanted it to happen, ached a little for it even.

Kali sniffed the air when the breeze came up. Harry, with no cloak, found it chilling and quickly walked home. In the garden he paused and listened but no unnatural sounds emanated from amongst the last of the flowers.

After lunch the next day, Harry took Vineet by Floo into Hogsmeade. "Britain's only all-Wizarding village," Harry announced as they stepped into the street, which unfortunately had a row of thick clouds hanging just above it. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders for warmth against a sudden wind.

"Hello, Harry!" Someone said as they passed. Harry recognized the shop clerk from Glad Rags and greeted her back. The next person they passed greeted him as well.

"You have many friends," Vineet observed as they walked out of town.

"I guess," Harry admitted. The castle came into full view almost immediately. "Hogwarts Castle," he announced, hoping he didn't sound the way Mr. Weasley did the other day.

They walked up the lawn, which Harry had remembered as being smaller than it was today, and up the front steps. Since it was during class, the Entrance Hall was deserted. Harry wondered if this place would ever feel unfamiliar. "Professor Sinistra's letter said to come up to her office," Harry explained as he headed for the

staircase. "Oh, but you have to see this," he said, diverting to the Great Hall. Just inside the doors he gestured at the ceiling. "Charmed to show the sky outside," Harry explained. Some older students looked up at them curiously from the other end of the long tables.

"Ah, I thought you would be showing me something else."

Harry let the door close. "What do you want to see?" he asked.

"The place where the Unnamed One fell."

"You're standing on it," Harry pointed out and then added a grin.

Unusually startled, Vineet looked down and stepped quickly off the spot he had been on. "Here?" he asked, looking around for some sign. "Not there?" he asked in confusion.

Harry followed where he pointed and saw that a brass plaque had replaced one of the stones. He bent over to read it. "Here Voldemort perished," he read. The date was printed around the edge in flowing longhand. "Hm." Harry backed up and surveyed the scene. "No, definitely where you are standing," he said to Vineet.

"Such few feet hold little meaning," Vineet intoned, also bowing to read the plaque. When his eyes came up they held that reverence that they had lost of late.

"Sinistra's waiting," Harry said to get them moving on.

Professor Sinistra walked them down to the Defense classroom for tutoring. "Professor Snape has taken his class outside today. Wanted to show them a few nasty creatures Hagrid collected from the forest." She pushed a few desks aside with a wave of her wand and clasped her hands before her. Her complicated earrings caught the light as she looked Vineet over. "Well, Mr. Abhayananda, I have been given some background details. You have been using a mismatched wand, correct?"

"I have been using my family wand," he conceded.

"That is the usual way one ends up requiring such tutoring. Let me see your old and new wands."

Harry sat in one of the front desks and observed. He had been given loose instructions about escorting Vineet here, so he used the lack of clear orders to return as an excuse to stay.

"There are many ways of reducing magic when one is too old to learn by instinct. One is by narrowing." She moved a stout granite monolith away from the wall into the

middle of the floor. "But," she held up a finger, "one must do so without focusing one's power. Otherwise even harmless spells can become dangerous." She demonstrated a simple torch spell, then a narrow unfocused casting of it that produced a very useless little spot of light on the granite, and then a narrow focused version that left a waft of smoke and a small dark spot on the stone. "Give it a try."

Vineet produced far more than a waft of smoke on his first attempt, and his second. After many attempts and a little progress on reducing his power, he said in frustration, "That is harder than one expects."

Lecturing now, she said firmly, "Everything we are going to work on requires practice."

Vineet nodded and concentrated harder. After another long round of attempts the air had grown hazy with smoke. His shoulders slumped in defeat. Harry was about to get up and offer encouragement but Sinistra stepped in before he had the chance and put her hands on the Indian's upper arms. "Mr. Abhayananda . . . we have many, many, techniques we can try. We are just getting started." Her tone was compassionate, unlike anything Harry had heard from her as a student. It got through to Vineet though and he straightened and returned to himself.

An hour later the door opened and students began to step in. Harry stood and watched for his guardian. Ginny came in and gave him a wave and a smile. Snape entered last, with a student in tow, who was summarily told to sit rather forcefully. "And you as well," he said to a nearby Slytherin. "Detention, both of you." He looked up and said calmly, "Hello, Harry. for next class and a short essay on . . . " He looked to be considering a topic appropriate to bad behavior. " . . . hazardous magical tree dwellers."

The bell rang then and most of the students departed, murmuring to each other about various topics. Nott and the other Slytherin sat sulkily in their desks, eyeing the rest of them darkly. Snape stepped over to Harry after dropping his books on a side table. "How is the tutoring progressing?" he asked.

"We are making headway," Sinistra responded pleasantly. "Folding seems to be the technique of choice in Mr. Abhayananda's case. I should start preparing for the evening classes, if you'll excuse me." To Vineet, she said, "Practice that on your own and come back perhaps on Thursday?" When he nodded gratefully, she departed with a small smile.

"And how are you?" Snape asked Harry, sounding unlike himself in this environment. Vineet wandered over to the windows and peered out with interest.

"Good," Harry assured him.

Chapter 65

"Training going well?"

"Training is going fine," Harry said, amused by the outpouring. "You haven't been away from home that long, have you?" he teased.

Snape smiled lightly and patted him on the arm. "True, I'll be joining you this weekend. Come with me to my office a minute while I put my papers away."

"Vineet," Harry said, to pull his companion along.

With a glance at the surly Slytherins, Vineet followed. In Snape's office, Harry asked, "What'd they do to get detention?" The sunlight was just right for the windows on this side of the castle, and everything in the office, from the tall stacks of parchment to the empty cage on top of the shelves, glowed with light.

Snape frowned. "Wandered off during class and then pretended they had been there the whole time. I must wonder that they think I have gotten that easy to fool." He sat down and tilted his head back, apparently to rest it. "A few students have been exceptionally troublesome lately. But onto this weekend, how do you intend to travel? It is getting a little cold for the bike. I need to know what time we should depart on Saturday."

"Oh," Harry said. He hadn't thought about this. "It is a little cold for the bike," he agreed to stall. "I don't suppose there's a Floo node. But I think I can Apparate that far now. Although I haven't tried it." Vineet moved to examine the bookshelves, again giving them space.

Snape scratched his cheek. "That isn't the problem, Harry. Your relatives will expect to see Muggle transport, will they not?"

"Oh, yeah." Harry had been looking forward to the visit that he had let that detail slip by him. "We'll have to work something out. Too bad we don't have a car."

Snidely, Snape said, "I don't think so. Noisy miserable contraptions and if I'm not mistaken it is many hours drive by ground means and would require an entire day there and back."

Harry thought hard. "What if we Apparate nearby and take a cab? Except we should take a cab from a nearby town . . . one with a train station. No one would believe we took a cab all that way, but I've never been to the nearby towns to Apparate into. Hm. Well, my mum's cousin's sister knows we're wizards. She'll cover for us."

"That is good, otherwise it is possibly not workable. Does she have a car?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I'll ask although Muggle post won't get there and back in time. Guess I'll telephone from the Ministry. I have her number."

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Do let me know what time I need to be home on Saturday to depart."

Harry adjusted his cloak; he had forgotten how cold the castle could get. "Thanks for agreeing to come along."

Snape gave him a wry smile. "I could do no different. You should probably return to the Ministry."

Harry felt the box in his pocket and withdrew it. "I almost forgot. Can you give these to Suze for me?" he asked, holding out the sunglasses in their nice, hard-sided case. "I think they'll stay on during a match, even the way she flies."

Snape opened the box and carefully unfolded and held the shiny, Muggle, plastic sunglasses to the light. He raised a brow at Harry. "Certainly." His lips twitched slightly as he said it, Harry was certain.

"Thanks. It was good to see you," Harry insisted, generating another wry but different smile. "Ready to go, Vineet?"

On the walk back down the lawn, Harry asked, "Did Professor Sinistra help at all?"

Vineet replied, "I am hopeful now. I could feel some measure of control at the end of the lesson."

Harry hadn't noticed this from what they had been doing, but he was willing to trust the other's judgment and his own anxiety eased. "That's good to hear. Hey, shall we stop for a butterbeer?"

Inside the Three Broomsticks it was relatively quiet. Madam Rosmerta came over as soon as they entered. "Harry, my Harry," she said affectionately. "Oh, who is your friend?" she backed off to ask in a low tone. Harry introduced them and Rosmerta put an arm around Vineet's shoulder to lead him to the best table. "My but you are a handsome one . . . but handsome ones are always taken, right?"

"I am assuming you are inquiring if I am married," Vineet said, appearing perplexed by this rather outgoing woman. She tweaked him on the chin.

"She likes you," Harry said and pulled out a chair for himself.

"I have a wife already, yes," Vineet stated, making Harry look up in surprise.

"Ach! Of course," Rosmerta sighed theatrically and brushed her forehead with her bar rag. "Your free butterbeer, Harry, I will fetch it," she added in a tragic tone.

Vineet sat down beside Harry and looked at him in consternation. "What?" Harry asked.

Chapter 65

"Your free butterbeer. It is going well with the free sundaes."

"I . . . They . . ." Harry tried and failed to come up with words. "People like to give me things," he finally said in exasperation.

"Hm," Vineet muttered but was interrupted by their warm mugs arriving.

"So, a wife?" Harry prompted to change the subject.

"Of course. You do not have one?"

"Well . . . no," Harry replied and then laughed. He couldn't even picture being married, or to whom. "So when do we meet her?"

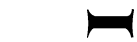
"If I gain a little more confidence in my attenuation, I will send for her. She is living with my mother in India. She did not want to journey until the stay was certain. It is often this way."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling sympathetic. "But she has your mother for company," he observed.

Vineet shifted his mug on the table without picking it up. "I am thinking that my wife is getting eager to move now." He had stated this flatly, without humor, but Harry smiled into his mug.

"That works."

Vineet finally drank some of his butterbeer. "In a way. It does not generate happiness, however."



On Saturday, Snape arrived home as Harry stood by the mantel shouldering his cloak. "Sorry, Harry, rather a day, and with more student difficulties. I see you are ready to depart."

Snape sounded slightly frazzled, so Harry said, "Do you want to rest up a bit? We are supposedly coming from Highbury on Wye so we could believably be late."

Snape removed his soot-dusted gloves and rubbed his hands together. "Let me wash up at least."

Harry waited in the dining room, feeling more anticipation than a simple dinner warranted. Snape finally returned, looking better than his average, which Harry felt grateful for. "Ready?"

Mum Galore, Part 1

"You are certain you can take us both?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. I practiced this morning a few trips back and forth."

Snape held out his arm, Harry put his hand firmly around it and forcing himself not to think too hard, scrunched down a large paper ball and imagined the shady area under the willow in Godric's Hollow. Harry opened his eyes when he heard a bird scolding above him. The wind moved the long grass of the graveyard and made Harry tighten his cloak and wish for gloves himself.

Snape stepped out from under the low branches and looked about with his usual sharp gaze. Harry followed, detouring over to his parent's marker. The glass egg didn't have any flowers now and the remaining silvering had corroded from the mirror, leaving it a black square framed by tarnished silver. Snape stood a few rows off at the crux of two aisles, waiting with his head down. Feeling heavy in his chest, as he always did, Harry finally stepped away toward the gate. Snape joined him in silence and they walked that way through the village, down the narrow lane and finally up the grass path to the house. The wind grew stronger as they walked uphill, channeled by the adjoining hills that gave the place its name.

Harry knocked and the door opened almost immediately. "Come in, come in," Polly welcomed, her mitted hand gesturing as she disappeared from view. Harry led the way into the kitchen where many things were cooking on the stove, and the counters which were usually crowded, were packed tight with dishes and more pots. When he reached the stove he received a warm, one-armed hug. "Just a moment," she said and turned off a burner while stirring another pot. She finally put the spoon aside and rubbed her hands on her apron. "Well, this must be . . ." Her face changed a bit as she actually looked at Snape. " . . . your adoptive father." Her eyes went to Harry as though to verify what should have been obvious.

"Yes," Harry confirmed pleasantly, unfazed. "This is Severus Snape."

"Ah. Well . . . " She reached out a hand and shook Snape's. "Welcome to the Evans' place." Snape bowed at that, looking stern. Polly frowned lightly before going on with oddly measured speech, "Harry, would you be a dear and fetch the children? They are out in the neighboring field looking for four-leaf clovers."

"Sure," Harry said and aborted removing his cloak. He stepped back out and looked either way before moving out of view.

Polly turned back to her cooking only after giving Snape a much longer look. Farther inside the house other voices rose in laughter. "I don't know quite what I was expecting, Mr. Snape, but you are not it." She stirred a large pot of mashed potatoes

before moving things around and putting another on. The pot she stopped stirring began to bubble violently.

"I assure you that . . ." Snape took out his wand and charmed the wooden spoon in the potatoes to stir on its own. " . . . I am Harry's guardian."

She watched the spoon in surprise for a few turns before going on with other things. She took a pie crust out of the oven and poured filling from a pan on top of the fridge into it. "Your name is actually familiar. Is it possible James Potter would have spoken of you?"

"Not unlikely," Snape replied. In the heat of the kitchen he shucked his cloak off and draped it over his arm.

"You can put that down in the next room," she suggested.

Snape did so and returned to stand in the doorway, arms crossed.

She put the pie back in the oven and set the loudly clicking dial. "Yes, I'm quite certain I've heard that name. An odd sort of name, isn't it?" When Snape merely shrugged, she said, "Yes, Snape. . . I'm quite certain, in fact, that James rather disliked you."

"The feeling was mutual," Snape stated calmly. "Whatever it is you are getting at, you may go to directly. I expect Harry will return momentarily."

She uncovered a roast on the small table and prodded it with a long fork. "Now, give an old woman time to put old memories together." She took out a carving knife, prompting Snape to say, "May I assist?" She shrugged and held out the knife, but Snape had his wand in his hand and with a wave, the roast was reduced to slices on the plate. She looked between the empty pan and the full plate before saying, "You do a lot of cooking, then?"

"I have an elf for that. But I do a great deal of potion brewing and ingredient preparation, which is rather similar."

She set the pan aside on the floor. "You are a dry one, aren't you? Harry does speak of you fondly though. I wonder what his father would think of that?"

"I don't know, nor care, frankly," Snape replied darkly.

She put the long fork aside and looked at him hard. When she didn't speak, Snape said in a low voice, "Yes, the worst you can remember James Potter saying of me is most likely true. Or was. You must have sent Harry on a rather roundabout errand."

"If he knew exactly where to go, it wouldn't have been. The children do like their hiding places."

Snape sighed and said, "I appreciate your concern for Harry. He is in need of relatives who understand him rather than vilify him. It is one of the things I cannot heal on my own." The voices from the other side of the house rose and fell in boisterous conversation. Snape tilted his head and waited for silence before continuing. He had caught her off-guard with that comment and she was now more thoughtful than suspicious

She asked, "Does Harry know that his father hated you so?"

"Yes. And Harry has despised me just as much although he is not as good at it, since his father's personality is tempered by Lily's disposition as well."

Polly smiled, apparently in memory. "Yes, a lovely woman. Very sad what happened."

Snape watched the door in anticipation but there was no sign of Harry. Polly wasn't finished. "The worst James ever accused you of . . . is rather terrible," she stated while spooning string beans into a bowl.

"Almost certainly."

"And all true?" she asked, sounding amused which may have been a measure of her confusion.

"Probably. The worst he could have accused me of . . . certainly was."

She stopped suddenly and a string bean fell onto the floor from the hovering spoon. "He included you in with those trying to hunt them down." She resumed spooning. "I remember James warning Ed and I to be on the lookout for odd visitors . . . characters in black hooded robes with masks, that sort of thing. Seemed like a bit of a game, really . . . until that night." She sounded unseated.

Silence fell between them. She sprinkled fried onions over the heaping bowl. "And now you have Harry."

"Yes," he replied mildly.

"And you with that wand of yours, not much someone like me could do about that."

"You misunderstand," Snape stated. "I could hardly wish Harry any harm."

Her eyes asked for reassurance of that but looked doubtful of getting it.

Snape sighed lightly and crossed his arms. "Harry very much needs people around him who understand him. I have no need for you to understand me beyond that."

He moved to the door to peer through the window. Harry was at the far side of the long field, approaching with two children, one by the hand. Speaking quickly, Snape said, "The Harry I took in a year ago last summer was not the one approaching now. He was worn down, used up even, by the task a heartless prophecy had set him to, which was to destroy the vilest, most powerful wizard in half a century. He had no family to speak of. He had been Voldemort's puppet. He was disbelieved regarding everything that mattered, and not given help when he most needed it." Snape exhaled, frustrated at trying to explain. "I gave him a home–something he had never had. I drew him out of his past–something only I, who had also been the Dark Lord's puppet, could do."

She covered the string beans with the plate she had been holding for this. "So this is about redemption, then?"

Snape shook his head with a frown and reached for the doorknob. Quietly, he said, "There is no redemption for me," and pulled open the door just as a small boy, running full tilt, ran up the steps, and without pausing, inside and through the kitchen.

Harry was carrying the girl. "Goodness, you are heavier than you look," he breathed as he put her down. "Hey, Severus, getting to know Mrs. Evans?"

"Yes, of course," he replied evenly with no hint of the seriousness of the conversation.

"Why don't you head on in and sit down?" she invited, arranging other things quickly in the small available spaces.

Harry noticed the self-stirring spoon and gave Snape a shake of the head before leading the way through the house to where the voices emanated.

"Harry!" Pamela exclaimed, pushing her chair back and coming around to greet him as he entered "And . . . this must be your father, adoptive father. No family resemblance there, is there?" she teased.

"This is Severus," Harry said, and introduced everyone except Patricia's husband who stood to shake Snape's hand.

"Sit down, we've been famished waiting for you," Patricia complained with a wide grin.

Dishes began arriving and Pamela jumped up and helped ferry them to the table. Harry tucked into a huge pile of everything, wrapped in the cheery house and relatives.

"So, Mr. Snape," Pamela asked, "What do you teach?"

Snape, who had been monitoring Mrs. Evans' scrutiny of himself, took a moment to formulate a reply. "A diverse course covering various, what you might call, folklore

and European myths." Harry's brow started to knit in confusion, but it faded quickly. Snape went on, "It is a new topic for me, I used to teach chemistry."

"That's a change," Patricia's husband exclaimed, one of his few contributions.

"So what kinds of myths?" Patricia asked curiously.

"Mythical creatures, for example," Snape said. "Basilisks, sirens, things of that nature."

"That's very interesting. Did you like his class?" Pamela teased Harry.

Harry grinned, "Yeah, except that he graded me really hard so no one could think he was being too easy on me."

"Did you really?" Pamela asked and the sisters laughed.

Hours later, when they finally put on their cloaks to depart, Snape pulled Mrs. Evans aside and let the door close to the outside. Everyone was seeing them off, which had necessitated calling an actual cab to pick them up. Snape said quickly, "I am considering suggesting to Harry that he apply for a dispensation to be allowed to reveal his wizardry to his blood relatives, your two daughters. If you have reservations, however, I won't."

Her eyes widened. "Is that how it works?"

"It is complicated, but given who he is and his lack of blood family, I expect the Ministry will accept it."

She put one hand on her hip and moved a spoon from a bowl to the sink. "You are a puzzle, Mr. Snape."

Dryly, he said, "I have no desire to be easily understood, really."

"I think Pammy and Patty would be thrilled to hear that magic is real."

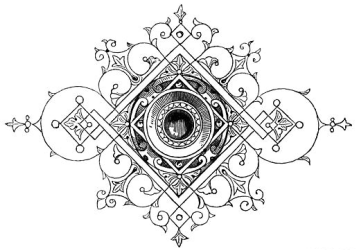
Someone knocked on the door from the outside. "They could not tell anyone."

"They can keep a secret," she assured him. "As can I," she added.

Snape bowed faintly, opened the door and stepped out. Harry asked, "Ready to go?"

At the end of the grass path they had no choice but to get in the cab. They rode in the direction of Highbury on Wye for a few miles before asking the cabby to drop them off at a pub at an unmarked crossroads. They tipped him well and Disapparated when the cab disappeared over the next rise.

Chapter 66.



Mum Galore, Part II

Harry arrived for Monday training feeling good about everything. He had dropped a thank you letter to Mrs. Evans in the post on the way out the door along with a letter to Elizabeth who sounded in her last letter as though she were having an exciting time at university.

They were still working on combined spells in training, and Vineet, who was rather good at it before Sinistra's tutoring, was even better now at matching his power to another. Harry, who was his usual partner got the main benefit of this, although Rodgers starting shifting partners around by the end to give the others a chance to work with Vineet and hopefully pick up some of his skill. Vineet, who was not accustomed to being the best at spells, gave Harry a rare smile when they finally broke for lunch. Everyone but Vineet was exhausted and shuffled out of the training room with tired sighs.

Harry was feeling rather relieved that the Indian was certain to stay on past the six month review. He still could not risk casting a spell at anyone other than an Auror but he was gradually improving on this. As they settled into the break room, Vineet passed the cold teapot to Harry to heat. Harry obliged and tapped it with a hollow tink! He then asked, "So, have you invited your wife to come?"

The others stopped what they were doing; even the older apprentices, Munz and Blackpool, turned to listen in.

"You're married?" Kerry Ann demanded. "You never said."

Vineet shrugged in confusion. "It is normal. I don't understand your surprise." He turned to Harry, who was taking out the sandwich Winky made for him from last night's leftover roast chicken. "And yes, I will do that this week." In a lower voice, he said, "I am having you to thank, Harry."

"I'm glad you can finish your training now, Vineet. Very glad."

Vineet, appearing embarrassed at that, ducked his head over his bowl of curry.

"So, what's her name?" Kerry Ann asked. "Let's hear all about her..."

Harry, who expected Vineet to be reticent, was surprised when he began to give her family history, father's occupation, a description of his mother's house where she now lived. Harry listened to these details as he ate.

"So where'd you meet?" Kerry Ann then asked, just pausing between bites long enough to get another long part of the story.

"Where did we meet?" Vineet echoed. "At her house, I suppose, when I went to meet her parents to finalize the engagement."

"Huh?" Aaron said. "You have an arranged marriage?"

Vineet gave him a lowered brow. "Everyone does. You are very strange here with this hit-or-miss pretending to be in love system you have." He sounded honestly critical.

None of them could come up with a decent response to that for some reason. "But really," Kerry Ann finally insisted. "How can you live with someone you don't love?"

Vineet looked around at all of them. "You are none of you married. You do not know of what you are speaking."

Kerry Ann's face twisted in thought. "Well, you have us there. I'll give you that."

Harry arrived home to find a letter from Snape on the table. He read it as he walked upstairs to drop off his things and stopped dead on the center step upon reading Snape's suggestion about the dispensation. The thought had not occurred to him before. Through all the hassle of arranging a visit, he had assumed they could never know. Standing there, he was certain the Ministry would allow it if he asked and that made his heart feel light.

I asked Mrs. Evans directly–that is why I we were detained leaving the house. She gave her consent to it and assured me that her daughters would be discrete.

Snape's talking to Mrs. Evans before speaking with him, made him a little annoyed, but the thought of visits where his distant cousins knew what he was and what his parents had been, thrilled him enough that he easily put it aside.

Chapter 66

The very next day at the Ministry, Harry used his lunch break to visit the Magical Filings office. He waited for his turn at the window a little impatiently; although not outwardly so because a witch had already tried to let him cut in on the queue and he had declined. Behind the desk sat a thin old witch with jeweled cat-eye glasses on a silver chain. "Yes, next," she said in a nasal voice.

"I would like to file a dispensation to . . . " Here he pulled out the note he had written out from one of the Ministry rules booklets he had been given over the last few months–the ones he hadn't really touched otherwise. " . . . allow me to inform a blood relative that I'm a wizard. It is called an Extended and Distant Blood Filing, I think."

She frowned and chewed her gum three times before getting up and going to a cabinet and leafing through a drawer. On the top of the cabinet, paperclips were busy hooking themselves into a chain. By the time she stood straight with a hand on her lower back, the clips were jumping rope with themselves and a seal that had been inanimate until then.

She handed a form over to him. "Fill this out with copies of the appropriate records and bring it back. NEXT."

Harry stepped away and gaped at the hundreds of tiny boxes that covered the form. He jumped literally at the identically packed back of it. "Aye," he breathed as he hurried back to his department.

Pulling paperwork together became Harry's primary free-time activity over the next weeks. He visited Muggle offices in many different counties. He wrote away for property records. He discovered a dusty Ministry records office he didn't know existed for birth certificates going back three generations, because he had to prove that Pamela and Patricia were actually blood relatives. When the gangly man handed him an unexpectedly thick file of Evanses Harry had stared in dumb surprise before thumbing through for the ones he needed copies of–all under the watchful eye of the clerk.

"What's this tag mean?" Harry asked of the orange dot beside the name on the file label.

"That is color code for, uh, intermittent magical progeny."

"What?"

As though Harry were slow, the man said, "It means magic isn't constant in the family. It shows up only random-like."

Harry was stunned. "Does that mean it's shown up before?"

The man reached over and flipped expertly through the oddly sized papers and decorative certificates in the file. "Here, they're marked in orange too."

Harry accepted the birth certificate the man held out. "Clayton Evans born 1632," he read, then flipped madly through the pile. "Gerabald Evans born 1760. I didn't know there were others."

The man shrugged and, seeming slightly miffed, tapped the remaining pile to make it jump back into order. "Got whatcha need?"

"Yeah, thanks. I need copies of these seven."

Upon his return to his floor, he encountered Mr. Weasley in the corridor. "Hello, Harry. How are you, my boy?" He didn't wait for Harry's reply. "You probably have a ton of invitations, but I thought I'd give you one anyway." He held out a card and Harry accepted it; it was an invitation to a Halloween party at the Burrow.

"Thanks. I'll definitely be there." A pair of witches went by, each hovering a large trunk. They took them into the file room at the end.

Mr. Weasley said, "It'd be nice to see you. Just one set of Weasley twins this time."

"Oh, that's right. I'm really sorry I couldn't make the last picnic-"

Mr. Weasley hit him on the arm. "No problem, dear boy. I know you're busy."

"I had something I really needed to do," Harry said at the same time. "Thanks for the invitation, though." He gestured that he needed to go into the workout room.

Mr. Weasley looked as though he wanted to say more, but he merely gave a little wave and stepped away. Harry thought he seemed a little strained, but he forgot about it as soon as they settled in for reading review.

The next morning, Harry stood opposite Vineet as they sequenced through their normal blocking drills. Vineet wore his usual furrowed brow that spoke of frustration. "You are pulling your attacks again," he stated.

Harry frowned lightly and lowered his wand. Vineet's blocks were unpredictable, since many of the attenuated ones required fine power control. Excess power usually resulted in an exploded or collapsed block. Harry was very tempted to explain that he really didn't want to hurt him, but decided instead to say, "I'm putting a lot into my attacks, as much as I do with the others."

Vineet also lowered his wand. "I wish to work on my blocking," he stated calmly although with almost a plead in his dark eyes.

"All right," Harry said. When he cast a stronger Blasting Curse, Vineet had to leap back and pour power forward in his Chrysanthemum block. His look of consternation grew deeper but he stepped forward with a determined expression and Harry moved on to a Freezing Curse.

When they changed roles, Harry's blocks held up well against the broad assault of his partner's spells. Deflecting and countering each overpowered attack appropriately required concentration and as the sequences repeated, Harry settled into an intense state that made his blood rush as the flashes and sizzling explosions flowed safely around him.

"Goes to show that Potter is used to being on the defensive," Rodgers drawled as he stepped over from explaining a detailed point about block nodes to Aaron. "Let's try a few combination attacks," he said, "since Potter appears bored. We'll be starting them next week in any event."

Vineet stepped back and Rodgers said, "Oh, no, continue. I'll match you as you sequence."

Vineet stepped through their usual attack sequence, with Harry blocking or countering each one. Rodgers added a contrary attack spell to alternate attacks from Vineet. When he did this Harry found his blocks wavering oddly and felt that he did indeed need practice at this. The fifth one of these attacks made Harry's block fail with a blindingly bright blue flare. Harry went to his knees, his legs suddenly unable to support him. Vineet stepped over and offered him a hand up. Harry, dizzy still, accepted it slowly.

"Problem, Potter?" Rodgers asked.

"Don't know, sir," Harry replied. He had never before felt quite so disoriented from being hit. He forced himself to his feet and blinked at the others. Looking around made him lose his balance and had to step backward to catch it.

"Down to the Healer, Potter," Rodgers ordered dismissively. Harry shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it, and stepped out of the workout room.

Mum Galore, Part II

In the Ministry Healer's station Harry waited to be consulted by a young witch who seemed overwhelmed. She hurried through healing a nasty cut on the thigh of an older wizard that appeared to have been caused by the claw of something very large. Harry, feeling a little warm in the small closed room, slid his sleeves up off his wrists, and slouched down in the chair. His attention was caught by something on his arms several times before he managed to focus on it properly. Blue jagged streaks resembling an ephemeral net continuously walked up his forearms. Rubbing his skin had not effect on them. Harry stared at it uncomprehendingly while he waited.

Finally, the young Healer took a look at him, cast a few spells at him, and frowned deeply. "I don't know what that is on your arms," she said. "Some kind of spell rebound. I expect it will fade." He was released with the instruction that he should take it easy.

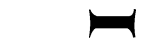
Harry sat out the rest of workout, which was almost over by the time he returned. Rodgers glanced with a frown at the strange electric lines on his arms and waved him to a desk. During the review session Harry could barely keep his eyes open. By the time he returned to Shrewsthorpe he was utterly exhausted, but fortunately Winky had tea and biscuits waiting for him, which helped perk him up.

With his books at his side, he studied for the next day, sleep tugging constantly and unwelcomingly at him as he turned each page of what seemed like endless chapters of mind-numbing information. He replied to Snape's most recent letter with a quick description of what he had learned in the last week. Hedwig took the letter away with her usual energetic flapping.

The next morning Harry wasn't feeling much better although the electric blue effect on his arms was indeed dimmer than the night before. He prodded at the underside of his left arm while he waited for the usual bacon and eggs to appear. The effect was so strange; walking strings of jagged blue glow flickered their way along just under his skin. When one disappeared off his fingers, another emerged from his upper arm.

Breakfast revitalized him as did coffee, but holding on during morning training took every ounce of strength he had. He actually wished, then felt guilty for it, that Vineet's spell power was still weak. Again he forced himself through afternoon review and then home.

The quiet house was a blessing to his raw, worn nerves. Harry ate dinner gratefully, then crawled straight into bed without even cracking a book or opening the afternoon post.



Chapter 66

Professor Snape sent off the student he had kept for detention, a Second Year Hufflepuff with an aggravating penchant for doing the exact reverse of what he was told. Snape imagined the boy's parents were relieved utterly that school had resumed. He sat at his desk and methodically pulled out the rolls of assignment sheets from tomorrow's classes as well as the grade book. As he recorded each grade in an unambiguous hand, his thoughts strayed to Harry, not for the first time that day. Usually, he found himself half-expecting a visit from him, as Harry had frequently done the previous year. Now he found himself worrying about him, which was ludicrous; he had received an ordinary missive from him just yesterday. He shook himself and focused on the columns of meticulous green numbers before him.

Friday, Harry didn't have any place he needed to be, which was good, because he yearned to sleep in. Which he did–until a very late ten in the morning and he could do this tomorrow as well, he thought with relief. As he made his way downstairs, he attributed his difficulty with negotiating the steps to excessive sleep. Rubbing his eyes, he waited for breakfast, or whatever Winky decided to prepare so late in the morning. Bacon and eggs and a pot of tea appeared eventually. He had a hard time pouring from the pot as though the porcelain had a shiver charm on it. Using the cozy, he managed to pour with both hands.

The hot tea and heavy food made him feel well enough to do some reading. He did this the library, his stretched his legs out on the lounger as he held one of his books on his lap. During the course of reading one chapter, he fell asleep at least three times. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, wondering why he was so drowsy after such a long night's sleep. Sitting up, he struggled through the remaining chapters for Monday, not certain if he had learned anything memorable from them. Tomorrow he would take some notes, perhaps.

At the end of the day, as he changed into his pyjamas, Harry noticed the blue effect was still there on the underside of his forearms. The strange ripples looked brighter. He wondered with a jolt if maybe they had not faded, but that they showed up better in the dark.

The next morning, Harry could barely force himself out of bed. He wondered if he had caught the flu, although it was hardly the season. He stumbled downstairs and took up his usual spot at the table with his books and parchments. One pot of tea

disappeared and then another as he struggled to stay alert enough to read. He would have missed lunch had it not bumped him on the head as it appeared on the table.

Eventually evening came on. Harry looked forward to going back to bed as he sat at the dining room table and slowly, methodically studied. The hearth flaring startled him as he turned the page of a reference book on apprehension charms. Snape stepped out, ducking his tall frame as he did so. Harry greeted him warmly, very glad for the unexpected company.

Snape hesitated at Harry's tone, giving him a faint smile. "Good to see you studying even without my constant presence."

"They haven't given us any less to read," Harry tried to quip, but it came out weakly.

Snape put his satchel down and stepped over to him. He glanced at the open book before Harry and then looked him over with narrowed eyes. He finally said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm tired. I've been tired since I got hit during paired spell blocking at training."

Snape's hand brushed his shoulder. "Did you see a Healer?"

"Yes. Right after." Harry rubbed his eyes hard and pushed the book away to fit his elbow on the table so he could lean his cheek on his hand and cease holding his head up. His foggy brain remembered the blue lines. "But this strange effect hasn't gone away like the Healer thought it would," he commented as he tugged his sleeve up.

Snape grabbed up Harry's arm so suddenly that it made him jump. "How did you get this?" Snape demanded.

"At training. On Wednesday," Harry answered groggily, unable even to rise to Snape's alarm.

"Wednesday?" Snape whispered in disbelief. "What happened?" he demanded, sounding almost nasty.

Harry awkwardly explained about the paired spell attacks they had been practicing. About how his block had failed.

"Rodgers was one of the ones spelling you?" Snape asked. Harry could hear suspicion behind it.

"Yes. He didn't know what it was on my arms either."

"I'm surprised," Snape sneered, "since he fancies himself the Death Eater expert." He turned to the hearth, scooped a clump of Floo power and with a jerking motion,

threw it onto the grate and requested the Ministry Auror's office. He tossed his cloak back out of the way as he knelt before the hearthstone. "Nymphadora Tonks, please," Snape demanded when a head appeared.

When Tonks' head floated into view, greeting Snape in a friendly way, Snape laid into her about Harry's condition. Harry sat rigid, holding his breath at the tone of extreme anger.

"Wait, wait," Tonks interrupted. "Step back. I'm coming over." She was all seriousness when she appeared, didn't even apologize for knocking the poker rack over. When Snape showed her the rippling blue on Harry's arm, she asked Harry, "You still have that?"

Snape cut in. "Of course he does, it . . . You don't know what it is either?" he asked, sounding discouraged. He paced once, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. His cloak flared behind him as he turned. "You're too young, I suppose," he muttered.

"What is it?" Tonks asked in concern as she held Harry's wrist to examine it better.

"Sponteingero," Snape said. "A regenerating spell that is draining him as it propagates. It forms when two perfectly counter-phased netting spells are used simultaneously on an unprotected person. Voldemort's servants perfected it. Malfoy and Nott were particularly good at causing it to manifest."

"I don't think I've heard of that," Tonks said apologetically. "This happened by accident, I heard."

Snape stood and gazed at Harry in thought. "It was used for blackmail when there wasn't anything else to hold over the victim. It takes two to cause it, and two to eliminate it. The spell drains your magic as it feeds on it. You probably have no magic accessible at this point, given how long it has been."

Harry pulled out his wand, considered testing that, but then stashed it away again when Snape added quietly, "Eventually it will drain your life."

In alarm Tonks asked, "Can I help? What spell do you need to cancel, or should we take him to St. Mungo's?"

"It is not a complicated spell . . . but I would much prefer someone who has experience with this." He frowned in thought. "Moody has . . . do you know where he is?"

Tonks frowned. "He's off this week, but I could have him found . . ."

"Remus Lupin has experience with it as well," Snape added thoughtfully.

"He's at the Weezes," Tonks offered. "He's been working for them off and on. We should get Harry to London where we can either find someone or take him to Mungo's." She sounded on the verge of taking charge.

Without hesitating Snape turned back to the hearth and contacted the three Ws on Diagon Alley. This time a password was required to get through. When one of the twins appeared, Snape asked, "Is Remus there right now?"

"He's just out on an errand. Should be back in a mo." His head turned and looked up at Harry and Tonks, "Wotcher!" he said.

"I am coming through with Harry to wait for him," Snape said, pointedly cutting off more small talk.

"Gotcha. Love to see ya." The redhead backed out quickly.

Snape stood and came over to Harry, lifted him to his feet by the arm, and held him steady. Harry, for his part, forced his shoulders back and tried to stand straight and unaffected. He was swimming in weakness so completely it was almost restful.

"The Floo Network is going to be disorienting for you in this state," Snape said, as he led Harry to stand before the empty grate. He took down the canister of Floo Powder and handed it to Tonks. "If you would throw for us," he said to her. At her nod he pulled Harry into the hearth, careful to ensure that Harry ducked under the mantel.

Harry, finding standing to be far more effort than he could expend, leaned against his guardian as they stood up in the chimney. "Tell me when you are ready," Tonks' voice echoed up into the chimney. As Snape's arms enfolded him, Harry rested his forehead on a shoulder and found himself trusting utterly that he would be taken care of. He wasn't used to this kind of faith in someone else, and wondered idly if all parents warranted that feeling.

The green flames distracted him from his musings and they were catapulted through the darkness. Dim hearths and fires roared past them, making Harry believe he was flying into oblivion. Just as he was losing track of himself, they stopped suddenly with Harry's landing softened by being held off the floor.

The dim, candlelit rooms that made up Weasley Wizard Weezes' assembly and research area were disarrayed and crowded with odd assortments of things. One of the twins greeted them as they ducked out of the hearth. "What's wrong with 'arry?" he asked as he quickly moved to clear a box of candy rats on sticks off the nearest old straight-backed chair. The rats squealed in complaint.

Chapter 66

Harry was helped to sit down, gratefully, because he felt sick and dizzy from the Floo as well as somewhat surprised to be whole and breathing. Snape kept a hand on his arm, he assumed to keep him from falling out of the chair. The hearth flared, lighting half the room, and Tonks appeared.

"Oy, so many visitors, Fred. We have to change the password again," George commented in false tones of being overwhelmed. He stepped over from the dim, far side of the long room.

While they waited, Snape explained about the spell. He held Harry's arm out and said, "It drains all the magic from its victim and then the very lifeforce."

"Aye, Harry has no magic right now?" Fred asked. "My one chance to beat Harry in a duel." he said with relish, pulling his wand out and brandishing it. Snape took only one long stride to block him bodily, eyes flashing. Fred stepped back at his menacing move. "Only joking, Professor," he muttered panicky, quickly stuffing his wand back into his robe pocket and slinking aside.

Minutes later, the door opened and Lupin appeared, gingerly carrying a small glass jar. George leapt over and removed it from him and quickly put it aside in a cabinet. "Just a, uh, necessary ingredient for an experiment," he muttered.

"What is this?" Lupin asked upon seeing them all there. When Snape showed him Harry's left arm, he crouched quickly before Harry. "How did that happen?"

"It happened during his training," Snape explained, glancing sideways at Tonks. "Apparently an accident."

Tonks stiffened and frowned but did not respond. Lupin looked Harry up and down. "Looks like it's been a while . . . "

"Since Wednesday," Snape provided.

"Wednesday!" Lupin exclaimed. "You are doing very well in that case, Harry." He stood back up. "Let's get him on the floor," he said, pushing a stack of flattened boxes off the one clear corner of rug. "Take off his robe so we can see the tracings."

Many hands assisted in pulling Harry's robe down, revealing his grey t-shirt underneath. Urged to the floor, Harry rested his head back on the dusty, red rug. A discarded sweet wrapper crinkled in his ear; he reached up clumsily and tossed it away. More things were pushed aside so that Lupin could kneel on one side of him and Snape on the other.

His short sleeves were tugged up and thumbs pressed into the crux of each of his shoulders. "We are right on the nodes," said Snape instructively to Tonks, who

appeared very worried as she stood before Harry's feet. "Ready?" Snape then asked Lupin, who replied by nodding grimly. "Harry," Snape said gently. "You are going to black out when we incant the spell. Don't fight it . . . you will wake up again shortly."

Harry nodded. His total faith was holding strong; although he wouldn't mind being allowed to sleep a little.

"On three," Lupin said and counted. "Mutushorum," they incantged together at the end of the count. Tonks gasped. Snape lifted Harry's now limp left arm and turned the underside upward. He and Lupin watched as the blue tracings slowed, grew sparse and then only appeared occasionally. A moment passed with no jagged line.

With his wand Snape tapped Harry on the chest and said, "Locoinitio," in a hurried way. Harry drew in a sharp breath.

"Too soon," Lupin criticized. Indeed, a few blue traces appeared again, but they remained sparse.

Snape sighed audibly. "Perhaps you should do the reanimation," he said in a tone of self-recrimination.

"You should, Severus," Lupin said. "We'll try it again after he catches his breath."

Harry opened his eyes and lifted his head. Snape said, "We didn't quite get it, Harry. We have to do it again."

"All right," Harry said quietly, resting his head back on the floor. He sounded disoriented.

Lupin counted down a second time and they repeated the spell. Harry again fell limp and quite still. "Count a slow ten after the last line appears," Lupin instructed patiently. They watched Harry's arm as the electric lines faded and finally stopped. Lupin counted aloud. At seven another line appeared and the count restarted. Snape fidgeted, repeatedly changing his grip on Harry's limp hand. One tense count after another was interrupted. Finally, they made it all the way to ten. Snape repeated the reanimation spell, with more power this time, enough to make Harry's body jump as he gulped air. "It's all right," Harry murmured as he exhaled.

From Harry's feet Tonks said, "I'm glad there was someone else to do that spell."

Harry's breathing slowed and he opened his eyes. Lupin tugged him to a sitting position as they continued to monitor his arms. "It's all right," Harry repeated dazedly.

No more lines appeared for several minutes. They helped him back into his robe before pulling him to his feet. Fred and George stood in paired, identical, stunned silences beside the hearth. Harry glanced at them and gave them a small smile.

"Feeling better?" Lupin asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, feeling real strength flowing in his limbs for the first time in days.

"Thank you, Remus," Snape said sincerely. He released Harry's arm when it was clear he could stand on his own.

"Anything for Harry," Lupin said in a teasing tone. When Harry looked over at him, Lupin said, "Stop by anytime. We're all usually here working most days."

"I was admiring your ingredient cabinet," Snape intoned.

"It is open for borrowing . . . I think," Lupin said

"Trades," Fred said. "We definitely do trades."

"Ready to go home?" Snape asked his charge. At Harry's nod Snape pulled the tin of Floo powder from his pocket and held it out for him. Harry took a handful and stepped before the hearth.

"Thanks," he said to the room, eyes dwelling on Lupin a little longer.

"I'll see you on Monday, Harry," Tonks said in a tone of concerned affection. "Rest well until then."

Back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry immediately sat down in a chair at the table and breathed deeply. He felt much better although he also felt strangely numb. Snape arrived in a roar of flame. "Would you like dinner?" he asked after setting the Floo powder back on the mantel.

Harry's stomach growled at the thought, so he nodded. Snape stepped out into the main hall and down to the kitchen. Winky looked up from lifting a cauldron off the wall, clearly in the midst of dinner preparation. Snape crossed his arms and eyed the elf. "I was going to ask you to prepare dinner," he said dryly, "but that is apparently unnecessary."

She hung the oversized cauldron on a hook and swung it onto the fire, which was flaring high on recently added wood. "Winky make dinner," she stated reassuringly.

Snape watched her a long moment before turning to leave. Her voice stating, "Master Harry better," brought him up short. He turned his head around to her. "Yes," he

confirmed quietly. They considered each other as Winky stood on the hearthstone and wrung her hands around the tea towel clutched between them.

"Winky is bound," she squeaked finally in some distress. "Very limited. Cannot order Master home. Only compel. Something very strange with Master Harry and Winky can only compel."

Snape stared at her, the long debate he had had with himself about checking on the boy cast itself into new light. In the end it was likely the reason he had decided to come home unplanned. "Thank you," he said.

Winky dropped her gaze and straightened her tea towel upon seeing the state of it. "House-elves get only worst wizards have to give," she said, tugging excessively on the bottom edge of the towel to pull out the wrinkles. "Masters very good wizards," she asserted. "Have nothing bad for Winky." Her oversized eyes finally came up to him, blinking sadly. "Winky not want to lose nice wizard family."

Snape swallowed consciously. "Neither do I," he said. After further thought he considered asking her if she were capable of compelling Harry to grow as well.

Winky pointedly turned back to her cooking. "Winky make dinner now."

"Thank you," Snape breathed again before stepping away. In the main hall he felt a delayed, twisting panic at the realization that it would have been truly ironic if Harry had died from such a thing.

Back in the dining room Harry sat in his usual seat, looking glum. He had had time to build up a list of apologies. "I'm sorry," Harry began when Snape stepped in. "I ought to be able to manage on my own for more than two weeks. I went to the Healer, she didn't know what it was either."

"Harry," Snape interrupted as he pulled out the chair across from him. He sat down and shook his head to indicate the apologetic speech could stop. Harry fell into a brooding silence instead.

When dinner arrived, Harry ate voraciously. He consumed two large servings of roast chicken by the end, followed by chocolates when they appeared.

"That and a good night's sleep should render you quite recovered," Snape stated, sounding relieved. When Harry's eyes tried to fall closed as he pulled one of his textbooks over from the stack beside him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should sleep instead."

Harry stumbled his way upstairs where he changed hurriedly and fell into bed.

An hour later, Snape stepped in to check on him. As he approached the bed, Harry rolled over and looked up at him in the dimness. "Hello," Harry said groggily.

"There is no sneaking up on you," Snape observed.

"Not when I'm asleep."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed. "Let me see your arm," he commanded.

Harry sniffed and pulled an arm out from under the light duvet. In the darkness it would have been easy to see the tracings. A long time passed before Snape said, "It has cleared. It was an unfortunate thing to have happen."

"It's all right," Harry said, pulling his arms back under the warmth. He held his breath as that brought an odd, slippery memory back. "Hm," he muttered.

"What?"

Harry exhaled. "I had the oddest dream when you and Remus hit me with the spell," he said, straining to remember the foggy world where his parents had approached. They had chastised him for being there, he recalled in confusion. Disjointedly they also seemed to expect him, although maybe that had been a second dream where they greeted him welcomely. He blinked against the darkness, as he thought he remembered Dumbledore as well.

"You could not have dreamt," Snape said. "We used a Mutushorum on you, two of them, directly on the strongest magical nodes of your body. The only way to eliminate a self-propagating spell such as that is to cut it off from all energy."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked, shying away from the inkling he was getting.

"There was no activity in your brain with which to dream. You were effectively dead for sixty seconds the first time and nearly three minutes the second."

A chill ran over Harry's arms and chest. "Is it possible to see beyond the veil in that time?" he asked, fearful of the answer.

"I suppose." Snape shifted, crossing his arms. "What did you see?"

Harry hesitated as he sifted through the memory again and remembered his mother smiling; she hadn't seemed very old he considered, more Harry's own age. "My parents. Dumbledore." Harry remembered another figure moving through the snaking fog, a shy or self-recriminating one. "Maybe Sirius," he said and then had to swallow hard.

"You were speaking when you woke up," Snape said. "I thought it odd that you would have come to awareness that quickly."

Harry let his head fall back on the pillow. "I was talking to my parents," he explained. "They were apologizing for leaving me alone. How did they recognize me, I wonder?" He remembered the half figure of Dumbledore that appeared to be standing in a denser fog beyond his parents. "Dumbledore didn't say anything, just smiled." Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "You don't think that was real, do you?" he asked.

"I don't think the concept of reality applies in this case."

"Probably not," Harry murmured in reply. Tired, he rolled over and curled up. Snape took the hint and stood, although he hovered for a minute or more. Harry, realizing he was still there, rolled back and looked up at his faint grey outline in the dark room. "What is it?" Harry asked.

A pause ensued before Snape reluctantly replied, "I cannot help but think I would have deserved to have lost you this way."

"What?" Harry blurted, raising himself onto his elbow.

Snape exhaled before saying in a dark tone, "I certainly have stood by and watched it take others down."

Harry turned the lamp up a bit and sat up farther with a quick motion. "Severus," he started in an admonishing way, but didn't know where to go from there, just couldn't bear to have Snape feel as guilty as he sounded.

"You should rest," Snape said and turned to leave.

"Severus," Harry called him back as he stepped to the half-open door of his room. "Severus," Harry repeated, when Snape kept going. As his guardian grasped the door handle to open it farther, Harry said with a stab of concern at being ignored, "Dad."

That did bring Snape to a halt, arm immobilized mid-pull. Harry pushed himself out of bed and padded across the floor in bare feet. Snape turned just his head to him, his expression very odd and far away in the sharply shadowed light. "You wouldn't deserve that," Harry insisted. "How could you think that?"

Black eyes flicked over to him, reflecting the single flame of the lamp across the room. "I don't deserve you, Harry," Snape stated before again moving to leave.

"Severus," Harry said in exasperation but Snape stepped into the hallway. Harry leaned out the door and watched him walk away, unable to try the word 'dad' again because if Snape ignored him, Harry wasn't sure what it would do to him. Harry stared down the empty hallway after Snape went downstairs. Frowning deeply, he finally returned to bed and the nightstand where he found the last of an old bottle of sleeping potion and drank it down.

Chapter 67.

Removing the Mask

At breakfast the next morning, Snape's mood did not seem to have improved from the night before. Harry started eating the plate of food that was already at his seat when he arrived. Snape didn't speak and Harry, feeling bitter in his helplessness, finally decided to say, "Thank you for taking care of me." Snape nodded silently, holding his coffee cup before him without drinking from it. His expression was still too distant. Concerned, Harry tried to make conversation, "When do you go back?"

Snape said, "I need to leave for Hogwarts shortly."

Harry scratched his head. "I'll try to take better care of things," he said, sounding too eagerly helpful to his own ears. Snape's guilt must be tangling him up.

Snape set his cup down and pushed his plate away untouched. He stood and said in a quiet, commanding voice, "If you are in doubt about anything, owl me or even contact the Hogwarts Floo. Someone is always monitoring it, and they will think nothing of you contacting me."

"I'll do that," Harry insisted.

With a stony expression, Snape collected his things together and departed through the hearth. Alone, Harry pushed away his half-eaten breakfast and both plates sparkled away. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, trying to think of what to do. Eventually he gave up and fetched his books; he was very far behind for Monday.

"Figures he would know," was the only response Rodgers had on Monday to Tonks' reciting of what had happened. Harry stonily let the comment pass, not noticing Vineet's alarm as the explanation was given. Harry's close concentration on their practice made everyone leave him be during the morning, for which he was grateful; he was afraid his temper might be short and didn't want to test it.

When they broke for lunch Vineet stepped to Harry's writing desk, looking grim and uncertain–an extension of his quiet demeanor that morning. Harry put his books together slowly to give the others time to move on to the tearoom. When he did stand, he moved confidently, but Vineet was looking down at his clasped hands and might not have noticed this show of recovery.

"It was an accident," Harry tried. "One of those ironies I'm cursed to attract." With this, Harry winced inwardly, because it reminded him of Snape's mood when he had departed for Hogwarts.

Without responding Vineet took out his wand and studiously rubbed the gold pattern with his dark thumb. Harry prompted the Indian with his name and Vineet finally said, "I am regretful of what happened and not certain how to amend."

Harry was regretful too, for other reasons, but he didn't let on to it. "I don't want you to ease up during drills. I was glad you didn't today," he added brightly.

Vineet appeared more chagrined. "I could not ease up any more than I did . . . I was trying."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "Maybe we should go to lunch . . . "

Vineet stood his ground. "You are trying to move from the conversation."

"Yes, because I don't want you to feel bad about it. It wasn't your fault. Come on." Harry urged his companion with a toss of his head.

Despite appearing unconvinced, Vineet gave in. Harry gave him a smile which seemed to work better than arguing.

Harry was grateful for the quiet house that evening. He opened the mail and replied to Penelope's last letter with one that came out sounding happy and friendly when he reread it, making him think that maybe Snape's dark departure wasn't weighing

so heavily on him as he had thought. Thinking he may have gotten perspective on things, he took out a quill and longer parchment and started another letter.

Dear Severus, Harry started and then thought for a long while before continuing with, I've been thinking about what you said and wish you didn't feel so. I'm also worried that you will take your mood out on the students in your house, or worse yet, my house. He frowned at that; it was too straightforward. He decided that he would rewrite it before sending it. He also decided to try an eyes-only spell so that he could say things more openly knowing only Snape could read it. He dipped the quill in the soot-black ink and continued.

An hour later, Harry had the third version of the letter before him. It read a lot better, for which he was thankful, because he deeply felt he needed to do something. He rolled the parchment and pinched the end to hold it curled and then pulled the white candle closer and, needing grey wax for the spell, dropped India ink into the liquid wax around the flame. Incanting the first part of the spell, he tipped the candle and sealed the parchment with a thin line of dingy wax along the edge and in a ring around the center. The next step was the most crucial one; he took out his wand and tapped the paper while saying, "Flamen Cypher Severus Snape." The paper glowed and the wax darkened. Quickly, while it still glowed, Harry held it over the candle flame. It ignited immediately and began curling away into black ash, which he caught on a white plate.

The last corner of parchment flared orange and went out. Since his breath was disturbing the delicate ash, he held his breath as he mouthed the same incantation again while tapping the center of the ash pile. With a barely audible whoosh the ashes reassembled into a scroll-shape which flashed white before leaving behind the previous rolled parchment.

Harry fetched Hedwig from his room, giving Kali a pat as he passed her cage. "Straight to Severus," he told his owl. "Don't give it to anyone else." She took off through the window and Harry closed it behind her against the cold evening air.

A knock preceded Headmistress McGonagall's entrance into the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. "Severus," she said in greeting, though her tone held much more. "Do you have a moment?"

Snape, who had been pacing while reading a textbook, dropped the book on the desk with a slap and crossed his arms.

"Hm," McGonagall uttered thoughtfully. "I just sent a pair of distressed students to the Gryffindor Tower for the night. You were perhaps a bit short with them when you kept them after," she suggested.

"They were foolishly attempting spells from the syllabus for the second term," Snape stated. "I will not tolerate that."

"Ah," she uttered and paced casually to the window. The clouds were rippled orange from the low sun and were reflected pristinely in the still lake. "Is everything all right with Harry?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" Snape returned.

McGonagall frowned and said without turning from the view. "You are behaving . . . well, like yourself, Severus–your old self, that is."

"Something the matter with that?" he asked snidely.

"The students have ceased to expect it," she pointed out calmly.

"Is my performance in question?"

"No," McGonagall answered immediately, finally turning to face him. "I am just concerned. You arrived back on Sunday in this mood and it hasn't eased. It was interesting at first for us all to receive a little lesson in how different you have become, but it has grown old already. What has happened?"

Snape didn't immediately respond. A scratching at the window interrupted his stalling, and when he didn't move, McGonagall opened the sash. Hedwig hopped inside and fluttered over to the desk to drop the scroll with its distinctive wax. She then flapped once to rise to the back of the chair to wait.

"Well, I hope he can talk some sense into you." she said. "Probably knows you better than anyone else." Snape fingered the scroll, turning it to look at the ink-stained wax. "Severus?" she prompted, insisting, it seemed, on some kind of response.

Snape, fixated on the unopened scroll, said, "I arrived home on Saturday and found Harry half-dead from Sponteingero."

"Severus! How in Merlin's Realm did he get that?"

"At his training. I am forced to accept that it was an accident. They are all apparently too ignorant to even know what it is," he stated harshly. "But it would have been a fitting end to him," he went on in a dark tone.

"Oh dear," McGonagall grumbled and came closer. With an almost theatrical sigh, she said, "At least I understand where we are here." She took her glasses off, cleaned

them and put them in her pocket. "It would not have been fitting, in the least," she argued forcefully. "What is fitting is what everyone says about Harry, how fine he has become, because that was your doing, Severus. That hardly sets one up to deserve what you are suggesting."

She stood straight when he didn't reply. "Well, I'll leave you to the letter. Do try to read it with an open mind." When the door had re-closed, Snape waved a locking charm at it and broke the wax.

Snape's first reaction was pain that Harry had foreseen which students would bear the brunt of his anger. He did not like to imagine himself as that predictable. He read on: I understand that you feel guilt over the past, and think you are obliged to feel it, but I also know how self-destructive it is–it doesn't lead anywhere. I do hope you can let go of it or at least not let it rule you so. If you can't do it for your own sake, please do it for mine. I assume you realize how much I still need your knowledge and guidance. Where would I be if you hadn't known what was wrong? Moody or one of the Healers at St. Mungo's might have known but what if they didn't? As always, I need you because you know these things, not in spite of it. Even if you feel you cannot make up for the past, most everyone believes you already have. Corner Headmistress McGonagall and try prove me wrong if you doubt it.

Snape lowered the letter and smiled weakly despite himself. Certainly his colleagues treated him equitably now, which he had come to take for granted. Candide was a sore point still, he tried to disregard her even as she crept into his thoughts at random times throughout the day. In the larger scheme of things, her opinion was minor in comparison to the author of the letter he held, and always had been.

Guilt doesn't pay anyone back or restore anyone to life; it is more of a dark magic spell you shouldn't be doing because it drains your spirit and can become a habit that only hurts those around you. If you still feel you need to make amends, figure out how to do that. I'm willing to help.

It was signed below, Your loyal adopted son, Harry.

The room, the very school seemed oppressive to that notion, as though years of enmity had been recorded in its walls. Snape rested his head on his hand and considered the letter until a rap on the door interrupted his musings. He rolled the letter up quickly and slid it into his breast pocket to preserve it from the flames locked inside of it.

McGonagall stepped in quietly after opening the door slowly. "Are you coming down to dinner, Severus?"

Snape stood straight, still far away in thought. "Do you believe I owe anyone anything?" he asked, rather than answer.

"What? Oh." She gave that some consideration. "Albus."

"Conveniently . . . he isn't here," Snape stated in annoyance.

She smiled lightly, though with pained eyes. "My, but you are in a mood."

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "You know what is ironic?" he asked, then answered himself in a bit of a snarl, "How much I care that I care."

"The curse of having a conscience, Severus," she stated in a lightly philosophical way, so that it didn't carry any damaging weight. She turned to the door and invited easily, "Come down with me to the Great Hall. The elves are waiting to put dinner on."

He turned after a hesitation and followed. It was late into the dinner hour and the corridors were empty. As they walked, McGonagall said, "I think, Severus, that of everyone here, I'd trust you the most to do the right thing in any circumstance." At the top of the staircase, she stopped and turned to him. "I think because you, more than anyone else, know the consequences of not doing so. The unexpected price of things can be very high, and most people do not appreciate that. You have that ingrained in you, something Albus put a lot of trust in, although it's taken me a long time to see." He still looked very far away. She patted him on the arm before starting down. "Forgive me for being so slow."

That night, after he was prepared for the next day's lessons, Snape pulled out a parchment and quill. He hesitated a long while before writing simply: You and Minerva can be quite persuasive when you put your minds to it. Do try to stay out of trouble. It was a pride-saving letter, he realized with a frown as he sealed it up, but he expected that Harry would understand.

By Wednesday Harry fell back into the rhythm of training. Rodgers had stopped treating him as though he were breakable and returned to his normal overly-forceful spells during demonstrations with him. By lunch Harry felt he was going to arrive home bruised and was grateful that they would move to a discussion of investigative questioning techniques for the rest of the day.

"Are you going up to Hogwarts again today?" Aaron asked Vineet. "I'll escort you this time," he offered eagerly.

"I believe I can locate it myself," Vineet replied easily. He sounded more relaxed now, almost teasing. "Perhaps you should teach if you wish to spend more time there."

Aaron's face twisted and untwisted. "Is it that obvious I want to?"

Vineet replied before Harry could. "It has been a repeating topic, yes."

"Ah." Aaron nibbled on a carrot and sulked a bit. "What would I teach though?"

"Skiving," Kerry Ann immediately supplied.

"Thanks," Aaron sarcastically replied.

Harry arrived home and again was disappointed by a lack of a reply to his dispensation application. As he half-read a few other letters he wondered if he had actually been expecting special treatment; he really thought a reply would have arrived by now. Not that he couldn't simply walk into Madam Bones' office and simply ask outright. But that was the sort of thing he hoped he wouldn't ever do.

He rolled up his letters and tapped them edgewise on the sideboard. No, he would be patient, he insisted to himself, even though imagining his relatives knowing about magic, knowing about him, made his chest swell. If the application came back denied, he wasn't certain what he would do then. That possibility made it easier to picture himself appealing directly to the Minister, which made him feel slimy.

Friday arrived and Harry was early for his fieldwork as usual. He was paired with Rogan for the first time and the Auror gave him a wide smile when Harry entered the office. Vineet entered behind Harry, and Tonks tossed a memo airplane in the vague direction of the door and stood up. "Well, Vishnu, it is you and I tonight. Just patrol, we hope . . . I hope anyway." Shrugging on her cloak she collected the quiet Indian and they headed out.

"Do we have an assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Rogan chuckled and bent his head down, making his mop of straight hair fall into his eyes. He appeared on the edge of exhaustion for a moment before recovering and sitting straight. "You really want an assignment?" he asked. When Harry shrugged, Rogan pointed at a balsam board in the corner where notes were pinned. Harry went over to it as Rogan explained, "The miscellaneous pile of minor Muggle reports that

haven't led anywhere. Suspected to be false, but we or Enforcement aren't certain enough to discard them."

Some were sheets yellowed with age and layers deep behind others. One newer looking one had printed on it, Mysteriously aggressive ivy with a cartoon doodled beside it of a plant-like snake with long teeth. "How about this one?"

Rogan laughed and stepped up behind him. He plucked the note down and unfolded it. "Dead end, I think, but we can take a look if you like. The report came in on a Friday three weeks ago . . ."

As he read the note in silence, Harry asked, "So what happened with the murdered witch?" He really wished he were more involved and chaffed at that still not being true.

"We haven't arrested anyone."

"No?" Harry prompted.

Rogan sighed. "Some odd facts turned up, such as: she hadn't bought her godchild a birthday present, she hadn't sent in a grocery order for the next week . . ."

"So she did kill herself?" Harry asked.

Rogan looked up sharply. "Figures you'd be good at this. Yes, it looks that way. As bad as it is to admit, it is much neater for us if it is true." He pocketed the note from the board. "Well, Mr. Potter, why don't we try our luck with phantasmic plants this afternoon. Patrol does sound dreadfully boring. And if it sounds boring to me, it most certainly must sound boring to you."

They Apparated into a long narrow alley. "This is as close as I can get us. We'll have to walk the rest. One reason for frequent patrols is to learn every last good Apparition spot possible." When Harry didn't respond, Rogan turned to look curiously at him as they walked. "You aren't always this quiet, are you?" he asked, sounding surprised.

After long blocks of fast walking they turned down a narrow street with no outlet. A quiet consultancy was in the building at the end. Rogan glanced around them and stood on tiptoe to peer in the large window. "Looks empty. I want to use it to look out onto the next street." He grasped Harry's arm and they reappeared inside. Rogan tilted his head and listened for a long minute before he moved farther into the building beyond a disorganized storeroom and to a back entrance.

"No window," Harry said, pacing in and out of a tearoom that shared the back wall.

"No difficulties," Rogan said and tapped in the shape of a box in the center of the door. A small window appeared there, framed in wood. Someone passed by on the street, walking a small dog.

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"Won't anyone notice?" Harry asked.

Rogan shook his head. "If they do, they'll assume it's always been here. Muggles ignore pretty much everything. You'd think their eyes were closed most of the time, even though they look open." He crossed his arms and looked out at a bit of a distance. "The report was for this block, south side, which is across the street. We'll see if anything happens."

They stood there for a long while, almost an hour. Every time Harry heard something from the street at the other end of the office, he expected the owner to be returning. Rogan paid no mind to this, so Harry made himself relax. Rogan broke the long silence with, "So, Potter . . ." but then stopped.

"Yes?" Harry finally prompted.

"Enjoying your training?"

It seemed like Rogan was going to ask something else, originally. "Yeah. Loads. And every time I go out I see all these spells we haven't learned." He gestured at the window.

"This is an easy one."

"At least we are finally doing barriers," Harry said. "I've been wanting to learn those."

A long silence ensued before Rogan said, "I'm surprised you like the detailed work. Oh, what's this?" he asked, putting his nose closer to the magical glass.

Harry looked in the same direction and saw a woman picking up her bags. With a deep look of consternation, she looked behind herself at the ground, then at the bottom of her shoe. She finally stepped away.

Rogan said, "Could have been those heels of hers, rather than something else." He was squinting now. "Do you see that?"

Harry leaned close in and looked as well. Something seemed to be moving along the pavement trailing out of a grate. It looked a bit like ivy that had a gained a rather independent disposition.

"Here's the deal," Rogan said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes to cross around behind that building, the next street over. Got that? Yeah, of course you do. I'm going to come at that from the front and I expect if someone is there, they will flush your way so I expect you to get them when they do."

Harry pulled out his wand and stashed it in his sleeve. Glad to be given a real role, he strode eagerly through the unlit office and out the door onto the empty street. Fifteen minutes had sounded like a long time, but the blocks were long. Harry jogged part of the way around the corner and only slowed when he was crossing the street they had been observing, careful to not look at the grate in question and give anything away. A man at the corner was retying his shoes and muttering angrily under his breath when Harry passed. As he made the next corner, he thought that he should have checked his watch at the start.

Harry had counted the number of buildings between the grate and the corner and now stood before the same number in on this side. The block had been short, the buildings stretching fully across from one street to the next. A cluster of schoolgirls went by him, making Harry finger his wand and consider various illusion charms he may need if things got serious. He stepped up to the door and waited. Anxious, he looked around, and down below he spotted another entrance, below ground. It was ajar. Moving quickly, Harry looked around and, seeing no one on the street now, leapt over the rail with a quick pillow charm to the hard concrete below.

He landed silently, cloak billowing, just as the door was jerked inward. Someone gasped and twisted away from the opening, but ran into someone else who hadn't the sense to move. Harry let his wand slide out of his sleeve into his hand. Two boys, one sandy haired, one redheaded, tangled each other up in their panic to get aside and fell inward.

This worked well, because high-heeled footsteps were approaching along the street. Harry stepped inside and knocked them both down with a light Jellylegs since they were trying to run farther inside. The room he had entered was a workshop of sorts with old bicycles in various states of repair and the strong scent of oil. The sandy-haired boy made a noise of alarm but finally gave up and stopped struggling. The redhead glanced fearfully at Harry but upon seeing his companion sitting still, did so as well. Their eyes looked very big in the dim light.

"So," Harry said, crossing his arms, but keeping his wand out. "Up to no good, I see."

"It was his idea," the sandy-haired one whined.

"It was from your aunt's garden!" the other countered.

Harry rolled his eyes. They must be ten, just a year from starting at Hogwarts. Rogan stepped in from the far corridor and leaned on the doorframe. Neither boy reacted, making Harry assume they couldn't see him. "Names?" Harry asked.

They both shrunk down. Harry gave them a look he remembered Snape doling out many times and they actually quivered slightly before quickly answering. "Nothing better to be doing?" Harry asked facetiously. They both frowned.

"It was kinda funny," the redhead offered.

"Yes. Getting Muggles suspicious about magic is very funny." Harry was surprised at his own annoyed tone.

"We'll remove it," the sandy-haired one insisted.

"I already did," Rogan stated and the boys both jerked stiff and scrambled away from the Auror. Rogan held out a mesh evidence bag inside of which green leaves and stem snaked as though to escape. He stepped over to the redheaded one and ungraciously hauled him to his feet. "Address?" he demanded. To Harry he said, "You take the other home."

Harry nodded before Rogan Disapparated. "Come on, Tilman," Harry said, "Let's go." Wide-eyed and looking most unhappy, the boy got to his feet. Some part of Harry tried to temper his attitude under the logic that this had been himself many, many times. "Where do you live?" Harry asked. The boy started to answer haltingly that it was only two streets over and Harry immediately said, "I can tell you're lying. Not your grandmum's place. Your house."

The boy fell into a stillness during which he looked Harry over as though assessing him for potential danger. "I can haul you to the Ministry to look it up," Harry suggested, and the boy gave his address up. Trouble was, Harry had no idea where it was or how to Apparate close by. Thinking now that he should have simply returned to the Ministry in the first place to look the address up on a map, Harry thought fast to save face.

"Your mum or dad home during the day?" Harry asked to stall for time.

"My dad. Works nights for Wizard Rail. That's why I was at my grandmum's. My dad's asleep all day," the boy added, sounding glum at the prospect of waking him. The boy looked up at the delay in departure and Harry saw a man in his light brown eyes–a rough, bulky man with a two-day beard and the look of one not happy about being disturbed.

"You live in a flat, right?" Harry asked. "What floor?"

"Third." In that instant Harry saw an image of the place in Tilman's eyes, clear as his own imagining of his house in Shrewsthorpe. Before it could fade, Harry took the

boy's wrist and scrunched them both down in his mind. An eating area appeared around them. The boy shook his hand free and slouched in worry. Harry felt his blood rush at how well that had worked and how easy it had been. The dishes were quietly washing themselves in the sink and a tea towel was fanning the ones in the rack beside.

The noise of them arriving had indeed roused dad and a side door swung open as though propelled by someone with a strong arm. A man resembling Harry's preview, right down to the t-shirt with a hole in the belly of it, stepped in and stopped stock still. He stared at Harry in complete befuddlement, not even glancing at his son. "What's this, then?" he asked with a stunned quiet that didn't match the rest of him.

Reducing the seriousness with his tone, Harry said, "Your son was playing with magical plant life down in Freebury. Causing a bit of a stir among the Muggles."

The man swelled at that, stalked over in one long stride, and scooped up the back of the boy's shirt which lifted him to his toes. "You," he demanded into his son's ear, "were making such trouble as to have Harry Potter himself bring you to bear?"

Harry, who was forcing down memories of Vernon Dursley, said, "Really, I'm just an apprentice. It isn't so serious as all that."

The man didn't appear to hear this. "Sorry, sorry," the boy said, futily twisting away. "It was only a joke." He was dropped onto his feet where he pulled his shirt straight.

Harry couldn't help his own shoulders falling when the boy was released. He wanted to point out that it wasn't even going to get reported, but then censored that.

The man, waving his finger in his son's face said, "You'll be lucky if Hogwarts sends you a blasted letter. You think they want miscreants of your sort at that fine old place?" Harry again forced himself to refrain from contributing anything. Mr. Tilman went on, "And now look what we've got here, Harry Po-" He stopped then and straightened as though just realizing something. "Mr. Potter," he said, in an voice trying for politeness. "Most ple- uh, welcome to our, humble little flat here. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Harry resisted grinning at the sudden affectation. "It's all right, sir, really. Just . . . doing our job."

"You're, an uh, Auror, then?"

"Apprentice," Harry clarified.

The man returned his attention to his son by regrabbing him by the shoulder of his oversized shirt. "YOU, had to be hauled home by a bleedin' Auror! You know what Aurors does, right? Dark wizard hunters, they are. Shape up or that's where you're headed, boy." He released his son again and again Harry felt himself relaxing when he did so. The man stepped closer to Harry. "Terribly sorry 'bout this. Gettin' harder to keep an eye on him what with the double shifts and all." He sniffed and fidgeted a bit. "Anything we have ter fill out or a hearing or something we need to attend?"

"Oh, no, I don't . . ." Harry dug through his law readings quickly in his head. "No Oblivation was required and no injuries reported, so I don't expect so."

The man's great shoulders fell slack. "Well, that's fortunate for us. So . . . I suppose Hogwarts might not find out then?"

Harry hesitated before replying, "I have to honestly admit that I don't know how Hogwarts finds out most things."

The man snorted and grinned for the first time, which gave him an almost childlike appearance rather than the previous tired workman one. "True. I do remember my days there." This seemed to trigger more thoughtfulness and he turned to his slouching son with a more accepting, though wry, look. "Well, Mr. Potter, sorry again for troubling you."

Harry nodded and gave the now cocky poised boy a sharp look before stepping back to Disapparate. The man saying, "Oh, uh, you wouldn't be willing to give us an autograph, now would you? It would make explaining to the missus a bit easier."

Harry returned to the Ministry because he hadn't been told to return to the scene and since Rogan had the ivy, it didn't seem necessary. If Rogan weren't in the Auror's office, he would just have to Apparate back to the bicycle shop. He had a feeling he should just know what to do next.

Rogan was at his desk writing something out. "Are you filing a real report?" Harry asked.

"Just a quick one. I wasn't going to bother filing it under their names. We haven't had trouble with those two before." He scratched away with the quill for a time before asking, "So, how did it go?"

"It was fine."

"Did you talk to his mum?"

"Dad, and he was properly incensed with his offspring."

More scratching with the quill. "It occurred to me after I returned that you may have been forced to take him home via the underground if it was any distance. I find myself mistakenly considering you a full Auror, even though you are far from it." He said all this without pausing in writing or looking up.

"I Apparated him home. I knew the area," Harry lied.

"Good, I was assuming I'd have to apologize for abandoning you."

Harry, who had no trouble with being given more duties, said easily, "No, it went fine."

Sunday, Harry wondered if he shouldn't have some kind of costume for the Halloween party at the Burrow. He hadn't thought about it until that morning and now he stood before his cupboard, lightly scratching his head in thought. He considered and then dismissed the idea of going as a magical animal, same with pretending to be a Death Eater, although that sounded easy enough, just a hooded cloak and a mask. For a long moment, he was sorely tempted by that idea, as it would certainly get attention, and his friends would find it highly amusing. But the thought of possible headlines in the Prophet made him sigh, so he dismissed it. It didn't help imagining Snape's reaction either.

Additional ideas were dismissed as he tapped the door of the cupboard lightly with his fingertips. Kali rustled about in her cage, and he went over to let her out while he thought. She climbed out onto his sleeve and sniffed his hand. Harry watched her climb about, a sly smile forming at his lips.

Harry still could not Apparate all the way to the Burrow, or he thought there was perhaps a chance if he really tried, but he didn't want to get Splinched any more than he wanted a photo of himself in the Prophet that would make Snape cringe and wonder that he had lost his senses. So instead, he waited half of an hour after the party's start time and Flooed directly into the Weasley's hearth. A lot of people usually came to the Burrow parties and there was nothing worse than a Floo traffic jam where one could get stuck in a stalled spin for five or ten minutes only to get redirected to an entirely different node and have to start again.

Harry bent very low and replaced his hat when he was clear of the mantelpiece. The sitting room was quiet, but Mrs. Weasley was mixing punch in the adjacent kitchen.

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Outside the windows orange fires glowed and many voices could be heard. Molly Weasley turned as Harry approached, looked taken aback, and then grinned broadly while shaking her head. "Harry dear, that is something," she said with a laugh in her voice.

Harry looked down at his sky-blue flowing robe and smoothed his long white beard. "Do you think it's all right?"

She was still laughing as she worked. "I think it's adorable." She put the ladle down and wiped her hands on her apron. "Oh, and look at your pet. Oh dear, she doesn't mind being that color?"

"She's usually bright violet, so no, doesn't seem to." Harry adjusted his now-peach colored Chimrian to better sit on his shoulder. He also again adjusted his hat.

This prompted Mrs. Weasley to say, "Did you actually borrow one of Albus' hats? That one looks familiar."

"No, I changed a plain one from memory using an Illusion Charm."

She gave him a hug and said, "It's good that you remember him that well." She released him and smiled even more broadly. "Well, go on out, then."

Harry stepped out and approached the long, crowded tables. Glowing pumpkins hovered above them in crowded rows to provide light. A bonfire crackled and spat a few yards away. Someone turned to watch him approach and did an amusing double-take. The table quieted as he arrived and some even appeared alarmed, making Harry wonder what effect the firelight was having on his illusions.

"Harry?" a frog-costumed Neville cautiously asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "It's only me."

This broke the spell that had held the table in a stunned stillness. Everyone laughed which attracted others to come over. Fred and George scampered over wearing just their usual dragon-covered jackets, although the dragons appeared to fly between one and the other, which was disconcerting.

"Harry?" one of them cautiously confirmed. "Wow, a little taller and . . . " He tugged on Harry's beard and Harry had to bat his hand away. "Nicely done." He sounded truly impressed.

"I've been slow at the Metamorphia they've been teaching us, and this is my best one yet. I don't know how long it's going to last though . . . "

"Aye, might be permanent," the other twin suggested with a laugh.

"Then you'd have to retire, join the Wizengamot . . . "

"Not anytime soon, I hope," Harry countered. Kali had climbed down his arm and onto the table, and was investigating a pushed-aside plate. "Come here you. I'll get you something."

Harry returned from the food table and found a seat across from Ron at the far table. "That's a really scary costume, Harry," Ron said.

"We think it's bloody brilliant," one of the twins countered. "Especially with that leather-winged Fawkes of yours."

Harry gave the peach-colored creature a strip of chicken meat, which she seemed less interested in eating than mauling. Fred fetched them all fresh mugs of mead. Other friends came over and laughed over his costume as he ate. Those from the Ministry seemed less amused and more disturbed by his costume than his friends.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, realizing that he had not yet seen her.

"She said she'd be late," Ron replied.

"Office party with the solicitors to attend," Fred supplied with a glance at Ron. While Harry was puzzling out the subtleties of the moment, George hit him on the arm and said, "I don't feel like making any trouble all of a sudden. That's your fault."

Harry, remembering how he had spent his Friday, said, "Good."

"Ah," Fred uttered. "Forget the costume, Harry. You are scary enough on your own."

"No date?" the other twin prompted as a hoard of bats fluttered by overhead. Kali ducked low on Harry's shoulder and watched them, wired and alert.

"Couldn't think of anyone to invite," Harry explained easily. He was certain that Ron's jaw stiffened. Wondering at that, Harry added, "I might have tried Tara if I'd planned ahead a bit." Ron was avoiding his gaze. Frowning, Harry kicked him under the table and asked, "What's up?"

Ron shrugged, eyes still evasive and Fred and George were frowning lightly as well. Mr. Weasley stood up on a far bench and announced that the games were beginning. Ron was the first one up and over beside his father. The first contest would be broom races, their host announced and then explained a racecourse around the property that sounded more like a flying obstacle course. Fred and George stood up eagerly. "You racing? That beard might slow you down," George teased.

"I didn't bring my broom."

"It's pairs, you can borrow mine. I have a 3030–brand new," he graciously offered.

Harry was watching Ron negotiating with his dad to be in the first race. "What's up with Ron?" he asked, rather than answer.

"Uh, nothing sensible," George replied.

"What does that mean?" Harry returned, but the twins waved that they wanted to draw for a spot in the races and headed away. Harry moved down to where the non-racers like Neville, Justin, and some of the older friends of the Weasley family were sitting. The races began with Ron competing against Fred. The two of them took off on broomstick into the darkness to follow a long, hazardous course lit only vaguely by floating jack-o-lanterns. Much shouting of encouragement ensued.

Harry looked up as someone sat down beside him. "Tonks!" he said, very pleased to see his colleague.

"Just stopping by for short visit–technically on duty." She patted his shoulder. "How are you doing, Albus?"

"Good," Harry replied. "Did I tell you you have detention?" he carried on.

"Do I now?" Tonks returned. "What did I do?" she asked with no little insinuation.

"Skiving from your Auror duties, I hear, to attend a Halloween party."

She leaned closer. "Many of the people I'd like to keep an eye on tonight are here, so I count it as being on duty." She looked Kali over. "Poor thing. I think her color is fading." She tapped the creature with her wand and her color returned to bright peach from mottled.

"How is my beard?" Harry asked and submitted to inspection.

"Not bad." She gave it a tug, making Harry wince. "You did a good job with that," she praised. "How long has it lasted so far?" They carried on with a discussion of illusion and Metamorph spells as the races went on and the table cleared as people departed to watch.

"Dumbledore, my goodness," a middle-aged witch exclaimed as she took a newly empty spot along with some other newcomers. Everyone shifted down to make more room for people and plates. "You're a sight," she said to Harry. "Didn't want to come as someone too famous, eh? Who were you last year?"

"Harry Potter," Tonks and Neville replied together, and Neville continued with, "It was getting repetitive, though, that old costume. About time you got a new one." He winked at Harry.

"Thanks," Harry sarcastically replied.

The newly arrived wizard beside her, who apparently had sampled a great deal of mead before arriving at this party, said, "So, Dumbledore, I've always wanted to know . . . why didn't you ever go up for Minister of Magic like everyone wanted?"

Harry thought a bit, using the shouting from the races as cover for hesitating. Affecting a sage tone, he replied, "It was no longer my time. Others needed to learn that their moment to lead had arrived."

The questioner held his mug before him and glared at Harry with his bloodshot eyes. "You even . . . sound like Dumbledore. Goodness."

"You did ask," Harry returned, still trying for airy. He knitted his fingers before him and sat up a bit straighter. Kali reacted to this by quitting her grooming and sitting up pretty on his shoulder.

The man leaned over to the middle-aged witch and whispered, "Who is that really?" She shrugged. Neville giggled and Tonks ducked her head.

"Something amusing, Mr. Longbottom?" Harry asked in a teacher voice.

Neville held up his hands as though to ward Harry off. "No, no. I can't take it. You are too much."

Harry glanced at the openly curious couple across from him. With his eyes changed to blue, the hat over his scar, and the beard hiding his face, he considered that he may not be too recognizable. Strange sort of anonymity, this.

"Do you work at the Ministry?" the woman asked. "You do look familiar."

"I'm there most days," Harry said easily and sipped from his mug, which was nearly impossible without getting his mustache foamy with mead.

"So how's the afterlife?" the man asked, sounding snarky.

Harry thought over his vision of Dumbledore's serene figure from his near death experience. "It's pretty quiet in the veil," he replied. "But I get to see all my old friends and, at my age, that is quite a few people." He had spoken this with such authority that even his old schoolmates gave him surprised and uneasy looks.

"You didn't take that hat out of Dumbledore's cupboard, did you?" Neville asked in concern.

Harry gave him a wink. The spectators grew louder as the finalists were selected for the last race. Ron stalked grumpily back over. "Fred and George, it's always Fred

and George. Wish I had a brand new broom to race with." He took a seat and looked around for his mug.

"Who is that?" the stranger asked Ron while pointing at Harry.

"Who?" Ron asked, as though confused about the question. "That's Harry Potter, who do you think?" he answered with a sharp edge.

The man let his mug hit the table a little hard. "You don't have to say, then. Blather." Neville giggled again.

Harry stood up and said, "Ron . . . " while signaling with his head that they should step away.

"What?" his friend asked, not moving.

"I want to talk," Harry explained.

"Going to give me detention if I don't?" Ron asked sulkily.

If you don't stop behaving as though you're ten, I might, Harry thought grimly. "Is this costume peeving you?" he asked, unable to come up with a better guess. "I can ditch it. It is just a Metamorphmagus spell."

"Yeah, no showing off there," Ron grumbled low.

Kali hissed–though it wasn't at Ron–it was at something behind Harry, in the unoccupied blackness beyond the aura of the party. Chilled with the notion of what she might be sensing, Harry clamped down hard on his hot anger. Kali calmed and climbed around to his other shoulder. The whole half of the long table was staring at him with mixed expressions. Tonks stood up and went around to Ron where she hefted him to his feet and dragged him away as though it were her duty to help. Harry followed, far more concerned about keeping his temper in line than what his oldest friend's problem might be and grateful for Tonks' quick action.

Tonks didn't give Harry a chance to speak. As soon as they were out of earshot, she asked the redhead, "What's wrong. Why are you being so peevish around Harry?"

"Nothing's wrong," Ron returned.

"Yeah, and I'm a prima ballerina. What's wrong?"

Ron finally held Harry's gaze. "Hermione said you stayed at her place the other night."

"So?" Harry said, not understanding the significance of that.

"She didn't want to do anything with me that night."

Harry stared at his friend. "I was only there to sleep," he argued, but then thought maybe that wasn't the best thing to have said given Ron's anger. "I was too tired to go home."

"Can't take the Floo?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"I had my bike with me. I'd been out on my bike all day. I'd've had to come back for it."

"What were you doing?" Ron asked as though to test his story. When Harry hesitated, Ron more sharply asked, "Well?"

Tonks appeared interested in the answer as well. Darkly, Harry finally replied, "I was hunting Avery."

"You were, were you?" Tonks asked sharply.

"I was riding around Devon. Having a look," Harry defended himself.

"Find any clues?" she asked smartly, propping her hands on her hips in a disapproving pose.

"No." They stared each other down until Harry said, "It isn't like you've found him. It isn't like all along the Auror's office has done a stellar job of hunting Death Eaters."

"That isn't quite fair, Harry, and you know it. We were hobbled by previous Ministerial edicts."

"You aren't anymore."

She sighed. "No, now we're just expected to take care of bloody everything. Every hexed garden strimmer and rogue hag on a flying carpet."

Harry didn't relax his fierce look, although he kept the emotion superficial. A long silence passed, which was broken by Ron saying, "He thinks you're letting him down." Harry dropped his eyes, reminded starkly of how well Ron knew him.

"The department doesn't revolve around you, Harry," Tonks pointed out.

"I know that," Harry replied. "I'd just feel better–I'd feel like everything was complete–if he were in Azkaban where he belongs."

"We'll discuss it later," Tonks threatened. "Right now I have to get on with patrol." With one last glance around the proceedings, she Disapparated.

Harry said, "I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know you'd think anything of my crashing at Hermione's flat. I really was too exhausted for the Floo and I needed to talk to someone who understood, because as you just saw, I can't talk to most people I know."

Ron looked more unhappy but no longer angry. He sighed and said, "'Mione's been difficult to get along with lately. I don't know what's wrong with her. She's always upset with me about something."

"I'm sorry for that, Ron," Harry said sympathetically.

Ron gestured at the spot Tonks had occupied a moment before. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm head of the Wizengamot, remember?"

Ron laughed lightly. "I got the feeling from Dad's Ministry friends over there that they're afraid you'll believe that."

Harry grinned. "They do seem unseated, don't they? Maybe I should go back and tease them some more. How's my beard doing? I keep expecting it to fade."

Ron gave him a once-over. "Looks convincing to me." They started back to their seats and Ron added, "Sorry I accused you of showing off."

"I wasn't trying to."

"I know," Ron mumbled reluctantly.

Fred and George, now sporting yellow trophy-shaped hats and sweaty hair, shifted to make room for them. As he and Ron took their seats, the drunk stranger said, "Okay, I have more questions for you, Dumbledore."

The others were all grinning, so Harry said, "Why certainly," as amiably as he could manage.

"Why, when you had the chance, didn't you stop Tom Riddle when he was a student? Huh?"

Harry took a deep breath and considered that. Everyone, including his friends, waited for the answer. "I thought there was still hope for him." When the man opened his mouth to ask, Harry interrupted with, "Why? Because I believe that about everyone."

"Oy," George exclaimed, "Fred, get us some more mead if we're sitting at this table."

Fred stood while saying, "I'll just get Dad to run the costume judging so he can go back to being himself."

"What if he doesn't want to change back?" George asked fearfully.

Fred returned presently. "No, Dad's running the William Tell contest first. Hey, Hermione!" he greeted someone approaching from the house.

"Wow, Headmaster," she said, greeting Harry after giving Ron a casual hug.

"You haven't seen anything," Fred insisted. "Ask him a question."

"Oh . . . can I? Hm . . ." She fell thoughtful. "Goodness it is odd to look at you like that." She looked away and rubbed her cheek as she thought. "Well, I think I'd ask the real Dumbledore how everyone is behind the veil, but . . . "

"Already asked," someone interjected.

"Really? What was the answer?" She sounded honestly disappointed.

"Everyone's fine," Harry replied, but then rethought his answer, "Although, Sirius . . ."

"Sirius what?" she prompted, curious.

Harry realized he had said too much, but didn't see how to back out. He went with his persona instead. "He doesn't seem very happy, but I can't do anything for him."

Hermione stared at him a moment before saying, "All right, this is really creepy."

He leaned over and whispered to her, "I'll explain later."

"That should be interesting. Do I still get a question?" At Harry's nod, she asked, "Are there any other prophecies we need to worry about?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry uttered, making the table chuckle.

"That wasn't much of a Dumbledore answer," Hermione criticized.

Harry sighed and cobbled together a sage-toned response. "The future is something best not known ahead of time, lest that knowledge do irreparable harm." He hesitated, unable to stomach the idea of another prophecy that referred to him or any of his friends. "There aren't any prophecies that I know of." Harry truly hoped that Dumbledore's serenity was a sign of Harry's own freedom; he discovered within himself that he counted on believing it.

"That's better," Hermione said. "So how good of a job do you think McGonagall isdoing?"

"What about Madam Bones?" Justin interjected.

"Are you asking me?" Harry hesitated. "Or Dumbledore."

They both laughed. "Either," Hermione admitted. "You've been back to Hogwarts a few times."

"Minerva's doing well. She's working Severus really hard, though."

"Severus? Severus Snape?" the stranger interjected. "So, Dumbledore, why did you trust him?"

Their end of the table fell still again. "Because he was worthy of it," Harry replied with a flat, deceptive lack of concern. No one relaxed at this. The man wore a smirk making Harry ask, "You believe that you know better than I?"

"Despite that long beard, I've been around a lot longer than you," the stranger countered.

Harry did not at all recognize the man with his small nose and salt and pepper hair, and now wondered who he was. "What department at the Ministry are you in?"

"Can't say."

"And that doesn't narrow it down at all," Harry stated with a touch of snide, assuming the man was in the Department of Mysteries.

"We've been to the Department of Mysteries," Neville, apparently following Harry's train of thought, stated cockily and swigged from his mug.

"No, you haven't," the man returned.

Ron laughed. "We all have. Broke in when Voldemort was trying to get Harry's prophecy."

"Oh, yes. Bloody little punishment all of you got for that." No one responded to that, but Harry could feel them all closing ranks with their postures. The man went on, "So, you are Harry Potter. Only you'd have the gall to wear that costume. Joining the Wizengamot soon?"

Mr. Weasley came by before Harry, or anyone else, could come up with a proper response. "Harry, my boy, I see why you are expecting to win the costume competition. Oggie," Mr. Weasley turned to the man across from Harry. "I see you've been getting to know my son's friends. Quite a little crew they all are. Especially this one." Here he clapped Harry on the back. "Come on up–we'll have the judging–and you too, Longbottom."

Harry escaped the table and waited in a row with an amphibian Neville, a rather crude dragon, a far too tall elf, a pair of black cats, and a brightly glowing rainbow.

Their friends all cheered loudly when Mr. Weasley held his sparkling wand over Neville's head and just a tad louder when he held it over Harry's. "Harry takes the day with his stunning interpretation of Albus Dumbledore." He presented Harry with a trophy-shaped gold hat. "Any words of wisdom for us?" Mr. Weasley teased. The resulting negative shouting from Harry's table startled the party host.

"I've dolled out too many words already," Harry informed him.

"Ah, I see." The Weasley father grinned, understanding. He leaned in and said, "You fit his shoes better than I would have expected, Harry."

Unsure of how he felt about that, Harry merely shrugged, garnering a pat on the back and a push toward his seat.

"Your beard is fading," Ron informed him as Harry approached.

Before sitting, Harry pulled out his wand, removed the charms, and changed hats for his trophy one, putting the old, now-dull one under the bench. He met the eyes of the man across from him, feeling more at an advantage facing him down as himself. "I didn't catch your name," Harry said.

"Ogden, Tertius Ogden. This is my wife, Olive." The woman held her small hand out to be shaken.

"Your father is on the Wizengamot, correct?" Harry asked.

"Forty-three years this December, in fact. Before your parents were even born," Ogden snidely went on.

"But long after Tom Riddle was," Harry added conversationally while handing his empty mug to George for refilling. "The Ministry certainly had many chances at him."

Ogden frowned into his own mug. "Disgusting how thrilled the Ministry was to get you," he muttered.

Feeling no threat from this man, Harry just shrugged. Around the table his friends glowered at Ogden as though weighing possible hexes in their minds. Harry merely pondered the odd fact that he felt more confident and certain of his power out of his Dumbledore disguise.

Chapter 68.

Magic to Muggles

"Invited your wife to come yet?" Harry asked Vineet during a quiet lunch in the department tearoom. Vineet had been quiet that morning, ever since Rodgers had expressed disappointment in the Indian's progress on strengthening his blocks, and Harry hoped to draw him to other topics.

Everyone took their usual keen interest in the answer. "I have. She is planning the details now."

"When does she arrive?" Harry asked.

"She must complete the packing first."

"Uh, oh," Kerry Ann uttered. "How big is your flat?"

Vineet appeared vaguely disturbed. "I have been measuring, yes . . . "

They all shared grins at their friend's dilemma. "Bring her in when she comes," Harry said and swallowed the last of his sandwich. "We'd all like to meet her." At Vineet's solemn nod, Harry excused himself to use the extra time to work on his languished petition to have Sirius' case reopened.

Tonks was at her desk, writing a response on the bottom of an unfolded airplane memo. Without looking up she handed over the file Harry kept stashed with hers. With a quiet thanks Harry took it to the next open desk. Tonks had yet to take him to task about hunting Avery and he continued to expect her to at any time, but apparently at the moment she was too busy. Harry put concerns about trouble out of his mind and perused the to-do list he had spellotaped inside the folder. Compile

witness list was the main item left on it, with a penned in list of potential names below. Harry had seen the rare Alastor Moody, who was the first on the list, just that morning. He got up and wandered around the corridors peaking in any open doors. He found Moody in the file room, peering closely at a file with his one real eye.

"Potter," he grunted without looking up.

"Can I ask you a favor, sir?"

Moody scratched his gristled cheek and closed the file before him. "Depends."

Harry explained, "I have a petition for the Wizengamot to have Sirius' name cleared. I need to submit a potential witness list with it and since you were involved in the original investigation, I was wondering if you'd be willing to be called . . . if they decide to call anyone."

Harry couldn't read Moody at all. "Sure, Potter," he grunted before stashing the case file under his arm and walking toward the door.

"Thanks," Harry said as the wide man passed with his limping shuffle.

"Aye. I'm supposed to be retired . . . talking to that mouldy old bunch always makes me feel young."

Harry grinned and followed him out. Now he needed to owl Hagrid, whom Harry expected would say yes, but he didn't want to presume. He wished that Dumbledore could have been on the list but pushed that aside.

Back in the offices, Tonks was absent, so Harry took her desk instead. Rogan stepped in and peered over Harry's shoulder. "Getting that finished?" he asked.

"Almost," Harry replied.

"Would you like it looked over?"

Harry gratefully handed the bulk of the file to the Auror and waited with impatiently grasped fingers for him to read through it. A paper airplane sailed in and landed in the excessive pile already on Tonk's desk, causing them all to shift around as though they all wanted to be on top.

Mid-flip of a page, Rogan asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it isn't right that Sirius is still believed to have helped Voldemort," replied Harry, trying not to sound annoyed at such a question.

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"So, you are doing this for the dead?"

"Well . . . he was important to me. It's not right."

Rogan closed up the file and pushed it back to Harry. "So, you are doing this for yourself . . . "

Harry could not read his intent. "You don't believe I should be doing-"

"I didn't say that. Are you doing this for yourself?" Rogan reiterated.

"No, for Sirius' memory."

"For the dead then . . . "

"I guess," Harry admitted.

Rogan shook his robes out, crossed his arms, and said, "It looks good, but before you step before the Wizengamot, figure out the answer to that question and stick with it. Controversy is not kind to those who waver," he added helpfully.

Harry sighed his annoyance away, grateful for the advice; he wasn't looking forward to the actual hearing with much relish.

The week passed with no response to Harry's dispensation application, which would allow him to tell his cousins that was a wizard, would in fact, make them real family. Fidgeting his impatience, he read the Friday morning mail with little interest. He had owled Ron the day before, asking what his plans were. This had been a nearly arbitrary decision–whether to owl him or Hermione, since it no longer seemed safe to assume that their plans were the same. Harry was in dire enough need for a real break that he wished he had planned a party for this weekend. He should plan one for next weekend, perhaps, after the Hogwarts Quidditch match. A little desultory, he dropped the unopened mail on the sideboard. If he simply showed up at the Ministry early for his shadowing, he wondered if they would let him do something useful while he waited.

Sighing, Harry pulled out his books and did a little reading instead. Before he left for the Ministry, Pig arrived with a quick note saying to meet Ron in their usual pub at 7:00. No hint of whether anyone else would be there. If shadowing ran long, Harry might not be on time and he wouldn't want his friend sitting there alone. He sent a reply back reminding his friend about his duties sometimes running late.

When he arrived at the Ministry, Rogan took Harry up to the street by the hidden staircase where the alley entrance was disguised as a loading dock for a lingerie shop. At first Harry followed the Auror in silence, until he remembered that Rogan didn't expect him to be quiet all the time. "What are we doing today?" Harry asked.

"Hm . . . just looking around," Rogan airily replied.

That sounded vaguely misleading, but Harry didn't ask more. They walked along a crowded shopping street for well over a mile, turned and walked another. Rogan did appear to be looking for something in particular. Harry, rather than prying, kept a watchful eye out around them. The neighborhoods they passed began to decline in appearance and the number of pedestrians dropped significantly. Rogan stopped then, right in the middle of the pavement before the taped-over window of a closed hat shop. He made a thoughtful noise.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Speaking low while adjusting his sleeve where his wand was hidden, the Auror replied, "Just a few too many strange reports from this area. Thought it worth a look around."

"Something more than animate ivy?"

"Definitely. But not so clearly described." He looked at Harry finally, as though trying to decide something. "Tonks said you sometimes sense things. Do you feel anything right now?"

Harry closed his eyes and tried to find the green world or the Dark Plane without luck; he was far to wakeful and in too good a mood. He shook his head. Rogan stepped away and Harry caught up. "Sorry," he said, not wanting to disappoint.

Rogan chuckled. "Why are you apologizing?"

When they were back in a more lively area, Harry asked, "What's been reported?"

Rogan stopped again, even more suddenly. "I need a cuppa," he announced, stepping into a little gyros place. Harry followed him in. The young man behind the counter put a tea bag and hot water into a plastic foam cup and handed it over. In the corner away from the one table of customers, Rogan replied, "Nothing significant and that's what bothers me." Harry gave him a confused look as the Auror sipped stained water.

Rogan explained, "Meaningless things don't filter down to the Aurors office. So when a run of seemingly harmless things come up, like a wizard's dog disappearing here and a minor memory charm there, I start to wonder. We are too busy to investigate something with no serious magical crime attached to it." He frowned and drank

from his very Muggle cup. "It feels the way things did when Voldemort was around. Reports came through, but those involved and what had happened were only vaguely or incorrectly described, uselessly so. These reports are useless too."

The young man behind the counter was moving a meat-covered pole from one machine to another. No one else remained in the shop. "Voldemort is definitely not back," Harry stated.

"I didn't mean to imply he was. But something doesn't feel right to me and there is a geographic link to that area for the reports. I didn't want to Apparate in, hence our long walk. Taking you out is a good chance to investigate because if my instincts were right and something very bad were going on, I'd expect you could take care of your end. But on the surface it looks like I took you out on low risk patrol."

He put down his tea suddenly and reached with alarm into his pocket. He stared at the wooden-framed square an instant before pulling out his wand and sending a confusion charm at the young man who was now topping up the paper cups in the dispenser beside the cola machine. The tower of cups toppled onto the counter as his hands became clumsy. Rogan then grabbed Harry's arm and the shop disappeared.

They Apparated into the hazy upper room of a pub furnished only with an old couch and burnished brass lamp. "Wait here," Rogan ordered and promptly Disapparated again. Another pop! and Tonks and Vineet appeared just an instant before Tonks departed again.

"Some kind of emergency," Vineet opined as he wandered over to an old leaded window through which the world was too distorted to see.

Harry joined him there where he could just make out that people were walking outside on the street below. "I wonder why they didn't just tell us to return to the Ministry?"

"The rules state that we are to return to the closest safe place."

Harry circled the several empty connected rooms which composed the floor, feeling imprisoned and unuseful. A carved wooden railing surrounded the staircase down. He leaned down to try to see to the level below. Vague noises of a pub filtered up. "I wonder if we can get an order of fish and chips. I didn't have lunch."

"You are concerned with food?" Vineet asked in shock.

"They don't very well let us be concerned with anything else, do they?" Harry snapped. He circled the whole floor this time, eyeing the poor view out each window, before returning to the old red velvet couch, dropping into it and resting his head

back. "I suppose I would get kicked out of the program if I tried to find them if we're still here in an hour."

Vineet sat down as well. "I do not recommend doing that," he stated dryly.

Silence ruled for many minutes before Harry asked, "So how do you like shadowing Tonks?"

"She is the same as Mr. Rogan."

"You think?" Harry returned in surprise. "You didn't find Rogan a little more . . . loose?" Vineet shook his head, making Harry utter, "Huh." Harry bounced his crossed ankles impatiently a while before asking, "So do you think they'd notice if we just slipped down to the Ministry? We could walk even . . ."

Vineet, who was sitting calm and still, replied, "I believe the instructions were quite clear."

"Hmf." Harry crossed his arms and again rested his head back. "So, tell me again . . . how did you get the name Vishnu?"

"It was my dachnam. My child name, which is supposed to be temporary and is usually less serious. When one knows a child's real name, it is then given."

"But your mum didn't give it up," Harry suggested.

"Correct. But among family, this is quite common."

Harry blinked at still not following completely. He gave up on it. "So when did you first know you were a wizard?"

In his usual level voice, Vineet replied, "My mother said she always knew. Everyone else, meaning my whole family, discovered during my rice ceremony."

"What's that?" Harry asked, glad to have conversation as a distraction.

"It is an important passage for an infant where I come from. The whole family is there. As part of it, the child is presented with three plates, one with earth upon it, one with money, and one with tools. It is to determine the lifepath of the child. The story is that my uncle was urging me, when I refused all options, to take the money, and I did so only after transforming it into chocolate."

Harry laughed. "So you like chocolate, then?"

"Yes."

"Wish we had some now. Transform us a box of Honeydukes, will you? Or nip out for some? If they come back while you're gone, I'll tell them you're practicing invisibility charms."

Chapter 68

"I believe the Hero of Wizardry is much less likely to be removed from his apprenticeship if he is caught fetching chocolate when he is supposed to be staying put."

"Yeah, but they'll be more disappointed in me. You can always say I talked you into it."

Vineet tilted his head. "True." He too rested his head back on the bolster. "Perhaps if an entire hour does pass . . ."

Harry frowned and after a long pause asked in annoyance, "What are they doing? Did you get any clue?"

"No, I did not get a glimpse at Ms. Tonks' wooden tablet."

Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. "Hope they aren't in trouble."

"It is my understanding that they are considered competent to face trouble."

Silence descended again. Pigeons alighted outside the window, casting flickering shadows across the room. Harry finally broke the silence with, "Looking forward to having your wife here . . . Nandi, right?"

"Yes. She is supposed to be with me."

Harry gave him a doubtful look. "That's the only reason?"

"She is my wife," Vineet explained patiently.

"Yeah, but . . . never mind," Harry gave up on that too.

"The British do not understand this, I realize. It is a better way, though," he stated.

Harry didn't feel like arguing, so he remained silent and tried not to imagine Tonks defending herself against a spell onslaught from some violent hooded figures.

Vineet continued though. "Love is a poor way to choose a life mate. It is not a good predictor of compatibility."

Harry resisted pacing the room again by calling forth that waiting patience he had built up during his abduction. This relaxed him as well since it reminded him that he wasn't truly imprisoned at the moment, only inconvenienced. He finally said, "I think you'd try harder with someone you love."

"That may be true, but it is not offset by additional complications it causes."

Harry began to feel a tiny bit sorry for this unknown Nandi person. "I can't see it."

A long while later, Harry pulled out his watch. Seventy minutes had passed. "Tell me again why we can't just go to the Ministry?"

"The rule is straightforward and is applied, I am quite certain, whether we are in County Cork or Central London," Vineet explained.

"That's kind of dumb, don't you think?" Harry began to pace the perimeter of the floor yet again, and this time leaned over the rail to peer down the stairs more keenly. He didn't know if this was a Muggle establishment or not.

"I think it eliminates all uncertainty. There is a barrier on the stairs, you realize."

"There is?" Harry had been very close to stepping down just then. "How can you tell from all the way over there?" he challenged.

"It is in the floor." Vineet tapped his foot on the wood. "And it extends across the opening downward, keeping everything and everyone out, presumably."

Harry looked around at the old, slightly warped, wood floor. "You're good at that. I can't sense barriers without casting something at them."

"I have always found barriers easy to detect." After a moment, he added, "And to disable."

Harry gave him a thoughtful look. "So, you can get us downstairs?"

"You may go when you like. You will not be able to return," the Indian intoned casually. Harry crouched and frowned at the landing below, which was all he could see. His mind pondered his options one after another. Vineet's voice caught his attention fully, "How do you know that this is not a test?"

Harry stood and stared at him. "Ah," he uttered, feeling foolish. "I don't." He returned to the couch and relaxed, wishing now for a chess set.

Much later, when a pop! sounded, Harry turned from the window, wand at ready, which he had not planned on doing.

"My," Shacklebolt said, looking between them. Vineet also had his wand out and aimed. "Remind me not to sneak up on either of you. Back to the Ministry with you both. Come along."

In the Auror's office it was quiet, but Harry had learned that meant everyone was out and things were actually at their busiest. Shacklebolt checked them both in and said, "Your shadowing is done for the day, head on home."

"But where is Tonks . . . and Rogan?"

"Out on a call, go on home," he repeated, sounding more commanding this time.

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Harry, feeling difficult, said, "I'm actually supposed to meet some friends at a pub in London, can I do that?"

"Of course. You know what I mean. I don't want you out looking for the other Aurors."

Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and pointed out, "I don't even know where they are."

Shacklebolt propped his hands on his hips, which, with his long cloak, gave him real presence. "Somehow, Potter, I don't think that would stop you."

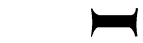
On the way across the atrium, Harry said to Vineet, "They don't trust me."

"I was noticing this," Vineet said.

Harry frowned, put-off by that notion. "What do I have to do, I wonder?"

"Obey, I would think," Vineet offered levelly.

Harry really looked forward to meeting with Ron to whom he could complain about all this, and he would actually be early. "I'll see you on Monday."



Sunday, Harry received a Ministry owl, which at first he thought was a reply from Tonks to his message asking if everything had gone all right on Friday. It wasn't. It was a letter from Rodgers telling him to wear his dress robes to training the next day. Harry preferred his dress Auror robes to the fuzzy workout suits they normally wore, so he had no difficulty with that. It also occurred to him that he could use the opportunity to file his petition for Sirius with the Minister's office if he pulled it all together in time. Doing so wearing his dress robes seemed like a good idea.

The next morning Harry rose an hour early, dressed, and in the pale morning light, checked himself in the mirror on the cupboard door. As much as he was rushing, this brought him to a halt. The image that reflected back at him was yet again a leap beyond what he had expected. He filled out the carefully measured fabric of the tunic in a way that implied physical as well as magical power and the high collar made him look older and competent. In the robe pocket, he found his medal bar, which he pinned on straight the first try. A wrist flick brought the cloak over one shoulder, showing off the red edge of it. He would trust himself, he thought; he looked like he could do anything.

Still feeling this confidence, Harry arrived at the Ministry just as the elves finished mopping. Tonks' desk was a disaster of parchments, maps, and a broken quill or two, but he found his work file in the stand where it always was. He used the tearoom to finish organizing things and a copy spell to make a duplicate. His copy spell was still a little poor and the ink on the copy turned out faded and bluish, but it was readable, so he stuffed the original set in a large envelope and tied it closed. There was space on the tie for a wax seal, but he didn't think he need bother.

The offices were getting busier as he made his way to the lift, where he checked his watch. He just had time to drop off the documents before training. In the Minister's office, the receptionist looked up sharply and then her expression relaxed, as though she had expected someone else.

Harry said, "I have something I want the Wizengamot to consider," as he held out the packet.

The woman at the desk, whom Harry recognized as being in the Weasley Twin's year at Hogwarts although she had changed rather a lot, stood and accepted it with a formal air. Through her formality, her eyes flickered over him less so. "I'll see that the Minister gets it."

"Thanks," Harry said. He was noticing the shine on her auburn hair that covered the right quarter of her rather smooth face when she looked down.

"Unless you'd like to present it personally?" she asked and gestured toward the office door behind her. She almost looked to be blushing and it didn't look bad on her.

"No, that's all right," Harry reassured her. He hesitated, thinking he could add something along the lines of a personal question, perhaps. Looking at her, he got the distinct impression she wouldn't mind that at all. He was just stealing himself for something in the theme of Don't I remember you from . . . when voices entered from the corridor.

Harry turned and found the doorway filled with figures that stood out from the usual Ministry denizens, and not just because of their very fancy Muggle suits. Two of them wore rather alarmed expressions and the one in the lead was very familiar. Harry and this man stared at each other a few long seconds before the man said, "My, and you must be Harry Potter, correct?"

Harry recovered his poise and couldn't have been more grateful to not be in his usual silly workout suit. The man stepped forward, leaving his companions frozen in the open door, and put his hand out. Harry said, "Prime Minister," as he shook it. The man's eyes twinkled almost unnaturally when he smiled.

Chapter 68

Madam Bones had been called from her office and swooped in at that moment. "Tobius," she said in familiar greeting. "I see you have met our most famous Ministry employee."

"Yes," Mr. Daire confirmed, "I just did." To Harry he said congenially, "We hope you can be counted on to prevent the next spillover out of the Wizarding world should you have another powerful rogue wizard causing difficulties."

Harry took that in and composed a safe response. "I intend to." In his head he was thinking, spillover? "As soon as my apprenticeship is complete. Speaking of which, I'm going to be late . . . "

Daire smiled that smile again. "By all means, we don't mean to get you in trouble . . . " He gestured at the door gallantly. Harry nodded at Bones, took one very quick glance back at the receptionist and escaped the room, parting Daire's slow moving assistants still rooted in the doorway.

"Nice of you to join us, Potter," Rodgers stated grimly when Harry rushed into the workout room.

"Sorry, sir." Harry took his seat, not bothering to explain.

Rodgers returned to writing a list of accidental magical reversal procedures on the rarely used chalkboard. Aaron asked, "Why are we in uniform today?" and Rodgers didn't respond until he had finished the second board. He stepped back and eyed the long list. "How does that look?"

"Like it will impress the Prime Minister," Harry quipped. When his fellows turned in surprise, Harry said, "He's with Madam Bones right now."

"Really?" Kerry Ann spoke with eagerness. Her eyes brightened as she asked with relish. "Is he coming up here?"

Aaron gave her a disgusted look. "Don't tell me you like that bloke?"

Kerry Ann geared up for a reply but Rodgers interrupted. "I thought it unnecessary to point out that we should be behaving in a dignified and organized manner." He gave Harry an odd look and put the chalk away.

Aaron turned backward to Harry. "So, he isn't talking . . . why's Daire here?"

Harry replied, "He wants to be assured that we aren't going to allow rogue magic to spillover into the Muggle world again."

"Ah. Is he right?" Aaron asked their trainer.

Sounding vaguely annoyed, Rodgers replied, "Of course Potter is correct. Must have gotten the memo even before the department did."

Harry, not wanting a return to their previous animosity, banked his all-knowing attitude and said with a shrug and a laugh, "I didn't get a memo, sir. I just happened to stop by the Minister's office this morning." The rest of the room had stiffened and they now all turned to see their trainer's response.

"You do that every Monday morning?" Rodgers asked with the slightest sneer.

Harry considered explaining about Sirius' petition, which he had not been keeping secret, but given the political waves it might cause, it was easier to respond with, "It was a good chance to talk to Belinda, Bones' receptionist."

Kerry Ann made a noise of amusement. "Oooh, Harry has his eye on someone."

Harry frowned but could not, despite his efforts, keep his face from heating up.

Rodgers rolled his eyes and muttered, "Flirt on your own time, Potter." Munz and Blackpool entered then, and with a glance at the clock, Rodger's whole demeanor changed. "Push the desks aside and line up here. We are supposed to be the second stop on the tour."

They stood waiting, which Harry thought a little silly. They should be doing drills instead, especially since Kerry Ann was quietly interrogating Harry about Belinda, as well as dropping gossip she knew, which Harry was ignoring for the most part. On his other side Vineet leaned over and, sounding as though he truly wished to be helpful, said, "Imagine how much easier to simply have your parents meet with hers and decide."

"I'll ask Severus if he's willing to do that then," Harry returned.

Vineet straightened and muttered, "Ah, yes. I had let my mind slip on that fact." He sounded vaguely alarmed, which made Harry grin.

A troupe of footsteps came down the corridor, ending all conversation. Falsely toned introductions could be heard from the Auror's office across the way. Rodgers muttered, "Goodness, I hope Mad-Eye is out today." He didn't sound as though he were trying to be humorous, more truly worn down and Harry felt a little bad for having set him off earlier.

Madam Bones came into view, Daire right beside, followed by a pack of his and Bones' assistants. "And here is the future of our Magical Law Enforcement efforts," Bones asserted brightly. "This is our largest ever class of Auror apprentices, all of

them the highest achievers on our rigorous admissions examinations." The Muggle assistants to the Minister did not appear to have relaxed at all and still maintained antsy postures as they stood just behind their boss, who took no notice of their alarm. Harry considered that they may have been informed just that morning that magic truly existed.

Daire passed along the line of apprentice Aurors and with that smile still fixed asked, "So, how does one enforce magical law against someone practicing black magic?"

"Can we have a little demonstration, Reggie?" Bones asked.

Rodgers walked along behind his charges and put his hands down on Harry's and Vineet's shoulders. In their ears he whispered, "Give them a bit of a show–lots of light and noise." More loudly, he said, "Certainly. We'll run through some of our drills for you, starting with two of our first year apprentices."

While Harry slowly took his place in the open end of the room he considered what spells made a lot of show without straining a block; the last thing he wanted was to actually knock Vineet off his feet during a demo before the Prime Minister. The visitors arranged themselves beside the other apprentices and Harry noticed that Belinda, standing on the end beside Daire's assistants, appeared keenly interested in the demonstration, in contrast to the Muggles in suits who appeared only additionally alarmed.

Harry lifted his wand and after a decent pause, sent a simple Freezing Charm at Vineet. It had a nice blue spell trail and some sizzle, which drew a gasp from someone. Vineet countered and spelled him with a rather broad Blasting Curse in return. Harry blocked it sufficiently, but he had not been expecting so much power in return. The boards in the floor shook. They exchanged another set of spells and again Harry went easy and bright and Vineet didn't curb his power. Harry bit his lip and considered what to use next.

During the pause, Daire said, "Bit of a mismatch here, Madam Bones. I thought young Potter was your star."

This bothered Harry far more than he would have liked.

"Oh, he can be counted on when it matters," Madam Bones returned casually, but beneath it Harry thought he heard a challenge.

Harry sent a chain-binding spell at his opponent, which he knew required timing and exactness on the block. Vineet was forced to use his agility to jump out of the way of it as his counter failed and the heavy chain floundered loudly on the floor before

vaporizing. The Muggle assistants, who had been backing up with each exchange, were now up against the wall.

Vineet found his feet and his former spot and sent a blue torrent of Freezing at Harry, who found enough concentration for a block with an ease that made his heart race. Ice crystals clattered to the floor around him in a circle. Harry, deep in the zone of competitive concentration, cast back a whiplike disarming curse they had learned just the previous week. Vineet's wand clattered as it skid across the floor and stopped at Kerry Ann's feet.

"Ah," Daire stated with strange happiness. "Wizards are helpless without their wands, now aren't they?"

Harry had not been able to read Vineet's eyes until that moment, but he saw then that he longed to have a try at Harry with his martial arts. Harry didn't lower his wand. Madam Bones was beginning a complicated explanation of different magics when Vineet demonstrated unexpectedly. One moment he looked to be stepping rapidly forward and the next a white tiger was loping straight at Harry, who took a few quick steps backward, partly from startlement and partly to gain time. Vocal expressions of surprise were coming from more than the Muggles. Harry raised his wand, dismissed spells as fast as they came to mind, and then dropped it to the floor instead, in favor of his own Animagus transformation.

Harry had no attention for the sudden movement of the audience to get farther from the pair of them. His attention was fixed on the tiger, which in its last bound before reaching him, was desperately trying to avert its approach. Claws scrabbled at the wood floor to no avail. Harry, only in the interest of avoiding have his feet taken out from under him, put forward one of his large scarlet feet, knocking the snowy, delicately striped tiger over with ease. For a breath, nobody moved. Harry had spread his wings for balance without thinking, and now pulled them consciously in as he stepped back off of the prone big cat. Vineet flipped to his four feet and then just as smoothly stood and transformed back into himself as he returned to upright. He gazed up at Harry with eyes almost vacant in surprise. Harry quickly released the spell and flushing, picked up his wand while attempting an attitude of normalcy. Unfortunately, even the other apprentices were gape mouthed.

"Well," Daire exclaimed, clapping his hands once. "That was illuminating. Madam Bones, good to see you have someone to keep your star wizard properly challenged. What's next?"

"Sports and games, I believe," Bones said, failing to recover quite as quickly as her counterpart. She gestured to the door and Daire followed but had to turn when his

assistants failed to move from where they leaned heavily on the wall in a tableau of horror.

"Come along then," Daire cajoled them. "Much more to see."

Only their eyes moved at this and Kerry Ann had to turn to hide a laugh at the comic disbelief they held. Only after further urging they did finally slink away in an attitude which implied that any sudden noises would be unwelcome.

Rodgers immediately spun on his apprentices. "What was that?" he demanded.

Harry didn't have a good answer. Kerry Ann provided one after a long pause. "Harry was colorful," she offered.

This put Rodgers on a different tack. "What was that, anyway, and you had better be registered."

"I am," Harry responded, careful not to sound anything but cooperative, even though he longed to snap at his trainer.

"It wasn't on your application," Rodgers breathed in annoyance.

"I hadn't managed the spell in time for my application," Harry offered calmly. "And my form is a mountain gryffylis."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes and then his face. "Well, you certainly made an impression. I guess that was the object of this exercise," he added with a groan before commanding, "Pair up, let's get some real drills in before lunch. Not you two," he added, gesturing at Harry and Vineet. "Vishnu, pair with Aaron."

When they finally broke for lunch after remarkably sober drills, Harry approached and said to Vineet. "I couldn't come up with a spell that would stop a four hundred pound tiger without hurting it."

Vineet appeared pained as he quietly said, "I allowed my frustration to rule me, for which I am apologizing."

Aaron and Kerry Ann stood by the door and waited for them. Harry said, "In a real fight you wouldn't give someone so much time, so you wouldn't necessarily need your blocks. After the first spell I think you'd be all set."

"It is more than that. I cannot even heat my tea without destroying the teapot. I have destroyed several and I do wish to have one when Nandi arrives. She will wonder."

"Maybe you could get a metal one or use a cauldron, they're tough," Harry offered helpfully.

Vineet brightened only a little as he replied. "I didn't consider a cauldron, I will do that."

The envelope didn't look very impressive but Harry's heart started to race even as he tore the seal of what he was certain was the response to his dispensation request. The roundabout wording required a heart-stopping minute to sort out, but it confirmed what he had assumed: that the Ministry would allow him to inform his two cousins of his magical background, with the caveat that they not tell anyone else and that their doing so would be grounds for reevaluation of the dispensation.

Harry raced to the drawing room for a pen and paper to write to Mrs. Evans with the news. When he got there, he stuffed them back away and instead fetched his cloak and Apparated to Godric's Hollow, to his usual spot, the deep shade below the Willow tree, which wasn't so shady now as it had lost its leaves. A cold wind blew through the small valley, making Harry wrap his cloak around himself and wish for gloves. He paused only a moment at his parent's grave before walking swiftly to the Evan's house where he interrupted Mrs. Evans reading a magazine with her tea.

"Harry dear, what a surprise." Her short grey hair was pulled back in a scarf today and the house was warmer than Harry was accustomed to.

Harry gave her a broad smile in return and pulled out the dispensation which he had stuffed into his pocket. It had crinkled it rather badly, so he quickly smoothed it with a charm and handed it over.

Polly Evans adjusted her glasses and asked, "That work for shirts as well?"

"Sort of. There are better spells for laundry."

"Goodness, haven't felt jealous of anyone in years but I have to say waving a wand to do the ironing has rather a strong appeal." She handed the letter back with a smile of her own. "Would you like a spot of tea or are you going to rush over to Patty's this instant?"

"Is she home?" Harry asked.

"She may be in the square with the children, even in the cold they prefer to be outside." She smiled at Harry's indecision. "Perhaps you should fetch her here for tea and we can share the news. Pamela will be home in an hour or so."

Harry's chest tightened for the tenth time at the very thought. He said he would return quickly and headed back out into the brisk breeze.

Patricia didn't answer her door, so he walked over to the small village square. The wind was much lower here, blocked by the buildings and a row of pines. His cousin sat

on one of the two benches in the middle of the weedy cobblestones; her two children ran in fearsome circles nearby, chasing a bright pink football. The boy was too small to kick it and resorted to picking it up and dropping it instead. His sister tried in vain to explain better.

Harry approached from the side and said, "Hello."

"Harry! This is a surprise. You came all this way just to call?"

"Um, yeah. It's not all that far really," he said as he sat beside her, bundling his cloak around himself better. He watched the youngsters at play a minute and finally asked, "Anything strange ever happen around them?"

"What?" Patricia asked, sounding alarmed. Sounding amused instead, she added, "Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged and found himself hoping one of the children would turn out to be magical. The prospect of little magical relatives was dizzying. The ball rolled to Harry's foot and he picked it up and tossed it back into the game, such as it was. Neither child had on mittens. "They don't mind the cold, eh?" Harry asked.

"No, not at all. If I tried to keep them inside all day I'd go nutters."

They'd make good Quidditch players, Harry thought to himself, still wishful. His friends' various stories about how their relatives tried to determine if they were magical flitted through his mind. The next time the ball rolled his way, Harry held it out of reach to see what would happen. The girl just stood on tiptoe and bounced until the ball was given up.

"Did you stop and see Mum?"

"Yep," Harry replied and shook himself. "She said to bring you round for tea."

Patricia stood immediately. "Sounds good. Come on Basie," she called to the boy when he didn't follow immediately. His sister picked up the ball, which forced him to follow with a cry of displeasure. As they walked, she asked doubtfully, "So you stopped by just to say hello?"

"No, I have something I want to explain."

"About what?" she asked, sounding curious.

"Um, partly about the night my parents were killed."

"Hm," she murmured eagerly and accepted the ball from her daughter to carry. "Mum knows something and she would never tell. It was always so mysterious what with dad always making up crazy explanations to tease us with. So what really happened?"

Harry took a deep breath. "An evil wizard came and killed my parents."

She tossed the football at him, hard. Only his Quidditch reflexes let him catch it although he jammed a finger doing it. "Ow," he muttered. "What was that for?"

"You sound like Dad," she complained.

"Ah," Harry said in understanding. They were on an empty street so he pulled his wand out and tapped the ball, turning it bright blue. He gallantly handed it back. She turned it around and looked it over, then looked at what he held, the wand. To her credit she kept walking.

"Ball!" Briar, the daughter demanded.

"Just a second, dear," Patricia insisted. "Neat trick."

"I don't actually know many tricks," Harry admitted. "That's an illusion." He took the football back and tapped it with an incantation to turn it into a blue golf ball.

"You're a magician?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

They had reached the field leading to the Evan's property. "Not exactly," Harry admitted. "A wizard."

"There's no such thing," she countered with a laugh.

Harry removed the illusions and tossed the ball ahead of them on the freshly mown field. Giggling children gave chase. The children remained outside as they went into the house.

"Hello, dear," Polly greeted her daughter. "Met our magical relative?"

Patricia froze at that. "Sort of," she hedged.

At Harry's questioning look, Polly explained, "I knew you couldn't wait to say." She fetched the teapot and biscuits and took a seat and cajoled her daughter to join her.

"He's telling one of those crazy stories like Dad used to," she said. "About magicians, no . . . wizards." She shook her head with a frown.

Harry took a seat across from her. "Give us a little show, Harry dear, since you have your wand out. Get us the sugar, perhaps."

Harry hovered the sugar bowl from the shelf above the stove. Patricia closed her eyes and muttered, "Goodness. You aren't kidding."

"You should wait for Pammy or you'll have to tell it all twice," Polly said helpfully, sipping her tea with a smile. "I do so remember your mother with fondness."

Chapter 68

"Lily was a . . .?"

"Witch," Harry and Polly replied together.

A bit reluctantly, Patricia queried, "Ah, and the question you had about anything strange happening with the children . . . ?"

"I haven't seen a sign of anything," Polly went on. "But I don't really know what to look for."

Harry calmly explained to his rattled cousin, "Magic shows up occasionally in this family. But only every hundred years or so." He shrugged. "But either of them could be magical. You'll know for certain when they turn eleven if not before."

"Why when they turn eleven?"

"Because Hogwarts school keeps track and sends every single magical child in Britain a letter saying they can go to school there. Not all of them do though. It isn't the most normal education."

"Your dad seems to teach normal things, chemistry, well, mythology is a little different."

Harry shook his head. "He used to teach Potions. Now he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Oh," Patricia quipped. "Potions . . . as in Love Potion?"

"I can brew one of those . . . they're easy."

"Pammy could use one," she stated authoritatively between bites of biscuit. "Hover something else," she then insisted.

With a bright smile Harry obliged.

When Pamela arrived, drawn by multiple mysterious messages left on her telephone answering machine by her sister, Patricia dove right in with. "Guess what? Dad wasn't joking, it really was an evil wizard."

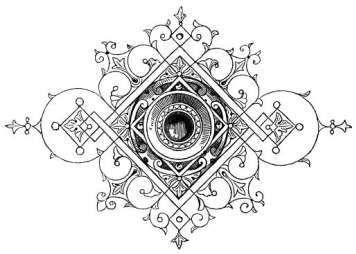
It grew dark outside the window as Harry and Polly explained. Much dismay was expressed about the prophecy, which made Harry feel unexpectedly good.

"So, wait, your dad, Mr. Snape, he's a wizard as well, then?" Pamela asked when Hogwarts was explained.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"I have to admit to finding him a little creepy before," Pamela confessed. "That doesn't help."
"He has his moments, I'll admit," Harry said. "He's good at intimidating students."
"Even you?"
"Well, for a while," Harry hedged. "I see through it now."
"So one of the children could be magical?" Pamela asked. "That would be fun. Maybe I should have a few," she uttered thoughtfully. She didn't notice the gleeful expressions on either her sister or mother's face. Harry ducked his head to hide his laugh.
"I should show you my album. Let me fetch it." Harry said, and promptly Disapparated. He arrived in his room directly, picked up the album out of the nightstand and returned. Three sets of stunned eyes fixed on him as he held the album out. "I didn't explain about that, did I?" he asked and swallowed hard. "That's called Apparation. It's how we get around."
Silence reined until Patricia glanced at the album and said, "You went all the way to your house? Isn't it just miles and miles away?"
"Yes," Harry admitted and tried to distract them with the album which, of course, was full of animated pictures, which didn't help the general sense of alarm.
"And this is me playing Quidditch for my house team. My dad played too when he was in school. And that's the end." Except for the chocolate frog card that Harry had had forgotten was in there between the last page and the back cover.
"What's that?" Pamela asked, grabbing it up and reading it off. "It looks like a football card. Are you famous?"
"Sort of," Harry admitted. "Everyone's very happy to have Voldemort gone."
Patricia took the card next, watching the picture on the front closely. "You look small in this picture."
"I was. I've grown a lot since then."
"Looks it." She continued to peer into the card intently until she noticed the time suddenly and insisted she had to get the children home to bed and get some dinner together. She gave Harry a hug, and the card, and departed.
"I need to get to my studies as well," Harry said, remaining standing. He said his goodbyes and insisted he would visit again soon. Polly had less than dry eyes as she gave him a hug as well.
At home the house seemed extraordinarily quiet and his light heart made it hard to finish his readings. Before getting into bed, he wrote a quick note to Snape explaining about his evening, which refreshed the memory rather happily. He fell into sleep with a smile still quirking his lips.

Chapter 69.



Circling in the Dark

Harry decided to depart early for the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match so that he could visit at Hogwarts beforehand. For the match he planned to meet up with Ron and some other former schoolmates as well as Aaron. As he moved around his room getting ready, he wished that he could just Apparate into Hogsmeade, since that distance was easy for him now. After he finished feeding Hedwig and Kali, he found himself half tempted to try. Closing his eyes he imagined High Street and scrunched himself down hard, only to be popped back so fast he had to take a step back to stay on his feet. Harry sighed to himself; he really couldn't have expected that to work. Both of his pets were peering at him with identical tilted head expressions of curiosity.

"Yeah, I know–Hogwarts, A History," he grumbled at them.

As expected, he became stalled in the Floo for long minutes before getting dumped a bit unceremoniously on his knees on the hearthstone of the crowded Three Broomsticks. Pretending nothing was amiss, he got to his feet and brushed himself off.

"Harry!" a familiar voice rang out and Seamus came over to greet him. When his old schoolmate started discussing the match-up in great detail, Harry had to beg off. Other than the occasional letter where Ginny discussed a new play, Harry had no sense of the two teams and wondered that he had lost touch so quickly.

A cold wind blew steadily sideways along the path to the castle. Harry tightened his cloak against it and walked most of the way with his arms wrapped around himself. Few others were on the lawn this early, preferring instead the warmth of the pubs

until game time. Only a pair of well-bundled students were moving quickly in the other direction, so quickly that they took no notice of Harry. In contrast to the empty lawn, many students were milling about in the Entrance Hall. He didn't expect to see Ginny or any of the other players since they would be down in the changing rooms already, but many students waved hello as he passed through and only a few stared in surprise.

Snape was in his office grading a thick roll of essays. "You are early," he said in a way of greeting.

Harry dropped into the visitor's chair and relaxed into the familiar feel of the surrounding stone walls. Snape continued to work uninterrupted. Harry peered around the office, eyes alighting on a few things that had not been there before, like a brand new manual of forbidden potions that sat alone upon the top shelf beside the dusty pensieve. Below that Harry spotted the tin from the Himalayan tea alongside some other ingredient jars and realized with a jolt that Snape's birthday was fast approaching and questions about potion books fled his mind as he fiercely considered what he might get his guardian this year . . . quickly.

"Are you coming home next weekend?" Harry asked, rapidly plotting ahead.

Snape's eyes lifted from his task. "I was not considering it."

Harry, who regretted not thinking of plans sooner, but figured he could safely assume Snape did not have a date with Candide scheduled for his birthday, suggested, "Shall we meet in Hogsmeade on Friday?"

"You have nothing better to do?" Snape asked lightly. When Harry shook his head, he prodded, "Wouldn't rather be out with your friends?"

"They're all coming over this evening."

"Ah, do try to keep things sedate, if possible." Snape rubbed his hair back out of his eyes and held it there as he searched through a pile of books. "We can meet in Hogsmeade if you wish," he said.

He sounded just a bit down to Harry, but of course this time last year he had a date. Harry figured that was probably what was bothering him. With a glance at his watch he stood. "I'm going to meet my friends. I'll see you after the match?"

Snape nodded and started to wave him out, but then closed the book he had started to search through with a snap! "Everything going all right, Harry?" he asked soberly.

Harry gave him a smile. "Well enough. Very well, I think." Snape seemed to expect more elaboration, so Harry leaned a hand against the doorframe and said, "My visit

to my relatives went very well, but I owled you about that. They are expecting us for Christmas at some point, just to warn you." Here Harry smiled even more, but bit his lip as he added, "And I didn't tell you that I submitted a petition to the Wizengamot to have Sirius' case reconsidered. I haven't heard anything about that yet." Snape's passive gaze didn't waver, so Harry went on, "Um . . . I met the Prime Minister, but I didn't tell you about that because the demonstration of Defensive magic got a little out of hand and Daire's two assistants needed calming draughts by the end of the day, and I was a little embarrassed about the whole thing." Harry felt his cheeks flushing at the vaguely disturbed expression that had overtaken Snape's face. "We'll keep the party tonight small and quiet . . . I promise."

Snape raised a brow and rubbed his chin. "I was going to suggest that perhaps life had gotten calm and ordinary for you, but I realize not." He turned back to his papers. "There was some strange rumor about a griffin fighting a tiger at the Ministry and my paranoid thoughts immediately leapt to you." He raised just his pitch dark eyes to peer at Harry with a vague challenge.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "The press wasn't there. Thank Merlin."

"I would say," Snape intoned. "Perhaps you should join your friends. I had hoped to finish grading these essays before the match."

"I see you later then, although I'm not staying for dinner. Is Minerva expecting me to?"

"You should probably find her or leave her a note in that case."

As he exited Snape's office, Harry checked his watch and found it was still well before match time. He headed farther on, around to the gargoyles, but didn't know the password. He was turning to go ask Snape and came face to face with Professor Greer. "Good morning, Professor," Harry said in a rather friendly way, he thought. It was easy to let go his dislike of her since he was feeling even farther removed from this place than last visit.

"Mr. Potter," she said with a sour shape to her mouth. She grinned then. "Don't know the password?" she asked the way Dudley might have, as though to taunt.

Harry calmly refused to rise to it. "No, ma'am," he admitted.

She swung her full robes around, "Lemon Verbena," she commanded haughtily and the gargoyle jumped aside.

Harry followed her up the office where McGonagall appeared to be having a meeting with Professor Cawley, who looked a bit more worn down than Harry remembered.

"Do try to be firm with them . . . it does no good to give them a chance to rule the situation . . . " McGonagall was advising when the turning staircase reached the top. Her door was open as usual.

"That might cut down on the Slytherin skiving as well," Cawley responded.

"Ah, Gertrude . . . and Harry," McGonagall said, pleasantly surprised. "Please come in. I'm sorry, you've caught us in the middle of an impromptu staff meeting." She came around her desk and gave his hand a light shake. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"No, sorry, Professor. I'm having a party tonight." Harry noticed that she looked greyer than ever.

"Ah, well. It was nice enough of you last time. Know that you are always welcome to stay after the match." She glided back around her desk. "But I'm afraid at this moment we have issues we must discuss."

"Of course," Harry said amiably and started back to the staircase. A frosted glass dodecahedron mounted on a spindle shifted to follow him as he passed by it.

"Ah, but . . . " McGonagall said, pulling him back around. "There was something I wanted to ask you." She had an odd smile on her face, as though reluctantly amused. "I heard a very strange story about the Prime Minister, a scarlet griffin and a rare white tiger, or some such." Harry's shoulders fell, which he feared gave him away. McGonagall went on pleasantly on the surface but underneath she sounded as though she might be getting even for something. "The story was too many tellers removed to be wholly accurate . . . I thought you would . . . perhaps have heard what actually happened."

Greer and Cawley both turned back to hear the answer as well. "No one got hurt," Harry pointed out instead of replying. "And Daire seemed to enjoy himself. It's a long story," he breathed, not willing to explain.

"Ah," McGonagall uttered, eyes twinkling. "Is Daire as good looking in person?"

Harry shrugged, unable to gauge that. "My fellow apprentice Kerry Ann can't shut up about him now, so I guess he is."

She smiled and waved him out with a generous goodbye. Harry fleetingly suspected that she enjoyed knowing that his penchant for trouble was someone else's problem now.

To overcome that thought, Harry walked the other way around the castle to find Hagrid in his garden, harvesting the last of his peas. Only they weren't ordinary

ones. Even browned by the frost, these kept trying to reach out and tangle Hagrid's hand while he plucked the nobbly pods off into a massive basket.

"Good to see ya', Harry," Hagrid said with feeling. They had a pleasant long chat that didn't include any discussion of any kind of trouble Harry might or might not have gotten in at the Ministry.

When Harry found his friends in the visitor's section of the Quidditch stadium, he gratefully tucked into a bag of wriggling caramel caterpillars and a butterbeer that Ron had purchased for him. He and Hermione had formed a small section of former students along with Neville, Seamus, and even Lavender, whom Harry had not seen in a long time. When Aaron arrived, Harry made them all shift down to make room.

"As long as you aren't a Slytherin," Ron commented around a mouthful of cinnamon popcorn.

Aaron beat Harry to a reply, by sitting straight and saying haughtily, "And what would you do if I were?"

"Ah," Ron uttered. "Nothing, I guess," he admitted sullenly. He swallowed and leaned over to whisper to Harry, "You've picked up some strange friends."

"This from someone who works with Trolls and Goblins," Harry retorted teasingly.

Ron sighed and slumped in his seat. "True."

The match was long–three and a half hours long. Harry thought that they should have used the old Snitch given that both Seekers were new. He also wondered if anyone else knew of the switch in equipment. By the end all of the players were utterly exhausted. Ginny's hair had fallen completely out of its tie and she was doing much more shouting at her players than Harry would have expected, probably out of frustration due to their trailing by two goals most all the game. The Gryffindor Seeker, Louisa Llwellan, finally caught the Snitch almost by defense when it veered suddenly as though imitating a Bludger and came right at her. The Ravenclaw Seeker hung his head and shook it, tossing his long curls side to side as he did so. Ginny had mentioned in one of her letters that even though he was a Third Year many of the girls had a crush on him. He had poise in losing though, and flew over to shake hands with Louisa before landing where his team had gathered on the pitch. The Ravenclaws slouched off the field as the Gryffindors slapped each other on the back, although they didn't do this with the usual enthusiasm; perhaps they were too tired even to celebrate.

The crowd lacked energy too and filed slowly out of the stands. "Good thing we have a party to look forward to," Ron said, slapping Harry on the back rather hard.

The doorknocker sounded, just audible over the voices in the crowded main hall of the house. Harry, while maneuvering his way across to answer it, had not realized that he had invited so many people. He opened the door to reveal Aaron with a fashionably pretty girl on his arm from whom he seemed to be getting more than moral support. Harry wondered at that, he had only two hours with which to pick up his date after the match.

"Harry!" he greeted and then gesturing with a wine bottle that sported a crinkled red ribbon at the neck, he introduced, "Rachel . . . Harry Potter . . . how're ya' doin', Harry? This is for you." With this he held out the bottle.

"Come on in," Harry invited, stepping back and gesturing with his arm. Rachel passed with wide, surprised eyes as though trying to see him better in the darkness of the entryway. Aaron drove ahead without noticing his date's amazement.

As they made the hall, Rachel said to Aaron in a confused and heavily French-accented voice, "Zo, you really are an Auror?"

This seemed to get through to Aaron's alcohol-fogged brain. "Yeah," he replied in a hurt tone. "I wouldn't make that up. What if someone expected Auror things from me if I did make that up?" He sounded honestly alarmed.

"Have some punch," Harry offered from the tray Winky carried past at that moment.

Rachel accepted the glass of glowing blue liquid, still fixated on Harry. "Zis is your house?" she managed to ask.

"Yes."

Aaron looked around with a keen eye. "That's right, this is Professor Snape's place, isn't it?" He swallowed hard and looked more wary.

"Nothing hazardous here," Harry assured him. "Unless you start drinking things from the medicine cupboard without mixing or diluting first. Speaking of which, before you leave I can mix you something you are almost certainly going to want."

Rachel stared at Harry over her untouched glass which was making her hand and chin glow. "You are really ZE Harry Potter?"

Harry neutrally replied, "Yes. Aaron and I are in the Ministry Auror's program together."

She appeared to be reevaluating Aaron, including looking him up and down. "Huh."

"Let me introduce you to some of my friends. . . "

The party only seemed to get more crowded as the evening wore on. Perhaps this was due to the excessive amounts of food Winky kept bringing out. Harry looked around at the laden tables covered in trays of little snacks in alarming variety. Someone had brought a Wizard Wireless set and strains of eerie music were battling with the conversations.

"Harry," Ron said, stepping over. "Quite a spread of food. I really need to get an elf. Maybe when I get a pay rise."

"How is Gringott's?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "Good. I got to see the ninth level this week, which is the second most secure and full of all kinds of nasty stuff. The Goblins are good at cursing iron, I'm hoping to learn how they do it." Ron fell into explaining with relish. "They have this double door leading to the lowest levels . . . it looks like two ordinary reinforced doors, but if you aren't supposed to be there, these triangular spikes pop out and the two doors snap together like an iron maiden."

"That's nice," Harry replied, feeling more queasiness from thoughts of physical harm than from magical.

Fred and George slinked over, their usual broad grins visible even in the low candlelight. "Great party, Harry. You do have an awful lot of friends."

"Everyone wants to be Harry's friend," the other twin teased as they both leaned in close.

"How goes your training, O Auror? You haven't come by for a visit in a long while."

"Yes, we need to ply you with treats now, so you don't arrest us later."

Harry wondered what they were getting up to. "You haven't been expanding to other neighborhoods, have you?"

The twins appeared curious. "No, why?"

"Just wondering. Have anything new and interesting that would help an Auror?" Harry asked as a distraction.

"Hm, George have we?" Fred asked thoughtfully.

George rubbed his chin in a pose of careful consideration. "We'll have to think about that." He tugged on his brother's arm as though to keep him from speaking.

"What are they working on?" Harry asked Ron when the Twins had moved off, wearing identical sly grins.

Ron finished chewing before answering, "Well, they spent a lot of time trying to make an invisibility cloak. I don't think they quite managed it, or how about, I think they actually wanted to make an invisibility lemon drop. They get bored with that and moved on. I actually don't know what they're working on now. Ginny might . . . she keeps up with that better."

Tonks wandered over, her expansive pink Mohawk bobbing above the crowd. "Have to go, Harry. Thanks for the invite."

"You just arrived . . . didn't you?"

She laughed brightly, which plucked at something inside Harry's chest. "Two hours ago, Harry."

"Really?" Harry asked in shock and fished out his watch; it was nearly midnight. "Well, glad you could come," he stated with some formality. She gave a little nod before she disappeared with a bang! Harry, looked around the crowd to avoid Ron's gaze. He watched Aaron dancing with his date across the floor, agile in the crowd and rhythmic, despite dancing while the Wizard Wireless announcer was giving Quidditch scores. They tangoed near to them and stopped, with Aaron dipping his date almost into the punch.

"Hello, Harry," Aaron said graciously, sounding a bit like his mother might. "We should have parties every night," he said dreamily. "Rather than readings, for certain."

"Readings?" Rachel asked, straightening up.

Aaron sighed, "Yes. Aurors, we're all nearsighted from living inside a book, you know . . ." Here he tweaked Harry's glasses.

Harry pushed his glasses back up his nose. "I've had these a long time," he pointed out.

Aaron took his date's arm through his own, and she draped herself against him and gazed at Harry with a strange look of wonder. Harry cleared his throat. "So, where did you two meet?"

"On the train," Aaron said, patting Rachel's hand. "She is visiting from Lyon and I offered to show her the sites, you know, Tower of London, Dungeon of London . . . Harry Potter."

Rachel giggled with an elegant hand over her mouth. "I sought he waz joking."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "You pick up women by telling them you know me?" he asked in dismay.

Aaron leaned over as though to confide something. "Harry, you should be picking them up by being you. Why don't you have a date?"

Harry had owled Tara, just as a casual invitation, but she already had an engagement. During the week, he had tried to think of a reason for stopping in at the Minister's office, but didn't want to actually run into the Minister until he was certain she had gotten over the demonstration, so he hadn't. He shrugged.

"Aye," Aaron breathed and pulled his date over so he could put an arm around Harry. "We still have so far to go with him," he murmured sadly.

"Good luck," Ron quipped while eating his twentieth sausage roll of the evening.

The party finally began to thin out, although the food hadn't, Harry noticed. He didn't see Winky in the hall and, fearing that she was making yet more snacks, headed to the kitchen.

It was blissfully quiet even on the steps leading down and at the bottom only the crackle of the kitchen hearth fire was audible. Winky was busy cleaning cauldrons. "Hey, Winky," Harry greeted her.

"Master need something?" she asked in concern.

"No, no, I was just coming to make sure you didn't bring anything else out." It was warm and cozy down here and Harry's ears were ringing from the noise, he discovered in the quiet. He took a seat on a low, elf-height stool. "Thank you for doing so much for the party," Harry said, making Winky bow.

A foot scraped on the stone steps. "I thought I saw you duck down here," Hermione said, coming into the red firelight, the only light in the kitchen. "Big party."

"I didn't mean it to be," Harry said, rolling his sleeves up in the warmth.

"Did you make all that food, Winky?" Hermione asked.

"Winky make food, yes," Winky replied, while pulling at the edges of her teatowel.

"That's a lot of work," Hermione said, pulling over a crate of potatoes to sit on between Harry and the low table that dominated one wall.

"Oh, no Mistress, little work for Winky." Apparently seeing Hermione's doubtful face, the elf went on, "Winky not given much work–Winky like work."

Hermione slapped the back of her hand lightly on Harry's arm. "Harry, you're not much work. Loan me Winky, will you?"

"You?" Harry blurted in disbelief. "You want to borrow an elf?"

"No, I guess not." Then thinking further, added, "I'd eat a lot better if I had one, though."

"How are things at the solicitor's?" Harry asked.

"Interesting enough," she said, sounding vaguely insincere. "Really, it is challenging and all, but I spend too much of my day going through books."

Harry gave her an even stronger look of disbelief and lightly pinched her arm. "Is that really Hermione in there?"

She slapped him weakly in return. "Yes," she replied in exasperation. "It's just that . . . I don't really use my magic at all. And I'm good at magic. I heat the office tea with my magic. You and Ron get to use magic all the time and you get to learn lots of new magic." She rested her chin on her palms and stared into the fire. "It's hard to mix magic and serious work. But I'm not sure what else to do. I get to do all kinds of important things now, but not what I had set out to."

They both considered the hearth in silence until Hermione said, "I need a change."

"Considered being an Auror?" Harry teased.

"Yes, and the conclusion was, 'No'," she stated emphatically. "Maybe I should try to find something at the Ministry. . . " She sighed and rested her chin down on her hand again.

A dark, cloaked figure silently descended the five steps leading to the kitchen. Harry looked up and said, "Hey, Vineet."

"I should be departing," the Indian intoned.

Harry stood and shook his friend's hand. "Thank you for coming. Sorry, we didn't get a chance to talk."

"Your invitation was most welcome . . ."

Aaron barreled down the steps at that moment and grabbed Vineet up from behind, apparently for support. "Harry! great party. You should have more of these. Hello, we didn't get introduced, did we?" he said, squinting at Hermione.

"We met at the match. Hermione Granger," she said, holding out her hand.

"Harmony, nice name," Aaron greeted, shaking her hand. "Aaron's the name. Harry and I are at the Ministry together . . . I mean, we are training at the . . . well anyway. See ya' Monday, Vishnu. I should get the lady home . . . she wants to . . . I have to go." With a sharp pat on Vineet's back he departed with an unsteady step.

"He's an Auror Apprentice?" Hermione asked in concern.

"He's all right normally," Harry assured her with a laugh. Aaron was not leaving much of a positive impression and he left without any pink stuff, although he might get more care out of his date as a result.

"I will be seeing you Monday as well," Vineet said and gave a little bow in Hermione's direction. "Harmony," he stated formally before turning and departing.

Harry expected his friend to express annoyance at the mishearing of her name. She didn't say anything however, just sat in silence while Winky hung cauldrons up to dry along the wall. "Who was that?" she asked finally. "Another of your fellow apprentices?"

"Yeah, that was Vineet."

A long pause ensued. "How's he doing?"

"He was using a mismatched wand until recently, so now he has no power control." Harry smiled, "It really annoys him too." Seeing her odd expression, Harry added, "He's getting better. He can counter, but he can't put up a block worth much. Otherwise he'd be the top of the class."

"Where's he from?"

Harry cast back in his memory. "Oh, he said, once. Uh, Bhube-something."

"Bhubaneswar?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "You've heard of it?"

"They are famous for their white tigers," she explained, locking her hands around her bare knees below her skirt and rocking back on her crate.

"Ah. I can imagine," Harry stated cryptically.

"So, how is Auror training going. Seems like you have interesting fellow trainees."

"I like the training a lot, except that drills get a little tiresome and things are going on and no one tells us anything. That annoys me."

"You don't get to go to staff meetings?" she teased.

"No. And I found out the other day that they don't trust me."

"They don't trust you?" Hermione echoed in disbelief. "What are they thinking?"

"They think if I know where trouble is I'll disobey and try to get involved."

"Oh," Hermione uttered, sounding too understanding of that.

Harry huffed into the still air. "You think I would too."

Hermione rocked back, still holding her knees tightly. Her bright white socks glowed in the firelight. "I think it would depend on what was going through your head. Like if Tonks were in trouble . . ."

Harry stood suddenly and paced the very short distance to where stray broken biscuits lined the edge of the table. He munched on one as a distraction.

"Harry . . . you like her, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Harry replied, trying for an ordinary tone.

"No, I mean, really like her."

"I'm not allowed to," he answered quietly.

Hermione sighed and stood up beside him. "My advice, if you are willing to hear it: don't wrap yourself up in her, it will only make it worse. Go out with someone else."

"I've been doing that. Well, I've been trying anyway," Harry answered defensively. "I avoid thinking about her, but when I suspect she's in danger . . . "

"She got by just fine without you looking out for her, you know," Hermione pointed out gently. "When things were much worse."

"Something's going on," Harry whispered, needing to tell her that.

"What?" she asked, alarm quick to her voice she stood up and came beside him.

"I don't know exactly. You haven't heard anything, have you?"

With a sharp laugh she replied, "You're asking me?" A paused ensued before she asked, "Are you sleeping well?"

Harry faced that question. "Not always," he admitted.

"You haven't been hunting Avery again, have you?"

"No, but maybe I should be," he replied flatly.

She patted his back. "Be careful, Harry, all right? Whatever you do."

Chapter 69

That night, Harry awoke in the coldest hour just before dawn, a headache grinding at his temples and an odd dream disturbing his calm. The fire in the grate flickered weakly and it wasn't enough heat for this late in the year. Harry slid out of bed, the duvet wrapped around him. Halfway across the floor, he considered that he could have used his wand to hover more wood onto the fire instead. With a huff he dragged the covers the rest of the way across the room and rearranged the coals with the poker before adding new wood. He pulled over the velvet-covered stool from before the rolltop and sat close to the hearth for warmth as the fire rose up. Rubbing his eyes hard did not make the cotton in his head go away, in fact it made his head pound a little more.

As he sat hunched close to the rising flames, the dream flickered though his memory; in it he had been fighting a panther in the Forbidden Forest. The sleek, pitch-black cat moved unnaturally, as though not entirely solid. Harry had been fighting it in his Animagus form and only his ability to fly was giving him any advantage at all over the sharp toothed, slippery-bodied beast. Every time it turned and lunged, he pumped his wings hard downward and lifted himself out of reach, but he could not manage to bring the creature down. His claws repeatedly passed through the thing as though it were only a shadow.

Harry rubbed his eyes again. Perhaps he had drunk too much mead and eaten too many spicy sausage rolls.

Harry, tired of waiting for Tonks to open the subject, did so himself the next chance he had, which was Monday, when their training broke for lunch. She was reading through a thick stack of files at her desk. People were going in and out, but they looked otherwise occupied. Harry pulled a chair over and sat down, which brought her attention up to him.

"You were supposed to yell at me about Avery . . . I just thought I'd remind you."

She closed the file before her and put her hand on it. The thickest file emitted a sigh and the pile settled. "Yes, I was, wasn't I?" she asked rhetorically while staring beyond the note-laden cubicle wall at the back of the desk.

Whitley stepped by with his usual stooped shoulders and handed her another file, which she stacked with the rest, this time eliciting a groan from one of the folders. Tonks rubbed her cheek thoughtfully. "Someone would help you, Harry . . . you hardly are in this alone." Voice harder, she added, "You never were, you know."

Harry pressed down unwelcome memories and focused on the present. "I haven't sensed him in a while. And I haven't been looking, not since Halloween."

"He was a dunderhead, Harry," Tonks stated. "Unlike many of the others we need to deal with right now."

"Why is he still out there then?" Harry asked, upset at being put off.

"A lucky and extra paranoid dunderhead."

Harry paused until Rogan finished fetching a small crystal ball from his desk and departed again, tossing it in the air and catching it again as though uncaring of the value. When he was gone, Harry said, "But he must think it is safe for him now, eh?"

"We've not had any sightings, Harry. Only you have any news of him, and you haven't exactly been sharing it," she pointed out, anger underlying her words. "Just because you aren't allowed to be involved at all levels, doesn't mean you aren't part of this team. Where did you sense him last?"

"Near London."

She tilted her head as though this was news. "He must have gotten better at disguise." She bit her lip. "Or he has help. There are still people out there, although not many, who would sympathize with him." She stared off in the distance thoughtfully. "We can issue another round of posters. No one would complain if we did." She pulled out out a mostly blank scrap parchment and scratched a note on it. "London, eh?" She stuck a pin through the note and added it to the layers upon layers of notes already pinned to the cubicle divider. "Any other news, Harry, please consider sharing it," she stated this in such a cold tone that Harry felt it as well as heard it.

Harry stood, fighting the tangle under his ribs. "So what happened the other day when Vineet and I got left at the safehouse?" He asked this because he figured he had little to lose and only information to gain.

"Nothing," she replied.

She sounded honest, so Harry echoed, "Nothing?" in disbelief.

"Turned out it was a complicated mistake."

Harry thought of Rogan's comments about vague and inaccurate reports and felt uneasy. "That's strange."

Without looking up from the file she had reopened, she replied, "It was. We spent a lot of time determining that it was truly the case . . . that nothing was going on." She sounded dismissive, so Harry moved off, feeling heavyhearted.

When Harry opened the post that afternoon his spirits lifted when he found a letter from Patricia. Inside was a photograph of her, her husband, and the two children. He stared at it for several seconds before realizing that it was unlikely to start moving. It occurred to him that he had no good picture to send back, unless he wanted to send a page of the Prophet. He placed the photograph inside the edge of the frame of a picture of him and his friends from third year. He could really use a new one of the group of him and his friends as well, they looked much too young in this one – naïve even. And sometimes when he looked at it, he felt the cursed grip of the events to follow, as though they were still in the future. But they weren't. Voldemort was gone. The Ministry was run more competently. Things had changed a lot from that moment captured at the Leaving Feast that year, but the otherwise innocent photo still unwelcomingly evoked that past.

The unmoving photo of his smiling relatives covered too much of the one underneath; he would have to get a new frame. He would also have to get a picture with his guardian, as he didn't have a good one to send or even to keep.

Harry wrote out a nice reply addressed to Patricia, and just in case her husband might see, put it in care of Mrs. Evans and gave it to Hedwig to deliver. His owl's white form soared away over the trees, making Harry smile at the expected scene of her arrival. He had mentioned how wizards send post . . . hadn't he? In any event, they would welcome an owl delivery he was certain, unlike the Dursleys.

"Don't put your things down and change yet," Rodgers said when they arrived on Wednesday. "We are going to do some work outside, practice some larger barriers. Magical Games and Sports is storing a herd of racing thestrals in our usual spot, but fortunately our assistant department head has offered the use of his property in Ottery-St. Catchpole for our spell practice."

Harry's spirits rose at the prospect of visiting the Burrow. They Apparated in just behind the house and Mrs. Weasley came out, drying her hands on a bright yellow

polka dot apron, a dingy grey parka pulled over her shoulders. "Harry dear," she said, giving him a big hug. She then released him and straightened her apron while flushing under Rodgers' dismayed scrutiny.

"Mrs. Weasley," he said soberly shaking her hand as though to make a point about decorum. "We promise not to be any trouble, please let us know if we disturb you at all."

Harry was very grateful he had left his rabbit-lined gloves in the pocket of his cloak, as they followed Rodgers of the uneven ground to the area usually used for Quidditch. In fact one of the poles still held a bent bicycle rim. Rodgers turned to Harry. "This is technically not far enough away from a Muggle settlement," he breathed as though wanting to hold that over him.

"In the summer the trees block the view from the nearest road," Harry pointed out, then hoped that it wasn't obvious that the trees had grown magically fast. Right now they looked like ordinary leafless trees.

Rodgers frowned at the tall line of trees and then let it drop in favor of explaining the barriers he wanted to practice. "The first is an object repelling barrier, traditionally called the cannonball catcher because it was widely used to protect castle walls. The second is a Muggle repelling charm such as a Quidditch stadium would have . . . "

They worked for hours. The spells began with them holding their wands in the air near each other and incanting a spell in unison repeatedly until a hazy glow encompassed all of their wands. Usually the glow would only be around two of the wands and almost always around Vineet's and Rodgers'. Harry did as poorly as the others and he struggled with the advice to feel the spell and channel the nearby magic as well as his own through his wand. Vineet patiently followed along, although it was clear he didn't need the practice.

Lunchtime came and went and still they worked at it, Rodgers apparently not pleased with their progress. Mrs. Weasley interrupted around 1:30, for which Harry and his rumbling stomach were very grateful. She brought them all cups of chicken soup and Rodgers accepted one rather than complain about the interruption as Harry expected he would.

When their wonderfully warm mugs were empty, he said, "All right, back to it. You are the slowest bunch I've ever seen at this." Harry, Kerry Ann, and Aaron shared a frown as they raised their wands yet again. Harry restrained himself from pointing out to their trainer that the Ministry had never tried to teach barriers to this many apprentices at once, so how did he know?

Chapter 69

Despite his aching arm and frustration, Harry dearly needed to shop for Snape's birthday present for that Friday. They departed the Burrow after Mr. Weasley arrived home, so twilight hovered over Diagon Alley when Harry stepped out onto it. Few shoppers were out this late in the cold and some of the shops, such as the Apothecary, were already shuttered for the night.

Harry wandered down the street, still having no good ideas of what to buy. He had been saving his allowance and had a good amount to spend, but without any ideas, Galleons themselves weren't helpful. Harry peered into the Eeylops window and dismissed any owl accessories as too boring. Fortescue was doing a brisk business in hot cider and small cakes. Harry ordered a cider and was desperate enough he almost asked Florean for gift ideas.

"Hello, Harry," came a voice beside him as he gingerly sipped from a steaming, chipped mug. It was Belinda, Bones' receptionist.

"Oh, hi," Harry replied, pleased to run into her, but given his dilemma, not showing it.

"Your stop on the Prime Minister tour went memorably," she said with a bright smile.

Harry had previously thought that if anyone else had mentioned that, he would have reacted very differently than he actually did. Instead of snapping, he grinned mischievously and said, "We got their attention."

She smiled more. "So what are you doing out on such a nice evening?"

Harry thought that her sarcasm needed a little more work . . . she sounded serious. But Harry realized she might be able to help. "I need to buy a present for my guardian–my adoptive father. I have no good ideas. Do you?"

"Hm, I don't think I realized that you had been adopted."

"You keep up with these things?" Harry asked evenly between sips of clove-scented cider.

"I have to for my job. I read a lot of personnel files, believe me." She bit her lip then and Harry wondered if she had pulled his just recently. She went on, "But . . . gift ideas. I think I can help with that. I do a lot of that as well for visiting dignitaries."

Harry set his empty mug back up on the window ledge. "I'd really appreciate any help. Last year I got him an exotic tea, which he really liked, but now he orders that kind for himself. That idea was someone else's too." They began walking slowly down the street together. Harry strangely found her very easy to talk to. Maybe it

was the way she managed to look interested in what he was saying without looking overly interested.

"Well, let's see. What does he do in his spare time?"

"Hm, works on spells, I guess. He doesn't have a lot of spare time, really."

"Well, so I assume you considered a spell book?"

They were in front of Flourish and Blotts, and stopped as a result. "Yeah. But he has a lot of books and an entire library at his disposal, so it would have to be something rarer than I can get in two days."

"Two days?" She laughed. "You didn't leave yourself much time," she chastised gently.

"I've been thinking about it for, well, a few weeks at least."

"I think you're taking it too seriously. You just need to have something to wrap up and hand over. With dads that's all that matters, I think." She stopped to retie her boots which Harry now noticed stretched all the way up beyond her knees. They had high heels on them too, which explained why she was his own height. "So," she uttered thoughtfully while straightening, which she did with a certain charm, especially the way she tossed her thick hair back at the end. "What does your adoptive dad do?" she sounded quite curious.

"Strange my file doesn't have it in it," Harry commented casually.

"It is," she immediately rejoined and then sucked her lips in at giving herself away.

Harry laughed. "It's filed with the WFC."

"The paperwork at the Ministry rarely seems to find its way where it belongs. I once ordered a file from the records office for Jacob Jackson, this plaque maker the Ministry hired to redo the office labels and it wasn't until I finished summarizing the file that I realized the birth date was 1225 and the two was written like a nine. That Jackson had been dead for seven hundred years." She shook her head. "You know though, much of the stuff the WFC deals with isn't supposed to get into the personnel records. Your boss isn't supposed to find out if your kid is disowning you right after your wife ran off with a circus magician. But . . . back to your present."

"You know my dad. You had him at Hogwarts–Professor Snape."

She gave him a long look. "You are perfectly serious of course," she stated strangely as though accustomed to suppressing her reactions to things. She started walking

again. "I distinctly remember Potions," she said in a neutral tone. She clasped her gloved hands together before her. "Well, a present for Professor Snape," she intoned slowly as though getting used to the idea.

"Never imagined thinking about that?" Harry supplied, amused.

She shook her head slowly. "Nope. Doesn't do much in his spare time," she repeated thoughtfully.

"Except make up ways to torment first-years," Harry quipped easily.

"Stop speaking my thoughts. You don't know Legilimency, do you?" she asked, teasing.

"I do, but haven't been using it. That is in my personnel record I expect, if my application is in there."

"Yes, it was," she admitted. "I only read your essays."

"Ugh. I wrote them under duress," Harry insisted with a groan, which made her laugh. She had a nice laugh, the realization of which made Harry step back emotionally. He knew nothing about her availability beyond Kerry Ann's rumors that she had given up dating Ministry people in some kind of huff.

"What would he like if he could have anything?"

Candide, was the very first thing to leap into Harry's mind. He looked up at the first floor windows across from them and traced down to the darkened ones of the accounting office. A few windows further down, the lamps of Tri-W were lit. "Hm," Harry uttered, getting an inkling of something. "I have an idea, but you should wait here."

"Why?" she asked curiously.

"Well, because if this works I'll be breaking several Ministry regulations and I don't want any witnesses about whom I don't have anything to hold over their heads. And I know almost nothing about you . . . "

Before Harry could turn away, she tugged his sleeve and quickly said, "My full name is Belinda Beatrix Beluna, but everyone always called me Bell when I was young. My parents are both magical and I didn't have any sign of magic even after my Hogwarts letter so my first year was really very difficult, even with everyone insisting that the school never made a mistake, but I since found out that they actually did once graduate a Muggle in 1421 after not having the heart to kick him out." She finally took a breath. "I've been working for Bones for a month, even though I always

wanted to be a broom charmer growing up but that never worked out, and working for Madam Bones is a lot of pressure but I really like meeting all the interesting people who come through the office and I get to know everything that is going on . . . " She bit her lip and fell silent.

Harry laughed lightly. "Okay, so I do know something about you. But . . . oh, well, come along then. I'm going down to the Weezes."

"Fred and George's place? Those two are completely bonkers." She bit her lip yet again and straightened attractively. "All right then," she said more gamely.

Harry liked the way she could do that, sort of pull a diplomatic face down. If Kerry Ann was correct that the Minister was very pleased with Belinda, then Harry could imagine that might be one reason.

On the rickety dark staircase leading up, Harry took Belinda's hand, to help her along, of course. At the top Harry lowered his luminescent wand and knocked on the door. Much scrambling about could be heard from the other side and then nothing. Harry was about to knock again when something slithered out from under the door and stretched up before them. Belinda stepped back suddenly at the sight of the eyeball on a long pink thread that hovered before them, a detached eyelid blinking over it bizarrely.

"Harry!" the door popped open and one of the twins stepped out and quickly bundled up the eyeball and stuffed it away. His eyelid was sill inside out however, and he deftly flipped it over.

"Extendable eyes?" Harry asked, pointing to his bulging pocket. The Weasley rooms smelled even more pungent than Harry remembered and he had to put an effort into not wrinkling up his nose.

"Still experimental. Not selling them yet. Come on in. And who is . . . ah, Belinda. How are you . . . haven't seen you in yonks. George, come see what time has wrought on little Belinda."

"Hey there," she complained.

As George shook hands, Fred asked, "To what do we owe this little visit?"

"I need a favor," Harry said. "I need a present for Severus and some of the few things he might like that he doesn't already have, you do have."

"Ah," the two of them uttered in joint understanding.

Harry asked in a slightly pleading tone, "Is there anything you didn't end up needing that you think he might like, or something I can replace later, because his birthday is on Friday and don't have much time."

Fred pulled his hat around so that it pointed forward and rubbed his unshaven chin thoughtfully. "Replace I don't think is possible for you, but we may have something or two somethings." He and his brother stared at each other. "The K.T? We haven't used those and they are taking up space in the volatile storage trunk."

Equally cryptic, George said, "The A.S. as well. It's been in there a year."

"All right, then!" Fred said, suddenly excited. He and his brother went to the corner of the long narrow room and after much shuffling of things around, including hovering two trunks to the corridor because there was no space elsewhere to put them down, they gingerly unlatched a large steel-sided trunk. Fred, tongue sticking out with the effort, reached oh, so slowly into the trunk and removed two packages. "Oh, and this too," he whispered, sounding very nervous. Finally the trunk was closed again and extensively latched back up.

Fred handed over the three packages one at a time after he was certain Harry had each of them. "I can't believe we are getting presents together for Snape. Harry, you do make life interesting for us all, you know."

"But, what are they?" Harry asked.

"This . . . " Fred held up a silver ball with a hinged top a third of the way up. ". . . . is Asteroid Salt. Have to confess we never got it to react with anything although it is considered sought after. These are Kraken teeth," he explained, pointing at a thick leather sack in Harry's hand. "Very active if mixed properly. Don't get them near a flame. And . . . the jewel that has proved too hot to handle . . . " Here he took back the sandalwood box and after de-enchanting the lid with a wave of his wand, opened it. Inside were tiny bits of black broken glass and lots of glass dust. "Two of the top five most powerful Japanese potions require it for proper brewing but it is highly regulated even there. Our first two experiments with it went so badly that we haven't tried again. Frankly, we just need to dispose of it now."

Harry was staring at the sparkling stuff that filled the box. His heart felt oddly emptied as he peered at it.

"Harry," George prompted, sounding concerned.

"What? Oh, what is it?" He closed the lid himself and felt better immediately.

"It is crushed glass of a Kuromakyo–a demon mirror."

"Why do you have that? It sounds darkly magical on its own."

George shrugged. "It is used in magical paints in Japan to get an iridescent glow. That's what we were going to use it for, that coloration, but if the potion isn't perfect, the power isn't trapped right and . . . "

Fred shuddered. Belinda leaned over and opened the box to peer into it. She looked interested rather than alarmed as Harry might have expected.

"But, when the power is trapped by the right mixture, it is just beautiful. We saw the effect on an antique in a shop in York and talked the proprietor into selling us the glass powder. He had no use for it anyway, just kept it around to tell the story."

"I tried to bring it back to him but he'd retired and moved to Majorca and I didn't trust the couple running the shop now," Fred explained.

Harry slowly accepted the box. "So . . . it is from a mirror into the demon world?" Harry asked, very curious and just a little hopeful that perhaps the Japanese knew something more about the Dark Plane.

"No," George replied, surprised by that guess, "It is from a mirror used by a demon."

"Ah," Harry said, still uncertain.

"Harry," Fred admonished. "If you are looking for a present for a master potion brewer, it doesn't get any better than that one."

"True," George said. "Having invaded his personal stocks on, well . . . shall we say, having glanced at his personal stocks on several occasions, I've never known Snape to shirk from a powerful potion ingredient."

As Harry and Belinda were leaving, Fred ran down the steps to catch them at the door. "Oh, I almost forgot . . . don't take those in the Floo. Or, how about, I wouldn't take them in the Floo, even if I were married to a hag and dying of a terminal ingrown toenail. Just a bit too much Floo powder and you could vaporize a dozen Floo nodes if you were carrying those, not to mention your own insides. Oh, and nice to see you again Belinda." He gave a gallant bow to her and zipped back up the steps.

Harry stood in the street and stared down at the packages while he figured out what to do.

"Shrewsthorpe is way in the north, isn't it?" She glanced at her watch. "The overnight leaves in half of an hour..."

"Good idea," Harry said. "I can probably Apparate all right to the station." He hefted the packages as though checking the weight. "I should probably go. . . "

"Maybe we should . . . " Harry started to say just as Belinda said, "Do you think . . . ?" Harry waited for her to continue, which she did after a gay laugh. "No, you please," she insisted.

In the silence of thinking harder, Harry found himself having to force the words out of his mouth. "Should we plan to get together sometime?" he asked, trying not to look strictly down at the packages in his hands rather than her bright brown eyes.

"I'd love to. How about next weekend sometime?"

"Excellent, I'll send you an owl," Harry assured her and then, stepping back with a nice goodbye, Disapparated while very carefully cradling his burden in his arms.

He reappeared at the far end of the platform, beyond a drinks machine. It was a little risky but since it was night, Harry figured it would be quiet. He only needed to walk back along the platform and through the barrier. Platform 9 and 3/4 was deserted this early. Harry took a seat and rather than risk setting his packages down, continued to hold them until the train arrived.

Friday, Harry rushed home from training, changed his shirt, snatched up the small trunk he had packed with a feather pillow and an old towel, grabbed up his broom, bundled himself in his winter cloak and gloves and took off from the back garden. It was nearly a two hour flight to Hogsmeade in good weather, heavily laden. Harry straightened the compass on the broom handle, gripped the trunk tightly under his arm, and leaned into the fastest speed the broom could sustain.

By the time Harry landed, his arms were numb from the wind. Repeated heating charms had quickly been negated by the misty cold air buffeting him. Outside the Middle Inn, he swung his arms to loosen them before he straightened his hair in the reflection from the window set into the door. He ascended the rickety stairs and, as he waited to be seated, tried to look normal while holding a broom in one hand and a trunk under the other arm. The dour waiter directed Harry's cloak and broom off to a side room with a flick of his wand before leading him to an empty table.

Snape arrived ten minutes later, enough time that Harry had himself fully composed and warmed up. "Happy Birthday," Harry offered as a greeting.

A small smile took over Snape's lips as he sat down. "Thank you for coming," he said a little stiffly.

"Wouldn't miss it," Harry chastised him.

The meal passed quickly in quiet conversation. Harry had the sense that Snape needed a break more than entertainment so he kept his training stories few and far

between, although now that he was here with his guardian, he found himself wanting to share all kinds of things he had forgotten until then.

By dessert, the formal restaurant had filled with Wizarding's more fashion-sensed members. Bright conversation poured around them and everyone seemed to be smiling, making Harry wonder if this was normalcy or not. It didn't feel too bad. Remembering, Harry reached under the table and gently took out the trunk, which Snape certainly would recognize as one of his own. "I got a present for you," Harry said, setting it down on Snape's side of the table. "But don't open it here," he quickly added. Snape's hand moved away from the latch and his hawk-like visage shifted to curious.

Speaking quietly, Harry explained, "It's some rare, and probably regulated if not banned, potion ingredients."

With a teasing snide Snape asked, "The Ministry didn't teach you how to look up regulations yet?"

"Oh, they did. I just thought . . . " Harry shrugged. " . . . that I was better off not knowing."

Snape placed the trunk on the third empty chair at the table. "Well, thank you. You somehow always know what to get me."

Before they finished their slices of chocolate cake, Snape put down his fork and said, "I find myself much too curious . . ." He had Harry's attention because Harry didn't know the topic. "What is in the box?" Snape asked.

"Oh," Harry laughed and then more quietly, said, "Get ready for this: Kraken teeth-"

"Indeed?" Snape asked, sounding very pleased, making Harry think he should have just stuck with that.

Harry went on, "Asteroid salts."

Snape's brow left brow rose higher and he almost reached for the trunk but restrained himself. He looked as much like a first-year in a sweet shop as he ever had.

"And the real zinger," Harry went on, "Demon mirror glass."

Snape didn't respond immediately, when he did, he soberly said, "You are, of course, joking."

"Mm, nope," Harry insisted. "Most of it is in a pretty fine powder," he added for good measure, assuming that broke down the magic more.

Chapter 69

Snape blinked down at the small battered trunk beside him. He actually looked vaguely uncertain. "I think . . . I will need to respell my potions cabinet. Most definitely. Or perhaps get a new potions cabinet." He patted the box very lightly. "A most pleasant surprise, Harry."

Harry grinned happily. "I was going to get a tie, but then I thought, he never wears ties."

"Your gift comes just when I was thinking it was time to show Greer up a bit in the brewing department."

"Oh, please embarrass her for me," Harry pleaded as his empty cake plate was removed.

"I will do my best." Snape stood when the waiter asked if they wanted coffee. "It is getting late, I'm afraid. I have to check a student doing detention with Filch this evening." While Harry placed sufficient Galleons on the table, Snape picked up the trunk, hefting it experimentally. As they departed, he asked in sudden alarm, "You didn't take this in the Floo, did you?"

"No, I came by broomstick." At that moment Harry received his broom and cloak back from the waiter.

Snape turned at that. "That was a rather long ride in the cold."

"I didn't mind," Harry insisted, forgetting his numb arms in the wake of Snape's pleasure at his gift.

"Be careful with them," Harry teased when they parted in the middle of the street.

Snape gave him an acquiescing bow and a snap of his cloak and stepped away.

All the next week they were dragged out into the cold field at the Burrow to practice barriers. By midweek, Harry was even more impressed with Vineet's patience, especially since it seemed to be setting an example for Rodgers to follow. Rodgers at least called for breaks now when he was frustrated with them, rather than getting angry.

During one such break, Harry and Aaron stepped away in the direction of the makeshift Quidditch goal.

"You aren't just pretending to stink at this, are you?" Aaron asked.

Harry laughed which felt good after two straight hours of negligible progress. First thing that morning they had finally all managed a basic object repelling barrier and everyone had cheered, even Rodgers. But since then their Muggle repelling barrier and their illusional steep incline barrier had little success.

Mrs. Weasley, bundled in two Gryffindor scarves, came out with hot cocoa. Everyone gathered around and thanked her effusively.

Kerry Ann broke the resulting sipping session with, "So, Vishnu of the Great Barriers, when does your wife arrive?"

"She is coming in two weeks time."

"Ah, bring her into the Ministry," Kerry Ann urged.

"I do not wish to overwhelm her so soon."

"Oh, come on," she teased, putting a thickly jumpered arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry will behave himself."

Harry spent a restless evening trying in vain to finish his readings for Thursday, the day Rodgers seemed to actually question them closely on their assignments. He found, however, that he could not sit still. He paced to his room to change out of his street clothes and into jeans and a housecoat, thinking that he might relax if wearing something more comfortable. It didn't work; his left foot continued to bounce on its own as he sat at the dining room table with a thick book entitled Mahemic Mastery Manual open before him to a daunting page four.

Harry slapped the book closed and paced the hall once. Perhaps a walk, he considered, to lose some of this energy. Or, perhaps a flight. That idea lifted his spirits considerably. He stepped to the back entry and out to the dark, wild garden behind the house. Stars winked overhead out of a clear dark sky and the cold air froze his lungs. Without hesitation Harry transformed into Gryffylis and stood tall, breathing in the now comfortable air. The stiff wind felt refreshing and freeing as it ruffled his furred legs and feathered chest.

Harry raised his wings upward and with a powerful leap, launched himself over the garden wall. Many powerful flaps later, he reached a comfortable speed and relaxed

into flight just above the treetops, which loomed dark as they passed below him. This was the first time he had started from standing and, despite the effort at getting going, he thought it had gone pretty well. Two hard, quick flaps gained him enough height for a sweeping turn and a sheep field slid by below him, the street lights casting the telephone poles as long bars across it. Then their street went by, and Elizabeth's neighborhood, and then fields again.

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 69

Harry gained more height and played with his speed a little to see what took the least effort to maintain. He found that if he shifted the long feathers at his wing tips–sort of like spreading his fingers–the air that would pass through his wings at the angle his wings normally slowed him down. He experimented with this along with relaxing into a long glide to see how far he could go without flapping. It wasn't as far as he would like and he had to touch down in a field with one back and one front foot to get airborne again. He supposed that he was rather more ungainly than your average eagle. But he was pleased to find that his wings had a natural position for gliding that required almost no muscle to maintain and small foldings in and out of his wing tips was sufficient for steering and leveling. The air still felt wonderfully refreshing even though on a broom he would have been quite frigid. Perhaps the hot rush of freedom was helping keep him warm.

Harry continued on, content with simply following north along the river valley. He knew he could always Apparate home, although he was planning on testing if he could find his way back on the wing. Passing over the motorway resulted in an unexpected lift, so Harry ducked his head to dip lower again. The river turned eastward and Harry rose to clear the hills on the left to continue north.

A village, all alight with shops and a petrol station, passed by below him on the other side of the hill. Muggles were moving around their cars and walking on the pavements, bundled against the chill. Harry felt sorry for them there on the ground. He grinned as well as he could with his catlike mouth and flapped higher to avoid being seen.

A dark, wooded area passed beneath Harry now, a large one that stretched to the distant hills, although the sky was lit ahead as though by a big city. Harry swerved side to side to practice his steering some. It was on one of the broader turns to the

left that he espied a bonfire through the trees. He veered back and flapped harder to speed up and get a look. Three fires came into view, burning in a clearing. The positioning, an equilateral triangle, was typically the way witches would have them during a coven gathering.

Curious, Harry flew closer, peering in detail with his odd gryffylis vision. The fires flared green and the next instant Harry was upside down with the star-packed sky below his feet. Frozen with surprise he held his wings straight and still. The dark trees loomed above him and gravity was pulling him in confusing ways but mostly toward the trees it felt like. Harry forcefully put himself past the panicked disorientation and considered that he had not turned over; he was certain of that. Methodically Harry flapped his wings hard and balanced on the stars as downward. Repeatedly he flapped, stubbornly ignoring the approaching crash with the craggy dark forest. Suddenly, he was upright again, flying high above the ground and the three fires which now appeared small and close together. Harry rose higher still and rotated quickly away to gain some distance before circling lower and gathering his thoughts.

Figures moved around one of the fires. Harry used his keen animal eyesight to get a good look at the space between that fire and the wall of trees beyond it. Then, taking a very deep breath and steadying himself, he flapped and raised his head to come to a dead halt in the air. One last flap gave him a straight up lift and just as he reached the top of it, he released his Animagus form, and Disapparated.

With a bang! that Harry heard echoing when he arrived and dearly wished he did not have to make, he appeared behind the five robed figures. His wand was in hand from his housecoat pocket before they turned around. They were witches–the kind that fit the Muggle understanding of that term much too well.

"Who are you?" one exceptionally stooped one asked. When Harry didn't reply, she used her staff to stomp in his direction.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in his best Auror voice.

Behind the approaching witch the others were feeding the fire and muttering about something getting away. Wood was hovered onto the other fires, making them spit tall towers of sparks into the dark air.

"If you must know," the witch answered snidely, "we were brought in by the neighboring village to rid them of a vampire. I don't know what business it is of yours . . ."

"Why don't they have the Ministry take care of it?" Harry asked.

"Ha!," she scoffed. "We are a very long way from the Ministry, my boy. Up here, we are the assistance most wizarding folk get."

Harry didn't think he had flown that far, but he didn't know enough about hedge wizardry to argue. She was eyeing his wand, so he lowered it and stepped over to the others at the fire, from which the heat radiated too much to get really close, although the witches seemed to be able to.

"Yvonne," one of the others complained. "Something was definitely in the trap but it has vanished."

"That was me," Harry said.

They turned and looked him up and down, eyes dwelling on his orange and green plaid housecoat and maroon knitted slippers a little longer than on his face. "You don't dress like a vampire," one of them commented dryly, as though trying for an insult.

"I'm not." Harry put his wand away and looked up at the sky, stars barely visible over the bright fire. He didn't know how to catch a vampire, only repel them, and thought perhaps he would like to wait around in case one showed up so he could see.

Yvonne shuffled over to him. "So . . . what are you then?" she asked challengingly. "You don't have a broomstick."

"My Animagus form can fly," he explained. "I was out stretching my wings and saw your fires and got curious." After she had examined his eyes to assess the truth of that, he added, "I really think the Ministry would send someone to help if there was a problem with a vampire."

She scoffed again and stepped back to her cohorts. Harry stepped back from the fire to better see the sky, but not so far as to get cold from his poor late-autumn dress. The witches were leaning close together and whispering; one of them turned and glanced back at him with a throaty giggle before breaking away and approaching. She was the shortest of the group and her robes the most worn. Her long crooked nose even sported the expected wart. She gave him a half-toothed grin that set Harry's neck hairs on end.

"Yes?" Harry asked. "I just thought I'd wait around . . . "

"Oh, no matter, no matter," she cackled and continued to approach. Harry stepped back, farther from the fire, thinking perhaps he should go rather than wait. The approaching witch looked different now. Harry blinked and watched as she grew

taller and younger and long auburn hair spilled out of her hat, which was no longer worn and bent but shiny and straight. Her clothes too changed into a fancy black dress with a fur cloak and long black gloves. Harry stepped back again. The spell progressed differently from a Metamorphmagus one, making Harry curious what spell it was.

"Do you like Gretel now?" she asked provocatively.

"Um," Harry hemmed and took another half step back as she continued to approach. Perfume even wafted around her. "It's not bad," he opined. Her eyes were now bright green and she flickered long eyelashes coyly before smiling in a most pleasant way. Harry was still slowly backing away. "But I think I should be going now . . ."

"Oh," she said playfully, "just when things were getting interesting."

"Uh, yeah. Really. Sorry to have bothered you all." Harry scrunched himself down to Apparate away . . . or tried to. Instead he found himself on his knees, in the center of the triangle of fires, Gretel right before him. Harry growled at himself; he had fallen this time for the same trick as before where he was fooled about direction. Instead of stepping back into the trees, he had stepped right into the center of their power.

Harry pulled out his wand and stood straight, eyes fierce. Gretel just laughed and the other witches approached, all grinning with amusement and anticipation. "And what are you going to do with that?" Gretel asked airily.

Harry's wand began to shake queerly. He lifted it and found himself holding the rattle of a long-fanged snake that twisted and coiled as it tried to strike him. "Stop it!" Harry hissed at the snake and it relaxed and uncoiled slowly, sniffing the air with its tongue unconcernedly. The witches were no longer smiling and Gretel, who had returned to her normal self, looked alarmed. "Remove the illusion from my wand," Harry ordered. The snake disappeared. Harry rubbed his fingers over the wood before holding it upward, not aimed, but ready.

An impasse seemed to have taken over. One of the witches huddled in the pack quipped, "Not often you see a dark wizard about in a housecoat. More the high-collared cloak type."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm an Auror, not a dark wizard," he insisted.

"You don't see them about in housecoats much either," someone else commented.

"We don't seem them about around here much at all," Gretel said.

Yvonne, the oldest one, stepped forward. "Most Aurors introduce themselves as such," she stated.

"Do they?" Harry asked. "Well, I'm still learning protocol. I'm new." He considered lowering his wand again but wasn't keen on letting down his guard at all. "Don't you know who I am?" he asked rhetorically. They all stared blankly at him. "You haven't seen my picture?"

"We don't have many pitchures here. Only pitchures we've got's on chocolate frog cards," the stoutest of the bunch retorted. The others chuckled.

"I'm on one of those," Harry pointed out. "Although, I've grown a bit since that photograph was taken."

The witches gave him puzzled expressions now. "He can't be . . ." one of them began to say when she was interrupted by the fires flaring green and nearly exploded with sparks. The witches scattered to tend the fires and Harry ran to the side to get out of the way. His hair and clothing had begun blowing around as though he had become the eye of a whirlwind. For many minutes a battle raged between the fires and something distant. The witches held up their hands and incanted spells into the fires and Yvonne stomped between them hurriedly shouting instructions.

Eventually, something dark fell into the center of the clearing. It fluttered there desperately before giving up and transforming into a man-shape. The man who straightened up, set Harry's teeth on edge, let alone the hair on his neck. He straightened slowly and crossed his arms as he considered the witches surrounding him. His grey and black streaked hair fell back when he shook it that way with eerie sensual confidence and his clothes were exquisite, although far out of date.

That awful chittering sounded just at the edge of hearing, making Harry realize that this man, this creature really, was a gateway to the Dark Plane. Harry stood, transfixed, as the witches continued their spells as they moved in, their hands up, palms outward, the green glow from the fires forming a dome over events. He hoped they knew what they were doing. The Vampire's eyes went from cocky to wary. He dropped his arms and gave his cloak a toss backward and disappeared. But he hadn't actually, he had transformed into a mist which unfurled itself, trying to get around the circle of witches. A chant in old english rose up from the five and the smoke drew into itself until it was in the shape of a bat and then solidified into a black bat that flapped madly an instant before a silver net was tossed over it and cinched down very tight.

Much shouting of glee went up from the witches who quickly collected their things. Harry had approached to get a closer look and, after some effort at getting her

attention, asked the witch holding the net what they were going to do with the vampire.

"We're going to have a bit of fun," she said gleefully and then she Disapparated, as did the others, leaving Harry alone in the clearing, the bonfires still burning hot in the cold night air.

Harry Apparated home. His house felt blissfully peaceful as he walked through it up to his room and then back down to the toilet for a much desired hot bath. With a sigh as he settled into the warm water, he considered that he still had much too much to learn.

The next morning, Harry arrived early at the Ministry with the intent of behaving like a real Auror, despite the distraction of an owl from Belinda agreeing to a movie in London on Saturday night.

"I need to file a report," he informed Tonks, who appeared to have been up the entire night.

She perked up at that, however. "Do you now? Anyone we know in this report?"

Harry didn't rise to the bait. "Some witches who hold a coven near Hadrian's wall. I only have two names, Yvonne and Gretel."

"Hm, what are they up to?"

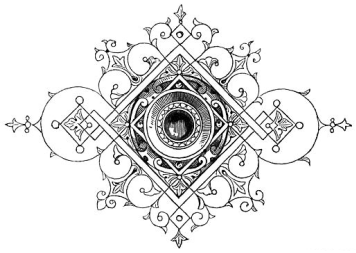
"They were capturing a vampire," Harry explained, accepting the long parchment form she handed him along with a never-out quill. The form was dauntingly long, but Harry settled in at Rogan's desk and methodically filled in all the details he knew.

Harry was working on the report section itself, for which he was having trouble coming up with the right terms for things as he had seen in other reports, when Tonks tapped him on the shoulder. "You have to get to training." She took the form from him and started reading it even before he departed. She was sober and serious around him now, which he continually found himself stinging from, despite efforts to dismiss it.

Training today was curse neutralization, because Rodgers insisted that they all needed a break, especially him. Fortunately they were all pretty good at this, so it became a bit of a game between them and Rodgers, with the trainer increasing the morbidity of the curses with each round and all of them avidly working together to break it.

Harry was glad the week ended on a high note; it left him in a good mood looking ahead to that weekend and his first date with Madam Bones' receptionist.

Chapter 79.



Time and Tide

Harry met Belinda in the Leaky Cauldron. She leaned gracefully on the bar chatting amiably with Tom who was wiping mugs with a cloth and lining them up on. "Hey, Harry!" Tom greeted him as he pushed open the door from Charing Cross Road, the windows of which hadn't had a cleaning in a century.

Belinda gave him a nice smile that implied that they shared some secret, and indeed they were the only two present dressed in Muggle clothes. She swigged the last of her mead and leaned away from the bar. Tonight she was wearing very high-heeled boots and was actually taller than Harry. He graciously held out an arm as she hooked her heavy cloak and they headed out. Behind them Tom loudly wished them a nice evening. Many heads in the room turned at that, although no one Harry recognized.

They walked to the Odeon, briskly because of the cold evening. Harry, in fact, had to keep up with his date, despite her loud and heavy boots. At first he considered offering to use a Silencing Charm on them, but then decided not to risk offending her. They arrived in plenty of time for the film so they settled into the small bar and had a beer while they waited.

"How was your week?" Belinda asked conversationally.

"It was not the best week of training I've had. We are working on barriers and most of us are turning out to be slow learners at it." Harry shrugged. He then felt the need to justify a bit. "Barriers are supposed to be hard to do, but for some reason Rodgers expects us to pick a barrier spell the first time he shows it to us. But you have to tune your magic to all the others building the barrier and we apparently don't work

well together when we're actually sharing magic. I think we are all too different from each other or something."

More people were crowding around, ordering drinks. Belinda said, "The Ministry is thrilled with your class' progress otherwise."

"Are they?" Harry asked.

"I'm pretty certain," she said with a sly smile.

The movie Belinda had picked out was about a time traveler who gets sent back to 1999 and must spend the movie fruitlessly trying to convince everyone that an army of robots was shortly going to take over the world. Halfway through, about the time the main character was plotting an escape from a mental institution, Harry slipped an arm around his date's shoulder. He didn't have to wait long for a reaction; Belinda immediately leaned into him, and Harry relaxed into the warmth and the fruity scent of her hair.

On the screen the man was frantically tying dental floss he had hoarded into a trip wire for the guard. Belinda asked, "Do you believe time travel is possible?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I've done it before."

The woman beside Belinda scoffed in amusement and rolled her eyes. "I believe him," Belinda retorted playfully. Into Harry's ear she said, "You'll have to tell me about it over drinks after the movie."

"You really want to hear that story?"

"It must be better than the one we're watching . . . this guy fails at the end. I think he goes completely insane and they lock him up for good."

"He'll probably be dead before the robots arrive, so that's okay," Harry opined.

The movie finally let out and the unsatisfying ending was negated by Belinda leading Harry out by the hand. An older lady waiting to file out gave them a wink as they exited in front of her. At a pub down the street from the Odeon, they settled into glasses of ale just before last call. "So time-travel. Tell me all about it," Belinda urged.

"Well, it was my third year of school and my friend Hermione had been given a time-turner by the headmaster so that she could take classes that were occurring at the same." Harry paused at Belinda's amazed look. Harry cast his mind back to that day, the desperate race to save Sirius . . . the desperate, and in the end, futile race to save Sirius.

His face must have reflected too much of his feelings because Belinda said, "Looks like it did fail."

"Yes and no," Harry admitted, hesitating to piece the story together because he wasn't certain how much old pain would rise with it.

"Drink up your ale first, then try telling it," Belinda urged.

"Sorry," Harry said. "In the end I couldn't save the one person who passed for family to me. At the time, that is. We were successful with the time-turner, all right, and my godfather escaped the Dementor's kiss by flying away on a hippogriff."

"Wait a minute . . . is this the hippogriff that was supposed to be executed? The one that slipped its leash?"

"Buckbeak, yes, the very one. My friend Hermione and I freed it just in time and flew it up to the tower where they were holding Sirius. They were just fetching the Dementors . . . "

She put her mug down with a load thud. "Ugh, that's awful. Fudge was completely inhumane." Harry didn't comment, he was seeped in the memory of Snape's anger at Sirius' escape. Belinda said gently, "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories . . . "

Harry conjured a smile for her. "It's all right. I haven't thought about some things in a while. And I have a family now . . . " He shrugged lightly, although unease still clawed at him. They finished their ales with harmless small talk and departed when the pub closed, moving with the bleary-eyed Muggles making their way out the door in a clump.

Harry walked Belinda in the direction she indicated led home. "I live just here," she said eventually and stopped before an apartment building on a small side street. As Harry looked around, she said, "A wizard from Sports and Games lives on the second floor there, a witch lives on the end there. It is nice to have someone to fall back on if something magical comes up. Like once I left an ironing charm uncanceled, and fortunately Mrs. Florence went over and stopped it from ironing all of my books, which it had started on after it did the drapes and the bed sheets. My cat was cowering under the bed when I got home, so maybe it had gotten ironed as well."

Harry chuckled.

Belinda stood in silence looking up at him with bright eyes. "Are you coming up for another drink?"

"I think I should head home. I had field work late yesterday."

This took her completely by surprise. "Oh. All right. Well, I had a very nice evening . . . "

Harry gave her a quick kiss and friendly hug before holding her at arms' length and thinking that she just needed to lose that vaguely worshipful look and then she would be perfect. Harry said good night and with a glance up and down the quiet street, Disapparated to the Leaky Cauldron to use their Floo node.

At home he stepped through the house, humming faintly. He checked the post and actually ran up the stairs in a burst of unneeded energy. He paced his room, far too wired to sleep or even get ready to sleep. He wrote a letter to Hermione instead, explaining about the very nice date he had just had. As he read it over he considered that Belinda must have some flaws. Presumably he would find out what they were, eventually. Still humming, Harry tried to do a little reading, but even this was tough in his overactive state. He forced himself to not wish he had accepted her invitation to come up to her flat. The evening would have ended predictably, and he needed to get to know her a bit better, but just a bit.

Severus Snape opened his eyes and raised his head from the cold ground. He squinted perplexedly into the blue late-afternoon light radiating off the dusting of snow before pushing himself achily to his feet. He stood beside the peeling back wall of the Three Broomsticks and at his feet a patch of green grass had been revealed where the snow had melted. That was odd; the grass should be dead by now. Shaking out his cold, wet cloak before wrapping it and his arms around himself, he stumbled between the buildings to the road and looked around. Orange light poured onto the snow from the shop windows and the low sunlight made the ruts in the road look treacherous. Nothing unusual seemed to be happening, nor did he see anyone he did not trust. He turned in the direction of the castle and managed to put one half-numb foot before the other.

At the edge of the village, a small voice said, "Are you all right, Professor?"

Snape turned jerkily. Tracy Trillium, a first-year, barely recognizable through the thick cloak and knitted scarf bundled around her, was walking alongside, wide eyes looking concerned. "Of course," he snapped at her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shrugged, which barely translated through her thick outerwear, but continued to walk just behind as he cut across the street to take the path to the gate. "Are you following me?" he asked her, truly amazed by the notion.

She looked pained and explained haltingly in her muffled voice, "I, uh, was making sure you made it to the castle, sir."

Snape actually stopped hard and stared at her. "You what?"

Her arms waved awkwardly as she gestured in both directions. "You didn't look like you would make it for certain, sir," she explained.

"Off with you," Snape huffed at her in annoyance, too befuddled to manage anything more pointed.

"Yes, sir," Tracy replied. He stared at her as she headed back to the village, small back hunched over against the cold.

The castle torches flaming beside the doors were a welcome sight. Snape stepped inside, passing Filch, who was checking students in on his list. He headed down the stairs and strode to the dungeon classroom with purpose, intending in his chilled state to collect his thicker fur-lined cloak from the cupboard. He yanked open the door and paused on the threshold when a voice said, "Yes?" rather forcefully.

Snape stared at the chubby, curly-haired woman who was obviously mid-brew of something complicated at the front bench. A bit more rudely, she said, "Something you want, Severus?"

Snape looked around the subtly altered room from the primitive painting of the London skyline on the wall beside the supplies room door, to the short curtains on the small upper windows, something even he wouldn't have thought useful in a dungeon. "No," he replied, thinking fiercely. Clearly he was the one out of place, though that didn't seem possible. He started to close the door, only to look in and around again in quick verification.

Grimly shaking his head, he strode with purpose up to the second floor and around the long corridors to the gargoyles. "Lemon drops," Snape said. They didn't move. He tried a few other common passwords to no avail. A student wandered by, one of the Prefects, Snape didn't turn to him, wished simply that he would go away.

"Need the password, sir?" the boy asked. It was Mumfred, one of the Hufflepuffs. Snape gave a noncommittal sideways nod. The boy said, "Lemon Zinger is the password."

The gargoyle jumped aside. "Is that a kind of sweet?" Snape huffed.

"Tea, sir," the boy patiently explained.

Stalking forward, feeling even more dread, Snape muttered angrily, "Right."

The moving staircase carried him to the top landing where the door stood open, something he rarely encountered. McGonagall paced behind the desk with a long parchment in her hand. The office was significantly changed and most of the mechanical contraptions were gone. "What can I do for you, Severus?" she asked, not removing her eyes from her reading.

Uncertainly, Snape said, "I suppose you would think me daft if I asked where Albus was?"

The parchment fluttered violently as her hand dropped to her side. It required a moment for her to say, "Yes, I suppose. Though not daft, perhaps befuddled." She looked him over very closely. "Have a seat, Severus. Tell me what is going on with you."

He accepted the chair and sat heavily in it. Mud was drying in spots on his cloak; he should have removed it before sitting. "I just now found myself, rather unexpectedly, on the ground behind the Three Broomsticks," he reluctantly explained. "I . . . seem to be in the wrong place now."

"Or the wrong time," McGonagall suggested easily. She came around and studied him still. "What do you believe the date to be?"

Snape started to answer, then hesitated. "February. I don't remember exactly," he added, disturbed by the lack of detailed memories for just the day before.

"That would indicate a Memory Charm. Especially since it is November."

"November?" Snape echoed. He sat straighter. "What has happened. Where is Albus?"

"Albus is dead, Severus."

"Not retired to beekeeping, then?" he asked, sounding alarmed as well as snide.

She smiled faintly. "No." She went over to the hearth and took down her canister of Floo powder. "I'm going to call the Auror's office, get someone to investigate."

"You think it worth their time? Aren't they a bit busy with important matters?" Snape asked, not liking the idea very much.

"I expect it worth their time. You don't appear injured so I doubt you had an accident. I'm assuming someone had ill intent, making you lose so very much time."

"What happened to Albus?" Snape asked after she spoke with a floating head at the Ministry and was told to wait ten minutes or so. "What kind of trouble are we in now?" he asked a little frantically.

"Relax, Severus," she soothed. "Perhaps I should call Madam Pomfrey after all? You are bit haggard, even for you."

Snape combed his hair back with his fingers, plucking out a dead leaf, and leaned back in the chair. "I am not myself, apparently." He then muttered, "Thought in this state I would not have any luck avoiding those meddlesome Gryffindors: Potter and his little friends."

Her face crooked into a small smile. "You needn't have worried about that, Severus. They are gone."

Snape fell still an instant before he asked, "They are dead as well?"

"No. They finished. It is November of ninety-eight. You are missing a bit more time than you realize."

Snape's hand fell from the back of his neck as he went slack in shock. "Ninety-eight?" he breathed. He glanced around the office and brushed his hand over his left forearm. "What of the . . . Dark Lord?" he asked carefully.

"Gone."

"Dead?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Very much so," McGonagall replied kindly.

He found it very hard to believe her. "You are certain? For good?"

She nodded and said, "You are very far behind, Severus. Very far. But you need not worry about Voldemort."

He flinched but moved on. "And my classroom? Some strange woman was in it."

"What do you think you are teaching?" she asked with a sparkle in her eye.

Snape pushed his shoulders back. "I am finally teaching Defense?" he asked, sounding almost hopeful. When she grinned in reply, he asked, "You did that?"

She shook her head. "Albus. Although I didn't disagree with his assigning you that position."

Snape relaxed just a bit, but his hands kept clasping and reclasping. "What happened to the Dark Lord?"

"You really should use his name, especially now that it doesn't matter," McGonagall pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone. She heated the teapot with her wand and held it up to ask if he wanted any. Snape nodded and accepted the cup when she had poured it out. "Need something stronger in that?" He nodded again, while hiding his surprise at her solicitory offer. She pulled a silver flask of brandy out of a desk drawer and gave him a splash of it.

He sipped the doctored tea carefully, hand not completely steady. "I cannot use his name. Even if he is gone."

"You do all the time," she observed.

"Do I?" he muttered in disbelief.

The hearth flared green, interrupting them, and Tonks stepped out and shook herself off.

"No partner today?" McGonagall asked conversationally.

"No. Only Fridays. And I wasn't certain what was going on, so I didn't pick him up." She stepped briskly over to Snape and pulled out her wand. "Hold still," she commanded. Snape looked very dubious, especially when she tapped the end of his nose with her wand, but he held still. A spark jumped from the end of it and stung him. "Looks like a Memory Charm, all right."

"From February ninety-seven," McGonagall supplied.

"What?" Tonks blurted. She spun back to Snape. "That long! I don't think I've ever heard of such a charm. You have . . .ninety-seven? You have no idea what has happened?"

"No, I do not," he replied nastily, tired of this.

"Oh, dear. Well." She rubbed her head. "That eliminates someone just trying to erase evidence of something recent. Let's take you back to where you became aware again and see what we find."

Accompanied by the headmistress, she led him out and down into the village. The three of them looked around the buildings, talked to people inside and to some of the other shopkeepers. No one had anything helpful to say. By the time they were walking back toward the Three Broomsticks, having canvassed the village, Snape was lagging behind.

Tonks waited for him to catch up. "Disoriented?"

"Fatigued," he snapped back.

"We should take you home to rest. A charm like that can be wearing. I've never heard of one covering so much time–it can't be holding tightly to any part of your memories . . . it has to be spread too thin. There's a chance you'll recover on your own as it weakens, but I'll have St. Mungo's send a specialist." She looked Snape up and down in concern. "Hopefully we'll have luck with you. I'd really like to find who did this."

Harry heard the flare of the hearth from the library and, curious who was coming in, headed that way, but Tonks was standing in the doorway to the dining room, holding up her hand to forestall him. Mystified, but accustomed to obeying her, he waited. The hearth flared again and voices sounded beyond. Tonks was speaking to someone who sounded like McGonagall. Harry inched forward and saw the headmistress helping Snape into a chair at the table. Concerned, he touched Tonks' shoulder.

"Just a sec," she said quietly.

Harry didn't feel like waiting a second. He couldn't understand why he was being kept out when something clearly had happened to Snape.

"You said you would call someone from St. Mungo's?" Snape was saying when Harry pushed by Tonks. Snape looked up at him, eyes narrowing severely. McGonagall, who looked about to reply, fell silent. "What are you doing here?" Snape demanded of Harry.

Harry blinked at him, then looked between the two women. Tonks explained, "He's had a Memory Charm."

"Yeah? One that took out how much?" Harry asked a little vehemently. The implication rattled him.

Snape pushed himself to his feet and stepped toward Harry. "You didn't answer me," Snape pointed out, voice holding nothing but cold, rocky cliffs.

Harry actually took a step backward, bumping the mantel, before he gathered his wits. Snape's looking him up and down as though surprised by his height, gave Harry an extra moment to level himself.

"I live here," Harry stated frankly, feeling unseated to be arguing about such a thing.

Snape's eyes narrowed farther, lids vibrating a little. He turned to McGonagall, who shrugged broadly. "Was a surprise to everyone, believe me."

"What was a surprise?" Snape asked dangerously.

McGonagall looked as though she were trying hard not to grin. "When you adopted him."

Snape seemed to swell at that. His head tilted to the side and he looked back at Harry who took another small step back in concern at the sheer fury he was seeing. "This is an elaborate hoax, isn't it?" he asked in a very low voice. "They gave you a height spell and Ms. Tonks an anti-clumsiness charm." Menacingly, he headed at Harry, who backed up again, almost to the wall beside the hearth, but Snape ended up nose to nose with him anyway, radiating anger.

The sound of teacups rattling distracted everyone. Snape turned, and aborted what he was going to shout at the elf bringing in the tea tray. "Who is this?"

The house-elf curtsied. "Winky, Master."

"Where's Tidgy?" Snape demanded.

After a silence Harry replied, "She was killed by Nagini." Snape's hard gaze came back around to him. "You know I'm telling the truth," Harry said levelly as he matched the intense black stare.

Snape snarled and stepped back to the table, which he leaned on heavily while gazing around the room, apparently to get his bearings. He spied the photograph of Harry with his friends on the sideboard and growled at it, turned away from it, then stepped around to slap it flat, out of sight. McGonagall, who had been amused, now looked concerned. She gave Harry a very sympathetic expression.

"What?" Snape began loudly. " . . . on earth . . . would possess me to adopt you?" Snape asked, waving a hand at Harry.

Harry, who knew several reasons, some Snape's stated ones, some his own guesses, nonetheless didn't feel like going over them before an audience. He remained silent instead, hoping like a thunderstorm, Snape would run out of energy. "What?" Snape mocked. "No answer to that?"

"I don't have an answer you'll understand, Severus" said Harry, sounding unhopeful to his own ears.

"DON'T call me that!"

McGonagall came around to face Snape down. "Sit down." When he glared at her challengingly, she said, "I inherited Albus' mantle, I'll have you know. Sit down." Snape grudgingly obeyed after hesitating, apparently for show. "Now, listen closely.

You have lost almost two years. That is a very long time. Blustering about like this isn't helping anyone, including yourself." She stood straight and sighed. "What you need is a good night's rest and a good looking over by a Healer." She sent Tonks a forceful look before stepping over beside Harry and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I need to return for dinner and two meetings, as well as to arrange for a replacement for him for the next week."

"I can teach," Snape insisted forcefully. "Defense, certainly. My memories of Defense are quite clear in my mind, thank you."

She spun on him while gripping Harry's shoulder harder. "Oh really? Tomorrow's lesson for the seventh-years is the Patronus. Ready to teach that?" She sounded downright cruel. "Your modern counterpart has it down rather well." She straightened and propped a hand on her hip as she surveyed the effects of that. Snape did look knocked back a bit.

Tonks uncrossed her arms and shrugged her cloak straight on her shoulders. "I have to get going as well. Stop by St. Mungo's, then the Ministry to file a report." To Harry she said, "You going to be all right here? I'll come back if you want."

"I'm fine," Harry replied flatly.

As they moved toward the hearth, Snape scrutinized Harry darkly, making Harry scoff, which only darkened Snape's expression. McGonagall hesitated on the hearthstone until Harry waved her on. "Owl if you need anything, Harry. I could borrow a variety of useful things from Mr. Filch . . . " she added with a crooked grin.

Harry waved her off again, but almost smiled at her offer. Tonks left with a, "See you tomorrow." When they were gone, Harry started to march out of the room, until Snape's, "Where are you going?" pulled him short.

"I'm going to continue my studies for tomorrow."

"Aren't you finished with school?" Snape prodded insultingly.

"I'm an Auror's apprentice, so I guess the answer is 'no'." Snape's lips pursed but he let Harry leave.

Harry glanced back to see Snape sitting slouched, eyes hinting at distress. Harry didn't see any path but to wait this out even though he longed to force Snape to understand. He returned to his reading but found it extremely difficult to concentrate. An hour later, after banging around in the drawing room, Snape stepped into the library. Without preamble he lifted the cover of Harry's book to read the title. His

eyes narrowed in surprise at Spell Predestination and Propagation: a Primer. He wandered the perimeter of the room like a caged animal, pausing a half minute at the shelves added for Harry's books before heading over to the overstuffed black leather chair in the corner by the large wall lamp. He looked like he really wanted to say something but was holding back. Harry turned back to his reading, head pounding.

Time ticked by. Harry, when he looked at the clock, was surprised how much time, given that he was forced to study with dark eyes inscrutably upon him. It began to occur to Harry that Winky had not asked if they wanted dinner, which should have been hours ago. He sighed and closed his book.

"Giving in already?" Snape sneered.

"I've been reading since noon. I wouldn't say, already." He stood to return the book to the shelf, which normally he wouldn't have done; he would have left it on the small table beside the lounger.

"So, an Auror. How sweet," Snape said in falsely touched tones.

Harry met his gaze. "Ironically," Harry began, level and conversational. "You don't know me well enough to hurt me. The current you could do it like that." Harry snapped his fingers. "But wouldn't."

"Someone must have addled him utterly," Snape said, sounding disgusted.

Harry shrugged. "I am surprised this you isn't at least grateful."

"For what?" he almost laughed.

Harry studied him instead of replying right away. "You haven't been told anything, have you?"

Snape violently swung himself to his feet and growled, "NO. I'm dragged back to my house only to find it isn't mine anymore. I've a new house-elf. My dungeon has some strange, rude woman in it."

"Greer," Harry supplied. "Gertrude."

"I've heard of her at least," Snape muttered, barely concessionary.

"She was rude to you because she despises me. And surprising as you'll find this, that doesn't make you and her allies."

"Goodness, were you as stellar in her Potions class as in mine?" Snape asked, voice dripping in sarcasm.

"For your information, I got an O on my Potions N.E.W.T. and my Defense one. On all of them except Transfiguration, Divination, and History, on which I received Es."

Through a twisted mouth, Snape said, "Well, good for you."

"I've already thanked you for your help in preparing for them, so I hope you don't mind if I skip thanking you this time around."

Snape stalked around the room again. "I won't miss the thanks, believe me."

Harry considered Snape as he stopped and pulled one of the fatter law books from Harry's shelf and flipped it open with a scowl. His head was bent tiredly over it, making Harry feel a little sorry for him. He was mean because he had never known much else, Harry had already decided, but had to remind himself. Harry's stomach reminded him about dinner. "I'm going to ask Winky for something to eat."

Snape paused before looking up. "And?" he asked rudely.

"Nothing," Harry said, and departed for the kitchen.

Harry ate alone, avoided having a glass of the smoky liquid which had replaced the used up sherry, and tried not to imagine that Snape's memory would stay like this because he couldn't bear it. After eating, he returned to the library, where Snape sat in the corner, going over a stack of parchments in a file. He peered in mystification at some of them. Glancing upside-down at the label on the file, Harry said, "You're the deputy headmaster, if you are wondering why you have that stuff."

Snape froze as he took that in. Without responding he stacked it all neatly beside the chair and began instead to stare beyond the wall beside him, fingertips rubbing his forehead in a fidgety way. Harry rubbed his own forehead as he dropped onto his seat, feeling beaten down in a way he couldn't fight. He closed his eyes as he rubbed them and then gasped hard and reached for his wand. Two shadows hovered close-by. Up in an instant, Harry reinforced the property boundary spell with the best barrier spell he could manage in a hurry, hoping to trap the invader in. Red light flared outside the window as the spell fought something. Harry evacuated the window and casement, leaving a neat, square hole in the stone wall, and then sent a barrage of incarcerating spells out into the darkness. With a two-step start he leapt out onto the side wall a yard from the window, teetering there after a moment's Animagus transformation and wing flapping to balance.

"Damn," he swore when he didn't see anyone. The fresh night air felt good, even as the stones and sharp broken mortar cut into his shin where he perched. Snape was at the window, looking astounded. Harry, as he had leapt out, thought he had heard

a loud pop! of Disapparation, which meant he was too late and his spells insufficient. Harry jumped back to the missing window and climbed in. "Damn," he repeated forcefully, the stress of the evening fueling his frustration. He waved the window back into place and paced the room. "Must have been Avery, but I can't imagine him getting away."

Snape looked from the window to Harry and back, twice. "Why would it be him?" Snape asked doubtfully and as though he were attempting to be derisive but could not manage it. He sounded undone.

Harry stalled in his pacing and feeling his patience running low, said in a difficult tone, "He's the only one not in Azkaban."

Snape restashed his own wand finally. "Could have been someone else, could it not?"

Harry sighed. "No." He then laughed mirthlessly. "Is there anything you do understand?" he asked, going for derisive himself, then wishing he hadn't. When Snape didn't respond, Harry added, "It was Avery, or someone else has escaped, but I expect we'd have gotten a message right away because the Ministry knows they'll come here looking to off either you or me, I honestly don't think they'd care which."

"I am surprised you didn't catch whoever it was," Snape said, managing to not sound like he was complimenting Harry, though he sounded honest. "But how do you know?" he insisted. "There was no hint, none of the protective spells gave a warning until you boosted them."

Harry's lips quirked into a smile. "I saw him in my mind. Voldemort," Harry accented with clear enunciation, "left a little of himself behind, which I inherited" When Snape unconsciously rubbed his left arm, Harry said, "Not that ability, as far as I know."

"Is that why I took you in?" Snape asked honestly, looking wary. "To pacify you."

Harry dropped onto the lounger. "I doubt it. I've never had that sense. Do you want to know what you told me was the reason?" Harry asked as he Fetched a parchment and Never-out quill from the desk in the drawing room and began a note to Rogan, who would be on duty tonight, regarding what had happened.

"I don't know. Do I?" Snape asked, facetious sounding.

"You said," Harry went on, feeling relentless and like he had gained the upper hand with his Voldemort revelation, "that you enjoyed my company and were tired of living alone." Harry signed the note and whistled for Hedwig to come down. She fluttered into the room and Harry handed her the letter and let her out the window of the

library after checking that no one was around outside. Then, finally, he met Snape's strange gaze and went on into the silence, "Other theories have been expounded: You are looking for protection from the Ministry, which you have needed, by the way because Dumbledore isn't here to vouch for you. You are looking for redemption, which is also possible given the story you told me about Nott recruiting you and yes, you told me that story."

Snape looked startled but didn't speak further. Harry's eyes ached. He tried to piece together the Memory Charm on Snape with Avery coming to the window. The connections didn't form. "I'm going to bed," Harry informed the room. "We can catch up more tomorrow late afternoon if you want, when I get home from the Ministry. I keep expecting you to ask about what happened to Voldemort, since it seems like Minerva didn't tell you."

"I asked, she . . . did not get around to answering the question." Snape turned away with a jerking motion and pointedly returned to his pile of parchments. Harry left for his room, feeling strung out and in the mood to punish this version of this man.

The next morning, Snape was at the table when Harry arrived for breakfast. He had already eaten, but Harry had not expected that Snape would wait. He had also already finished the Prophet, which indicated he had been awake for a while.

Before leaving for training, Harry stood beside the hearthstone, hand clenched around a ball of gritty Floo power. "Try to keep an eye out," he said. "Someone obviously wants to get at you."

With derision Snape growled, "You think I don't know how to watch out for myself?" He had his wand in his hand in less than an eye blink. "The weak, simpering me that you apparently know too well was the one taken advantage of, not this me. I have survived far more than you can imagine, O Auror apprentice."

Harry listened to this diatribe without looking up. When it wound down, he tossed down the powder without responding. At the Ministry, Tonks noticed that Harry had arrived early.

"A patrol is going through Shrewsthorpe in about ten minutes . . . I thought you'd still be home when they arrived. Things okay?" she asked. When Harry restricted his response to a shrug she frowned. "Shacklebolt and Moody will be reinforcing the spells around your place when they come through the first time. And I found the best Memory Healer I could, asked him to visit your house this evening. I thought you should be there while he is."

Harry shrugged that he agreed to all of this.

At lunchtime, Harry, dearly needing company, headed to the Minister's office. He carefully peeked in the open door to assess the situation. Bones' office door was open and she was loudly giving instructions to three staff members who were scurring about between the reception area and her office. Belinda looked a little frantic as well, as she flipped through a file. Harry made a low hiss and she glanced up, looked suprised and then gave him a nice smile followed by an apologetic shrug. The other staff headed into Bones' office at that moment and Belinda slipped away and joined Harry in the corridor.

"Good to see you. Hope you weren't expecting me to go to lunch," she said.

"Guess not. I just wanted to see you."

"All right. Here I am," she teased.

Harry glanced into the offices to make sure no one was paying attention. "I may not be able to do dinner this week. Something's come up."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. She appeared to want him to tell her what but as usual her expression neutralized neatly.

"It's too complicated to explain. Maybe later," Harry said, hearing a touch of strain or sadness in his own voice. "I'll let you get back to work. Good to see you."

At home, after a day that went much too fast, Harry found Snape in the drawing room, going through his files in a rather destructive manner. He strongly expected that Snape would later regret having thrown things around so haphazardly. When he spied Harry in the doorway, he dropped into the desk chair, looking exhausted and tense. Harry felt a twinge for him, even as nasty as he was behaving. Snape appeared to remember something and dug through the piles on the desk and pulled out a note. "Explain this to me," he commanded. Beside the stacks sat a rolled up copy of the adoption papers. Harry eyed them as he approached, but they looked unruffled. To get to the desk, he had to step wide over tipped piles of parchments and file folders.

Harry took the note card and opened it. "I've never seen this." He mulled over the date and Dumbledore's signature with a bit of a chill. "This is months after he died." Harry read the note, feeling very awkward as though he were eavesdropping. He folded the note and handed it back. "What do you want explained?"

"What is this anniversary to which he is referring?"

"Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied.

Snape looked keenly interested in this response. Winky stepped into the doorway and announced dinner, something she had never done before. Harry followed her out

and after he sat down and began, Snape arrived as well. They ate in silence, Harry rereading his letters from his friends, thinking he should write back but not sure he would have anything happy to discuss. Snape was reading Witch Weekly, which he never did. It was unfortunately the Most Eligible Bachelor issue, the only one they owned.

Snape noticed Harry watching him. "You must be insufferable to live with," he commented disgustedly, indicating the magazine.

"I try," Harry returned.

The doorknocker sounded. Harry got up and let in the Healer, an older wizard with poor eyesight. He looked Harry over critically before Harry convinced him that it wasn't he who needed attention. In the dining room Snape was convinced to sit still for an examination of the charm.

After several tests, the Healer put his wand and magic crystals away. "I've never seen such a charm, and I've seen quite a few. Any dreams last night you think may be missing memories?"

"I did not sleep last night."

"Well, you most likely will tonight, then," the wizard said brightly. "If your memories are going to break loose on their own it will start with your dreams. Short of the charm weakening, I would want to have the wand that did it in hand before attempting a reversal." He gave both of them a nod and departed, leaving Harry feeling unsatisfied and anxious.

After a long silence Snape asked, "When did I cease to hate you?" Harry shrugged because he didn't really know. Snape then asked, "When did you cease to hate me?"

Harry thought that over. "Some time around the end of my sixth year. You were being nicer to me." He ignored Snape's snort. "And I wanted a home badly enough to overlook a few things."

"Albus had something to do with this according to his missive from the grave."

"Of course."

The door knocker sounded again. Harry went to the door and accepted the book Elizabeth held out. "How are you?" she asked brightly.

"Surviving," Harry quipped. "I really can't visit right now. I'm having a personal crisis."

"Oh. All right." She stepped back from the door. "Good luck with it. If you need anything else, just owl again. I'll accept any distractions after the term I had."

"Thanks and I hope your revising is going well," Harry said sincerely. He closed the door, turned and handed the book to Snape, who was hovering behind him. "Since your pride won't let you ask for some stupid reason, you should read it."

Snape took the book and slowly turned it over in the dim hallway light. Harry turned up the wick in the lamp beside the coat cupboard, spilling flickering light and smoke around them. The book was the Wizard Annual 1997, a slim volume to fit neatly beside the multi-volume Wizard Encyclopedia Albion. Snape opened it where he stood and paged forward roughly.

"Let's see, H for Hero, or I for Insufferable."

"V for Very effing messed up," Harry suggested, feeling more anger. "P for Prophecy, perhaps."

Snape froze an instant but flipped to the back as he slid down the wall to settle in across from the cupboard. Harry slid down across from him, bumping the cupboard door closed. The floor was cold. Snape swallowed hard and began reading in the poor, shifting light, "Voldemort, AKA The Dark Lord, AKA Tom Marvolo Riddle. Voldemort's dreaded reign ended this year when the prophecy that set the precepts for his downfall was concluded. Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, so marked by Voldemort himself to be the One with the Power to Vanquish the evil wizard, brought Voldemort down with a single spell, a Killing Curse."

Snape paused and considered Harry across the small space. Harry stared at his fingers as he clenched them together. It seemed too recent as well as too long ago. It made it hard to get a hold of the emotion of it.

"The Dark Lord, after tricking the witches and wizards guarding Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry away from said school with a ruse of having located a Celtic power Sceptre which they just had to free from a mound to make use of, attacked the school with twenty-two of his Death Eaters, intending to kill young Potter and terminate the prophecy." Snape swallowed hard again, looking vaguely alarmed. "Albus must have been getting doddered." He went on reading. "Harry Potter and nineteen of his schoolmates . . . not twenty two?" Snape halted to ask snidely.

Harry cleared his throat. "There were three more, which was a coincidence really, but they were first and second-years, so I made them stay back."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Snape sneered. "If you had lost, they would have all died."

Harry didn't respond, so Snape went back to reading. ". . . went down to meet the Dark Lord in the school's Entrance Hall. The battle lasted only minutes and at the end three Death Eaters were dead as well as Voldemort. Nine students were taken to St. Mungo's for treatment. This is what you meant by grateful?" he asked.

Harry couldn't read his tone. It was less nasty, but he refused to feel hopeful. He shrugged. The lamp sputtered, sending more orange sparks along the wall. Snape shut the book with a snap of its thin stiff covers. "Or shall I read your entry?" Contrary to his threat, he set the book aside. "I cannot understand this person you expect me to be."

"My expectations aren't much, really," Harry said, feeling on better footing, even though he didn't like the defeated tone Snape used. "Just the things Dumbledore mentioned in the letter. Even you at your worst are an improvement over my aunt and uncle."

"This is insane," Snape huffed as he shoved himself to his feet and stalked off, leaving the book behind. Harry felt despairing suddenly, as though the situation were taking control of him. He picked up the book and thumbed idly through it. His bum hurt from the uneven stone floor so he stood and went to his room.

Severus Snape awoke the next morning, a dream chasing his conscious mind. He was still fatigued and it was early, but he rose anyway and put on a dressing gown. He should be teaching . . . something; this forced idleness in the middle of the year made him antzy. As he headed downstairs, the dream caught up with him. In it he and Potter were at the zoo, a surreal scene in itself, but while Harry was enjoying the animals, Snape was studying the boy, looking for cracks in his demeanor, any sign of old wounds. It didn't make any sense, this dream, especially the stark memory of Harry smiling at him while eating an ice cream.

After his toilet he settled at the dining room table with the day's newspaper. The coffee service sparkled into existence, something Tidgy had not been able to do. Snape folded and put aside the Prophet before sipping the scalding coffee, considering in dismay and confusion his thoughts and intentions from the dream.

An hour later Harry came down, looking poorly slept. Snape's gut reaction to him came to the fore, holding him from returning Harry's automatic greeting, which shifted to a small frown as he poured himself coffee. Snape considered that in exchange for eliminating the Dark Lord, he probably did owe the boy something, but

not his house and life; that didn't seem acceptable, and why would Potter want those anyway?

In silence Harry ate and departed, earlier than he said he needed to leave. Snape returned to the drawing room and began the arduous task of reassembling the files he had tossed around in his frantic hunt for understanding.

Harry returned from the Ministry after running his errands in Diagon Alley and loitering alone in a coffee shop Belinda frequented. He had stood in the corner of the crowded place as long as his hot chocolate held out. This was a change, this not wanting to go home. Usually he wanted to share the day's learning, and for the most part Snape wasn't there, except the random weekend. It was well into evening, dinnertime, and Snape was at the table. He half-turned his head as Harry ducked under the mantel to enter. Harry considered putting his shopping bags down, but then changed his mind and carried them to his room, wanting to avoid a possible transgression. He wondered how Snape had spent the day, but didn't want to ask, since silence as sharp as it was, at least didn't cut in unexpected ways.

Snape seemed more subdued as they ate, which was an improvement over the vitriol Harry was expecting. Halfway through, Snape said, "You never explained the letter. What does it mean?"

Harry put down his fork and swallowed some mead. "It means he thinks you had redeemed yourself, even though you didn't think so. What do you think it means?"

Snape took that in with a confused expression. "Why did he send it then? What happened a year before? There is nothing in my notes or my files. The Dark Lord wasn't defeated until a month later."

Harry sighed and firmly replied, "I don't want to tell you. Telling you is handing you a weapon you can take me down with, which I expect you will do. This is hard enough already with you not understanding enough to be dangerous."

After a long pause Snape said ploddingly, "I had an odd dream last night: we were at the zoo together."

"That was just before school started," Harry said brightly, then forced his elation down.

The hearth flared before Snape could respond and McGonagall stepped out of it. "Sorry to interrupt dinner," she apologized after taking in the scene. "How are you doing?"

"Not well," Snape said, crossing his arms.

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"I wasn't asking you," McGonagall returned. "But here is your post, in any event." She placed a small bundle on the table. Snape didn't deign to look at it, just glared at her. To Harry, she affectionately said, "Surviving, Harry?"

"I'm fine," he replied quickly. He would have crossed his arms too if it wouldn't have mimicked Snape.

She pulled a chair around to the table end where she could sit between them. "So," she addressed Snape, "decided yet that this trade is acceptable?"

"What trade?"

"Your freedom for this responsibility," she explained, indicating Harry.

Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve. "I am not accustomed yet to believing he is truly gone. And no sane version of me would ever take this on as a proxy son. No matter how thoroughly and utterly I believed it would appall his father." He ended with quirked lips.

McGonagall sighed. "You strode into my office one day and asked me to witness some papers. His adoption papers," she gestured at Harry. "You seemed sane that day, even though I was too shocked to make any masterful observations."

"I know nothing of parenting," Snape returned harshly.

"But you do know something about being too closely affiliated with Voldemort," she returned. "And separate from that, I have seen you caring for him with surprising ease, in fact." When Snape huffed and turned his head away, she turned to Harry. "Any news?"

"The investigation hit a dead end," Harry said. "Unless someone comes forward who saw something or he remembers . . . " He shrugged trying not to appear too strained.

She patted his arm and stood up. "Don't take what he says personally," she said.

"DO take it personally," Snape countered vehemently.

McGonagall straightened her cloak. "Well, I am glad he is here and not Hogwarts. Thank you for that, Harry." Snape growled. "Do behave yourself, Severus. Goodness, I normally say that to Harry. Good night both of you. Do try to not kill each other," she said pleasantly and then she was gone.

Snape rubbed his forehead as though he had a headache and pulled his post over closer to his plate. He untied the bundle one-handed and flipped through the envelopes, pausing at the third one and opening it slowly. "Who is this?" he demanded of Harry, pushing the envelope over.

Harry glanced at the purple ink. "Your lady-friend, Candy." Snape mouthed the word, candy, in sickened dismay. Harry leaned forward and Snape jerked the letter toward himself. "I wasn't reading the letter, I was noticing that there was more than one in the pile. She might be worrying about you. I didn't owl her because I didn't know you were corresponding. Things are a little shaky between you as it is. Frankly I thought it was off."

"Oh, thank you for your confidence," Snape returned sarcastically.

"To fill you in," Harry said. "Her officemate was just a few years behind you and remembers the old you very well. It has things on the rocks as it is. If she met this you, I think it would be the end, even considering that she was half-expecting you to ask her to marry her at one point."

"What?" Snape demanded, startled.

"This situation is far too complicated to explain . . . to this you." Harry crossed his arms. "To any you, actually," he added wryly.

Snape turned to the letter again before refolding it and opening the other one. "She is asking for some board game back and trying to justify something," he uttered in confusion. "I am not this man. This is madness," he then huffed as he pushed all the letters aside. "Me as a husband. Me as your father. Do you go around calling me 'dad'?" he asked nastily.

"Only rarely," Harry admitted. "Don't you want a family, though? Did you really like living alone?"

Snape sneered, "Your father would disown you if he saw this," and then straightened as he appeared to consider that a positive. "You must be truly desperate. The wizarding world abandoned you again, then?"

"No, not at all. I wanted to live with you."

Snape appeared more annoyed. He pushed his plate aside, starting when it disappeared, before standing up. "It cannot work. It is madness. I see the hopefulness in your eyes," he accused, then leaned in close. "Give it up," he snarled, then grabbed up the letters, spun and stalked away. Harry frowned and pushed the rest of his dinner away uneaten.

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The next morning at breakfast, Harry, feeling a bold desperation, poured coffee for himself and asked, "Any dreams last night?"

Snape shook his head, looking fierce. "Just a nightmare." They waited for plates to arrive in silence punctuated by the rustle of the newspaper.

"I was hoping you'd remember something more," Harry said in a normal tone before tossing the Prophet aside after scanning the headlines.

Snape eventually said, "It was rather a fatally horrendous nightmare–it cannot have been a memory."

"What was it?" Harry asked quietly.

Snape put his cup down with a loud bonk that Harry thought might have easily shattered it, but didn't. "I was surrounded by Dementors. Literally hundreds of them," Snape explained, voice far away.

"Two hundred and sixty-three of them," Harry supplied. At Snape's narrow-eyed look, he explained, "That wasn't a dream . . . that really happened. They were sent by Malfoy and his cohorts to take revenge on me for killing Voldemort."

"I don't believe you," Snape returned flatly.

Harry pulled his head back. "You think I'd make that up?" He stood and stalked to the library and, after hunting around, found a book marked with a chocolate frog card, which he brought back and tossed on the table. "Or read it in the Annual, which is in my room."

"Of course. More incipient fame," Snape growled as he lifted the card. His expression shifted as he studied the photograph to one less hard and more far away. Finally, he flipped it over and read, "Famed also for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds. Lovely. How did you manage that, O Supreme Mage Wizard Potter."

"Malfoy apparently didn't realize that Voldemort had made himself one of them."

"One of the Dementors?" Snape asked, all curiosity suddenly.

Warming to that, Harry replied eagerly, "Yes. So that meant I was after he was gone."

Snape aborted lifting his coffee to his mouth and put it back down. "Really?"

"I cut them a deal and they went away."

Snape considered that. "You worry me, Potter."

"You always say that."

"At least I am not completely addled."

Harry grinned, almost made himself stop, then let himself grin more. Snape grumbled in a warning tone. "I am not this person you think I am."

"You are and you aren't," Harry countered. "In the months after Voldemort's defeat you were the only one who seemed to care that I was getting sucked into these green visions full of shadows and webs." Snape's eyes narrowed at that in thought. Harry went on, "See, like that. You don't shirk . . . you wonder about it. Everyone else was well-meaning but they were exhausted and too happy to have Voldemort gone to pay any mind . . . thought everything would just work out on its own."

Harry looked at the clock; he needed to go. He stood up and drank the rest of his coffee down before collecting his bag from his room. Before he tossed in the Floo powder, he said, "It made a difference to you before, so maybe it will again. There was a reason it only took one spell to take Voldemort down, and you were the reason. You don't owe me or anyone else anything." He tossed the powder in and ducked into the roaring green flame, thinking that at least Snape's expression had been thoughtful upon hearing that, if not still grim.

When Harry returned that evening, he couldn't find Snape in the house. Panicked with concern he checked the front, noting in passing that Snape's winter cloak was on a hook, so he shouldn't have gone far. The street contained only an old car turning at the next corner. "Winky!" Harry called out when he stepped back inside.

Winky came up from the kitchen and pointed shyly out the back. Harry strode quickly to the back entryway and outside. Snape sat on the frozen ground, leaning against the wall of the house, looking over the rampant dormant vines curtaining the walls of the back garden. It was cold and Harry worried how long he had been outside.

In an accusing tone, Snape said, "That is Black's bike," referring to the tarp-covered hulk against the high stone wall to the right.

Harry crouched beside his guardian and noticed that Snape's loose dressing gown was frozen stiff as though he had been out here a long while. Harry explained, "He left it for my eighteenth birthday. You could have not let me have it." When Snape shook his head, Harry added, "You flew it to visit your mum."

Snape's brow twitched. "I did?"

Harry smiled slightly, feeling he had an entry point to pry at. "Yes. She was appalled."

"How do you know?"

"We went together."

Snape's eyes fell half closed. "I don't understand this," he said, sounding utterly defeated–so much so that Harry wished he were angry instead.

Harry tugged on Snape's upper arm. "Come on inside, Severus," he urged kindly.

Snape scoffed. "Listen to you." But he tried to stand, and with Harry's arm around his back, managed just barely.

Harry led him inside, which now felt overly warm in comparison. He put his burden down on the lounger in the library and pulled out his wand to use a warming charm on him. Snape sat silently through it until Harry put his wand away.

"Same wand you killed him with?" Snape asked flatly.

"Only one I have," Harry answered.

"He is truly gone?" Snape asked quietly, rubbing his arm unconsciously, a habit Harry was glad he no longer had.

"He is truly gone. You are truly free," Harry assured him. He pulled over a chair to sit across from his guardian and leaned forward. "Look," he began. "I know you hate me right now, but you don't know me very well."

"Don't I?" Snape sneered. "You are an attention-seeking, sorry excuse for a student," he snarled tiredly.

"Well, no."

"And that article in Witch Weekly?"

Harry ducked his head, feeling no anger, only a eagerness to explain. "You think I knew about that? That was Skeeter's way of punishing me for not granting her an interview." When Snape glared at him doubtfully, Harry cajoled, "Come on, you know I'm not lying." Snape looked quickly away. Harry touched his arm. "Look at me," Harry said. "What do you see?"

Snape exhaled and turned halfway back to stare at the far window. "Someone taller than expected," he replied, sounding difficult and as though he were reserving the right to become uncooperative.

"And?" Harry prompted. When Snape remained silent, Harry filled in, "Someone who has been pulled carefully back together after sacrificing every ounce of himself to take Voldemort down." Snape didn't respond, although his head moved marginally. Harry said, "Do you know who everyone, from Dumbledore to McGonagall to Remus, even, credits for that?" He paused, and receiving no response, asked again, "Do you know?"

Snape shook his head.

"You," Harry said firmly.

Snape scoffed quietly, but his eyes had lost their edge. "I would have no idea where to start," he commented quietly before rubbing his forehead hard.

"You did. And I'm very grateful you did."

With a bit more snarl, Snape snipped, "I don't owe you anything."

"No," Harry agreed. "I owe you a lot. Almost everything."

Snape jerked his hand up to rub his forehead again. "Start acting like it then, and leave me alone," he said. He stood shakily and shook off Harry's offer of help. In silence he headed up to his room, leaning heavily on the handrail. Harry watched the door snap closed and went back to the lounger, pulled out his reading and forced himself to get lost in it, although his thoughts kept worrying terribly if Snape would ever be completely all right.

Harry tired early and headed upstairs as well. When he topped the stairs, he saw the light on under the first door and knocked. When there was no response, he pushed the door open. "Severus?" Harry queried. Snape sat on the edge of his bed, still in his clothes and dressing gown, one hand on his head, one holding a teacup from the tray on the nightstand. The sharp scent of valerian root wafted in the room.

Harry stepped forward in concern. Snape half-raised his head and said, "So many . . . odd memories."

"I should get the Healer," Harry said. He started to leave, but Snape's voice pulled him back.

"Wait," Snape said. "Was . . . was I there when you killed the Dark Lord?"

"Yes. You were coming up from the kitchens."

"You lied," he snarled in pure anger. "I almost made you fail. You looked at me and the Dark Lord almost overtook you."

"No," Harry countered forcefully. "It was a stalemate and Voldemort thought he had me, but I turned it into a trap. One I wouldn't have thought to lay in the beginning, I admit, because I didn't like remembering."

"Remembering what?" Snape asked suspiciously, still looking predatorial.

Harry rubbed his hair backwards and forwards; it still bothered him to remember. "The night that the letter from Dumbledore was an anniversary to." When Snape didn't respond, Harry went on, "I don't want to explain. Let's just say you and Dumbledore had to rescue me that night after Malfoy's old friends took revenge on me for him ending up in Azkaban." Harry, drawn into the memory, said, "I was a mess." He kept his gaze down instead of Occluding his mind. "Let me get the Healer," he said, and left the room.

Ten minutes later, the old wizard from before arrived with a pop! in the front garden. Harry led him upstairs and stood aside as he examined Snape.

"It is a good sign, these memories. Are they clarifying things for you?" he asked Snape.

"No," Snape replied darkly.

The Healer, who was putting away the strange crystal instrument he had used, paused at that. "You must want to remember if you are to do so completely." He looked to Harry. "Is there some problem?" When Harry nodded sadly, the wizard said, "You must remove this problem." He lifted his bag and stood before Harry. "Contact me if there is any more change and give him this before he sleeps."

Harry accepted the bottle and nodded. When they were alone, Harry placed the bottle on the nightstand, surprised when Snape didn't immediately scrutinize and criticize its contents. Instead, his dark eyes stared straight ahead at the empty wall. "I cannot be this man you expect," he insisted tiredly, doggedly.

Harry crouched before Snape and looked up at him. "I'm willing to start again," he said, though something tore loose inside his chest as he did. He kept his voice level and plowed on, "It could work. You and I understand each other."

Snape gave him a dubious look, then put his fingers to his forehead with a groan. "I hear myself saying that." More condescending, he added, "To Minister Obolensky of all people." Harry grinned, prompting Snape to say, "Why are you so insistent? I can't make you go away."

"You are the only father I've ever known."

Snape snorted and mocked, "Most unfortunate for you."

Harry shrugged, unstung. When Snape rubbed his forehead for the tenth time, Harry asked, "More memories?"

"Yes, but not understanding." He sighed. "I do think I enjoy teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts . . . I keep remembering that."

"You do enjoy it," Harry confirmed.

"The students don't seem as completely inept at it as they always are at Potions. Minerva said that Albus gave me that position."

"Yep. As soon as Voldemort was gone."

"He always held back. I assumed to punish me. Perhaps he did finally believe I had atoned. Or that if he pretended he believed it, I would change, thus making it so. He so liked to work that way."

Harry laughed lightly, drawing Snape's attention and a disgusted shake of his guardian's head. Harry stood straight on knees that had stiffened too much. Reaching for the bottle, he said. "Take some of this and get some rest. It's late. I'll be here tomorrow all day and we need to not kill each other."

Snape accepted the bottle, opened it and sniffed it before pouring out a splash into his empty teacup and handing it back. He stared down at the muddy brown liquid and asked, "Did I do all this just to avoid owing you?"

Harry set the bottle back on the nightstand. "I don't know," he replied honestly. "I guess it wouldn't surprise me if that were part of it. One thing I am certain of . . . the original reasons don't mean anything anymore."

Snape downed the potion in one swig, then held the cup out before him, turning it around in his fingers. His eyes narrowed as they traced a tea-stained crack in the side of the porcelain. A memory was leeching into him, matching the dim room, the cup, the hearth . . . and Harry. Snape had a vision of huddling close to a dusty hearth that gave off only paltry heat, a badly injured Harry unhappily resting too close, but too weak to move away. Snape himself forced by his loyalty to Dumbledore to care for the boy as best as possible under the limited circumstances.

And Snape was doing this duty, reluctantly, and with restrained complaint, but he had done something wrong. Something he didn't understand. After the years of whithering insults and outright threats, he had accidentally broken the boy down, utterly.

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Snape squinted at the hearth beyond his raised cup, trying to capture more of the memory and any true comprehension of it. It must be the events Harry refused to discuss, for which Snape could not blame him. Fear had motivated Snape as well in that memory. Fear that this annoying, aggravating, bad-memory inducing boy was far more important to them all than Dumbledore would let on directly. And indeed that fear had been borne out, it seemed.

Snape looked up at the far different Harry standing patiently before him. This one was tall and broad shouldered and looked slightly less like his father than he used to. He was also looking hopeful again, as well as concerned, and half a dozen other completely incomprehensible emotions. Snape rubbed his forehead. That event was the key to all of this, according to the foremost wizard of the last century; not an opinion Snape could entirely ignore. Rubbing his head, he considered reluctantly that some kind of understanding could have resulted from what had happened. He wondered what had set Harry off so. What possible vulnerability had he touched?

Harry finally asked, "Are you all right?"

It hurt to hear Harry speaking so; it meant Snape had no power to make him understand how ludicrious he was being. It also, more frightfully, meant that much too much was expected of him. But apparently he had risen to it. Maybe the biggest change that fateful night had been in himself. Snape ignored Harry's question and settled back on the bed, still clothed, to stare at the the ceiling, at the arch of light from the lamp beside the bed.

Harry turned down the lamp with a sigh, apparently giving up on getting an answer. "Good night, Severus. If you need anything . . . "

"Leave me alone, Potter," Snape murmured, unable to find the heart to snap at him.

Harry departed for his own room and found sleep easier than expected.

The next morning, Harry quietly passed by Snape's room and peered in. Snape was still asleep, as he had left him the night before, so he went quietly down to the dining room. At 8:30 he grew concerned and went back up to check on him. Snape was sitting up, rubbing his temple.

"Do you want the Healer?" Harry asked.

"Healer?" Snape muttered. "Oh, no, it is all right." He squinted at Harry after glancing around the room in dismay. "I am not entirely clear on what is happening, or why I am home."

"Are you remembering?"

"Remembering what?" Snape asked, sounding much more himself.

Harry, heart speeding up, went over to him. "You do remember–enough that you are confused. Do you remember who gave you the Memory Charm?" Snape's gaze focused beyond the walls. Harry prompted, "Behind the Three Broomsticks. You woke up there, anyway."

After an extremely long pause during which Snape's eyes roved the walls, he said, "They were wearing a hood, a Death Eater mask. It wasn't Avery, but there was something familiar . . ."

Harry grabbed his shoulders. "You remember!" he said, overwhelmed by elation.

"Harry," Snape chastised him, plucking Harry's hand off his arm. He stood suddenly and paced the room, looking caged again.

Harry watched him, forcing himself to be patient for a minute before asking, "What do you remember about the spell?"

"I remember what he said, but it was a strange voice I did not recognize."

"Which was?" Harry asked in painful eagerness.

Quoting, Snape said, "As much as you deserve to die, death is too easy. Instead, am going to take away everything you've gained cheating your Lord and Master, everything that matters to you." He looked at Harry. "I don't know who it was . . . The eyes were familiar, but not the voice." After a sigh, he said, "You were remarkably tolerant of me. You should have just left."

"I couldn't do that," Harry insisted. "It was Avery that night here though, I sensed him. What happened exactly . . . do you remember?"

"It wasn't Avery in Hogsmeade." Snape leaned on the wall and rubbed his face. "I remember someone calling out. I was in the road and I walked between the buildings . . . "

"Didn't you have your wand out?" Harry asked sharply.

"Of course I did. I believe I got hit from behind," he sighed and appeared even more weary.

"I should summon the Healer," Harry insisted.

"I don't need a doddering old wizard; I need coffee," he muttered, crossing in front of Harry a little unsteadily. Harry took his arm and led him downstairs.

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"I'm glad you're feeling better," Harry insisted vehemently, pulling out Snape's chair for him. His voice wasn't steady and he was glad that Snape did not seem to notice.

Coffee appeared immediately. "What? Don't want more abuse?" Snape asked snidely.

"I understood the old you better than I used to," Harry explained, taking the coffeepot up as Snape set it down. "McGonagall will be pleased, I'm sure."

"Owl her to stop by today, but do not inform her I have recovered," Snape said, taking a large gulp of coffee with unsteady hands. "I've a few things to say to her."

Harry nearly spit out his mouthful of coffee. After barely managing to swallow, he laughed into his hand.

Snape considered him from hooded eyes. "I don't deserve you, Harry."

"Don't be silly," Harry returned. "It's good to have you back. It's been a long week." Seeing Snape carefully set his mug down with shaking hands, Harry stood. "Healer," he breathed, angry at himself for forgetting in his excitement.

The old wizard set up a few complicated charms around Snape, which he barely sat through, though at the end Snape's back was less bent and he looked much more alert.

"You'll get my bill," the Healer said as Harry showed him out afterward.

"Thank you for everything," Harry said to the wizard as they stood in the doorway.

"He was lucky. Whoever did this tried to do more than they were capable of. If the spell had not been overextended, I think they'd've have succeeded permanently. Quite a charm, in any event."

Harry bit his lip and nodded that he understood, thinking also that there was only one wizard he knew of with that kind of exceptional skill at Memory Charms. Back in the dining room, he said, "We have to figure out who did this. Avery came to the window here, I'm certain. But it wasn't him behind the Three Broomsticks, what if it was Lockhart?"

Snape held his coffee cup before him and pondered that. "I'm not certain. I have to admit to ignoring him most of the time he was at Hogwarts . . . it was the only way to keep down a meal."

Harry went on, "I'll have Tonks check with the Ministry that everyone is still in Azkaban, no Doppelgangers, Aging potions, Polyjuice or otherwise." Breakfast appeared. Harry was getting angry now and it felt good. He looked up at his guardian. "Be more careful, all right?" he commanded.

"I have relaxed of late, it is true," he agreed.

Still angry, Harry said, "I don't want to lose you."

Snape, with a small smile, tilted his head to the side in a kind of nod.

Part way through eating, Snape said, "I apologize for the way I treated you."

Harry shrugged. "You really didn't know how to hurt me."

Snape straightened his napkin a little fussily. "I'm glad for that," he admitted quietly.

Chapter 71.

Arms of the Angels

Friday, very late in the evening, about the time Harry was getting ready to go to his room, Franklin appeared at the window and scratched at the pane. Harry let the owl in and it dropped a letter on the table where he had seconds before cleared away his studies for the night. Franklin flapped up to a chair back and stepped, as though nervous, from one post of it to the other. When he finally paused, Harry picked up the letter, making the bird shift from one foot to the other and cock an eye at him as though to gauge him.

Only Harry's name was on the envelope. He opened it and read: Dearest Harry, and swallowed hard. I find that I need to convey some things more strongly to you than I did before my hurried departure for Hogwarts. The next sentence had been written after a pause; Harry could tell this because the angle and shape of the writing changed at that point. I am sorry for the manner in which I treated you over the last week, and before. I am finding it most strange to be reminded of wishing to hurt you, and I wish I did not. You deserve far better and I believe the balance between us was already too tilted toward my vitriol, leaving me even farther behind in evening things out.

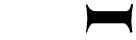
Harry paused to argue aloud, "We're even." He sat down with the letter and rubbed his hair back and forth as he continued.

I do truly hope you were honest and correct in your assessment of my inability to strike anything vulnerable in you. It was very wise of you not to reveal anything that could be turned against you. You did not always do this and I am heartened to see that you have learned to. What pains me most to remember is your offer to start

again. Had you tried, I flinch at how much you would have been put through on my stubborn-minded account. It was consideration I did not deserve.

I promise to be more careful. I do remember a time when it was necessary to scrutinize every shadow and every sideways look for enemies. I will do so again. Yours, Severus.

Harry put the letter aside, wishing Snape had not felt the need to send it. Somehow, it revealed less understanding between them and more uncertainty than Harry felt there was. He penned a quick letter back and gave it to Franklin, who had finally settled down. In it he said, I cannot have given up on you. Rest assured that beyond my concern that the charm might be long term, I wasn't under any real threat. Harry stared at the letter; it sounded too cold and isolated, but he imagined Snape might scoff at anything more intimate–his Snape, the one who could hurt him very easily. Harry added, You are my family, Severus. There is nothing I wouldn't do to preserve that.



By hand, Snape adjusted the position of the stout, hickory cabinet in the corner of his office. He had found it in one of the castle's attics and although it was small and a bit ugly, its construction was solid. Its former owner must have used it to hold his or her pipe smoking paraphernalia because the top surface showed flares of black burn marks. That was all right; a dangerous ingredient cabinet invariably got stained if not worse.

Snape checked it for existing spells but any spells it held in the past had weakened too much to do more than sparkle. He carefully layered on a new set and checked that the lock functioned before moving anything into it. It wouldn't hold many containers, but at least it would hold the ones most in need of protection from prying student hands.

He had just finished stocking and securing the cabinet and had stepped back from it when a shout and a high-pitched scream sounded from the corridor. Snape was out of the door in an instant, wand in hand, pausing only to get a sense of direction as another squeal sounded. At the second bend just at the staircase, three first-year students were huddling in an alcove as Peeves pelted them with balloons full of something thick and sticky.

"Peeves! Stop it!" a voice shouted. It was Ginny Weasley, brandishing her wand and her voice with authority. Peeves gave her a raspberry and then mooned her, which made her wand waver in surprise.

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"Peeves," Snape commanded, catching the Poltergeist's attention away. Ginny looked relieved to have help. "Off with you. NOW." Peeves turned in fast circles, chanting a twisted nursery rhyme. The first-years were removing their robes. Whatever it was had soaked through to their white shirts. "What is it?" Snape asked.

One of the boys sniffed at it. "Honey, I think," he replied in surprise while trying to rub it off, which only made his robe stick to his hand.

"Peeves, my next stop will be the dungeon to fetch the Baron," Snape threatened.

Peeves stopped circling wildly and slinked away with one last raspberry over his shoulder.

Ginny approached. "Why doesn't the school just get rid of him, Professor?"

"He isn't a thing to be rid of. He is a manifestation of the stresses and mental disturbances of the students. We could get rid of the students," he suggested snidely with a raised brow.

"Oh. I suppose that wouldn't work then," Ginny admitted before moving to help the first-years down to the Prefects bathroom to clean up.

One of the girls was complaining. "Why did Peeves do that? We weren't bothering him."

Snape returned to his office and his task of organizing his old ingredient cabinet. As he reached for the jar of essence of feather star, he paused, almost certain he had not left it so close to the edge of the shelf, even given that he had set it down in a hurry. Turning suddenly, he considered checking the corridor, but then remembered it was empty when he arrived. Peeves behavior now seemed more like a distraction than an accident. He quickly finished arranging the cabinet, grateful that the most dangerous ingredients had already been put aside.

Down in the dungeon, Snape found the Bloody Baron playing a game of chess with a nervous-looking second-year. The boy looked up hopefully at Snape who assumed the boy had gotten himself into the match and could get out of it on his own. Usually the Baron kept playing until you beat him; hopefully the boy was halfway decent at chess.

"Baron, I need you to do something for me," said Snape. When the ghost swooped up to attention, showing his silver stained front to full advantage, Snape commanded, "Come with me." In an empty dungeon classroom, Snape closed the door and said to the hovering figure. "I want you to question Peeves about what prompted him

to create a disturbance just now. It may be nothing more than my own renewed paranoia, but I wish to know if he was urged on by a student . . . or even one of the staff," he added, thinking of Greer.

The Baron saluted and sailed off through the ceiling. Snape returned to his office and straightened up his grading, checking that the grade books were still stored as they had been. The Slytherin ghost returned and bowed as he emerged through the floor. Soberly, he reported, "Peeves insists he simply found the balloons sitting in a box by the staircase."

"That's all, Baron. Good day to you," Snape dismissed the ghoulish figure.

The ghost bowed again and simultaneously floated backward through the closed door. Snape was reminded of annoyingly meddlesome students past, one of whom he had adopted. He shook his head and carefully put everything away to leave for dinner.

Harry received notice on a Monday morning that on the following Wednesday the Wizengamot would consider his petition. The scheduled time was during his morning training, but he assumed Rodgers would let him leave for it. The department was getting busy now with holiday plans and others were skipping out to take care of important errands or to greet out-of-town visitors at the station, so his absence might not be noticed.

In the lift, a wanted poster for Avery was wired to the inside of the gate door. During the long trip to the second level, Harry watched the Death Eater's nervous-eyed face glancing side to side. The photograph looked to have been taken at a garden party, since people kept entering the frame holding drinks with ice in them and wearing white, wide-brimmed, pointed hats.

Harry noticed that the lift had stopped quite a while ago and the lift door had long since unlatched. He slid it aside and stepped out and down the corridor to the training room. Tonks was in the corridor speaking with Kerry Ann and Vineet. She handed Harry a notice. "We received this memo regarding your hearing," he said in her now usual flat tone. Kerry Ann frowned but immediately spoke brightly to Vineet saying, "We'll stop by this evening if that's all right. Have a little welcome party. Harry, can you make it this evening?"

Harry had tentative plans to have Belinda over for dinner some night that week, but her work often kept her late so she did not want to make a firm date. Harry, despite

finding himself doing so a few times, did not want to sit at home and wait for her to have time to do something. "Sure," he answered easily. "Did Nandi arrive?" Vineet nodded solemnly, prompting Harry to congratulate him.

Rodgers came over then and the conversation ceased and they moved inside and took their seats.

"We're going to do some . . . yes, Potter?" He stopped because Harry had his hand up, school style.

"Any word on Avery?" Harry asked factually.

"No. I'll be sure to have you owled . . . I know you have a special interest," he stated, not quite sarcastically, and then went on with an overview of illicit objects and why they were regulated. He had a few examples in a box, but for many he drew on the chalkboard. "Now this is an interesting one." He drew a long round spike on the board. "Freezing Stick. Cursed object used semi-legally in Australia during a hunt to bring down and automatically refrigerate game. A few of these turn up every year, it seems. Mostly dangerous because people bring them back and they fall into the hands of someone who doesn't know what it does. Adds a few cases to Mungo's casualty lists every year. Fortunately, most Freezing Sticks work so well, Mungo's simply has to thaw you out." Holding up an ordinary bed pillow, he said, "This is a Lethipillow, not because it contains a Lethifold, but simply because it kills you in your sleep. No good way to identify these, but if you find someone dead in their bed, good thing to check for. Next, we have . . . "

Harry took notes on each object along with his fellows. The fact that they were doing lecture first thing usually meant Rodgers would be out, leaving them to drill on their own. And indeed this turned out to be the case.

Just before 4:00, Kerry Ann urged them all to head over to Vineet's. Harry urged the opposite and suggested running through their least favorite incarceration drills. "I'm not partnering with you then," Aaron complained to Harry.

"Come on," Harry urged, "Avery is out there right now, don't you want to be ready if you come upon him?"

"He's only after you, Harry," Kerry Ann teased.

"I wish he was only after me," Harry breathed. "I'd be fine with that."

They agreed to run a few drills and once they got going went on almost an hour more. Harry was better at most of these spells than the others, so after Kerry Ann

complained about the tightness of his Mummifying Jinx, Harry stood off to the side and offered suggestions. Vineet as usual was having difficulty with consistency; one spell would be far too much, such as a chain-binding curse with one-foot long links that clattered to the floor under its own weight and the next a perfectly acceptable version. He had taken to biting his lips a lot as he drilled. Kerry Ann and Aaron got into a serious competition to see who could produce the deepest Treacle Track Curse on the other and by the time they stopped, the floor was shoe-deep in sticky goo which it was nearly unanimously decided Harry should scourgify since the drills had been his idea.

Vineet's flat was in Greenwich. "Ever been?" Kerry Ann asked Harry. When Harry shook his head, she took charge, saying, "Well, we can all take the Floo to a shop that I know there. We'll meet you at your flat, Vineet."

Vineet nodded and Disapparated on the spot. The rest of them had to go down to the atrium where Bones seemed to be holding a press conference. At the sight of Skeeter and company, Harry slipped along the wall from the lifts and took the long way around to the hearths, skirting around behind the small crowd. He caught a glimpse of Belinda standing to the side in a nice line with Bones' other staff, but there didn't seem to be any way to wave to her that would not risk catching anyone else's attention, especially the Minister's. Harry's fellows were waiting for him before the first hearth, hands on hips, gazing at him oddly. Harry didn't try to explain as they took turns in the Floo.

During the longish walk from the flower shop, Kerry Ann said apologetically, "I think I goofed up, Harry." When Harry asked her why she thought that, she explained, "I let slip to Tonks that you had a date with Belinda. Normally I don't gossip about my friends, really, but the topic of keeping the Minister's office happy came up and it just slipped out. I didn't think anything wrong with it, but Tonks didn't look happy to hear it and I see she's still snappish with you." After a half of a block, she added, "I didn't know anything was going on between you two. Usually I notice things like that."

Aaron suddenly became unusally interested in their conversation. "Nothing is going on between us. Not that I know of." Harry stated this firmly, hoping to squash her line of thinking.

At the door to the flat, Kerry Ann held the bottle of port wine she had insisted on stopping for on the way over. She handed it over to a slightly befuddled Vineet when he opened the door.

"Nice place," Kerry Ann said, as she stepped into the airy second-floor flat. A small dark-skinned woman ,with shoulder-length hair so black it glistened blue, stood in

the sitting room they had entered, looking pensive. "You must be Nandi," Kerry Ann said brightly while Aaron and Harry trailed behind.

Vineet stepped in. "Yes, my wife," he stated. "These are my fellow trainees at the Ministry," he informed Nandi, and then went through introducing each of them. When he got to Harry, she made an exclamation and said, "My Vishnu has such impressive friends."

"Please, sit down," Vineet insisted, gesturing at a white chesterfield behind them. He then insisted on fetching tea while Nandi took a seat. She sat very primly, hands folded in her lap, but her eyes kept straying to Harry.

Kerry Ann made small talk about Nandi's trip until Vineet brought the tray. The teapot he set before Nandi, so that she could use a spell to heat it. Nandi did so with a tap of her wand, and with a sigh said, "I am surprised my Vishnu's magic has not gotten any stronger during his training."

Uh oh, Harry thought. Vineet's lips had drawn thin as he poured for everyone, but he didn't speak. Everyone on the chesterfield shuffled their arms around and tried to appear nonchalant. The visit ended some time later with Kerry Ann insisting upon taking Nandi to her favorite shops that weekend and Harry and Aaron shooting looks of uncertainty at their fellow apprentice.

Rather than sleeping, Harry lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He felt cold even though the hearth was burning high. Closing his eyes, he tried to drift and find the green world and its shadows, but it was ellusive, perhaps because he was trying too hard. It was difficult not to. Snape's attacker had not been found and lying there late at night with the cold darkness enveloping most of the room, that felt painfully unacceptable. Frustrated, Harry rose from his bed and began to dress with purpose. He put on his thickest woolen Molly Weasley jumper and wool pants as though expecting to be out in the cold for quite some time. When he finished dressing, however, his spirits dampened, and downstairs, while standing before the Floo when he could have announced any destination, he asked for the Ministry of Magic.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Rodgers asked when he stepped into the office and found Harry sitting at Tonks' desk, his head resting on his arm.

Harry sat straight, feeling anxious for no good reason. "I couldn't sleep," he tiredly explained, tried to explain more, then gave up.

Rodgers put down the file he had been carrying and with a sigh pulled over the nearby chair. "Something gnawing at you?"

"Avery," Harry replied with an aching wish that the Death Eater were before him now so he could simply take him down and be rid of him off to Azkaban.

Rodgers rubbed his hands together before asking, "You can see him somehow, right?" When Harry nodded, Rodgers went on, "Can you see him now?"

Harry closed his tired eyes, thought of his soft pillow waiting at home, and found the green world easily this time. A shadow hovered, but it wasn't particularly close. "Yes," Harry answered. "But he feels distant."

Rodgers stood suddenly and gestured for Harry to follow. "Put on your cloak . . . I want to try something."

Harry obeyed with clumsy motions. Despite his aching, undefined anxiety, he now wished he were back home in bed. Rodgers waited for him to shrug his cloak around himself before grabbing his arm and Disapparating both of them.

They were suddenly in an alleyway. Their arrival had startled something which now scurried frantically over the spilled rubbish piled against the wall beside them. "How about now?" Rodgers keenly asked.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to relax enough to find that green world again. It took him a long time, and he was surprised at his trainer's patience while he worked at it. When the forest with its towering trees appeared in his mind, the shadow was skulking in the distance, still just at the edge of Harry's vision. "No difference," Harry informed his trainer.

Rodgers grabbed his arm again and this time they reappeared somewhere where city lights didn't encroach in the least. The stars glared though gaps in the clouds and highlighted the edges in silver. Hulking pitch-black piles loomed around them. "Where are we?" Harry whispered, his voice sucked into the darkness.

"An abandoned pit. Try again," Rodgers instructed.

Harry did so. If there was any change in the shadow, it wasn't enough to be certain about. "No. Still a long way off."

They repeated the process four more times, until Harry's ears hurt from the pop! of air that hit each time they arrived somewhere new. The next time they Disapparated they reappeared back at the Ministry.

"Not the most useful skill," Rodgers commented dryly, although not impatiently.

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"It saved my life when Malfoy came to take revenge at our house," Harry explained defensively. He was frustrated and his underlying worry was starting to wear him thin. Forcing himself calm, Harry went on, "Trouble is, distance isn't always just miles. It can also be if one of them is thinking about me, or they are performing dark magic, or fighting each other." With a grunt he lowered himself back into Tonk's chair. "I want to find him. He's up to something. He's involved with Lockhart somehow."

"Lockhart?" Rodgers echoed doubtfully.

His frustration clear again, Harry said, "He was the best at Memory Charms. I'm sure he must have spelled Severus. Do you know anyone else who would even attempt to take away two whole years from someone?"

Rodgers paced once. A door opened and closed somewhere else on the floor, creaking loudly. "I have to admit, I don't. Snape didn't say it was Lockhart though, according to the report."

"You read it?" Harry asked.

Rodgers spun around. "I would like to catch Avery as well, Potter. If for no other reason than that his freedom mocks us." Frowning, he picked up a Remembrall from Shacklebolt's desk. It was flashing lightly. "Think that's for me?" Rodgers asked facetiously. With a bonk! he put the ball down again on its wooden stand. "I suppose we could issue wanted posters for Lockhart. Certainly have enough pictures of him to choose from."

Giddily tired, Harry quipped, "Have you seen this disgusting smile? After you get your autograph, please call the Ministry."

Rodger's lips curled slightly upward. "We'll put out something. He could be dangerous, I suppose, in the right hands. I expected him to simply show up in some Muggle hospital after being picked up wandering the streets." He sniffed and stood in thought. "Go home and get some sleep. Go on," he commanded firmly, when Harry stalled

Harry again stood before the Wizengamot, and despite not having nearly as much on the line, found himself equally nervous as the last time. He forced his shoulders down and flipped through the notes resting before him on the podium that stood before and off to the left side of the half-full tiered seats.

"Mr. Potter," Minister Bones said after getting through the preliminaries. She had a copy of his petition and was paging through it. "I must say this is well assembled."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry acknowledged quietly. He was staring at his own disorganized notes without really reading them. While he waited, he glanced around the assemblage again to gauge their faces. McGonagall was not present, unfortunately; Harry thought he could have used a guaranteed ally.

Bones was continuing. "If I may say, despite your thorough documentation of the case, there is little here but secondhand information. To overturn a conviction, even one posthumously, requires a preponderance of evidence."

Harry's first scribbled out potential witness list was open on the podium before him. Moody, Hagrid, Severus? Feeling as though he had been dipped in ice water, Harry suddenly realized why he really was doing this: He was still, after all this time, trying to rescue Sirius.

Bones was still talking. Hurriedly, Harry caught up with what she was saying while at the same time trying hard to latch onto the more sensible reason he had settled upon after Rogan challenged him on just this point: It wasn't fair. It set a bad precedent. None of them sounded all that reasonable while standing before the assembled governing body of British Wizardom.

" . . . upon what basis do you wish us to make this decision?" Bones was asking in a formal tone.

Harry quickly answered awkwardly, "Uh, upon the confession Pettigrew gave that I witnessed. The others who witnessed it are on the witness list as well."

Bones was relentless. She held the list up to better peer at it and said, "Your best friends and a werewolf, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry admitted.

Bones removed her glasses and held them between her clasped hands before her. "Let's hear your version of events then, and we will go from there."

Harry put aside his uneasiness at losing track of his purpose and launched into a detailed reminiscence of the events in the Shrieking Shack. He related as closely as he could remember how Pettigrew had broken down in the end and admitted that he had been scared of Voldemort and had given into him. "And lastly," Harry said, "Pettigrew's very existence after his supposed murder, an existance which the Ministry readily admits to, means that the original conclusions about the crime Sirius Black was convicted of were mistaken."

"True," Bones admitted. "Well, we shall deliberate and hand down a decision. I am curious though why you have brought this up now of all times, Mr. Potter?"

Harry had closed his note file and now placed his hand down on it. "It seemed to be a matter that needed to righted, Minister." He hesitated and then added, "I admit that I have a personal interest in this. My godfather was severely wronged and lost his freedom and his life to it. This is the only thing we can do to right any of it at this point."

"Hm," Bones muttered. "Well, we will take that into consideration. You are released."

Relieved, Harry stepped out and barely noticed the walk up the steps to the busy atrium. He made his way slowly to the lifts, wanting time to think before returning to his training. All he could change now were the history books, nothing else. But that was worth it, wasn't it?

Fortunately, Harry had his mind taken off of the hearing by Belinda showing up in his hearth that evening. "Hope it isn't too late . . . " she said apologetically. Harry had already eaten but he went and asked Winky for another dinner for two.

Back in the dining room, Belinda was sitting with her head resting tiredly in her palm. Harry, truly moved, suggested, "Maybe you should have gone home and gone to sleep early."

She shrugged and sat straighter. "I wanted to see you."

This statement made Harry's insides ooze around happily. "It's good to have you over finally," he admitted.

"Sorry, I'm always so late at work. We never can tell what notion the Minister will get in her head in the afternoons. She gets so many invitations that she can't accept them all, but she'll decide to go to some dinner, or dedication, or memorial, or reception, and expect some or all of us to go along. Behaves like it some kind of treat even."

"But you like working for her?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I like being involved . . . meeting people," she smiled coyly at him then, which made a dimple stand out on her right cheek. She pushed her hair back behind her ear, where it refused to stay, and took on a shy posture, making Harry suspect that she still didn't relax and behave like her true self around him.

"Dinner will be in just a few minutes."

"I was hopeful for something to eat, but not expecting it. Thanks." She looked around the dining room with interest, especially at the decorative potion bottles on

a high shelf on the far wall. Harry went and fetched the smoky liqueur that was in one of them. It was his favorite bottle with leaded colored glass fixed to it with fine chains and a matching colored glass stopper. As he carried it back to the table he considered that something like it would make a good present next time he was stuck for ideas. "Would you like some?" Harry asked.

"What is it?"

Harry held it to the light. "It tastes like burnt oak and sage and too much of it at once will make you feel like you've been hit in the gut with a Bludger."

She smiled and said, "Sounds good," so Harry poured some for her and a little less for himself. She seemed to think deeply as she sipped it. With another glance around the room she asked, "So this is . . . Professor Snape's house?"

"And his booze," Harry quipped.

"Ah, never imagined I'd find myself at Snape's house, drinking his booze. Nope, never imagined that. With you no less."

Winky brought dinner then and Belinda ate voraciously at first before slowing down. "I didn't get lunch either," she apologized. She saw that Harry barely touch his roast and potatoes. "And you've already eaten . . ."

Harry insisted that it was all right. When she had cleared her plate, she became interested in the house again and leaned over to peer into the main hall. "Do you want a tour?" Harry asked, only half serious. But she expressed eagerness, so he showed her around the ground floor and then up to the first.

"What's on that side?" she asked, pointing across to the other balcony.

Harry, thinking of pentagrams on the floor and skull candleholders said, "Just storage. There isn't an attic."

In his room she looked around keenly. Harry was very grateful that Winky usually straightened things during the day while he was out. "What's this?" she asked of Kali.

"Oh, that's a Chimrian." Harry opened the cage door and put his hand in so his pet could crawl up his arm to his shoulder. Belinda leaned close to get a look and Kali hissed at her before turning in a circle and crouching. "She's much better behaved than she used to be. I think she's matured, even though she hasn't grown much. Or maybe she's lost some of her color."

Belinda, who had backed off at the hiss, said, "Lost some color? Wow. What does she do? Does she deliver post?"

Kali hissed again, making Harry laugh. "No. She's empathetic and very protective. That's about it." Harry gave her a pat. "She would eat any post you gave her."

Belinda rounded the bed and said, "You haven't really personalized your room."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, glancing around. It sure felt like his room.

"Well, you don't have any posters on the walls or anything."

"I used to, at school. But there there was someone to see them. Most of them were too beaten up to rehang here." She looked around again, more critically. He sensed that she was trying to learn something about him from his space. Giving up on this, she plunked down on the bed. "Pretty normal looking place."

Harry approached slowly. "What were you expecting, wanted posters?"

"There is a new one out for Avery," she pointed out.

Crossing his arms, Harry stated grimly, "I know what he looks like." Kali growled low in her tiny throat.

After a pause Belinda tossed her hair back and asked curiously, "What would you do if you came upon him?"

Harry chewed his lip. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I'd like to see him put away in Azkaban. I don't suppose I would feel too much regret if something bad happened to him on the way there. I'd like to be able to relax though, and I can't seem to with him running loose."

Speaking the way Hermione might if she thought you were missing an important and obvious point, she said, "Harry, if you are going to be an Auror, I don't think you can ever relax."

He finally relented and sat down beside her on the bed. He spied the album under under his nightstand and pulled it out. "I have some pictures if you want to see them."

"I'd love to."

Harry flipped the album open to the first page, ignoring the chocolate frog card that had gotten stashed there. Belinda plucked it out and looked it over. "I have to get you to autograph one of these for me." When Harry made a small noise of dismay, she froze, holding the card up between them. "You don't like your fame, do you?" she asked in surprise.

"Not really," Harry answered, still looking down at the photograph of him and his parents. His mother waved at the camera.

"I didn't realize that," she breathed. "I'll keep that in mind. The other day in the atrium, I thought you were just being polite to the Minister, skulking around like you did to keep out of view of the reporters." She moved over closer and looked at the album with interest. "Your parents?"

Harry nodded and paged silently and slowly forward. One was of himself in a kind of baby backpack carried by his dad. The next was his parents and some other members of the Order photographed while sitting around a table strewn with maps. The next he now recognized as having been taken in Godric's Hollow. He would have to try to find that spot next visit. His father was posing before a plaque with a Snitch on it, but Harry had never seen a plaque there in the village square where the photograph appeared to have been taken. His father was saying something slowly to the camera, Harry tried to read his lips but beyond "My . . ." he couldn't make it out. He was pointing at the plaque though with some amusement and pride even.

"So," Belinda asked, "What would your dad think of you getting a new dad?"

Harry exhaled. "He'd be appalled."

"Really?" Belinda blurted, sounding amused and alarmed.

"Absolutely. He'd go berserk, I think. I don't know what my mum would think. She was considered the levelheaded one. Maybe she'd be okay with it." He flipped past more pages of bright picnics. "Next time I get stuck beyond the veil I'll ask," he quipped grimly.

Belinda had a mixed response to this, apparently uncertain if he were being humorous. "That happen a lot?"

"Sometimes," Harry said, and then mentally nudged himself. He was being mean doing that and knew it, but let it happen anyway.

"Huh," she uttered, taking that in. "That's Hagrid," she said brightly to a younger version of the Hogwart's groundskeeper, smiling sheepishly from the next photograph. He was holding a pumpkin the size of trunk under his arm as though it weighed nothing; Lily stood beside him holding a much smaller pumpkin, carved with a broad grimace.

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. "I don't get 'round to see him as often as I should."

"Friend of yours."

"My oldest friend."

"Huh," she uttered again as though forced to readjust her thinking. Harry had suspected that she understood him wrong; maybe after a half-dozen evenings like

this, she might be straightened out. Meanwhile, she had shifted closer still so their legs touched and he couldn't miss that fruit scent of her hair. "You playing Quidditch. You were good at that."

"Yeah. We lost that last year's cup though. But it doesn't matter, really. I thought I would remember that loss for a long time but I don't even think about it. The next challenge is always more important than the last, win or lose." She had put a hand on his arm and was moving it slowly up to his elbow. Harry almost commented that she wasn't a challenge at all but then decided that that would be a very unwise thing to say. He flipped though the remaining pages with photographs and closed it. There were quite a number of blank pages remaining.

"There isn't one of you and Professor Snape," she observed.

"No. I'll have to get one." He leaned forward to put the album away, pulling free of her grasp in the process. Then he stood up smoothly. "I have training in the morning . . . I think I have to get some sleep."

She appeared amused, but as though she were attempting to cover it. "All right. Stop by at lunch if you have a chance this week."

"I'll try," Harry replied before leading her down to the hearth and seeing her off, garnering a peck on the cheek as she departed. As the flames flickered down to normal yellow, part of him wished she could have stayed longer, but her infatuation was in the way, a kind of barrier to understanding that had to be pulled down before he wished to risk anything intimate. He sighed into the empty air, feeling a bit lonely.

The next morning, a Ministry post owl arrived. Harry wondered that they didn't just send him a memo at the Ministry. He then reconsidered that he really didn't have a desk for it to arrive at. The language was roundabout but upon a second reading he decided that it promised to add an addendum to Sirius' file casting grave doubt on his guilt but there would be no official announcement. Harry refolded the letter, feeling unsatisfied, and wondering how Bones and this assemblage of the Wizengamot would cope with real problems if they were this careful about dodging controversy when no one who mattered remained alive.

Over the next few days Harry did not manage to stop by the Minister's offic at lunch; he felt a deep, simmering frustration with Madam Bones and had no interest in testing his control. Wednesday evening, Belinda's owl arrived as he was doing his post-dinner readings. The letter read bright and cheery and hoped for them to make a date for the weekend, perhaps for Harry to have dinner at her parent's house. "Aye," Harry muttered aloud, bringing Kali's head up from his lap with a curious look. "Think

I'm being shown off?" he asked his pet. "Maybe that's unfair," he then answered himself, folding the letter aside to answer later.

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 71

Harry didn't make it to the weekend to find out; that night he jerked awake in his bed, feeling badly disoriented. His room was black, except for the orange glow in the hearth, and totally still. The curse detection above the hearth flared pure blue when Harry waved his wand at it, so he flopped back, closed his eyes again, and tried to relax. As he lay there, floating half-conscious, a tangled vision filled his mind; in it, overlapping shadows jousted in a green haze.

In a surge of acid panic Harry leapt from his bed, tossing the duvet halfway across the floor, the breeze of it sending flames skyward in the hearth. He grabbed up his wand and robe, which he shrugged on as he took the stairs in a rush, three steps at a time. He scrawled a five-pointed star followed by a two-word message on his Auror's tablet and tossed it heedlessly back on the dining room table. Inside the hearth he shouted, "Hogwarts" as he threw down a very large handful of powder. The resulting acceleration through the quiet Floo Network nearly knocked him out. Blurry moments later, he landed in an ashy heap in the largest hearth of the Great Hall.

Wand still in hand, he clambered to his feet and pounded his way out to the Entrance Hall and up the Grand Staircase, amazed and relieved at the fluidity and speed of his own movement. He didn't slow on the staircases and sped to flying speed when he reached the dim second floor corridor.

Snape's office door was locked and an strange foggy glass globe was resting just at the bottom edge of it. Harry pounded on the door, then stepped back, wand aimed. He uttered a Blasting Curse and the jagged bolt from his wand burned the air red and split the heavy wooden door in two with a deafening crack. The unhinged half fell aside and the other swung open, revealing Avery clutching a thick cloth over his nose and mouth, crouched over another figure. Blood spattered the walls and pooled around their black robes. Blue mist floated out into the corridor around Harry's feet.

For Harry, all existence reduced to the man staring at him in surprise quickly turning to fear. All sound faded beyond Harry's own breath and pounding heart. He blasted the man without conscious thought. Like a rag doll, Avery was tossed against the

couch from which he flopped to the floor. The Death Eater, eyes bright with pain, brought his wand around and tried to aim it but an Expelliamus disarmed him easily as though he had the magic of a mere child. Harry stalked forward into the room, his mind over-bright with a white hot wrath. Avery knelt in a pleading pose after giving up on reaching his wand in the far corner beyond the shelves.

Snape wasn't moving. Harry didn't remove his eyes from Avery, but to the side he could detect no life in the shattered form on the floor before the desk. He had to force himself to breathe. Every fiber of his being yearned to utter a Killing Curse at the wizard groveling before him. He took a breath, and his lips incanted a chain binding curse instead. It felt like emptiness, like the bitter winter wind blowing through a leafless tree. Giving vent to more anger he cast a Prison Box charm, a excessively forceful one that shrunk Avery down to less than a foot square. The box shifted and rattled before stilling.

Harry dropped to his knees then, spent, but with his heart still rushing deafeningly in his ears. Death-heavy, oily air air wafted around him and his ash-dusted robe licked at the blood spreading across the stone floor. Any remaining emotion he may have harbored slipped from him as he pushed Snape's shoulder away to turn his face upward and to pull his tangled hair aside. With a hollow heart he considered the familiar visage, the aquiline nose and thick brow, now unnaturally pale and still.

Minerva McGonagall had been woken by the old Order alarm: a half dome of glass ressembling a paperweight that she now used strictly as one. She stumbled into her office and read the message inside it, squinting hard without her glasses. It was from Shacklebolt and it was short. She threw on her robe and rushed down the far too slowly turning staircase.

When she made it to Snape's office, the door was split and light poured forth between the remains of it. Harry knelt inside over the fallen form of whom she could only assume was her colleague. "Potter?" she questioned sharply as she stepped inside. A rather cramped prison box sat on the floor, but she spared it no attention. Behind her, running feet approached.

"Harry?" she tried again. Only when she was right behind him, did she notice he was rocking forward and back slightly, keening faintly. The sound froze her hand as she reached for his shoulder. In her view over Harry's shoulder, Snape's future did not look promising.

Others entered the office. Tonks moved in, stepping around Harry as though he were furniture. She did not hesitate or ask anything, simply spelled Snape's body

with a rapid series of charms. Shacklebolt followed into the room as well as another. They were all moving, talking rapidly in abbreviated observations and commands. McGonagall pulled Harry backward out of the way. He didn't resist, although he made a louder keening noise.

"Run ahead to Pomfrey," Tonks said to Shacklebolt. "It's the only chance." She hovered Snape with a spell and for someone reputed to be clumsy, steered him speedily and unerringly out of the room. The pool of blood glistened in their wake; its surface disturbed.

The remaining Auror took charge of the prison box and the strange glass orb resting on the threshold. He hefted the box with a grunt and carried it to the door where he hesitated and looked back. His disturbed eyes looked over Harry, lying catatonic over McGonagall's folded legs. "What's wrong with him?" he asked, sounding unyieldingly hard.

McGonagall adjusted Harry so he was lying more comfortably and less like a discarded puppet. "If you knew how many parent figures this boy has lost, you would not need to ask that," she stated coldly. He appeared to consider that a half second before departing. McGonagall leaned back against the couch; despair wormed its way in as silence descended.

Another figure, wearing a Prefect badge, materialized from the darkness of the corridor, looking wide-eyed curious and distressed. "Ms. Weasley," McGonagall greeted Ginny. The young woman's face looked as despairing as Harry's should have. "Please, close the door," she said, only after realizing that wasn't a reasonable request. Ginny didn't hesitate, though; just set the heavy broken plank near the half still on the hinges and repeatedly incanted a Reparo spell. When it held, she pulled it as closed as it would go.

Alone then with Harry, McGonagall looked down at him. He hadn't moved at all. It was a mistake, she thought, to have referred to him as 'boy'. He had grown startlingly since leaving school. With broadened shoulders and additional height, he finally actually resembled someone who could believably defeat Voldemort. His face had changed as well, it had stretched into one more like Lily's in the jaw and brow. She brushed his fringe back. His scar had lightened too, as though he were outgrowing it.

She reached around him in a loose hug. "Hang on, Harry," she said. "I have no intention of failing Albus now. Or you." She huffed in frustration, but did not want to bring Harry to the dispensary without word, as it most certainly would not do him

any good. This left nothing to do but await news and decide how to proceed from there. She couldn't bear to chart either path forward without knowing absolutely. She imagined Pomfrey at work with her spells and potions, glad she was here imagining instead of there witnessing, and then wondered how improper it was that she was worried for Snape almost strictly because of Harry.

Footsteps approached the door and McGonagall heard urgent whispering. At the end she distinctly heard Ginny urging the messenger away. "Ten points to Gryffindor," McGonagall whispered.

The door creaked open and Ginny peered around it. "Headmistress? Pomfrey says Professor Snape's going to make it."

McGonagall nearly collapsed before she found the strength to sit forward and hover Harry aside so that she could stand. She shook her head at how much simpler things were if Severus was there to take care of them, which was a first. Ginny's eyes were taking in the alarming streaks of blood on the face of the desk and even the wall.

"To your tower, young lady," McGonagall ordered.

Ginny reluctantly obeyed. McGonagall followed her to the staircases before heading down with her silent burden.

In the hospital wing she settled her silent charge on the bed beside Snape's where Pomfrey was still working with the help of Shacklebolt and Tonks. She watched them sealing a few last minor wounds. When they finished and covered him, McGonagall looked down at Harry, who seemed to have fallen into a disturbed sleep.

Tonks came over to the other side of the bed. Her hands were bloodstained as she rested them on the white sheets to lean over Harry. She studied him a long time and sighed. "I'd keep him under until Severus is up."

"That could be a while. At least after the blood replenisher kicks in," Pomfrey pointed out, glancing doubtfully at Harry's sleeping face.

"I agree that is probably wise," McGonagall said, remembering with a twinge the state she found him in. She pulled a chair over from another bed and sat in it with her wand held at the ready. A Quiescent Charm could be repeated many times without risk, she considered, focusing on that simple fact and rehearsing the spell in her mind even though it was a trivial one.

Severus Snape moved in a grey fog, one that swirled unnaturally around him as he stepped through it. He felt feather light, as though his mind moved him rather than his legs.

A figure appeared. Snape hesitated at the sight before him, half obscured by tendrils of white and grey.

"Severus," Dumbledore greeted him kindly. Snape looked around in concern and the old wizard said, "Yes, you are in the veil." Dumbledore came closer and put his hands on Snape's upper arms as though greeting him. "But you are still tied to life." He nodded his white head broadly to indicate something behind Snape.

Snape turned and found a glowing cord tethering him to something hidden beyond the fog, in a darker greyness. Dumbledore didn't release him when Snape turned back to study his old colleague. He looked a little younger than Snape remembered but his light blue eyes still twinkled with an aged wisdom. Dumbledore turned and looked over his shoulder, appearing to wait for something. Snape followed his gaze and another figure became visible, this one moved through the fog, not disturbing it at all. Snape stiffened when he recognized the dark haired man with a sharp chin. "Black," he whispered. The other man didn't reply, just looked away and stood silent.

Confused, Snape turned back to Dumbledore, who sharply said, "Think of life."

"Life?" Snape echoed, more confused.

"You are at Hogwarts, undoubtedly in the hospital wing. Remain there, rather than here," the old wizard commanded. More figures shifted behind Dumbledore, flickering in and out as the fog cleared and thickened. "If you pass, there is no going back," he explained gently.

Snape struggled for comprehension. He could not have moved had he wanted to, Dumbledore had too tight of a hold. The figures beyond flickered and moved across one another. Sirius continued to stand beside Dumbledore, arms at his sides, gaze averted.

Snape looked down at himself, his hands were fading; he squinted at them, trying to understand. Realization came with a wave of cold. "I'm going to be a wraith," he murmured in fear. If he didn't cross over before it was too late, he would be trapped. "I don't relish living out eternity with the Bloody Baron," he said and laughed mirthlessly.

"Life, Severus," Dumbledore commanded sharply. "Remember that. You need to return to it and holding onto it is the only way."

Chapter 71

"You're helping him return?" a voice sneered beside them.

Jolted from his fearful musings, Snape turned to find James Potter appearing from the fog. It released James rapidly as he stepped up beside them. "Why?" he demanded of Dumbledore in hot anger. Behind his old nemesis a shyer figure appeared, although the fog still clung to Lily. Snape was startled to realize that Harry looked much less like his father than he had always assumed.

"You want Severus to return," Dumbledore insisted gently to James. "He is caring for Harry now."

"He's what?" James blurted in sharp surprise and tried to reach out to grab Dumbledore's arm. A flash of white surrounded it, throwing his hand back.

"James," Dumbledore admonished calmly, clearly disappointed. "You have seen Harry and what a beautiful young man he has become. You have Severus to thank for that."

Snape tried to appreciate James' rather distressed reaction to that, but his arms were fading alarmingly; although, somehow, Dumbledore still held them firmly. Snape couldn't remember what his body felt like, maybe he had never had one. "Harry needs you," Dumbledore stated firmly to him. "Grab hold one more time. There is still a path back."

Snape tried to do as he was told, deciding that life as ghost would be worse than not trying. He turned and studied James' angry eyes before Lily's more hopeful one's captured his gaze. He was falling somehow,without actually moving. Dumbledore gathered him up. This time, Snape could feel his mind rationalizing that into an embrace, rationalizing something that was not the least bit physical.

Suddenly, as though he had grown skin that instant, he could feel more, imagined he was breathing blessed air. Everything in his field of view was skewing distressingly. "A moment more," Dumbledore said in a reassuringly victorious tone.

"What are you doing with my son?" James demanded, leaning in without touching in order to get Snape's attention.

Snape turned to him and smiled then–his darkest smile ever. "He is my son now," he stated and took in James' odd distorted expression of horror for just an instant before everything skewed menacingly.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said with urgency. "Now." Snape felt himself being manipulated in ways that made no sense. Pain was slashing and hammering at him, but he decided it was best to not will himself to avoid it–it was a part of living after all.

He was pushed to Sirius, who looked sad more than anything else. Their gazes locked before he embraced Snape, crushing him. Dumbledore's voice sounded in his ear, "Do not resist him."

Snape had no fight left in him to resist with. Passively he felt himself being bunched up like a ball of paper by Sirius' arms and eventually just his hands. His last glimpse was from inside his old enemy's hands as massive fingers of darkness closed around him.

Snape's next impression, some time later, was of Pepper-up potion tainting his lips. His body rebelled severely at the notion of conscious activity. The potion flowed into him, nonetheless, as a swallowing spell made him take it down.

He cracked his eyes open and tried to push the cup away. Pomfrey was leaning over him, studying him intently. If he had not just experienced death, he would have thought this pain and total lethargy of will to be comparable.

"You are needed," Pomfrey explained, nodding to indicate the next bed over.

Snape breathed a few times, forced his head to turn, and found McGonagall sitting on the far side of the next bed, upon which rested Harry. Snape blinked in confusion and raised his head a monumental inch. Pomfrey held the cup out and this time he drank several gulps before heaving himself to a sitting position. His hand plucked at the unexpected hospital shrift he wore and confusion about what had happened made him dizzy. Confusing recollections flickered before him: waking with Avery glaring victoriously over him, taunting him for being overcome by a vaporous potion of all things, pain and furious helplessness, Dumbledore. He pushed it all aside and focussed only on Harry as he slid out and over to the next bed.

"What happened to him?" he asked. His eyes found others nearby; Tonks and Rodgers stood off the end of Harry's bed, looking pensive.

McGonagall responded, "He came for you," she said sadly, "came in from the Floo in the Great Hall." Snape ran his hand through his badly matted hair and looked Harry over. McGonagall continued to explain, "We've been using a Quiescent Charm on him for the last hour. It should wear off any moment." Their eyes met as Snape strained to understand the situation.

To stall Snape said, "Get him out of here." When no one moved, he looked over at Rodgers, who returned him a very dark look before Tonks urged him out of the wing. Snape waited until they were gone to return to evaluating Harry.

"What was that about?" McGonagall asked.

"Nothing worth discussing right now. Mostly, I didn't want an audience," he replied as he lifted Harry's wrist to feel his pulse.

McGonagall sighed and brushed Harry's shoulder with her fingertips. "He broke down," she explained in a dark tone. "Completely."

Snape dropped his head and laid Harry's hand back over his abdomen. He did not believe he had the strength for this. The scene beyond the veil was playing out in his mind in un-sequential pieces, disorienting him further.

"It was a distressing scene," McGonagall went on, "given everything he's been through."

Harry's eyes were cracked open now. Snape put his hands on Harry's arms and called his name without effect. "Give me the Pepper-up," he requested. Pomfrey handed it over and he forced a few sips into Harry, who turned his head away from the cup but was forced to take some anyway. After a few shaking breaths, he twitched on the bed and made a low keening sound.

"That's the noise he was making when I found him," McGonagall supplied quietly.

Snape frowned and put the cup aside to shake Harry by the upper arms. "Harry," he prompted a few times. Harry turned his head back, but his eyes stared beyond the ceiling. Snape forcibly turned his head farther to meet his gaze, and held it there. "Come on, Harry. Every thing's all right," he coaxed to no response.

Snape took a deep breath and pried into Harry's mind. Pain assaulted him, pain like his heart was being torn out. Snape quickly clenched his eyes closed and blocked it out, thinking as he did that Voldemort had less of a chance than he had previously imagined if that was what he had met with in the Entrance Hall on that long-ago day.

"Severus?" McGonagall's concerned voice prompted Snape back to the present.

Drawing on his fast-dwindling strength, Snape leaned farther over Harry and pushed his hair back from his forehead, intentionally touching his scar, which should have produced a jolt but only made Harry's eyes come into focus.

Harry's eyes blinked rapidly. Reality closed in with awareness and he swallowed a gasp. Damp eyes looked frantically around, finally glaring disbelievingly at Snape. Harry sat up suddenly and grabbed the front of Snape's shrift as though to verify he was solid.

"Everything's all right, Harry," Snape reassured him yet again.

Harry's mouth worked silently before he quietly said, "I thought you'd left me alone."

"No," Snape said and pulled Harry against himself. Harry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Never," Snape insisted. McGonagall gave him a surprised brow at that assurance. Snape considered that she didn't realize Dumbledore was blocking his path through the veil; otherwise he would never express such certainty. Feeling that he had committed to something with more certainty than signing a piece of paper, he ran a hand over Harry's back. His vision was wavering and narrowing though, and Pomfrey gestured for him to return to his bed.

"Are you all right now?" Snape asked, forcing his voice strong. When Harry nodded into his shoulder, he explained, "I have to go."

Harry reluctantly leaned away from him before Snape pushed himself carefully to his feet. Pomfrey helped him back to the other bed where he immediately fell unconscious again. Harry swallowed his distress and reassured himself by watching his guardian's chest rise and fall.

"Lie back, Harry," McGonagall urged. "Get some rest. Madam Pomfrey will keep an eye on Severus."

Harry nodded, still pulling himself together with great effort. He settled under the covers and tried to stem the panic that kept rising to clench at his heart. McGonagall stood to leave, her hand brushing his shoulder.

Harry must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, the room was full of morning light and Dobby stood beside the bed with a breakfast tray. "Harry Potter must be hungry," the elf squeaked and placed the tray on the side table. Clothes had been laid out for him too, he wondered whose they were, as they weren't his own. They were worn and faded to grey by many washings. Maybe they were just discarded spares.

Harry slipped on his glasses and looked quickly over at the next bed. Snape still slept deeply, but his color was much better, though not normal. Harry turned back to the elf. "Thanks Dobby." Dobby bowed, ears bobbing, and backed away. Harry ignored the tray–he wasn't very hungry–and slid out of bed. He pulled a chair over from between the next two beds and sat close to Snape's side, hands clamped tensely between his knees. Pomfrey stepped over from her office and checked Snape over quickly.

"How long before he wakes up?" Harry asked her.

"A while yet . . . perhaps this evening. The Pepper-up did not do him any favors on top of the Kayo vapor." She stated this brusquely and departed back to her office.

Harry frowned and closed his eyes, feeling guilt reducing him.

In the Great Hall as breakfast was winding down, Headmistress McGonagall stepped away from the head table and down the Slytherin one, which had been exceptionally quiet during the meal. She tapped Suze Zepher on the shoulder and indicated that she should follow. McGonagall led the girl to the other side of the hall where Ginny sat, picking at her breakfast in an unenthusiastic manner.

"Ms. Weasley, please come with me."

Ginny glanced between the two of them and stood immediately. When they reached the Entrance Hall, McGonagall said, "I am giving you both an excused absence from the first class of the day, but I want you to spend it keeping Mr. Potter company; I think he could use a little. I'll relieve you for your second class." She nodded at them both and headed back inside.

Suze moved quickly to catch up to Ginny, who was marching off up the stairs. "I don't get it," Suze said when she came aside the red-haired girl.

"Didn't you hear what happened last night?" Ginny asked.

"Only that Professor Snape was attacked and isn't going to be teaching for a while."

Ginny stopped in the empty corridor, empty except for the paintings, which turned and watched them curiously, whispering to each other. "I had the misfortune, because I was trying to track down the Creevey brother's latest prank before it got the house in trouble, to see the end of what happened," Ginny explained with a waver in her voice. She swallowed hard and went on quietly, "Professor Snape was dead by the time help arrived last night. Harry wasn't . . . coping well with that." She fell silent as the scene replayed before her.

"Dead? What happened? Why was Harry here?"

Ginny shook herself and started walking again. "I think he probably saw the attack in his mind. He told us he saw the Death Eaters fighting in Azkaban last year in his head."

"He saw what?" Suze asked in awed tones. They had reached the staircase to the second floor and both waited for two other students to pass by before continuing.

Very quietly, Ginny explained, "Harry sometimes can see Death Eaters in his mind. If they are close by, thinking about him, or fighting each other."

Suze looked very uncertain as they continued, and at the corridor that led to the hospital wing, she grabbed Ginny and said, "The older kids in Slytherin . . . they

scare the first years with stories about Professor Snape." She bit her lip, and asked, "He wasn't really? They just made that up, right?"

"Come on," Ginny urged, heading off down the well-lit corridor.

Suze caught up at a run and grabbed Ginny's sleeve. "But . . ." she whispered.

"Come on," Ginny repeated and opened the door.

Harry looked up as the door to the wing swung open. He straightened upon seeing his friends enter; glad he had pulled himself together enough to get dressed.

"Wotcher, Harry," Ginny said with a weak smile when she came up beside him. Her eyes glanced over their unconscious teacher before she moved to fetch chairs from farther down the row of empty beds. Suze stood at the foot of the bed looking anxious. She dropped her gaze rather than stare at Snape.

"How are you, Suze?" Harry asked.

Suze shrugged in reply. Ginny returned with two chairs and placed them both near Harry, took the closer one, and urged Suze to take the other, which she did after some hesitation. She looked very uncomfortable with being there. Ginny sat straight and said with mustered brightness, "He's going to be all right, right?" Harry nodded, rubbing his hair back. Ginny went on, "So, he'll wake up soon?"

"Later this evening," Harry said, feeling pained about that and hearing it in his voice.

"Great Goblins, Harry, you aren't feeling guilty are you?" Ginny demanded.

Harry rubbed his head with both hands. He really had to pull himself together. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Professor McGonagall said you saved his life last night. Why are you feeling guilty? You are some kind of guilt-freak."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her but couldn't find anger to go with it. "He'd be up sooner. . . never mind."

Ginny turned to Suze, who struggled a moment before saying, "Thank you for saving his life, Harry. We wouldn't want to lose our Head of House . . ."

Harry nodded.

After a long silence Ginny said, "Is your training still going well?" Harry nodded again. Ginny went on, "You are doing field work now, right? Is that more exciting?"

Harry finally pushed himself upright and replied quietly, "Yes. I usually get to follow Tonks or Rogan, both of whom I like. Tonks lets me do more now when we're out, like ask questions. She says people answer me more than they do her."

Ginny laughed a bit and said in a falsetto while clasping her hands to her chest, "Oh, the great Harry Potter is talking to me!"

Harry put a hand over his eyes and laughed lightly despite himself. "It's some of that," he admitted.

Harry leaned forward and asked Suze how Quidditch was going and whether they were going to beat Ravenclaw. Suze assured him they would, then glanced at Snape and fell silent again. Harry looked him over again as well. He was sleeping very soundly and it was a little odd to be sitting here chatting like this, but he didn't feel like moving farther away.

"Tell me about your new plays," Harry said to Suze.

"Not in front of the captain of the Gryffindor team," Suze complained.

Ginny folded her arms and stated smugly, "We watch you practice most days you're at the pitch. I think I know them already."

Quidditch filled the next hour until the door to the wing opened to reveal the headmistress. She looked relieved and a little pleased although she still managed a stiff tone as she ordered them off to their second class.

When they were gone, Harry asked, "You let them off from class?"

She ignored his question and sat down with a graceful lifting of her robes. "You seem in a little better spirits."

"Yep. Thanks."

McGonagall didn't remain long, and while she was there she seemed meditative. Eventually she stood and put a hand on Harry's shoulder without speaking. She had an amused expression, which prompted Harry to ask why. She replied, "You continue to prove me wrong, young man." With a wink she departed.

She was not gone long however. She returned looking more official and leaned down close to Harry to say, "There is a woman in the Entrance Hall who wishes to see how Severus is doing."

"Candide?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Shall I send her up?"

"All right," replied Harry, glad that Snape was out of it for this.

McGonagall straightened. "Hm," she muttered thoughtfully.

Reading her, Harry commented, "It's too complicated to explain."

"I am trying to picture Severus with a lady-friend. Though now that I think of it, I remember seeing them having tea in Hogsmeade a few times." At Harry's shrug she turned. "I'll send her up," she said over her shoulder.

Harry waited with mixed emotion. Eventually the door cracked open and Candide leaned in. Her eyes found Harry there and she slipped in, apparently loath to open the door too wide. When she stood at the end of the bed her eyes looked quite concerned, making Harry feel a bit hopeful. "What happened?" she whispered. When Harry didn't immediately reply, she said, "The rumors are flying thick in Hogsmeade. The reporters are scrambling around but no one from the school will talk to them. The Ministry will only say that the last Death Eater has been captured." She stopped suddenly on that point.

"Avery," Harry supplied. "Wanted revenge. He should have come after me, but he's been after Severus instead."

"Why?"

"Because Avery considered him a traitor," Harry said, anger rising. Something gnawed at Harry's mind, some connection he had yet to recognize, and when Candide asked how Avery had gotten into the castle, it blossomed into full suspicion.

"I don't know," Harry said, possible schemes flickering though his mind. Most of them involved inside help. "He filled Severus' office with Kayo Vapor and broke in and overcame him."

Candide unfolded her arms and put one hand on the bed near Snape's feet. "What did Avery do to him?"

"He killed him." The words were like a spell that hollowed out Harry's chest. He clamped his mouth shut and blinked hard.

After a minute Candide said, "He doesn't look dead now."

"The Aurors put a freezing spell on him and Pomfrey managed to save him." Harry spoke this all grudgingly; he really didn't feel like relating it.

"It was a good thing the Aurors came when they did."

"I signaled them when I saw the two of them fighting in my dream. And Shacklebolt, one of the Aurors, initiated the old Order of the Phoenix alarm." Harry fell silent before saying, perhaps not intentionally out loud, "I should have killed Avery. Voldemort certainly was tempted to enough times." After further thought he added,

"Maybe we'll find out who helped him, though. The Aurors should be interrogating him now."

All of this alarmed Candide and she stared at him warily, hands at her sides. Harry's own ill ease twisted into anger at her. In a deceptively soft tone he said, "This is who we are. We are survivors of Voldemort. Accept that, or go away."

She looked amazed by his tone. Their gazes locked and Harry could see her surprise was borne partly of sudden understanding. She looked Snape's supine self over again with a different expression, as though she were weighing things. Eventually she asked, "Do you need anything?"

Harry shook his head. He did wish that the ground didn't feel like it might pull out from under him any moment, but he doubted even Dumbledore could have helped with that. Though she lingered a while longer, Candide didn't speak except to say goodbye. Dobby brought a lunch tray just after and Harry managed to eat a little chicken potpie before his appetite fled.

Harry's friends came in the afternoon. Hermione and Ron appeared about as shocked as they ever had when Harry explained what had happened. At the end Ron said, "Boy, dad doesn't even know half that and he's talked to the Aurors office." He leaned over Snape to peer at him curiously. "He'll be all right, what?"

"Yeah."

Hermione pointedly asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

To his two oldest friends, he found himself saying, "I feel really unwell, as though something awful could happen again any minute." He watched them share a look.

Hermione patted his back. "That will get better. Everything worked out all right."

"It's true," Harry agreed. It was true that he wasn't sitting here wishing dearly to undo things; they somehow, for once, they got undone on their own.

His friends stayed until the dinner hour when Pomfrey hinted for the third time that there had been enough visitors for one day. Hermione gave him a hug and Ron seemed to consider doing so too, but patted him heartily on the back instead. They promised to come by again the next day. In the silence of their absence, Harry wished he had something with which to occupy himself. Dobby brought dinner, roast mutton with a thick gravy. Harry lied and told Dobby he would eat it when the elf insisted that he should do so. "Harry Potter is getting stretched too thin!" the house-elf insisted in concern.

Around 8:00 Harry was trying to eat a bit of cold meat because he didn't feel like being chastised by Dobby when he came to fetch the tray. Harry was sitting up on the bed with his legs crossed, having tired of the hard chair. With a jolt he realized there were eyes upon him.

"Harry," Snape greeted him, and sat up partly against the pillows. Harry was finding the breath that had abandoned him and Snape went on. "It is still . . . Thursday, correct?"

"Yes." Harry quickly set the tray on the nightstand and slid off the bed to stand beside the next. "How are you?"

"I have been better," Snape answered slowly in his usual dry way. "But this is, nevertheless, a welcome improvement." He took a deep breath as though experimenting with breathing.

Pomfrey stepped over and brusquely checked him over before sniffing in a satisfied manner and bustling away. Snape sat up a bit farther, leaning on an elbow in a way that didn't look entirely comfortable.

"I'm glad you're all right," Harry said sincerely.

"Not as glad as I am that you came in time," Snape lightly retorted. "I didn't smell the vapor, only saw it too late."

They fell silent then, bad alternatives hanging between them.

"I didn't kill him," Harry stated, his heart twisting again as he relived that instant of tenuous self-control. "I wanted to. I could feel the curse–the real one this time." The oily power of it still vibrated through him, unused; he hoped it would fade.

Snape 's black gaze focused more tightly and he seemed to be trying to see into him. Eventually, he said, "You redeemed me with that, Harry."

Harry, still caught in the raw memory of that moment, said, "He deserved to die."

"That is not your place to decide," Snape stated. With a wince he sat up a bit farther and sighed. "Go ask the madam, will you, if I am allowed a dinner tray. Your mutton is making me ravenous."

Harry smiled for the first time that day. "Sure."

Harry sat reading a book Ginny had brought for him from the library when Pomfrey circled to extinguish the lamps. It was nearly 11:00; Harry had lost all track of time. Snape slept soundly, but not as comatose as before. His chest rose and fell regularly,

reassuringly. Marking the page, Harry put the book aside and sat back to stare at the tall darkened windows across from him. McGonagall's approach actually startled him his thoughts had wandered so far from the hospital wing.

"Madam Pomfrey tells me Severus awoke." At Harry's nod she looked across at the other bed a moment before saying, "I wonder, Harry, if you wouldn't do me a favor?" At his shrug she said, "Would you cover Severus' classes tomorrow?"

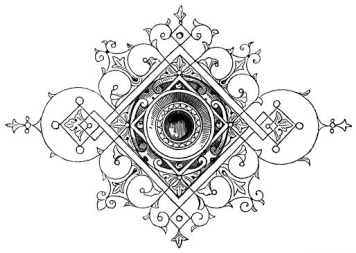
"Me?"

"Yes. It is the fifth-, seventh- and first-years. I do not think you will have any difficulty, but it is up to you. We managed to cover today, somewhat, but the older students preparing for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s cannot lose even a day of preparation."

"All right," Harry heard himself saying. He had a feeling it was his boredom talking more than anything else.

McGonagall touched Harry's shoulder. "Thank you, Harry," she said in deep affection. She started to turn away, but then stopped, "You know where Severus keeps his class notes in his office?" When Harry nodded she added, "Everything has been cleaned up." She softened that with an understanding smile and a squeeze of her hand before departing.

Chapter 72.



The Substitute

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun and went to freshen up in the boys' bathroom. The sinks were much lower than he had remembered, requiring him to bend uncomfortably low to wash his face. His reflection reminded him that he needed to fetch some clean clothes, or use a really powerful spell on the grey jumper and trousers he had been wearing for two days. He pulled out his wand, remembering unbidden the scene in Snape's office. It required several moments as a result, to remember a Freshening Charm and a Pressing Spell. He didn't look very professorly though. Scratching the back of his head, he considered that one of Snape's sleeveless robes might help.

He returned to the dispensary, thinking that Snape might have woken by now, and indeed he was sitting up with a tray before him, a pile of letters beside his plate. Harry sat on the next bed and eyed the simple toast and poached egg hungrily.

"You are not going to sit here all day, are you?" Snape asked snidely. "You must have training to attend."

"Probably," Harry tossed out dismissively, rocking his feet back and forth under the bed. With a devious look in his eye, he went on. "But instead I'm teaching your classes."

It required a moment for Snape to stare down the truth of this, but then he leaned back and said easily, "In which case you should be eating breakfast in the Great Hall"

"Should I?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed sternly. Harry reluctantly pushed himself to his feet. Snape asked, "And you have found the lesson plans for today?"

"No," Harry tossed over his shoulder. At Snape's look of consternation, he added confidently, "I'll work something out." To which Snape appeared rather doubtful. At the door Harry turned and said he would return at lunchtime.

There was only ten minutes remaining before breakfast would be served. Harry hurried down to the Defense office, which already had a new door–actually an old door, probably older than the previous door given the near black of the thick finish. By the time he found, and dropped the correct syllabi and corresponding notes and textbooks in the classroom, as well as grabbed an outer robe, breakfast had already started.

In the empty Entrance Hall, Harry intentionally walked in the far left doors and strode purposefully between the wall and the Slytherin table. He had made it halfway before the bright swell of morning conversation died down and heads turned to watch him, most eyes a bit wide. He easily found Suze's welcoming smile and gave her a wink.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall intoned in greeting when Harry pulled out the empty seat beside hers–the only empty seat at the long head table.

"Good morning, Headmistress," Harry returned formally. The room, with its bright ceiling and faces, boosted him enough to bring out a smile as he returned the other teachers' greetings. Cawley came down from the other end to shake Harry's hand vigorously and to welcome him to breakfast as though Harry were again a newcomer. Harry found he still had that instinctive suspicion for the man. He smiled through his ill ease and with a kind of impromptu bow, the man departed.

When Harry turned back to his place a full plate was there. He ate with hungry vigor.

"You have time for seconds," McGonagall stated beside him when he ate the last heel of his toast.

"No, that's-" he started to say but a new plate of eggs, toast, and sausage had already appeared.

"Thanks," he said and rubbed his hair back as a wave of uneasiness swept through him.

She leaned in and softly said, "It will get easier."

Harry didn't respond, just picked up his fork again, wondering if some of the empty feeling was from somewhere other than his stomach.

Standing in the Defense classroom, Harry felt more nervous than expected as the Fifth Year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs filed in. Unlike the advanced classes, these were just two houses, and Harry was happy that it was an easy two. He also knew many of the students personally, so this was really just an expanded session of D.A., he told himself. Everyone looked eager, if not a little surprised. He took role to learn the few names he didn't already.

Holding the class notes a bit tightly, Harry glanced at the attentive faces and said, "Today you are supposed to begin covering powerful dark magic creatures, let's see– giant spiders, Lethifolds, great black poison toads, and, uh, Dementors." Out loud he mulled, "I wonder if I should have brought the Lethifold from the office."

A hand went up. Harry looked up at Sanders, a Ravenclaw girl, and she asked, "There isn't really a Lethifold in Professor Snape's office, is there?"

"There was last year. Unless it got out again," Harry replied with deceptive casualness. This led to some widened eyes. "I can go fetch it if you want to see it . . ."

"No," she replied quickly. "That's all right, we . . . can read about them," she insisted.

Harry thought he understood why the sorting hat had such an easy time with most students. Feeling mischievous, he muttered, "That will leave more time for calling in a few Dementors, anyway." He really should be more careful, he considered, as he took in their alarm, but he was too busy trying not to grin too broadly. "You really can't tell when I'm joking, can you?"

A Hufflepuff boy by the name of Mumfred, who wore a prefect badge, and whose long hair was tied back in a frizzy puff said, "Professor Snape doesn't joke much. Can you really summon a Dementor?"

Harry thought about that, replaying in his mind the sounds from the dark plane to reconsider if he had heard the Dementors there. "I'm not sure," he finally replied when the students began to shuffle nervously. "Interesting question."

"Maybe not try it here, sir?" Mumfred suggested.

Harry smiled in amusement. "Do you know how much trouble I'd be in if I did that?" he asked rhetorically, leading a few to laugh in relief.

"The Ministry probably wouldn't like that," someone agreed.

Harry lifted the notes to read from again, now feeling confident and relaxed. "Forget the Ministry; I was thinking of Headmistress McGonagall." This led them all into a relaxing laugh.

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At the end of class Harry dismissed them all just as the bell rang. They hadn't even grumbled much about the essay assignment, which Harry himself thought a bit extensive. That, he supposed, was why they were in those two houses, either smart enough to make it easy, or hardworking enough not to care. Harry barely had time to go the office and change over materials before the seventh-years began arriving.

Ginny gave him a very big smile as she sat ahead of Colin Creevey, in the front row, where he truly doubted she usually sat. Colin himself and the other old D.A. members all looked very pleased to see him and said hello as though they were old friends.

Harry did a quick count, noticing that the Slytherins sitting in the back left corner looked much less welcoming. "Everyone is here, so we will skip role." He picked up the notes for the next few classes. Today the schedule was to finish up bog and moor creatures, but next week they were starting counter-curses. "So does anyone mind if we jump ahead?" Many heads shook.

A voice in the back sullenly said, "Professor Snape might mind."

Harry grinned lightly. "I'll worry about that." He flipped ahead a few sheets. "Counter-curses," he announced to much happy oohing. The list looked very easy and almost useless, most of the spells not powerful enough for any serious attacks. "We'll start with the counter for the tremor class of curses, such as Jelly Legs." Harry called Colin up to demonstrate. He backed up and asked the boy to spell him, which he did, very lightly.

"You can put a little more behind it than that, Mr. Creevey," Harry chastised.

With a mischievous spark in his eye Colin gave him rather a hard Jelly Legs curse, powerful enough to show the spell trail, which it normally didn't. Harry countered this one as well, although he had to step back to catch his balance. "Your turn, Mr. Creevey. Ready?"

Colin swallowed hard and raised his wand, but Harry sent only an weak curse his way. Harry then went through the rows making each of them come up and try the counter. Their attitude was almost universally one of having fun, and he wasn't certain if it was his presence that was causing that. He tried to sound more serious as he gave instructions. He called the first of the Slytherins up. A tall, lean, redheaded girl named Sylvia Askunk who was wearing a Prefect badge. She didn't raise her wand when Harry asked her to give the spell a try.

In a voice of trouble, she said, "No one will say how our Head of House is doing."

"Oh." Harry put his wand hand behind his back. "I'm sorry, I should have said. I assumed the headmistress said something before breakfast."

Sylvia said, "She said he was going to be out a few days. Someone said you attacked him."

Someone snorted, presumably Ginny. Harry resisted glancing over the other Slytherins, looking for who might have suggested that. "No," Harry responded calmly. "I would hardly do that. Avaricious Avery, the last free Death Eater attacked Professor Snape out of revenge." Still calm and sounding odd to himself, he added, "He's going to be all right though." Harry did glance over the room then and found Ginny's very sympathetic gaze. She was chewing hard on her lower lip and looked to want to speak. Harry did look over to the Slytherins then and found various expressions there, mostly hopeful.

Turning back to Sylvia, he said, "Shall I show you the spell again?"

The last Slytherin was called up and approached reluctantly. Nott, shoulders hunched, looking older than his fellows in more ways than his height, stepped up onto the platform and ground his teeth impatiently. Harry considered him and wondered who had taught him how to Occlude his mind. "Can you show me the block again, Teacher?" he asked flatly.

Harry stepped back and wand at careful ready, gestured for the boy to curse him. Nott raised his wand and shouted a spell that wasn't even related to a Jelly Legs. Instinctively and feeling that he foresaw this, Harry put up a Diamona block. Not his best one, but it chimed like crystal when Nott's Dissecting curse hit it.

The room fell hushed. Harry held his wand at ready and said, "That was very stupid thing to do." Nott was gnashing his teeth. "I didn't know it was you until you did that."

"What?" Nott mocked. "You wouldn't assume it was the son of a Death Eater? Are you stupid?"

"I believe everyone deserves a chance to prove their own worth." Harry relaxed his wand hand just slightly, perhaps trying to draw another attack, perhaps trying to move beyond the exchange of spells. "Shall I tell your housemates what you did?" This, of all things, disarmed Nott. "Yes," Harry went on pleasantly, "You threw away everything. And for what?"

"Avery said his lord was rising again."

"He isn't," Harry snapped.

"His mark was darkening. I saw it," Nott countered triumphantly.

"He was lying. I would know long before that. There is a spell that will reveal a mark, which is after all just a Proteon Charm." Harry banked his anger when Nott looked more frightened. With a flick Harry disarmed the boy and caught his wand out of the air.

Nott looked sullen now rather than full of fury. "He deserved it. For being a traitor," he growled, fists clenched around nothing. A few students whispered to each other, the first noise anyone had made.

"Severus wasn't a traitor; he was loyal to Albus Dumbledore," Harry said. "And I hope that revenge was worth throwing your life away for. Come," he said, stepping down from the platform. When Nott hesitated, Harry held out his wand and threatened, "You can walk or I can stuff you in a box as small as the one they took Avery away in. Your choice." At the door Harry turned and said, "Ginny, describe the rest of the counter-curses from the notes on the desk until I get back."

She went from befuddled to bright like a switch. "Sure," she said and stood up eagerly.

Harry dragged Nott, who was only an inch shorter than himself, down the corridor by the back of his robes. Anger built in him as they walked and all he wanted to do was scream at the boy if not pummel him. Nott was looking crafty as they approached the gargoyles. "Please try something," Harry whispered softly, avidly. This brought the boy to bear with a fearful gape.

"What are you going to do?" Nott asked.

Harry held off on the password. "I'm going to inform the headmistress and have the Auror's office come get you." Harry paused, mind chewing on things. "Funny that Avery didn't give you away. They interrogated him already almost certainly."

Nott's lip twitched. "I don't know how Aurors remember to breathe they are so stupid."

Harry still held off on the password. "You know, Avery couldn't have come up with this. Brewed the odorless Kayo vapor, gotten into the castle. You expected him to get caught and gave him a Memory Charm. No, you had Lockhart give him one," Harry restated. When Nott's look darkened, Harry said mockingly, "Aurors don't need to be very smart if you keep giving things away." Hot anger was trying to fill Harry and he was listening for any sound from the Dark Plane, but there didn't seem to be any. "So, where is Lockhart?" Harry demanded.

Nott pressed his lips together before smiling faintly. "I don't know, actually."

Harry thought fiercely. "You used an Imperious Curse on him, didn't you?"

Nott put a hand on one hip. "Can we get on with with this? Your playing at the Great Auror is really a drag. In fact, watching the Slytherin Head of House fawn over you nauseated me. Professor Snape doesn't deserve that honorable title, he deserved to be hurt . . . removed from his position."

Harry had Nott lifted up by the shirt and flat against the wall in the next instant and was pleased that the boy's eyes flickered with fear. "You tried to take away something I care deeply for," Harry hissed as Nott twisted in an attempt to get away. "I already have major moments of regret at not killing Avery. You think anyone would question for even a second if I took you out right now?" Actually, part of Harry's mind interrupted, Snape would. Harry released the front of Nott's robes, very surprised that they hadn't been overrun by dark creatures then and there given the fury pumping though him. But the corridor was silent, and the gargoyles unfazed. Harry spat the password then before his own will weakened, and dragged a resisting Nott up the turning steps.

The office still reminded Harry forcefully of Dumbledore. "Sit down," he ordered the boy, who obeyed in silence.

McGonagall came down from the upper level. "What is this?" she asked in her official voice.

"Avery's inside help," Harry explained, and now that he had backup, he pulled out Floo powder and notified the Aurors.

When he stood again to await their arrival, McGonagall was circling Nott's chair like a cat waiting for a mouse to twitch. One of the few unsleeping paintings tsked chastisingly. "You failed your second chance, Mr. Nott," McGonagall said in a low voice. "I now have to apologize to Mr. Potter for having given you one in the first place." She looked up at Harry and her eyes said how sorry she was. "You had too much to live down, I suppose," she said, returning to Nott.

Nott, arms crossed and head tilted far to the side, said, "Avery said Voldemort was coming back. He lied."

"Ah yes," McGonagall said. "So as usual, you are the victim. That makes everything all right."

The hearth flared and Rogan and Shacklebolt stepped out of it, wands out. Shacklebolt turned to Harry, "What do we have?"

"The person who helped Avery into the castle. In fact, I expect he planned the whole thing." More of the paintings around them woke up and blinked in surprise.

Chapter 72

"Well, Theo," Shacklebolt said, and then in one smooth movement, hauled the boy to his feet, put a binding curse around his arms and pushed him to the hearth. "I'm sure your father's old friends will be blasted happy to see you." Two flashes and they were gone.

Harry shook himself to return to the present. "I have class I think."

"Harry," McGonagall's regretful tone pulled his attention back from a room full of bored and highly creative seventh-years.

Harry cut her off, putting a lot of effort into a level tone, "Don't apologize for trying to uphold Dumbledore's virtues . . . Minerva."

She smiled faintly. Then a breath later chuckled lightly. "Merlin, Harry, don't make me apologize to Severus yet again."

"For what?"

"I don't even wish to tell you. Go back to your class now," she brushed him away with her hand as though he were a student.

Harry, as he rode down the stairs, wondered about the headmistress' tone at the last and considered that everyone around him seemed to be holding onto their pride a bit too fiercely.

Ginny was still at the front of the room and everything was surprisingly calm. When he stepped in, she asked bluntly, "Did the Aurors take him?"

"Yes." She returned to her seat, handing the pile of notes to him as they passed. Harry thanked her and stepped to the front. Only ten minutes remained in the session. "Well, who wants to demonstrate a Hydra Counter?" Askunk shot her hand into the air and Harry gestured for her to come up. With a nod of warning he sent a bucket of water her way. The spell was capable of producing something resembling a fire hose, but Harry wasn't doing crowd control as he had been taught the spell was good for. She didn't use the counter from the lesson but a heat one, which was a little dangerous since it generated a flash of steam and if incanted too late it would burn. Harry explained this patiently.

She stood with her arms stiffly at her sides, looking angrier than before. "I want to duel you," she snipped fiercely when Harry broke off the spell instruction.

"You're sure about that?" Harry asked, not unkindly. Even here he apparently was something to measure up to. Her gaze didn't waver nor did her lips unpurse. Calmly, ignoring the students who were avidly leaning forward in their desks, Harry said, "Trouble is, you have a huge advantage over me."

Her brow shifted to confused. "Why?"

"Because if I put you in the dispensary for so much as a pin prick, I'm in very serious trouble. Whereas you don't appear to care if I end up in Mungo's through Christmas. May I ask why you want to duel? Are you the school champion looking for a bigger challenge?"

"I'm the House champion," she said, raising her wand. Harry matched her on instinct; although he didn't want it to be an invitation.

"I'm quite certain Professor Snape doesn't run dueling competitions."

"He doesn't," she replied, grinning a bit. She threw a blasting curse at him then, which he blocked. At his sharp look, she said, "You had your wand up." She sent another one, harder.

"Goodness, Slytherin Prefects are selected on some unexpected criteria." Harry teased, "You do realize that if you hurt me, Professor Snape will be most displeased."

"Yeah, right." She tossed something stringy and sizzling at him that he ducked, but it came back after bouncing off the wall. Harry tossed a Titan behind him to block it.

"Sheew," he breathed in honest surprise at the unknown attack. The class were definitely enjoying themselves, but the bell was due to ring any minute.

"Why don't you send something back?" she asked sharply, sounding spoiled.

"I really can't," he insisted. "I'd rather you get in trouble than me."

Ginny said, "Professor Snape would be very upset if he knew you were doing this, Harry."

Harry laughed and countered a Freezing Charm, ice battered the floor. "That's Professor Harry, to you. All right then, go back to Blasting Curses and I'll demonstrate," he instructed Askunk. "Go on then. Hard as you want." When she raised her wand, he called out "Chrysanthemum," and used that block. The windows rattled and someone's book flew off their desk in the resulting shattering force. "Again," he prompted.

They worked their way up the list, her spells only increasing in force and focus. "Ever consider being an Auror?" Harry teased.

Her wand hand fell to her side. "They won't take me," she snapped as though he were being stupid.

"Why not?" Harry returned in disbelief.

The bell rang then. "Assignments," Harry said, suddenly remembering. Fortunately everyone paused in putting their things away. Quickly looking through the notes, he found a list for the next session. "Chapters 11 and 12 and a pop quiz. Oops, not much of one if you know about it."

"Cheers, Harry," Ginny said, laughing. Colin beside her winked.

"That was an accident, really," Harry insisted, but they turned away still grinning.

Harry quickly collected up the lecture notes and caught the Slytherin Prefect as she arranged things in her bookbag. She shot him a dark look that converted to a frown. As the room cleared, he asked, "Why wouldn't they accept you?"

"They don't take Slytherins. Everyone knows that."

"Who said that? They don't ask it on the application."

Her teeth ground togther. Gesturing at the door she demanded, clearly upset, "So why are you arresting us all?"

In a very serious tone Harry explained, "I took Nott in because he set Avery up to kill Professor Snape."

"And how do you know that?" she sneered.

Harry looked over her angry features and said, "I hope you aren't too attached to Nott . . . he's going to be in Azkaban for rather a long time."

"No one ever gave him a break," she said, voice wavering. She tossed the last book into her bag hard. It clunked loudly against the chair seat. When she moved to lift the bag over her shoulder, Harry put a hand on her arm. He had a bad suspicion she had been helping Nott, but perhaps without really knowing what he was planning.

"Look," Harry said gently. "His biggest chance was getting to come back to school after arguably fighting on the wrong side in the final battle. He was given the benefit of the doubt for defending his father, who abandoned him in the end. It would take a lot to get over that and his injuries, and Nott didn't have it in him, apparently."

"Yeah, and what would you know about overcoming something like that?"

"A bit," Harry returned, sounding snide to his own ears. He forced everything down again and managed a soft tone. "But I can't overlook anyone attacking my family. Or anyone helping attack my family." He let that hang out there intentionally, but she didn't react more than to appear thoughtful. "If you knew Nott, the Aurors are

going to want to talk to you." Her eyes rolled. "If you want your parents or Professor Snape, or even me there, that can be arranged."

"I don't want Professor Snape there," she said quietly.

Harry took out a scrap of parchment and jotted down Aaron's name and the Ministry address. "And take this. Aaron Wickem, a fellow apprentice would be happy to owl you, I believe. He was most definitely a Slytherin, so whoever told you they weren't accepted was lying." Harry strongly suspected Nott.

She looked painfully at the scrap and with a frown muttered a grudging, "Thanks."

"I have to run. I want to visit Severus before lunch. Good luck," he added before hitching up the now disorganized stack of lecture notes and heading out the door.

In the dispensary, Harry found Snape sitting up but resting his forehead heavily on his hand. He raised it immediately when the door swung open and sat a bit straighter as Harry approached. "How are you feeling?" Harry asked in concern.

"Improved. How was your morning?"

"Hectic. You do this all week. How do you manage it?"

Snape smiled faintly. "Practice."

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 72

"I have to confess that while I followed your notes with the fifth-years, I didn't for the seventh-years." At Snape's questioning brow Harry sat on the next bed and explained casually, "I, uh, jumped ahead and started on counter-curses because I'm better at those than the creatures you were covering. And, I had to arrest Nott because he let Avery into the castle, and-"

"What?"

"Afraid so."

Snape sat back and stared thoughtfully at the high ceiling. "Not too surprising, frankly."

"And I'm going to suggest the Aurors talk to Askunk as well."

"You are a quick study, Harry; they have been friendly of late. How much Legilimency did that require?"

"None." Harry returned a bit cockily, before glancing at the clock. "I have to go down to lunch. I'll see you this evening. Only the first-years yet."

"Hah," Snape snorted. "You think they are the easiest."

Harry turned. "They aren't?"

"Mindbogglingly frustrating, they are."

"And you have to watch that you don't step on them," Harry added, sounding sober.

"Yes. Please do avoid that."

They shared a grin before Harry turned again and departed in a swish of Snape's faded robe.

After a quick lunch Harry had to search the office, which had grown almost alarmingly disorganized just since that morning, for the right notes. He was about to simply wing it, when he found the correct folder. It was one minute after the hour when Harry stepped briskly into the room. The conversations dropped off to absolute silence as he walked down the middle row. Still rushing, he turned at the front and faced all twenty two of them, the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Out of them all, Harry only recognized tiny Erasmus, whose large eyes and hair were about all there was of him.

No Dementor jokes this class, Harry thought, scanning the wide-eyed, nearly alarmed faces all turned up at him. The ones in the front row almost appeared to be ducking a bit. Putting on a friendly smile, Harry picked up the class roll. "Looks like you are all here, but let's go through the list so I can learn some names."

They each responded to their names in varying impersonations of a house-elf. Harry honestly could not imagine being one of them; he could not have been. He put down the roll and scanned the notes, but all he could think of was Snape's comment that he had shown up smaller than Erasmus the Mouse, there. "Well, looks like you did hex deflection last week. Is that right?" Someone nodded, a girl with about six little pigtails arranged around her head. She then swallowed hard, apparently at having attracted Harry's attention. In that instant Harry wished for a few Slytherins to liven things up. "And this week you have been covering the forty-one restricted potions . . . " Harry didn't know there were that many. "Hm," he said as he quickly glanced through the notes mostly in curiosity. "Not my best topic, apparently," he confessed. "Sounds a little boring too. What could we do instead?" He glanced at Pigtails, whose brow was furrowed. "Yeah," Harry said, "I know, Professor Snape likes to stick to the syllabus."

Oops, Harry thought. Have to watch that. Pigtails was leaning back in shock at having her thoughts spoken aloud. They were open books; it was almost impossible

not to read their eyes. Plowing on, Harry stepped up onto the platform. "I'm partial to counter-curses myself. I wonder what we could get through in an hour and a half? Titan maybe?" The students were glancing at each other.

"Pixley," Harry said to a boy with very short jet black hair, whose name he had remembered. "Come on up. And who knows some good hexes?" All heads turned to a blonde girl in the back. "Shrumm, right?" Harry dredged up her name. "Come up too. Stand there." He indicated the far end of the platform. Looking very nervous, they both moved to stand where he had asked them to. Harry leaned down to talk to the boy. "Now, the Titan goes like this." Harry held his wand hooked under his thumb with his fingers spread, the boy copied that, looking interested rather than doubtful. Harry turned him around; it was like moving a metal spring Pixley was so tense. Harry dearly hoped it wasn't fear because there was only one thing on the platform to fear and it wasn't the champion hexer of the first-years who stood waiting fifteen feet away.

Continuing on as though everything was fine, Harry lifted the boy's hands into position. "This is a dome block, so all you have to do is push outwards from your hands."

"What's the incantation?" Pixley asked.

"There isn't one." Harry crouched behind the boy copying what they had done sometimes in D.A. when members had difficulty learning a spell. "Here, let me show you." He pressed his hands behind the small shaking ones, steadying them. "You simply push away with your mind the way you'd push something physical away. But you use the ball of magic inside you instead of muscles. I'll throw up a block, ready?"

"Yeah," came the small reply, actually more of a 'no' in intent.

Harry pushed out the weakest Titan block he could, the orange dome didn't even hover, but Pixley caught his breath. "Okay, let me try," he insisted impatiently. Harry backed off and the boy tried for a minute, even squeezing his eyes shut.

"You're trying too hard. Let me show you again." Pixley willing submitted to a second demonstration and Harry said, "You know, it is easier to bring it up under threat, I think. Shrumm, give us a small hex this way."

Harry noticed her shifting her wand. She apparently had been trying the Titan while she waited. Twisting her face in concentration she tossed a hex at them and Harry pushed a block through Pixley's hands. "A little much to counter a hair-growing hex, but it works."

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"Let me try it alone," Pixley insisted.

Harry gratefully stood straight. "Nothing stronger than that, Ms. Shrumm," he warned sternly.

She blinked at him and said, "That's the worst one I know."

"Oh. It's true, you're not a Slytherin, are you," he thought aloud. Many giggled.

Shrumm sent another hair growing hex and Pixley invented his own incantation, something along the lines of "Yah!" But there was the smallest of orange flares and when he patted his head in a panic, no extra hair was present. "Did I do it?"

"I think so. Try it again, and lets get some more pairs working on it."

In the end Harry ended up teaching more hexes, because they were needed for practicing the block. He ignored the inner voice that chanted how unhappy certain quarters might be about that. But eight students produced some form of the block within an hour, although Harry cheated with Erasmus with just a little Legilimency to get the feel of the spell across. The boy was so thrilled to have gotten it, Harry didn't feel guilty at all.

"All right now, take your seats again." The students piled down from the platform and, with far more relaxed postures, took up their quills again, though their eyes were still awfully wide when they took him in. He sat down on the edge of the platform, thinking that might help. "We have some time for questions, or if you want to start talking about restricted potions. . ."

A hand went up. Harry called on a chubby boy with blonde hair growing straight up from a clump on the top of his head. The boy's name was Donavan, but Harry couldn't help internally referring to him as Dudley, even though the boy seemed perfectly normal.

"I have a question," Donavan announced and then remembered that he could take down his hand. "Who took the photograph on your chocolate frog card?"

"I meant questions about the lesson," Harry clarified, but a glance around the room revealed many interested expressions. Hoping that they didn't intend to take notes on his answer, Harry rubbed his brow and replied, "I have to honestly say that I was a bit distracted at the moment it was taken." Some grins appeared. "So I didn't notice. Someone told me later it was one of the Ministry recorders. Normally such photographs don't get released. Normally."

Pigtails piped in, "Everyone wanted to see he was really dead."

"Yes, they did," Harry agreed.

"Why did he come to the school?" Donavan asked, sounding confused. "Do all dark wizards come to the school?"

Harry chuckled. "No. Not as far as I know. Only when they are trying kill me."

"Good thing he did," Donavan said with feeling. At Harry's disturbed and questioning look, the flustered boy quickly explained, "Because he needed to be gotten rid of and if he'd kept hiding, or whatever, he would have lived a lot longer. Sir."

Harry considered that. "I suppose you could look at it that way."

"You killed him so easily," Erasmus pointed out.

"Uh. It didn't take long, but I wouldn't have said it was easy. Let's talk about something else."

"Aw . . . " Many voices said in disappointment.

Pigtails raised her hand. "Are you going to be teaching us next week?"

"I don't think so. I have training and Professor Snape should be back in . . . not too long." More noises of disappointment. "Don't you like him?" Harry teased.

"He's all right," Pigtails admitted, "But you're more fun. Snape's really tough."

"Professor Snape," Harry corrected stiffly, then winced inwardly at the irony. "And he's tough because wants to save your life. If you really need a spell to protect yourself and you didn't learn it here that would make him feel he'd failed, I think."

Pigtails frowned thoughtfully. "He can be kinda mean though," she complained.

"Ignore it," Harry said with a wink. "That's what I do."

They had endless questions, it seemed, or they really didn't want to start the other lecture. Yet another student with copious freckles put her hand up and said, "So why are you teaching instead? Aren't you too famous?"

"I didn't have anything else to do today," Harry explained pleasantly.

A previously quiet girl with long black hair asked, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Sort of," Harry hedged.

"What does that mean?"

Donavan leaned over and whispered loudly, "It means he has too many."

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Harry pushed his hand over his hair; he was losing control of the situation somehow. "Next topic."

Freckles repeated, "But don't you have better things to do? Like, dark wizards to catch or something?"

"I'm only an Auror apprentice. I'm not supposed to be doing anything. But I caught a dark wizard this morning if that makes you feel better. And one the other night."

Pigtails asked carefully, "The one that came after Professor Snape?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. The class fell silent then and their alarmed expressions began to reappear. Harry shook himself out the dark revere that they may be picking up on. "So I don't get in trouble with Professor Snape, I'd better give you your assignment." He read the chapter readings off the syllabus.

Erasmus had his hand raised again. "Do you ever get grounded?"

Freckles scoffed. "And who would ground him?"

"Professor Snape," Erasmus returned as though the girl was slow. "He's Harry's dad."

Freckles looked shocked and disbelieving. "Don't be stu-"

"Ah-" Harry uttered sharply to shut them up.

Erasmus protested, "But he is. It said so in the American newspaper my mum gets."

Confused and possibly dismayed faces turned Harry's way. "Mr. Van Eschelon is right. He's my adoptive father."

"Professor Snape!" Pigtails blurted. "Really?"

"Yes," Harry replied in a stern tone.

"Oh," she muttered, just as the bell rang.

Erasmus stepped up to the front as the others departed, happily realizing that they were finished and had the weekend ahead of them. "Thank you, sir," Erasmus said, holding his small hand out.

Harry shook it, amused. "You're welcome." Behind him two of the girls were whispering. When he looked up, they blushed, said goodbye, and departed quickly, heads ducked.

"Girls," Erasmus scoffed.

"You should get your Friday underway, Mr. Van Eschelon," Harry prompted, then wondered who he was turning into to say that.

In the office Harry felt obligated to try to reorganize all the files he had pulled out, mixed up, and simply spilled on the floor in his rush to find everything. It took him half of an hour just to figure out how the files were supposed to be organized. Luckily, Snape had a strict scheme that was possible to pick up on. As he sorted, a rap sounded on the door and Belinda poked her head in.

"Hello," Harry greeted her warmly and put down the file he held open. "Didn't expect to see you here."

She smiled sweetly and said, "I convinced Minister Bones to let me come scope out what was actually going on." She closed the door with a click and approached the desk.

"Ah," Harry said. "I'm teaching. Severus is recovering. I sent Theodore Nott off with the Aurors."

"We heard about that, of course," she pointed out and leaned upon the desk, facing him. "And you are doing?" she asked concernedly.

Harry sighed lightly. "Is this for you or for your report to Bones?" he asked, honestly needing to know.

Her eyes darkened. "That's not fair, Harry. It's me asking. Trust me a bit," she added, sounding stung. After a pause, during which she studied his eyes closely, she said, "Is that why you are so standoffish with me? Do you think I go back to the Minister and report on everything we do?"

"No, of course not," Harry replied, feeling he didn't have enough spare emotion for this conversation and wishing it weren't happening. "I sorry, I didn't mean to accuse you of that."

She leaned farther over, and he could smell her hair and ash from the Floo. "I was worried about you when I heard you were still at Hogwarts and I needed a good excuse to leave the office. Trust me to summarize anything personal out of what I tell her when I get back."

"All right. Of course you would." Harry rubbed his head and gathered his wits, which seemed more tattered than he wished they were.

"You're teaching?" she asked, glancing around the desk.

He picked up the file he had been working on. "At the moment I'm refiling. I was in a hurry."

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"Want help?"

"No, that's all right. I messed it up. Have a seat though unless you have to get back."

She gave him that heartrate increasing smile again. "I have a few minutes. Tell me a bit more I can 'report' on, if you will."

Harry put a file of pop quizzes back away. "What does the Minister think of Severus?" he asked, wondering if she still considered him a free Death Eater, a former associate of Dumbledore, or didn't consider him anytthing at all.

"That's a question, not a fact I can pass on," she complained lightly. "I don't know the answer to that anyway. Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged, not wanting to explain. "Just curious."

After a pause she said, "You are so mysterious; you know that?"

Harry looked up in surprise. "I don't try to be," he returned.

She clasped her hands together over her crossed knees and said frankly, "I've read everything there is written about you, but I don't know you at all." When Harry didn't respond, she went on with a touch of sadness, "I feel like . . . you hold that against me . . . " she frowned with pursed lips and looked hopeful for a response.

She seemed honestly hurt, which Harry didn't intend, so he said, "Some things . . . are just too hard to explain. I don't mean to . . . " He frowned as well, not finding words. He picked up another file and put it back down on another pile, aimlessly.

Belinda stood suddenly and straightened her robes. "I'm sorry. You have a lot going on and I'm here adding to it. I'm glad Professor Snape is all right and that you captured the last Death Eater. I'll tell the Minister everything is calm here and I'll see you at the ministry next week."

Harry called her to a halt when she reached the door, stood up, and came around the desk. He said, "Look. I like you a lot. It just takes time for me to want to share some things. It's actually harder with you because I don't . . . well, I don't want you think badly of me, or wonder . . . " Harry trailed off. She turned with such an aching expression that he gave in and finished the thought. " . . . wonder that I'm actually a dark wizard or something." Harry turned his gaze away as he spoke and tossed his arm to the side in frustration.

She gave him a nearly comically disbelieving glare. "Harry, how in the Wizarding world would I ever think that?" She sounded bizarrely like Ron as she said this. Her neutral face reasserted itself a moment later, as though she didn't want to behave so

forcefully. She fell silent before suggesting, "You still have Dementors in your head or something?"

"No, but . . . I have other things in my head," Harry admitted and then immediately wished he had not.

She took that in during a longer thoughtful pause. Eventually, she said, "How could you not? After all that's happened. Merlin," she then muttered, "we're still discussing this." She came closer and gave him a firm hug. While holding him by the shoulders after releasing him, she said, "Harry, I refuse to believe that you are only pretending to be the nicest guy I've ever met. The nicest guy who also kicks serious arse when necessary." Harry let his eyes drift away from her very sincere hazel ones. She went on. "The Aurors said you managed single-handedly two nights ago. That's amazing. On the other hand they dodged the question of how you knew Avery was here."

Harry gave in again and stated, "I saw it in my dreams. I often see Voldemort's servants in my dreams, especially if they are performing dark magic."

She took that in while Harry waited for her reaction. "That must make it difficult to get a good night's sleep," she commented.

"Sometimes," Harry admitted, not entirely certain if she were simply putting forth that calm of hers and was actually alarmed behind it. He wished that she didn't make him feel so needful of her acceptance. Maybe he was doing that on his own. She tweaked him on the chin and he met her gaze.

"I won't pass that on to the Minister," she said.

"Maybe not," Harry agreed with a wry twitch of his lips.

"No wonder you and Professor Snape get on so well."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"He always seemed like a dark magic fan. You must fascinate him," she suggested, half-teasing.

Harry exhaled. "I fascinated him when no one else wanted to deal with me because I think I alarmed them too much." This time it felt like a release to explain things and Harry thought maybe he could make a better try at doing so.

"That explains things a bit." She glanced at the clock and gave him a quick kiss. "I have to get back. Take care, all right. Stop by at lunch when you can."

Harry now felt a bit sad to see her depart. "I'll do that."

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Harry returned to the desk, diligently keeping his thoughts from the feel of her kiss that still lingered minutes later, and continued to go through every folder to make sure everything was straight and in a reasonable order before filing it away. As he was refiling the midterm notes that had somehow been mixed in with N.E.W.T. preparation quizzes, an exceptionally light tap sounded on the door. Harry called out that it was open. He was expecting McGonagall, although it didn't seem like her kind of knock.

The door swung partly open and a small face peered around it, followed by another, the second face was Freckles from the previous class. "What can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"Um," the first one, a plain looking girl with glasses, uttered in hesitation before getting pushed into the room by Freckles. A third and forth followed with no little trepidation. They resembled turtles to some degree; their heads were tucked down so far between their shoulders.

Freckles, clutching a large book as though it were a shield, said, "We, uh, wondered if you'd give an autograph?"

Harry slowly looked over the four sets of large, disturbingly fawning eyes. He believed he now knew what a freshly unwrapped ice cream treat felt like. "Hm," he said, mostly to stall. "How about this?" He pulled out the class notes he had just filed and found the lecture notes he was supposed to have gone over. "Got a quill?"

All of them moved, so quickly that two bookbags spilled onto the floor to much blushing and perhaps even one tear. Harry casually went on, "Write these down." He read out the five potions from the list that he didn't recognize. They hadn't covered potion regulations yet in his training, but it bothered him not to know what all of these were, when Snape was teaching them to first-years. He wondered if the former Potions master wasn't trying to show up the current one a bit. "Take out your books and write out what each of those is for me, will you? I'll trade that for a few autographs." If he could buy things on Diagon Alley that way, he considered, he wouldn't need an allowance.

Brightly, the girls got to it, all managing to somehow share the one small desk and extra chair. Harry went back to filing, ignoring the occasional long glance he received. He shook himself for thinking like Lockhart, which reminded him that he needed to find Lockhart, or that someone needed to find Lockhart. Without a keeper he should turn up pretty quickly, probably wandering in Piccadilly Circus through Muggle Lorry traffic. That image heartened Harry rather a lot. Lockhart probably would be better of if someone other than Harry found him.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" Freckles, the apparent group leader, prompted Harry out of his far away thoughts.

He put on a smile. "I'm not teaching as of an hour ago, call me Harry."

She blushed better than Ron. "Oh, okay," she replied in a very tiny voice.

Harry accepted the sheet and looked it over with a critical eye, which wasn't easy given the variations on the admitted highly neat writing. Something about the hearts, smileys, and even flowers and birds used in place of various punctuation made the content hard to get to. But it read like something straight out of a book.

"Thanks." He set it aside. "What would you like autographed?" She held out the book she had been carrying. He flipped it open to the marked page. "What is this?" he asked.

"The Witch Weekly Yearbook, sir, uh, Harry." A bright smile followed.

"I've never seen this."

"You're in it a lot," she stated helpfully, clearly happy about that. She leaned over the desk and pointed at a picture of him from a Quidditch match, the one the Dementors interrupted. But it was a good picture of him, in the close foreground, cutting in the opposite direction from Malfoy, who did not look to be having fun and whose figure kept trying to get out from behind Harry. "Can you sign that one, please?"

Harry did so, and handed the book back. The next girl, the one with gold-rimmed glasses, shyly came forward. Harry tried a reassuring smile and wondered if he looked like Lockhart used to. With a jolt he also wondered if what that man had been hadn't been less himself and more what the world turned him into. Glasses had a Gryffindor flag to be autographed. When signed, she gingerly took it back as though it had turned to glass, and backed up a step before saying, "You're much cuter in person."

"Am I?" Harry asked, for lack of anything else to say. There was general agreement about this. "Better than being uglier, I suppose."

Autographs finished, they packed up their things and thanked him repeatedly. One of them whispered to the other. "I'm going to owl my mum!"

Before they left, Harry said, "Don't show those around 'til I'm gone this evening."

Freckles smiled conspiratorially, "Sure, Harry."

They departed with much whispering and giggling, and McGonagall stepped inside in their wake. "Ah, the Harry Potter Fan Club did manage a personal appearance."

"Yep," Harry sighed.

"I do hope you are coming down to dinner?"

Startled, Harry asked the time while he found his watch. "Yes," he replied, "are you going down now?" He quickly filed the last two folders, hoping he had gotten them right.

"Take your time, Harry," she said gently. She paced slowly around while Harry put a few stray things away and straightened up. McGonagall stopped in the middle of the office and stared at the stone floor with a faraway expression. Harry followed her gaze and felt that terrible shifting of reality as if those two drastically diverging paths of recent past could be accidentally swapped, leaving him again facing that agonizing grief.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I didn't come here to take you back."

Harry stood and slipped Snape's robe back on. "It's all right," he said, but the floor felt unstable and his chest tight.

"Also I hope you will do me a favor?" At his nod she went on, "Take Severus home for the weekend if you will. Make certain he rests and, if on Monday morning–no make that Sunday night–if he is not one hundred percent, owl me and we will cover his classes, as long as necessary. I don't want him straining himself. Remus said he is available. All right?"

"Sure."

She held out her arm, crooked at the elbow and Harry, with a smile, accepted it. She escorted him this way, patting his hand with her other, as they walked around to the staircase. "It is good when everything works out all right."

"It's shocking when everything works out all right," Harry commented vehemently.

"Oh, my poor Harry," she said sympathetically.

Harry was in the mood for sympathy and accepted it in silence.

The Grand Staircase and Entrance Hall were full of loudly chatting students. Many turned and greeted them deferentially as they passed. In the aisle on the way to the front of the Great Hall, McGonagall said, "Are you coming to our Christmas Ball?"

"I don't think I can find a date in time."

"I thought perhaps you would be mine," she returned with wink. A few strides later, they were on the platform beside her chair. She gave his arm a surprisingly hard

squeeze before turning to speak with Flitwick. Harry took the seat beside hers and made small talk with Sinistra on his right.

The hall gradually filled with boisterous students. Ginny gave Harry a wave and came up to stand before the head table. "How was your first day of teaching?" she asked.

"Too eventful," Harry returned over the general noise.

McGonagall said, "Ask him how the first meeting of the unofficial Harry Potter Fan Club went."

Harry shot the headmistress a dismayed look. Ginny said, "Oh dear. Who is that?"

"The four muskatellas," McGonagall said.

"Oh. Them. Poor Harry," she said in sympathy.

"I survived," Harry countered.

"Take your seat, Ms. Weasley, and we will start." Ginny turned with a last wave at Harry. McGonagall clapped her hands twice and platters appeared. Harry had just reached to serve himself when he noticed the center doors opening and a familiar figure enter. He released the long spoon and watched as Snape, heavily relying on a cane, made his way down the center aisle. Many of the students stopped and turned as well. Harry had to grip the table edge with both hands to resist jumping up to help his guardian.

Eventually, Snape made it around the long table to where they sat in the middle. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned on it hard. McGonagall stood and with her wand, waved another placesetting between them. Snape didn't move to it; he gestured for Harry to. "Go ahead, Harry. I'm sure Minerva would like to sit beside you, as she has more than enough of my company."

Harry looked up at him, marveling at his very strange smile. Snape gestured again and Harry shifted over one. Their placesettings magically switched as he settled in. Snape, gingerly it appeared, lowered himself into the chair Harry had vacated. Harry wanted to ask if he were really recovered enough to be here, but held back; it wasn't as if Snape were going to turn around and return to the dispensary this minute. Instead, Harry pushed the potatoes over to him, and then swapped that bowl for the chicken stew.

As they all started eating, McGonagall leaned close and whispered, "You are hovering, Harry. He hasn't chastised you for that?"

"Am I? No, he hasn't," Harry muttered back. He tried harder to relax then but panic seemed to surge through him for no good reason.

"How were the first-years?" Snape asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Mostly all right. You didn't warn me about the mooners."

"Ah. Didn't think to. Did you make it through all the potions?"

"No, sorry. I stuck with what I'm good at–defensive spells."

"Really? What did you teach them?"

Harry served himself more mead to stall. This moment had not been on his mind when he had arbitrarily changed topics in class. "Um, a counter-curse."

Sounding dubious, Snape asked, "And how did that go?"

"Um . . . " Harry considered that less than half of the class got anything out of it. "Well . . . "

Snape leaned past him. "Minerva," he spoke across Harry. "You hired Harry Potter to teach Defense today and no matter what the syllabus said, he taught only counter-curses. All day."

"No. The first session I covered . . . Dementors and Lethifolds."

"Sorry, I take it back," Snape said with more of his old snide. "He can cover other topics with which he is personally familiar."

Harry laughed. McGonagall leaned forward and said, "Judging by the jealousy I have heard expressed this afternoon from the students not so honored as to have Mr. Potter's tuition today, I believe we can allow him some leeway. For one day, at least."

"Hm," Snape muttered doubtfully, but he was still smiling vaguely.

The Great Hall emptied out after the plates and platters vanished. Harry felt much more relaxed with a warm full stomach and Snape beside him, the color more than returned to his complexion. The teachers, unusually, were the last to depart, aside from a few seventh-year Gryffindors, who were waiting for Harry. When the three of them stood, McGonagall leaned close to Snape, "I have instructed Harry to take you home to recuperate, Severus. No arguments."

Harry, who was considering going and speaking with his friends, remained in place instead and tried to appear stern. "Hm," was all Snape said before he hobbled along the back of the head table, the rest of them in tow. "I should perhaps go pack, in

that case," Snape conceded. Harry started to follow him to the doors of the hall, but Snape stopped and said dismissively, "I believe your friends wish to visit with you."

Harry stopped. "Oh . . . yeah." Snape gave him an extra visual nudge, so he turned and walked over to Ginny, the Creevey brothers and a few others who were still gathered at the end of the house table, talking animatedly. They greeted him warmly and made space on the end of the bench for him.

McGonagall followed the slow moving Snape to his office where he stopped to run his hand over the worn, age-blackened decorative flower carving on the replacement door. They stood in silence as a large cluster of third-years passed, after which McGonagall asked, "Are you all right?"

Frankly, Snape replied, "Very much so."

McGonagall hesitated before following as she worked out that reply. "That didn't sound the least bit sarcastic, Severus." She closed the door behind her, blocking out the youthful voices from the corridor.

Almost pleasantly, Snape replied, "It wasn't." He pulled out a small trunk and began filing a few things into it.

"Severus, don't work. Don't concern yourself with anything."

"I will go mad with nothing to occupy myself."

"Catch up with Harry. He clearly misses you." Dropping her voice, she added, "He clearly needs a rest as well."

Snape stared through the far wall, lost in recent memory. He laughed lightly as he tried to take it all in.

"Perhaps . . . you also need a slightly different kind of Healer . . ." she gently insinuated.

"No, I am quite all right," he countered, still sounding queerly pleasant. The small trunk was returned to the cupboard, empty. Lifting it even empty had been a strain, but Snape didn't let on to this. He met her worried gaze and held it steadily. That light feeling from the veil hadn't completely escaped, or perhaps it was lack of blood making him faint and euphoric. "I've won," he stated and then laughed in a huff.

McGonagall didn't speak, although she did rub her hands together before dropping them at her sides. Snape discovered in himself an unusual desire to be understood by his longtime colleague. He tugged his long sleeves down over his hands to cover

a chill from the cool room on his arms. "I could not pass through the veil. Albus prevented me from doing so."

Her expression shifted to amazement. "Truly? You saw Albus?"

Smiling wryly, he replied, "Yes. My assurances to Harry were not misguided." She started to speak but then stopped. Snape filled the silence with an even more wry observation. "He insisted I return to care for Harry–as opposed to for my own benefit."

McGonagall smiled lightly with him. "Albus always assumed those around him wished to be as selfless as he was."

Snape considered that he understood the old wizard better now; previously, similar situations had aggravated him. He put a few textbooks into a shoulder bag and placed it on the desk just as a rap sounded on the heavy door. The door opened and Harry put his head inside. "When are we leaving?"

"Soon," Snape replied.

Harry waved his friends on and started to step in, but McGonagall said, "I need a moment more with Severus, if you wouldn't mind, Harry dear."

"Oh. All right." He backed out and pulled the door closed behind him.

McGonagall paced before the desk while Snape waited for her to continue. Quietly now, she said, "I've underestimated you in the past, but I am concerned that you are not skilled enough to fully help him." She gestured at the door.

Without rancor Snape replied, "I believe I can manage."

She persisted, "He is injured-"

"He is scarred. He wears in it plain sight." Snape hoisted the books over his shoulder and replayed his own assertion to James Potter in his mind. "I appreciate your concern, Minerva. But trust that I do understand his difficulty–as well as my responsibilities." He fell into silent thought before observing, "The risk Harry took in accepting me as a guardian has only become clear to me now, and I am compelled to honor that–as well as other oaths I seem to have taken in the interests of getting even."

She studied him closely, trying to eek out some understanding of that.

Snape went on. "I am not averse to your assistance, however. I can certainly bring Harry to you more often for visits."

She scoffed. "You force me to confess my utter gratitude at your survival to care for him. He was in my hands, and I was completely unable to help him."

Snape picked up his cane and used it to step by her to the door. "Harry desires your praise–of that I am certain. You could perhaps be freer with it." He opened the door to cut off any reply she may have to that.

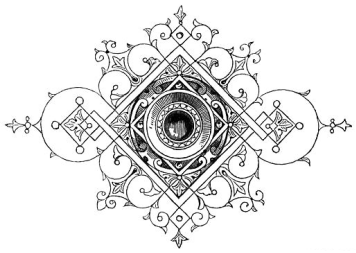
Harry and a cluster of older students were waiting in the corridor. Harry immediately came over and took Snape's bag off of his shoulder.

"You may use the Floo in my office," McGonagall invited.

Harry made his goodbyes and followed along farther into the castle. In the headmistress' tower as they organized before the hearth, McGonagall said, "Anything you need, please owl. Anything at all."

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely and gave a little wave goodbye. McGonagall waved back as Harry stepped into the blackened hearth.

Chapter 73.



Revenge and Redemption

At home, Harry put Snape's books down in the library and quickly returned in case his guardian needed assistance on the stairs; although, he looked to be managing. Harry hesitated helping without Snape signaling that he would accept it, so Harry followed a step behind, straining to remain patiently inactive.

"Feeling all right?" Harry asked when they made the balcony.

In a reassuring tone Snape replied, "Yes, Harry, I'm fine–just being careful." He patted Harry's arm before turning to the doorway to his room.

"Minerva said I was hovering. I don't . . . sorry."

"Your apology is unnecessary," Snape stated without turning from his slow journey into his room. "My father owled to say he and Gretta would stop by this evening. Show them to the drawing room and come fetch me if you would."

"Are you certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Snape firmly replied. "I put them off visiting Hogwarts, but could not put them off longer."

Harry wondered that Snape would put so much effort into not appearing weak before his father but nodded that he would do as instructed. Then he went back downstairs to check the post and straighten things up before guests arrived. The Prophets he stacked neatly and the post he sorted and took to the drawing room where he put it in the desk. Snape's previous desk diary was in the drawer and Harry drew a finger

over its soft leather. The desk and the room resonated with Snape's presence and Harry again felt fiercely grateful that he still had his guardian's living presence and not just the hollow memory and physical shell of his things.

Harry wandered the ground floor, unable to settle down to any calm task. He organized his books, pulling them all down to stacks on the floor and reordering them, flipping through several of them to remind himself of dimly-remembered spells from the first month of his training. When the Floo sounded, he shoved the remaining books quickly back on the shelves and went to the dining room. Shazor looked exactly as Harry has last seen him, but Gretta seemed older and her smile strained. Harry welcomed them and led them to the drawing room. He had been vaguely dreading their appearance but was now glad for the distraction.

When he went to fetch Snape, however, he found him dozing and disliked disturbing him. Snape woke on his own though when the hinge creaked and refused to let Harry do more than hand him his cane. Outside the drawing room, Severus straightened his stance more than Harry thought possible, and then entered. Shazor stood quickly to greet him and looked him up and down, shedding his concerned gaze for an annoyed one. "The Prophet seems to have exaggerated your injuries."

Severus took a seat with some care, saying snidely, "I doubt that, given that I spent a rather lengthy ten minutes beyond the veil."

Harry gaped at him, but hid it immediately. Shazor was too startled to notice Harry's own surprise. Gretta tsked in pained sympathy before saying, "You are very lucky to have returned, in that case."

Severus gave a pained, flickering smile before saying to Harry, "Have a seat."

Harry, gripped by bad memories and equally bad possibilities, had to shake himself to obey. Shazor and Gretta seemed more like a television program he couldn't turn off than real people there in the same room. Severus shot him a concerned look before saying to his father, "I was foolish. I knew my ingredient cabinet had been raided by a student, but I was fooled into believing their diversion. They left the Feather Star shifted on the shelf when they must have actually taken some of the extract of Ociumum."

A heated tendril of anger snaked through Harry at that. "You knew someone was brewing a restricted potion?"

"I suspected," Severus corrected. Sounding more defensive, he said, "The door to my office was well-spelled with an Imperturbable Charm, but Nott must have known

how to remove it. Your friend Ms. Granger was the only student I've ever previously known to have mastered that cancellation."

Shazor sounded vaguely chastising as he said, "Unfortunate to have been overcome by one of your own students."

Severus explained, "I woke and heard someone in my office but did not realize that the vapor had already started to affect my judgment and my magic." He fell silent then, looking grim, but it faded quickly and he gave Harry another concerned studying.

Winky appeared during the pause, bearing chocolate biscuits, which Harry gratefully accepted.

Small talk consumed the rest of the visit and eventually Shazor and Gretta departed with Harry getting the usual hug from Gretta. Snape slumped slightly when the hearth flared a second time and they were alone. "You should rest," Harry insisted. Snape merely nodded in silence and made his slow way back to his room. Harry followed, wondering what an ordinary family would be doing right about now.

Harry watched Snape settle into his room before he went to his own and stopped beside the corner bedpost for a time, just staring at the floor and the edge of the trunk by the window. He was simultaneously tired and overexcited, but he moved to change into pyjamas and dressing gown, remembering with a jolt that he was wearing some stranger's discarded clothes. After removing the faded black pullover, he held it up and studied it; the knit had stretched and sagged with time, but he tossed it into the hamper for Winky to clean, thinking that he could wear it while gardening in the spring.

With everything put away Harry tried to read for Monday, but instead wrote a few letters to his close friends, explaining that Snape was home now and recovering slowly. The hollow alternatives seemed to resist his writing down these simple things, as though some rational part of him knew differently and didn't want him sinking so far into delusion.

Still uneasy, Harry gave all the letters to Hedwig to deliver around London in one trip. She cocked her head at him at first, but flew off after adjusting her grip, claws spearing the stack to hold them all firmly. Her ghostly form flitted away down the road and over the streetlight. Harry closed the window and sighed at the sight of his lamp lit, neatly made bed. Complete exhaustion drew him to it, otherwise he might have organized his cupboard first.

Harry woke to the dimness of the short wick on his beside lamp. For a moment he couldn't figure out why he wasn't in the dispensary and then wondered why he

thought he should be. The last few days came crashing in upon him. He groaned and rolled over, punched his pillow, hugged it a bit, and tried to fall back to sleep.

He must have managed because he found himself jarringly awake, the same confusion playing out again, adding to the wearing on his spirit. He felt around in his nightstand drawer for a potion bottle before giving up on looking with the cold fear that he might not wake up if he were needed. Eventually, because his body demanded it, he plummeted again into sleep.

The next time Harry awoke he stared into the orange dimness of the stone floor between the bed and the door, and, with a nauseating quiver in his limbs, realized what was wrong. The eerie emptiness of the quiet around him felt suffocating suddenly rather than calming. Stumbling from his bed, he tugged his housecoat down from the bedpost and took up his wand from the nightstand. His rational mind told him that if he were correct, then he was much too late. His frayed nerves ached at the renewed urgency and he stumbled from his room.

On the balcony light spilled from Snape's room. Harry stepped unsteadily that way and pushed the door open the remainder of the way. Snape sat in bed, propped up by many large pillows, reading a book. He looked over at Harry in curiosity. Harry let his wand hand fall to the side, feeling very little beyond the throbbing of his overwrought nerves.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

Harry cleared his throat after unsuccessfully trying to speak. "You're supposed to be resting." It was all he could think of to say. He forced himself to breath normally.

Snape closed his book with a clap. "I have been resting for two days straight," he complained lightly. When he glanced at the wand in Harry's hand, his face fell slightly. "Come in," he invited gently. "What is wrong?"

Harry stepped forward halfway to the bed. He thought about his repeated empty wakings and breathed, "I've lost you."

Snape's expression grew alarmed. "Harry . . . come here," he said said more sternly. "I am right here."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I mean," he insisted. He stepped over beside the bed, however, and after two attempts found the pocket for his wand and put it away. "I keep waking up and . . . you're not there."

Snape's confused expression narrowed to a very intense one. "You . . ." He swallowed hard. "You do not see me in your mind anymore?" At Harry's half nod, Snape asked, "Are you certain?"

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Harry gestured sloppily in the direction of his own room. "I've woken up three times and . . . I'm alone." He pushed his hair back. "I thought something had happened to you. I was too tired to figure it out. To realize."

Snape rubbed his forehead. "Are you certain?" he whispered again.

"Yes. Three times. I usually see you all the time when you're home."

Snape was clearly stunned. "You sound . . . disappointed," he said in disbelief.

"I like knowing when you're around," Harry argued. "When you come check on me." More quietly he insisted, "No one had ever done that before."

"Yes, but . . . " Snape started and then laughed oddly. "Is that possible? To be unmade from such a thing–from being the Dark Lord's servant?" He rubbed his left forearm through his coarse sleeve.

"You weren't anyway. Voldemort is gone," Harry pointed out firmly.

Still gripping his forearm, Snape said, "I did not see it that way." He looked up at Harry, gaze far away, then he laughed lightly again. "I would not have imagined," he whispered. After a half minute more he shook himself. "You are having trouble sleeping?" At Harry's nod, he asked, "Do you want potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid I won't wake up . . . if something happens."

"Harry, you must sleep sometime," Snape swung his feet off the bed and reached for his dressing gown. "But it is half past five. We can have breakfast instead. I am quite hungry."

Harry helped him to his feet, which Snape did not resist, and held him steady while he reached for his cane. Putting an arm around Harry's shoulders, Snape gave him a half-hug. "Goodness, I wouldn't have imagined." He ran a hand over the back of Harry's head. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome . . . although I don't know what I did," he said a little smartly.

Snape started for the door, leaning on Harry more than the cane. "You gave me something to return for. Come, let's get you some breakfast." He ran his hand again over his charge's head. "And see what else we can do for you."

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. He was overreacting to everything but, even with effort, couldn't find a rational instinct for things.

In the dining room Snape asked yet again, "Are you certain?"

"What?" Harry's thoughts had drifted off into a bad circle of memories. He roused himself and stirred the coals in the hearth to warm the room. "Yes, I'm certain your shadow is gone."

Snape lowered himself into a chair. Harry gave up on the fire and sat across the table from his guardian. Snape simply stared at him. "Goodness," he muttered again. "You will forgive me while I am occupied with being stunned, won't you?"

Harry relaxed an inch and smiled. "Sure." He certainly hadn't ever seen Snape with quite this expression; it was an almost amusingly befuddled one.

Winky stepped in, hands clasped before her. "Masters wish for breakfast?"

Distractedly, Snape replied, "Yes, please. Thank you, Winky."

Harry laughed as Winky departed after a bow. "Oh sure," Harry taunted. "One never thanks the house-elf."

Snape appeared startled. He quickly turned to the door and then back. "I must be slipping," he breathed, with a tinge of dismay.

Coffee appeared. When Snape reached for it, Harry grabbed it first. "Pomfrey said you weren't to have any." At Snape's utterly appalled expression, Harry relented and poured him a quarter cup and pushed it over to him. Snape stared into it before taking a very small sip as though to make the scant amount last.

Harry put his cup down and stoked up the fire more and added another chunk of wood. The tongues of flame quickly rose to blacken it. He put the poker aside and returned to his seat and watched the fire build. Usually he found the fire relaxing, now it reminded him of his mad run to Hogwarts.

"Harry," Snape's voice cut through his thoughts. "Do not dwell on it . . . it only feeds it."

"I'm not trying to remember," Harry countered, annoyed. Part of him wondered what he had been thinking to put so much at risk and accept someone as a father yet again. Hadn't he learned from the past?

"Harry," Snape repeated. "I will be here for you."

Angry suddenly, Harry argued, "How can you promise that?"

Snape actually smiled lightly. "Albus is blocking my way through the veil. Otherwise, I would not promise such a thing."

It was Harry's turn to gape. "Dumbledore! You saw Dumbledore?"

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Calmly, Snape poured himself another quarter cup of coffee. Morning light was just beginning to infuse the room, brightening the walls. "I did, and I agree, he looked much younger than he did when he died." Thoughtfully, Snape sipped his renewed cup. "I wonder if he reverted to the age he was when he began using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir."

"When was that?"

"I do not know for absolute certain, but I got the sense it was just after Grindelwald's defeat." Snape was quiet for a long time, eyes focused far beyond Harry. "Albus would never discuss some things and that was one of them. My suspicion was that he knew Riddle would rise to power in Grindelwald's wake, and he wanted to be there to guide whoever was destined to defeat him. That happened to be you."

"So he didn't just defeat Riddle himself," Harry complained, even though he knew this.

Snape didn't reply right way. When he did speak, he sounded as though he were composing his response very carefully. "I suspect he believed that whoever did defeat him had other things that they must do after."

Harry's jaw clenched. "Oh. Great," he muttered. "Here I am going along thinking my life is my own."

"No one's life is their own. Not yours . . . " Snape's voice dropped low as he added, " . . . and certainly not mine, now." With a light smile he teased, "Relax Harry, by the time the next dark witch or wizard makes an appearance, you will be very powerful indeed."

Breakfast materialized while they both thought that over. Harry hadn't believed he was hungry but the heaping plate looked very inviting and his stomach rumbled even before he could pick up his fork. In short order, his plate was empty again and it disappeared.

Snape laughed lightly.

"You're sure you're all right?" Harry asked. "All this chuckling worries me."

The smile didn't fade from Snape's lips. "I've won."

"You're no longer a shadow to me, you mean?"

"There is that as well," Snape stated pleasantly. "I was thinking, actually, of cheating death . . . among other things."

Harry stood up to collect the Prophet from the owl that was dropping it off rather than let it sit outside on the sill. The cold air woke him up sharply before he re-closed the sash. "What other things?" he asked, putting the paper down beside Snape and returning to his chair.

Snape hesitated rather a long while. "Well," he finally began, "I no longer hold any ill will toward your godfather, who sent me back here, to the land of the living."

Harry froze. "Sirius did that?"

"Yes. He apparently has additional powers beyond the veil, perhaps because he arrived whole rather than the usual way."

Harry feared the memory that drew forth, but it didn't cut nearly so deep as it used to. He put his hands down on the table to feel its solidity. "How did he look?"

"Black? A bit melancholy, I must admit."

Harry remembered his own moments beyond the veil. "That's what I thought," he admitted sadly. "Too bad there isn't anyway to . . . to thank him."

"Not that I can think of. I am certain a time will come when you can do so in person, but hopefully that is well in the future." Snape moved to pour himself yet more coffee, but Harry pulled it out of reach.

"That's enough," he chastised his guardian.

"Hm," Snape muttered, but didn't argue. His eyes were abnormally bright, especially given their color.

Harry, needing a distraction from all the emotion churning within him, turned the paper over to glance at the front page. Avery was relegated to the bottom article and a scandal involving someone rigging Quidditch Bludgers had moved into the headline, which read, Falcons Must Forgo Questionable Wins. That nagged at Harry but he dropped it on the worn wood and pushed it back over to his guardian. Snape was giving him one of the closer lookings-over he had ever received.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Snape said, sounding strangely pained. He picked up the large folded parchment news and scanned it.

It was still early when the doorknocker sounded. Harry went to answer it and found Candide outside, bundled thickly against the cold.

"Can I come in?" she asked shyly, sounding as though she expected to be turned away.

"Sure," Harry invited, figuring there was nothing for it.

Snape had come into the hall, leaning on his cane. "How are you?" Candide asked him, sounding concerned.

"Improving," Snape answered amiably.

Harry excused himself and went upstairs. When the door to Harry's room closed, Snape said, "Something I can do for you?"

She smiled wryly. "I wanted to see how you were doing. I stopped by the school again and the headmistress said you had gone home." At his questioning look, she explained, "You were out . . . cold when I stopped by the first time." She glanced up a the balcony. "Got a good chewing out from your son." Snape's brow lowered and she quickly added, "It's all right. He explained something I hadn't understood. And he was only protecting you. That alone made me think." She sighed and swung her arms at her sides once. "You know, I miss being around you, but it is really hard to accept some things–no matter how much time has passed. But I keep reminding myself that Harry Potter himself has forgiven you, so who am I to hold things like that over you?"

Snape didn't respond, just stood in calm silence. She huffed into the quiet space around them. "I really want to let it go. I want to be sorry for what I said." She frowned a bit. "I want to spend time with you again," she said with a short laugh, then ducked her head. "Can we try again?"

Snape sighed lightly. "If you wish."

This simple response caught her off guard. "Oh . . . all right."

Snape gathered the sides of his dressing gown together as though he were chilled and leaned a little harder on the cane. "I would invite you for dinner, but I am not the best company at this time, and as well . . . " Here, he too glanced up to the balcony to check Harry's door. "I must devote myself to Harry for a time."

"I understand," she agreed, sounding flustered. "He did seem rather stretched to his limit when I stopped by Hogwarts." After a span of awkward silence, she moved toward the entryway and turned back, head tilted shyly. "Well, owl me then. All right? I can show myself out." Snape nodded.

After the outside door opened and closed, Snape made his way up the stairs and knocked on Harry's door. Inside, Harry was sitting on his bed, immersed in his Auror-assigned readings. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Fine," Snape assured him. He stepped in and gimped around to the window, stopping at the cages. Hedwig's stood empty but the Chimrian looked up at him and flapped her wings while holding them bent in the confining space. "Shall I let her out?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry replied. "You didn't have any great fondness for the curtains in here anyway, right?"

Snape turned to the window and studied the drapery, which now hung in wide tattered strips. "Hm. No, not particularly." He opened the cage and Kali flapped down to the door edge and then out and over to the bed. Harry perched her on his shoulder where she hunkered down and appeared to read with him.

Snape turned to the window with a wince, attracting Harry's attention. "You all right?" Snape assured him that he was, but Harry went on, "Pomfrey is supposed to check on you, right?"

"This afternoon."

Harry glanced at the clock; it wasn't even 9:00 in the morning yet. "I can fetch her now."

"It is unnecessary. I will go down to the library and take it easy."

"Why don't you just go to bed?"

"I am . . . thrilled . . . to be up and out of bed. I have no intention of returning until it is absolutely necessary. I will rest downstairs."

Harry followed Snape to where he settled onto the lounger in the library. He fetched Snape's books for him and hovered a minute to be certain he was settled and then went and fetched his own things anyway. Kali, who had gripped him painfully hard when he was moving quickly, settled down when he did at the small table.

Harry tried to follow the chapter on spell dissipation that he needed to read for Monday. It was interesting; really, he had always wondered why certain transfigurations lasted longer than others, why some kinds of spells were easy to cancel and others nearly impossible. But his attention wandered constantly and he had to keep repeating paragraphs to remember what he had just gone over. For the first time in a very long while he wished for a television to look at so he didn't have to think.

Owls arriving provided a welcome distraction. "Ron and Hermione want to stop by this evening. Is that all right?" Harry asked.

"Certainly," Snape replied without looking up. "If they are staying for dinner, you should perhaps inform Winky."

Harry reread the letter from Hermione, which was so full of compassion that he skipped over parts of it to keep from unbalancing himself. "Doesn't say. I'll assume they are."

The morning dragged on with Harry savoring the reassuring presence of his guardian, letting it ease the panic that kept trying to rise whenever his mind wandered backward in time three days.

During one of those moments, Snape urged him, "Do try not to dwell, Harry. Perhaps you should set up the chess board and we can play a little."

Continued top of next chapter...

End of Chapter 73

Harry shook himself and pretended that everything was all right. Just pretending made him feel better and he went to the drawing room for the roughhewn marble chess set. He moved the small desk over beside the lounger and transfigured it to be a little larger before moving the set onto it and arranging the pieces.

As they played, Harry leaned heavily on his elbow and finally just rested his head on his arm while he waited for his opponent's move. Kali had crawled down into his lap and curled up into a warm lump.

"Why don't you go have a nap, Harry?" Snape suggested.

Harry shook his head; he was about to put Snape in check, and when his move arrived, did so. His bishop made a motion as though to test the weight of his mace in anticipation.

"Have you been playing?" Snape asked as he surveyed the board.

"No." He was however, easily seeing the board as a whole, which was not usually the case.

"You have gotten better at this game," Snape observed as he moved his king one space to the left. Harry moved his other knight closer in, to box in the black king on the next move and waited again for Snape to take a turn. He must have closed his eyes and drifted off because when he opened them a tea set was being placed beside his elbow. The black king was on its side.

"I concede," Snape informed him as he poured out a cup for Harry.

Harry lifted his head and rubbed his neck. "That's the first time I've won playing you," he observed.

Snape settled himself back on the edge of the lounger and blew on his hot cup. "I blame your unorthodox distraction techniques."

"What distraction?" Harry asked, confused.

"Your sleeping beside the board, for one thing. It tends to lower one's expectation for one's opponent to mount a decent strategy."

"Everyone underestimates me," Harry complained while resetting the board.

Snape wrapped his hands around his cup and simply held it. "I think there will come a time when that will no longer be true. I hope you can rise to it when it does happen."

They played two more games which resulted in draws before Harry settled back into his reading, feeling relaxed, although later, the Floo flaring in the other room startled him, until Snape, getting slowly to his feet, said, "That must be Madam Pomfrey."

Harry longed to give him a hand, but held back and instead went to greet the visitor. Lugging a battered, black bag, the Hogwarts Healer took Snape upstairs with her usual efficient manner, with Harry observing their slow progress from the floor of the hall.

Inside his room, Snape made his way to the bed and with his now usual care, lowered himself to sit on the edge. Madam Pomfrey plunked her bag beside him and tapped it open with a finger. Its metal-hinged top yawned wide like a mouth and she plucked her wand out of it. "Looks like you are in a bit more pain than you ought," she observed.

Snape adjusted his dressing gown and nodded his head to the side noncommittally. Using her wand, she tapped him in the center of his chest and huffed quietly. She then extracted a tall, cork-stoppered bottle from her bag, much too large to fit had the bag been the same size on the outside as the in. She used it to fill the bedside glass nearly to the brim and handed it to Snape, who sniffed at it doubtfully.

"Another dose of tissue knitter is in order, Professor." At Snape's frown she retorted, "Better than suffering forever."

He sniffed at the clear liquid again. "Is this a new batch?" he asked.

"Yes," Pomfrey admitted and when Snape continued to examine the liquid doubtfully, she said, "Goodness, Professor, the Potions mistress would not poison another member of the staff."

Snape raised his left brow at her with a dubious expression.

Pomfrey went on, conceding, "And in any event, I tested it this morning on myself . . . no harm done." She lifted her hands from her full-skirted sides, as though to show off her normal self.

Snape huffed and drank a gulp before holding the glass to the lamplight. "Tastes a little off."

"Drink it all. Come now," Pomfrey cajoled as though to a child.

Snape swayed slightly and obeyed with a frown. She took the glass back and suggested that he lie down. "The knitting isn't the most pleasant, sleeping through it would be better anyway."

Snape's head was nodding and in a blink he fell over onto the pillow. Pomfrey scooped his slippered feet onto the bed and covered them with his dressing gown. "There we are," she said happily.

Speech slurring, Snape muttered, "You . . . slipped in . . . sleeping potion."

She propped her hands on her hips. "Serves you right. After the last dose of knitting potion you ran down to dinner. No wonder you needed another."

She adjusted his pillow and had to lean close to hear him say, "Had to . . . reassure Harry."

She sighed. "Well . . . never mind. This should be the last now." She closed up her bag and held it in her hand while resting two fingers on the pulse point of his wrist hanging over the edge of the bed. Humming lightly to herself, she finally turned down the lamp and departed.

Harry met Pomfrey at the bottom of the stairs. "How is he?" he immediately asked.

"He'll be fine," she stated pleasantly. "Although he'll be asleep for a few hours. See that he isn't disturbed." She headed for the hearth in a businesslike manner, but before she tossed in any powder she said, "When he wakes up, see that he gets a good meal . . . he should be quite hungry."

Harry returned to his reading without much ability to concentrate, but it wasn't long before Ron and Hermione arrived. Harry was very grateful to see them as he was in dire need of an understanding ear and something different to occupy his thoughts. They settled into the drawing room and played wizard chess while Hermione perused a few books she found in the library.

"I shoulda brought my set," Ron complained at one point.

"What? Mine aren't as crazed as yours?" Harry asked.

"I like a chess set that always does as I say," Ron went on. He ordered his rook to slide over beside his queen.

Harry didn't usually try very hard at this game, mostly because Ron almost always won anyway, but today, bolstered by his other win, he was in the mood for a challenge. That move looked as though Ron were trying to distract him from some other ploy. Harry studied the board thoughtfully, refusing to be baited. Thinking of making his own distraction, Harry asked, "Would you like a butterbeer?"

"Oy, yes, thanks."

Harry started to stand, but Hermione volunteered to fetch them from the kitchen.

When she got there, Winky was holding three, fully warmed butterbeers and glasses on a tray for her. "Thank you, Winky," Hermione said as she accepted the tray. She lowered it to her waist and stood with it, hesitating. "Are you happy here?" she asked a little quietly.

Winky straightened her sparkling white tea towel. "Oh yes, mistress. Winky very happy. Masters is very nice wizards."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, they are, aren't they. Well, thank you for the refreshments." Winky bowed her out, smiling broadly as well.

"Are you staying for dinner?" Harry asked later when his stomach began to complain.

"We'd like to," Ron stated forcefully.

"Ron, you don't invite yourself for dinner," Hermione complained.

"I wasn't," Ron retorted.

Harry held up his hand. "It's all right. I'd like you to stay. I don't think Severus is going to be awake for a while." He should have just invited them outright, he regretted to himself as each of his friends eyed the other in annoyance.

The meal was quiet, given that his friends were continuing to be a little peeved with each other, although Hermione kept trying to keep a conversation going regarding Harry's attempts at teaching. Harry, who had decided perhaps he hadn't done all that brilliant of a job, wasn't really in the mood to dissect his performance. When the dessert dishes cleared themselves away, the two of them made their goodbyes to Harry, including a long hug from Hermione that made Ron tap her on the shoulder.

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"I'm glad everything's all right, Harry," Hermione said with feeling as she released him.

"Thanks."

When they had gone, it felt much too still in the house. Glancing in concern at the late evening hour, Harry made his way quietly upstairs to check on his guardian, wishing that Pomfrey had told him exactly how long Snape should sleep.

Inside Snape's room, the low lamp and the flickering coals in the hearth were just enough to see by. Quietly, Harry stepped in, causing only Franklin to turn his head. Snape lay on his side in his dressing gown, one foot slippered–the other had fallen off–his bare foot overhanging the edge of the bed. The air felt cool so Harry moved to add fresh wood to the grate. He crouched and prodded the new wood against the radiating embers until it caught and only then let them roll forward on the wrought iron to continue burning. He then straightened, brushed off his hands, and approached the bed, where he stood and watched the reassuring lift of Snape's shoulder as he breathed. Two strands of black hair lay across his face. Harry gingerly lifted and brushed them back and considered Snape's angular profile, stern even in sleep. He stood that way, with bent back, forcing this scene to overlay the other memory, to dull its razor-like edge. Afraid suddenly of being caught so close should Snape awaken, Harry backed off and stepped lightly away, latching the door carefully.

In the dimness Snape rolled onto his back and rubbed his brow, and only after doing so did he remember how much pain to expect with that much movement. There was none; apparently the last dose of potion had worked itself to completion. Feeling Harry's distress like a weight on his chest, Snape stood with new ease and went over to the low shelf behind Franklin's cage. On a square of scrap parchment he scrawled out a quick note to Tonks, folded it, and gave it to the owl before letting him out the small window to deliver it. He then pulled an old straight-backed chair before the cracking fire and sat meditatively, long enough to make Harry expect he had woken separately from his visit. A quarter-hour later, and overheated from the high fire, Snape took up his cane, straightened his dressing gown, and quitted his room.

Harry looked up from his reading in the library when Snape appeared in the doorway. "How are you feeling?" Harry immediately asked, glancing down at the cane Snape still used, although he wasn't leaning on it nearly as hard as before.

"Much better. I think I will ask Winky for a plate of cold joint and bread. I assume you have eaten?"

"Yes." Harry stood and went over to him. "My friends were here for dinner, but they left half an hour ago."

Turning, Snape commented, "Good, at least you had company."

Of a sort, Harry thought to himself. He went to the dining room to make certain it was straightened before Snape arrived with a heaping plate of cold meat slices and half a loaf of bread. "Hungry?" Harry asked in amazement.

Taking a seat, Snape returned, "The elf apparently believes I am. Why don't you have some as well?"

Harry tore off a chunk of bread and proceeded to press it flat in his fidgety fingers. He looked Snape up and down. "Are you going to be ready to teach on Monday?" When Snape hesitated replying, Harry went on, "You should take another day off. McGonagall said that would be fine."

"Hm," Snape muttered.

"Severus, please don't push yourself," Harry said, hearing a plea in his own voice that undid some of his careful emotional bolstering.

Calmly, reassuringly, Snape said, "I won't Harry. Don't worry. I will take Monday off then."

Harry relaxed and nibbled on the now-dense bread. Hopefully training would not run late on Monday, he thought.

Snape eventually pushed his plate over to Harry who waved it off. He had only been eating out of nerves and was now overfull. After a glance at the clock, Snape grumbled, "Back to resting, I suppose." Using his cane, he gained his feet. Harry put out a hand to steady him. "I'm all right, Harry, really," he said, shrugging him off.

"You should owl McGonagall," Harry insisted. "So she can warn your replacement." A wave of distress hit Harry at that, unsettling him as though he were starting all over again from the worst moments. He ducked his head and waited for an admonishment for his lapse, or something lightly snide even, as he grappled with himself with what he felt was a heroic effort.

Instead of a well-meaning, yet biting, comment, Snape stepped closer with his cane and put his free arm around Harry's back. Harry grimaced with the effort at squashing the renewed surge of memory and emotion. It was as though a gaping wound had opened, revealing a hollow at his core that the cold blew straight into. He let his forehead touch his guardian's sharp shoulder bone. Solid. Warm. Harry calmed with relief.

Snape's voice distracted him. "At least I did not lie."

"About what?" Harry asked without moving.

Snape chuckled and released him. "I don't think I want to tell you."

Harry stood straight and stretched his shoulders back. "Tell me what?" he echoed.

With a sigh Snape squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Goodness, I must be redeemed . . . I'm feeling guilty for what I did."

Harry blinked several times, completely not following this. He waited to see if Snape would explain. Snape paced a little with his cane as though he didn't really need its support. Facing the table, head bowed, Snape admitted, "I got even with your father."

Harry pieced that together with the other things Snape had said. "In the veil?" At Snape's nod Harry uttered, "Oh," with mixed feeling and continued confusion.

Reluctantly, still staring at the table edge, Snape went on, "I regret it now. Ironically, I only now understand what I did."

A long silence passed as the hearth burned down and shifted, throwing sparks. "What happened?" Harry asked.

With a faraway expression Snape finally replied, "Albus restrained me from passing through the veil, but time passed before I could return, or be sent, more precisely." A long pause ensued before he continued, "Your parents appeared." Snape looked up at Harry as he started and gave his charge the smallest of smiles. "Your father was not pleased that Albus was helping me return."

Harry bit his lip, glad that Snape was looking at him now as he spoke.

"Albus explained to your father that he should wish me to return, because I was caring for you."

Harry's eyes widened. "Dumbledore told my father that?" he demanded, stunned silly. He swallowed hard, heart thudding.

Snape nodded and held up his hand to examine the palm of it. "I was fading. It was very strange. I actually forgot what it felt like to be alive, and Albus kept insisting I remember."

"Wh . . . what if you hadn't made it?" Harry asked.

"Just like anyone who refuses to enter the veil. I'd have become a ghost."

"Severus!" Harry exploded, suddenly alarmed. "Don't risk that for me. I wouldn't want that to happen–not for anything."

"Goodness," Snape returned, sounding amused.

Harry found a new measure of control at that insistence; one that he sorely needed.

"Albus most likely would have prevented it, but it was my choice to risk it," Snape finished sternly.

"Don't do it again," Harry insisted, stern as well.

Snape's lip curled. "I don't expect there to be a next time."

Harry thought a moment. "What did my dad say to that?" he carefully asked.

Snape appeared uncomfortable, but finally replied, "Well, he was not pleased. He demanded to know what I was doing with you . . . 'doing with his son'. This was as the world began drawing me back, although it was a world composed entirely of pain–the only time I have ever welcomed it." He hesitated, but finally added, "I told him that you were my son, now."

Stunned by trying to imagine events that he had never considered possible, Harry leaned one hand on the tabletop and rubbed his hair back and forth repeatedly with the other.

Snape added, "I do now regret saying that. I certainly wouldn't want anyone saying it to me. And he has no recourse. Absolutely none."

"You hope he doesn't," Harry commented.

Snape huffed, amused still, "True."

Harry breathed deeply, the wind outside had pushed a curl of smoke out of the hearth and its sweet scent reminded him of Hogwarts and here, of home. "I wouldn't have imagined my parents finding out," he said, uneasily laughing his distress. "What did my mum say?"

Snape shook his head. "Nothing. She remained in the background, in the fog." He brushed Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said, sounding more like he meant it than Harry thought possible.

Harry took a half step back at his guardian's fervent expression. The expression dulled an instant later. "Huh," Harry uttered, still trying to take it in. "But Dumbledore told him before you did," he pointed out.

"True. But he wasn't quite so . . . cruel about it." Snape turned with a shuffling of his feet to face the dying fire, gaze far beyond it. "If anyone tried to take you from me . . . " he faded out darkly.

Chapter 73

Harry felt undone in a whole new way at the same time as he felt more secure. He didn't have a response.

About the time Harry was going to insist that Snape return to bed, even though he was reclined in the library, the doorknocker sounded. Harry imagined Candide had returned so when he opened the door he was unprepared to find Anita there instead, insufficiently dressed for the wind in a thin wrap, but apparently not feeling the weather.

"Uh, come in," Harry invited when he caught up with the situation.

"How is Severus?" she asked. "I only just received the news about what happened."

"He's fine," Harry assured her. He led her into the main hall and she followed with apparent reluctance, posture uncertain.

Snape looked up and started in surprise. While they stared at each other, Harry backed up a step, uncertain if he should stay. Anita said to her son, "You look to be doing all right."

Snape sat up easily, almost normally. "I have had rather skilled care," he explained. He then stood and approached the doorway and her. "I am surprised to see you here."

She fidgeted. "I don't like being away from the coven, but the copy of the Prophet I saw described your injuries as nearly fatal. I guess if I had known how well you were doing . . . " She trailed off uncomfortably.

Harry expected Snape to react to that, but all he said, in a rather calm voice, was, "I am quite well. Do not concern yourself. I have Harry here to watch over me, if all else fails."

Both Harry and Anita took that in over a few silent seconds. Still awkward, Anita said with a small laugh. "That's good to know. But which of you adopted the other?" she added, trying for a joke.

Snape's lip twitched and he crossed his arms. "It is growing unclear," he stated in that new amiable tone of his that still struck Harry as vaguely worrisome or potion induced. "Trust that we are both all right. Do you require more assurance?" He sounded so confident and calm, that Harry had to bite his lip against the hopefulness that perhaps this woman no longer held any power over his guardian. While she worked out a response to that, Snape continued to levelly meet her gaze without even a flicker.

"Ah, no, I don't require more assurance than that. I realized that, unlike previously, I found myself believing that you perhaps no longer deserved such an attack, even from a former fellow Death Eater." Behind her, Harry's jaw hardened. She went on more brightly, "But I see that you are recovering nicely . . . " She paused, seeming to try to comprehend the altered man before her. She shook her cloak as though considering leaving.

"Recovering very well, I assure you," Snape replied. "But I believe you are uncomfortable here; perhaps you should return." It wasn't a dismissal, simply a statement of fact.

"It has been a very long time since I've been out. But . . . I thought since I had apparently almost lost my only offspring . . . that I should see how he was faring. But you are clearly all right." She gazed closely at him again before stepping back, clearly to depart. "If you can come for Christmas, you would be most welcome."

Harry frowned lightly, remembering their last visit. Snape said, "Owl with the details and we shall see."

She departed with a last long curious look back at Snape. Harry saw her out, wondering at the change in his guardian and whether Pomfrey's potions were still working at him.

In the morning, Harry awoke after an uneasy and frequently broken sleep. He had had a vivid dream of speaking with Sirius through the mirror his godfather had given him. It was very strange, Sirius wanted to know if Severus had arrived all right. Harry wished he really could use the mirror to speak to him, to thank him, but if it ever could have been used for that, the silvering was beyond hope now from the weathering it had received.

Harry was finally drawn from his bed when an owl appeared at the window, one from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry rubbed his eyes, took the letter from it, and discovered it was from Tonks.

Harry, Headmistress McGonagall assures me that Severus is recovering but I think you should take a bit more of a holiday, at least until Severus is back at Hogwarts. Harry blinked at that, feeling suspicious even as he felt grateful. If Reggie begrudges you the extra time, I'll let him have it. Harry grinned at that but then his face fell

and he bit his lower lip. McGonagall, when Harry had insisted on hearing details, had told him that Rodgers himself had taken Avery away. Harry had no recollection of his trainer that night. There was nothing in his memory but a queer, confused greyness between finding Snape in his office and his guardian's subsequent rousing him in the dispensary, as though a time-turner had been used in between or it had all been a distorted, potion-induced hallucination.

Harry folded the letter and ran his nails along the edge to crease it, then folded it a second time, again creasing it hard. Darkly, he wondered what Rodgers thought of him now. Certainly he had to believe Harry too weak to be an Auror. Harry imagined his trainer would return to treating him twice as hard as his fellows. Well, he would just match whatever Rodgers threw his way, he thought with resolution, to the point where he hoped the man did just that.

Snape was reading the last few days' newspapers at the table when Harry came down. Businesslike, Harry poured himself coffee and sipped it, ignoring its scalding heat. The world felt more stable this morning, less like a wishful delusion. Oddly, thinking of his parents made him feel calm, as though the truth had released some binding inside him that he had been unaware of. He felt light, almost euphoric.

"Did you sleep all right?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged, not wanting his guardian to worry. "Well, enough."

Snape considered him closely as though assessing the truth of that. An owl came to the window with a letter. Snape waved Harry to remain seated and fetched it himself.

"Where's your cane?" Harry asked.

Not looking up from opening the envelope, Snape said, "I don't seem to need it this morning."

"You're recovered?"

"Well enough to not require a piece of bent wood to get about, yes."

Snape's snide tone made Harry grin. "I could go to training tomorrow, then."

"I was thinking of something else, perhaps."

"What?" Harry asked, amused by Snape promoting skiving.

"Some Christmas shopping."

"Somewhere Muggle?" Harry asked hopefully.

Snape's lips twitched as he lowered the letter to peer at Harry over it. "If you insist."

Harry spent a quiet morning in the library studying, answering owls from his friends and idly considering what he might get them tomorrow while he was out. After lunch, since he had an extra day to address his reading list, he settled onto the lounger with the purple book, and tried to read some of it. The weight of the dry text–The atmos of the parallel planes presents a disquieting conclusion to the visitor that reality is indeed a thin, fragile construct.– pulled Harry's poorly-slept eyes closed.

Snape, taking a break from a much-needed refiling of his papers, stepped into the doorway of the library. The bright noon sun played at the window Harry had expertly removed and replaced with a spell when Avery had come snooping. Harry himself lay asleep, half curled, his arm trapping his book from falling, even though it hung half off the black leather surface. Snape drew it free and flattened its crumpled pages before setting it on the floor because the side table already contained a teetering pile of Harry's reading.

Harry did not stir through any of this. Snape straightened slowly and considered his sleeping face, his especially mussed hair, the fine white line that was all that remained of his lightening scar. The Hero of Wizardry fast asleep, Snape considered, and then additionally, his personal hero as well. Tempered by his knowing how dearly Harry needed him, he failed to bristle at that.

The library was the only room in the house with no hearth, making it far cooler than the drawing room. Snape shrugged out of his sleeveless outer robe and draped it slowly over the sleeping Harry, but even then he could not walk away and return to his parchments. With a broad sigh he sat on the edge of the lounger, leaned slowly back, and draped an arm behind Harry, who continued to sleep as one shorted on proper rest for too many stressful days.

Snape allowed his head to fall back and stared up at the ceiling, absorbing the moment, and resisted squeezing the shoulder beneath his hand, lest he wake his charge. His chest tightened as he felt the burden of Harry's strained emotions, even though they had been noticeably improving and at the moment, were nonexistent. Raising his head, he studied the top of Harry's mussed head and felt an utterly alien pity for his former nemesis James Potter–pity that James was not here in his place. This guardianship Snape had accepted, too lightly it seemed in retrospect, had grown into covetous honor and it felt almost cruel to be here in James Potter's stead.

One day Harry would rival even Dumbledore for power, but at this moment he needed the shelter of this house and Snape's knowledge and understanding. In response

to those simple things Harry returned a fierce loyalty that made everything else extremely easy. One day, too soon, Harry would no longer need these things, but for now Snape felt a burning pride that it was himself in this place, carrying this burden.

Harry shifted as he slept and Snape took that opportunity to pull him closer so that his forehead rested against him. Harry appeared to fall even deeper into calm sleep, making Snape wonder if he should not have been trying to give a bit more affection to him all this time. Harry hadn't given any indication one way or the other, but perhaps he wouldn't know to.

Concerned that perhaps he had been badly remiss in this, yet still bristling at the awkwardness, Snape rubbed Harry's back once, causing his eyes to snap open. Harry seemed rather startled to be held so and Snape read in his green eyes his vague dismay and the certainty that he was too old for this. Snape laughed lightly at the irony that he was just a little bit too late.

"You're doing it again," Harry complained, but rested his head on Snape's shoulder with an expression that hinted at recent pain.

One part of Snape marveled at how ordinary this felt. Soberly, he stated, "Everything is all right."

"I know," Harry said, sounding short on patience with hearing that yet again.

After a silence and thinking of his own renewal, Snape murmured, "'The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord.' I did underestimate you. You go on defeating him."

"I really didn't do anything," Harry argued.

"Except be yourself . . . your ordinary heroic self."

Harry lifted his head. "Don't you start doing that," he said sharply.

"Only for a few moments," Snape promised.

"Well, all right," Harry conceded reluctantly, but appeared annoyed.

Amused, Snape said, "I do love you, Harry." Only after, realizing that viperous word, that incantation which always threatened to turn and maul the incanter, had slipped out so easily. Snape froze a few breaths before sitting straight, but Harry appeared to have returned to sleeping. Uncertain, Snape asked, "You have no reaction to that?" When all he got in reply was a shrug, Snape pointed out, "I've never said that to you before."

Closing his eyes as though intent on returning to his nap, Harry said, "I assumed you did. Why else you've adopted me."

Snape sat in stunned silence, working out if that might actually be true, but in the end decided that it did not matter and returned to his filing, leaving Harry to his well-deserved rest.

Harry woke much later to the hard leather surface against his face and lifted his head. He had not intended to sleep quite so very much, just to rest his eyes briefly. Rubbing his hair, he sat up and discovered the faded robe draped over him and smiled gratefully. Chilled, he slipped it on as he rose to his feet. He found Snape in the drawing room, reading from a stack of parchments.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked.

A bit embarrassed, Harry replied, "Yes." With a sigh and a rub at his gritty eyes, he sat in one of the chairs, first turning it to face the desk as though he were still a student. Snape shifted the stack of parchments and put something smaller aside, something that resembled Dumbledore's last message. Harry asked, "So where are we going tomorrow?"

"I was thinking that Edinburgh is much closer and it would be easier to ferry packages back by Apparation. Unless your range reaches London now."

Harry shook his head. "Not quite. Although I actually haven't tried," he added thoughtfully.

"We will go to Edinburgh then," Snape said decisively.

After a pause Harry said, "I'm glad you're nearly better," with far too much emotion.

With a wry smile Snape said, "I have you to thank for that. You and your godfather."

Harry smiled at that. "It helps to know that old animosity is gone."

"It is quite gone and I'll agree, it helps." Snape steepled his fingers and looked to want to add something, hesitated a long moment, but in the end remained silent with a small frown.

They Apparated into a wooded area where a narrow trail cut and winded across a steep slope. "Where is this?" Harry asked in confusion.

Chapter 73

With a knowing, haughty smile, Snape said, "Follow me."

Around a bend in the trail, they emerged into cloud-broken sunlight halfway up a forested escarpment. Soon their trail joined ordinary pavement and steps before leading across an old cemetery to a busy shopping street. The wind whipped along the pavement, making Harry wish he had on two jumpers under his cloak.

"Let me know where you would like to stop," Snape said.

"Somewhere close-by," Harry returned.

"There is a sizable shopping center ahead if you can hold out."

"Where?" All Harry saw was a large open monument. He wondered if he could manage to hit himself with a warming charm under his cloak without attracting attention. Snape's robes, despite his cloak mostly covering them, already were attracting extra gazes from passing pedestrians.

By the time they turned indoors Harry couldn't feel the fronts of his legs. But contrary to external appearances there was a bustling multilevel shopping center hidden in the hillside. "This is more like it," Harry muttered, shaking off his cloak and blinking in the colorful artificial light radiating from the shop signs.

They wandered along a few shop fronts together. Harry needed to find a glassware shop if he were to buy potion bottles. A stationery store came up on the right. "Maybe I can find something in here," Harry suggested, thinking of Hermione and perhaps Belinda.

"Do you wish to split up?" Snape suggested, hovering at the threshold of the store, beside the security post.

"No," Harry replied immediately, then more lightly added, "Not until I figure out what I'm getting for you."

Snape followed behind as Harry navigated the narrow aisles, muttering about how ugly and cheap Muggle paper supplies were. That was, until a display of hand-held computers caught his eye. One was a student edition displaying the periodic table and other science references. Harry backed up and peered over his shoulder. "Find something you like?"

"It would break, most certainly," Snape commented.

"It would certainly stop working," Harry teased, "You have no place to plug it in."

Snape brushed the shiny metal edge of the display model. "Do you miss the Muggle things you had before, Harry?"

"No, not at all," Harry assured him.

Snape dropped his hand. "Good. I do not think I could tolerate them, even for you."

"They remind me of the Dursleys, especially my cousin, so I'm fine without them." Harry picked up a warm brown leather folder that held a legal pad. "This is nice," he opined. "Some things like this are better from a Muggle store. At least they are always made from a named animal."

"You disapprove of dragonhide?"

"It's fine for fireproof gloves. What I dislike is finding that my boots are made of trollhide and my gloves of seaworm skin." He flipped the folder open and closed a few times. "I think I'll get this for Hermione." By the time they reached the front of the store, Harry had collected a small pile of presents. As he waited in a queue to pay, he added them up. "Um, do you have a few extra pounds I can borrow?" Snape pulled out his coin purse and handed over some twice-folded pound notes. "Thanks. Sorry," Harry mumbled, thinking that he had more presents he wanted to get. He should have been saving his allowance more adamantly.

The family ahead of them was debating which relatives were going to be the most annoying to have visit and the current sale was held up because of something to do with 'too many transactions this time of year.' Snape intoned, "Do not apologize, Harry." More quietly, if not oddly pained, he said, "I find myself currently unwilling to withhold anything from you."

"Oh," Harry uttered, surprised and touched by his tone. Feeling sly and half teasing, he asked, "Does that mean I can get a new broom? A prototype Flugenblitzen M3 was in the shop in Diagon Alley last week."

Snape raised a brow and replied sternly, "No you may not. You do not need a new broom in any event."

"Ginny does. I was thinking I could give her my old one. They really want to win the house cup and she had Charlie's old one, which was only decent ten years ago." The queue finally advanced and stacks of photo albums were piled onto the counter.

"As little as I wish to assist with improving Gryffindor's chances, may I suggest you just trade brooms."

"That's a thought," Harry muttered. "Trouble is getting Ginny to go for it without hurting her pride. She's supposed to get a new broom when she finishes school, but that will be too late for the cup." Ahead of them the family was debating which

plastic card to use for payment. "How are the sunglasses working out for Suze? She sent me a letter, but she hasn't tried them in a match."

"Very well during practice," he assured Harry. "Unwise of you if you wish for Ms. Weasley's team to win the cup."

As Harry put his stack of things on the counter, he said, "I'm sorta torn. I want Suze to do well, but on the other hand, she has more years to show off after Ginny and most of my Gryffindor friends have finished."

As they exited the shop and stood at the edge of the flow of shoppers going past, Snape said in a reluctant tone, "Is there something reasonable that you are hoping for for Christmas?"

Thinking of how much he nearly lost, Harry said, "I have everything I need, Severus."

"Rather difficult to wrap that," Snape complained dryly.

"My first present ever was a birthday cake from Hagrid. It wasn't wrapped." More quietly, in the presence of hundreds of hurrying Muggles carrying thousands of presents, Harry said, "Neither was the one you gave me for my birthday. The ones that can't be wrapped are the best ones."

Their gazes locked a long moment until Snape said, "As usual, you display an odious sentimentality for such things, Potter." But his eyes were just a bit too bright as he made this assertion.

Early, because he had slept long and sound after a day of Apparating back and forth to Chester and Edinburgh for shopping, Harry stepped downstairs and joined Snape already at the table eating breakfast. Snape finished quickly and hooked a cloak around himself as he stood before the flaming hearth.

Harry stood to see him off, wishing he could stay a little longer but holding back on showing any bit of it. As though reading his thoughts Snape said dismissively, "Christmas is fast approaching." His tone shifted immediately, though, and he added in a softer tone, "Owl if you need anything at all. Owl even if you don't."

"All right," Harry promised, working harder on his forcing down his reluctance at seeing Snape go; he clearly was prepared to depart and even eager since he had to get ready to teach that morning.

Rather than reach for the Floo powder, Snape instead rested his light satchel on the floor and stepped up to Harry. Taking Harry's shoulders in his hands he commanded, "Take care . . . when you are at your training, and otherwise."

"I will," Harry promised.

"And I will see you in two short weeks." Snape appeared to wait for Harry's nod before taking down the Floo powder. "Owl should you need anything," he repeated firmly, voice reassuringly full of the promise of swift response.

Later that morning, Harry stepped out into the quiet atrium at the Ministry of Magic. The fountain bubbled musically, drawing him that way as he crossed the open expanse. The translucent, abstract sculpture in the center seemed to radiate light as water coursed down its surfaces; although the glow looked natural rather than magical. The pool was too big for the piece and Harry remembered the larger previous sculpture and the battle that had destroyed it. He had not thought about it in a long time and now considered that he had possessed a laughable amount of skill back then. As he fantasized his current self there now, he felt almost confident with his chances, even alone against the evilest of wizards.

He reached into himself, into that pathway that had drawn him here that night. The path was hollow, empty; Voldemort was gone. Harry not only felt his absolute absence, but had begun to feel he had never been a part of him. Considering that Snape had also freed himself only added to Harry's surge of independence. Standing there in the early light with the water in the fountain glistening, Harry, for the first time, felt truly whole and distinct, and in control of the future.

A figure stepped up beside him, light of foot. Vineet looked over the curves and angles of the fountain with a discriminating eye. "Not a very attractive thing," he observed.

"Better than the last one," Harry opined. Gesturing at the space where each had stood he explained, "It had a man and centaur a goblin and an elf all in these affected poses."

"What happened to them?" Vineet asked.

"Well . . . " Harry said, hesitating with a little cringe. "They leaped to life to protect me from Voldemort. Even the man after his head was knocked off."

Vineet gave Harry a very dubious and disappointed expression. "You cannot believe me so foolish," he stated almost annoyed, crossing his arms to peer along his nose at Harry the way Snape used to.

"I'm not making that up," Harry insisted, then laughed, deep down, in a manner that a few days ago he had not imagined ever doing again. He waved his hand around the atrium and tried to explain the scene more clearly before giving up. "Oh, never mind. It's embarrassing anyway."

Vineet appeared to reconsider Harry's honesty but he changed the topic. "The Daily Prophet spoke of nothing this weekend except your capture of the Last Servant of the Unnamed One. Like all stories about you, it seemed lacking in large substantial fact."

Harry hadn't read any of the articles, but he knew everyone intended to keep quiet about Avery having a mission of revenge against a traitor, because it led to uncomfortable, renewed questions about Snape. "It's finally over," he said, feeling unexpectedly gratified.

"Another will rise," Vineet stated authoritatively.

"That's a positive way of thinking."

"Another must rise. It is the way of things, this circle."

Harry, who preferred to consider a straight line leading out from where he stood, resisted this point of view. Although, he figured it naïve to consider that another dark wizard would not rise to power, sometime. "We have a little while though, right?"

"Usually." Grimly, as though speaking only because he felt he had to, arms still crossed, Vineet went on, "The newspaper was mistaken in stating that all Death Eaters were in Azkaban, even though the Minister announced this herself."

Harry met his dark brown gaze and held it steadily. "No, she wasn't mistaken." Then he smiled, broadly, couldn't help doing so. Vineet stiffened.

Harry turned back to the sculpture, smiling wryly. "Have you ever seen beyond the veil?"

"No." Then a long pause ensued before, "And you?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the Unnamed One?"

"No, actually," Harry replied. "Just my family . . . my friends." It would have been odd to have seen Voldemort, he considered, but he must be there. For the tenth time he imagined what his father's expression must have been when Snape made his assertion to him. Mixed emotion roiled in him at the vision.

"You would seem to be there now," Vineet offered, sounding awed.

Harry pulled himself straight. "No. I'm here."

The atrium had begun to fill with witches and wizards on their way to work. A familiar voice hailed Harry and Arthur Weasley stepped over and patted him on the shoulder. "How are you, my boy?" he asked in concern.

"I'm fine, Mr. Weasley, thank you."

Mr. Weasley leaned close and, while gripping Harry's upper arm, said, "Minerva told us what happened. An awfully close one, there, my boy."

Harry, attempting lightness although it came out wavering, said, "I don't mean to continue to be so hazardous to those around me."

"Oh, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, sounding far too moved. "This wasn't your doing. Some things were set in motion long before your time."

"And it's all right now," Harry added. At Mr. Weasley's confusion, Harry said, "It's hard to explain. Maybe over dinner sometime." He fell silent, thoughts pulled back a few days. But calm flowed through his limbs again and he smiled lightly. "Things are better than you know."

"Well, that would be a change." Mr. Weasley redirected his attention and greeted Vineet. "I hope you are helping keep an eye on him," he said, indicating Harry.

"The attempt is being made," the Indian stated dryly.

As Mr. Weasley said good day, turning his balding rear pate their way, Harry halted him with, "Hey, tell Vineet what happened to the old sculpture."

"Oh, it . . . " He paused and to Harry asked disbelievingly, "You really want me to?" At Harry's sharp look he said, "Well, I wasn't here–just Harry and old Albus Dumbledore, oh and of course He-Who-Shall-"

"Mr. Weasley!" Harry snapped.

"Oh, yes, Voldemort. Sorry, Harry. Apparently Dumbledore used the figures as allies in sending the old, evil bird off."

"Really?" Vineet uttered, still sounding stubborn about believing.

"Intent on killing Harry, he was, and mad as hell about not learning the rest of the prophecy as he'd hoped. The figures were all smashed to bits by the end." He glanced at his watch. "I have to go. Nice seeing you Harry, do call for dinner soon."

Chapter 73

Harry studied the abstract statue again. Parts of it seemed bulky and solid, other parts reached up and out, but the whole thing remained balanced from all angles. Unlike the figures, this one allowed him to define it himself. It could be anything, and he found himself appreciating that for the first time.

"You are very introspective today," Vineet said after a long pause. "And I am believing you about the other statues."

Harry realized that there was real luxury in being harmlessly disbelieved. "I don't have to make things up," he teased.

The deep brown of Vineet's eyes looked a little softer. "Are there any places where memories do not resonate so for you?"

"Not around here."

After a cart loaded with boxes of parchment rattled by, Vineet said, "And there are no free Death Eaters of any sort?"

"None," Harry replied confidently.

"Hm. We are late, just to be letting you know."

Harry glanced at the time and they both hurried away. In the lift Harry said, "All right, explain this dark wizard circle to me."

"It is not just dark wizards . . . it is all things that cycle," Vineet patiently lectured.

"Day night day night," Harry offered as he pulled open the gate.

"That is a very obvious example"

"And the good wizard cycle coincides with the bad one, right?" Harry said, getting into this notion.

"Hopefully."

Since they were the first to arrive in the workout room, they pulled the desks away from the wall and arranged the four of them. Harry removed his books from his bag and sat down with blank parchment and a quill, still thinking. Kerry Ann came in, looking underslept. She gave Harry a high-five as she passed. "Good going, Harry. Got them all now."

"Thanks." Harry chewed on the end of his quill before turning to Vineet again. "Can someone read these cycles and know when the next dark wizard is going to appear?"

Vineet's gaze went a little hard. "Some believe they can, but his art is very difficult. When there is a gross imbalance the gods may send an avatar to right things."

"A very powerful wizard, you mean?" Harry prompted.

Vineet didn't respond.

"What are you two on about?" Kerry Ann asked curiously. Rodgers stepped in then, seeming brusque as though he had interrupted something important to come. Aaron dashed in behind him, out of breath, and took his seat with an innocent smile. Rodgers hurriedly straightened his notes and didn't chastise the latecomer.

Harry, sly grin on his lips, leaned over and said to Kerry Ann, "I think Vishnu here is disappointed he didn't get his crack at Voldemort." When Vineet turned to him, eyes narrow though surprised, Harry hit him on the arm and said, "You were welcome to him. How 'bout you take the next one?" Rodgers cleared his throat and Harry dipped into the inkwell and bent over his notebook, quill poised with a ball of fresh ink teetering on the point of it. Harry whispered, still grinning, "Let us know if you need any help. We'll be here."

- End -

Author's Notes:
If you were looking for music to go with the closing credits, Fallen by Sarah McLachlan would probably be my pick.
Thanks to everyone for their comments an encouragement in continuing this beast. Couldn't have done it without you all. Also certainly couldn't have done it without the enormous help of all the beta readers past and present: Amy, Audrey, Nana, Cathal, Jane, Whitney, Stephanie, EC, Kate.
I'm currently outlining the sequel (tentatively named "Revolution"). It will be a while before I start posting and geez with the distraction of book 6... :)

Part II

Revolution

Chapter 9.

Introduction to the Sequel

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

Chapter 9

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

Chapter 1.

Years End

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

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

Harry rubbed his neck and his tender right shoulder as he carefully reread – from

the beginning – the chapter on fairy lights, frustrated and determined all the more by the apparent utter simplicity of the spells he was attempting. He winced. His shoulder was even sorer today than it had been immediately after his six-month review testing. At first, he had been pleased to be assigned to Mad-Eye Moody for his spell examination, but the old Auror had apparently seen more confidence in Harry than he liked and had proceeded to put Harry on his backside with an Alibappa spell that they had not learned, and in fact one Harry suspected none of the other full Aurors knew either given their puzzled expressions. As Harry had picked himself up off the floor and caught his breath, Moody had looked about as pleased as Harry had ever seen him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course," Harry insisted.

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

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

"Ginger, carrot, pumpkin and courgette."

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

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

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

"No, not at all," she replied easily, to Harry's great relief.

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

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

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

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

"Do that again," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oops," Elizabeth uttered. "I've been keeping you too busy."

Harry brushed his hair back repeatedly with his hand during the walk to the dining room to greet Belinda. She gave him a quick kiss and hug before allowing him to

lead her into the hall, where he could sense her stiffen through the hand he was still holding. "This is my neighbor, Elizabeth," Harry said, doing introductions.

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

Turning to his date, Harry said, "It's good to see you. You finally escaped the Minister."

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

"Bones is going to Lord Freelander's party?" Harry asked, remembering that Fudge had been absent.

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

"Went last year, but I turned it down this time –round."

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

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

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

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

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

"You aren't going to sleep, are you?" Belinda asked, sounding startled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't think that is going to help," Harry commented, thinking that was perhaps a bit much. He wrapped her cashmere clad self up, ignoring the pain this time. She was pleasantly soft against him.

"No other bruises?" Belinda asked in a sly manner.

"None that I am telling you about," Harry insisted.

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

asleep on the lounger, his head tucked down into the crook of his arm, a telltale smear of red lipstick on his collar.

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

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

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

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

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

Pointing as the bruises, Snape sternly demanded, "What is this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry's face twisted faintly. Some part of his score was due to joining Ron one evening two days before the exam, even though Harry had originally promised himself that he was going to go straight home every night and revise for the whole week before. "No, I guess not," he conceded.

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

Defensive now in response to Snape's unexpectedly hard anger, Harry countered in kind, "Moody was really rough on me. Didn't you see the bruises?" Kali, picking up

Harry's mood, stood up on his shoulder and circled his neck, pricking him with her claws. Harry picked her up and put her in his lap.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doubtful, Harry said, "You're going to decorate the tree?" He leapt up and followed his guardian to the main hall. Snape went into the drawing room and returned with

a box showing pictures of spherical ornaments on the side in a variety of bright colors. "Candide sent these." When he opened the box, however, the cardboard tray inside contained only clear globes with hooks attached at the top.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snape grasped Harry's wrist as he held the new clear globe up. "Harry," he said, gaze intent. "It will be the same." It sounded like a promise. This globe shattered before Harry could even change it, leaving two large curves of clear glass resting in his palm and glass shards on his sleeve and Snape's. Snape calmly shook his arm off, sending more glass to the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At lunch, Snape seemed keen to make up a bit for his earlier stridency. He kept Harry talking about his last two weeks of training much longer than normal. "And

we finally managed a Muggle-proof barrier, all four of us." Harry said. "We managed with three a week before. I was starting to spell barriers in my sleep I was so terribly sick of working on them. Does it matter how similar the wizards are who are trying to produce a barrier spells? It seems that way."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christmas morning arrived and Harry, in a dressing gown over his pyjamas and sitting cross-legged on the floor, began sorting through the stacks of presents. Snape stepped

out of the drawing room, holding a cup of tea, and observed him as he worked at this. As Harry rearranged the piles, he knocked one of the black ornaments onto the large bow bedecking the present from Ginny. With a frown he hooked it back up on a higher branch and then attempted to ignore it again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry opened the rest, one at a time. McGonagall has given him a rare old storybook that read one of a hundred stories aloud to you. Trelawney had given him boots to

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

As Harry opened the gold Astral Compass from Sinistra, he said, "They must be happy to have you around still." He had attempted it as a tease, but it didn't come out right. Instead it cut straight through his own chest. Grateful that he was facing away from his guardian, he pretended that he needed to sort through the remaining packages to choose which to open next. Ginny's was right in front of him, he managed to gather through the haze of meaninglessness that had enveloped him. He had been curious about the rather sizable box and focused fiercely on the previously established emotion attached to it to drag himself back to the here and now. He was desperate for Snape not to see him struggling, because any outward sympathy from that quarter would render him helpless, he was certain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry, feeling the cockiness from earlier in the evening come to the fore, said, "No, I'll Apparate. It's only to London." Everyone turned at that and before he could lose his certainty, he scrunched himself down very small and the drawing room was gone.

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

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

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

When she was finally ready, a bit late by Harry's reckoning, she took his hand and Apparated them both into a small living room. A thickly bearded, nearly bald man

with shoulder-length brown hair growing out the sides of his head looked up sharply at their arrival. Big band music played loudly elsewhere in the house. The man set his pipe aside and stood to greet them. He bore little resemblance to Belinda, but he greeted her warmly and then held out his hand to Harry. "And this must be Mr. Potter," he said graciously.

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

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

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

"How is your apprenticeship progressing?" the man then asked after a series of puffs on his pipe.

"Fine, sir. We're learning a lot."

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

"Some, yes. We aren't allowed to do much, though."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

"Well enough, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snape looked up with some surprise. "Yes, quite."

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

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

"How did you know that?" Harry asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pamela stared at Snape; Harry wondered why he was intentionally shocking her so. "It's hard to explain," Harry hedged. "But it's not as bad as he is making it sound." He then tried to explain about Winky and why it was better that she have a household, but he couldn't even manage to explain about her previous employer without simply generating more alarm.

"This elf sounds evil," Pamela whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He seemed happy enough," Harry confirmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I tried. I disarmed Vineet with a new spell we had just learned. It makes a whip appear that wraps around the other person's wand and jerks it out of their hand. But it made Vineet a bit angry and he, well, he transformed into a tiger and came at me."

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

"No . . . my Animagus form, as we call it, is a . . . resembles a eight-foot griffin, except with a cat's head." She stared in silence at him. Harry went on, "So,

I transformed into that. Imagine, there's the Prime Minister, the Minister of Magic, all their staff, and this big white tiger and an even bigger bright red gryffylis tussling in the middle of the room."

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

Harry chuckled then. "I didn't read that."

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

"You can't mess with Skeeter," Harry commented as he accepted a large slice of apple pie.

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

"Who is this?" Pamela asked.

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

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

"Even the American press," Harry insisted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I may be out, actually," Snape replied.

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

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

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

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

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

"You sure?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. –Course. I rarely use it what with Sirius' bike and flying on my own."

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

"Not during the Slytherin-Gryffindor match, you can't," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, that's what this is about. You have a bet with Professor Snape or something?"

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

"Yup. Except tree decorating was a bit annoying . . ."

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

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

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

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

"Does he need more help?" Hermione asked. "I've been reading up on that a bit."

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

Ginny returned with her secondhand Cleansweep Seven. "You're sure?" she asked again, voice tinged with pain.

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

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

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

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

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

"No, but I said 11:00," Harry explained.

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

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

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

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

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

Richard grinned. “Most of it, actually.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his room Kali was clamoring frantically inside her cage. Harry let her out saying, “Maybe you're the reason I'm ornery.” He sat down with his pet curled on his leg

and answered letters that he had put off until holiday, somehow thinking the holiday would be less busy than normal times.

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

"Yeah," Harry insisted.

"Minerva was concerned that Richard may have offended you."

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

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

Kali raised her head and cocked it curiously at Snape. "I don't know," Harry muttered. "He just didn't feel magical." Harry dipped his quill in the inkwell, but held it over the blotter instead of continuing his letter. "You are going to tell me this is some extraordinarily rare skill, telling wizards from Muggles?" Even Harry had to admit, he had never heard of it, but he still fixed Snape with a stubborn glare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A new skill then, perhaps."

"Or a lucky guess," Harry countered.

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

Chapter 2.

Trailing the Monster

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

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

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

While Harry waited at the table for the food to appear, his eyes strayed to the silver combined salt and pepper mill that was a new addition to the table. Draco Malfoy had sent it to Snape for Christmas and Harry kept eyeing it suspiciously even though

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fliteeficus, but you have to aim it at yourself and to do that you would have to be able to move, presumably. Harry had to agree given the complicated weaving motion of the wand waving diagrammed below.

Harry felt less certain about facing that spell than the other one, even though it wasn't even a defensive one. But knowing something about them, especially given the spells' obscurity, made him feel better. He composed a very grateful response and sent it back with her owl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where'd you hear that?" Harry demanded.

Kerry Ann grinned. "Harry, you are highly trackable."

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

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

Harry blinked at that. "Please tell me that the first part of that, at least, isn't true."

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

Harry leaned over to whisper, "I don't care what she wears."

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

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

Harry waited outside on the street for Belinda to come down. She had shouted from the window for him to wait and he didn't mind because a very light snow had fallen and for the few minutes before it melted, the world would be a white fairyland. Harry

stood, enjoying the windows and lamps glowing on the white pavement up and down the street. Belinda came down a few minutes later, trailing a rich brown cloak Harry hadn't seen before.

"Nice cloak," Harry said, admiring its fuzzy looking warmth.

Belinda actually blushed. "Thanks. It's borrowed from a friend."

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

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

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

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

When they began walking, Belinda asked, "So, you really want to go to the Wren's Den?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What'd she say?" Harry asked.

"Nothing."

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

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

"Knew about what?" Harry asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Their beers arrived. Belinda lifted hers to clink their mugs. "You don't think Fudge likes you?"

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

"Are you?"

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

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

Harry pulled out his watch. "I have field work tomorrow afternoon, so I shouldn't have another."

"My place?" Belinda asked.

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

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

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

"That's going to be true for a long time," she pointed out pragmatically.

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

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

"What?!" Harry blurted.

"Well, during Rothschild's trial, you had to answer . . ."

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

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

"I don't know," Harry uttered. He could feel himself closing her off and resisted it. Lots of replies came to mind, including accepting the invitation up to her flat. All

of them had the potential to create even more misunderstanding. Harry took her by the hand. "It's too hard to explain."

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

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

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

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

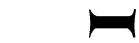
"You aren't supposed to be put at risk when you're out," Belinda countered in an argumentative tone.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Harry buried his disappointment. After last night he had found himself looking forward to his shadowing the gregarious female Auror much more than previously.

Probably a bad thing, given that any more-than-professional affection he still felt for Tonks was out of line.

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

"I don't mean to attract trouble," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is the assignment?" Harry asked again, hoping he wasn't being too difficult.

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

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

Outside there was an argument going on. A short round man with a long auburn beard was arguing with a ginger woman of identical shape and clothing although she

wore an apron. A cloud of mist rose from their mouths as the shouted. Shacklebolt led the way over the crunching snow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where did it head do you think?" Shacklebolt asked.

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

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

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

Harry's gaped before asking, "They're not allowed to keep dragons are they?"

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

Harry, his anger completely forgotten, said, "Yes sir."

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

White mist obscured all but the immediate vicinity and collected as freezing dew on their cloaks and hair. Harry glanced back at the receding shore and shouted over the wind, "Are we really going to catch up to a dragon flying full speed?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come on, you. Can't have you wandering aimlessly, eating sheep until you fall asleep like last time." Shacklebolt urged his broom forward, but the dragon resisted and snapped its head like a whip, forcing the Auror's broom up and the chain to slip off. The dragon made a turn back west again, but the pumping of its wings was slower and it was loosing altitude now as well as speed.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry tried about ten of them over the next few minutes and decided that was good enough. They landed a half hour later and between Shacklebolt and the two owners, they cemented the dragon's stake back into place. Harry, to hide his half-burned cloak, waited near the cottage. A few sheep stood at the very far side of a pen beside

him, eyes wide and forlorn, presumablye at the dragon's return. The dragon for his part curled up on the snowy ground, rested his head on his rump, and closed his eyes. Shacklebolt made the witch sign a few parchments and then they were off.

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

"You tangle with a dragon, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry replied levelly.

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

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

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

"No," Harry assured her.

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

Draco didn't add to this, just continued to appear stern. Belinda looked ready to snap back with something unladylike, but Harry, still holding a well of good will toward Draco from his rescue, found himself smiling instead. "Good morning," Harry said amiably, which made Pansy's face go sourly mystified.

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

Still smiling, Harry retorted, "I don't need to curry favor with the Ministry, Mr. Malfoy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He isn't the only one," Harry pointed out.

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

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

"You're serious . . . aren't you?" she asked.

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

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

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

"People don't understand how hard it is to govern witches and wizards," Belinda muttered but built in force as she went along. "Balancing between illegal magic detection and promoting magical activities. We spend three years preparing an expansion of Diagon Alley and all people can complain about is that they can't buy a flying carpet.

We fund a new wing at St. Mungo's and all we hear is that witches aren't allowed to brew toxic Nacissinium-laced beauty cream."

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

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

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

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

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

"On a Sunday, eh?" Harry confirmed.

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

"Of course," Harry replied.

Seven of them gathered in the morning light outside Shoreditch. Munz and Blackpool, the senior apprentices had joined in their lesson partly for a refresher and partly to help teach. An airplane flew overhead, buzzing annoyingly as only a Muggle device could. Rodgers watched it go by and waited for silence before beginning. "I suppose we can't give all the Muggles broomsticks to help the peace, can we?" he uttered before saying, "This is a good day for tracking practice with the fresh snow since it masks tracks unpredictably. We'll only have it for a few hours, so let's get started.

He explained the new spells. One for showing all tracks in an area. When he used it the ground was blank. One for finding tracks by time up to a week or more old, depending upon the power of the spell and whether it had rained. Yet another for illuminating one distinct set based on a single print of the trail. This last spell was

the hardest and involved a very long incantation and careful concentration. Only Augustus Munz, Harry and Kerry Ann managed that spell once each and couldn't repeat it to their frustration. They were each called up to practice the spells after the others jostled around creating confusing trails for that person to investigate.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry stepped carefully around to the marker and used his eyes first to try and track who had placed the flag before retreating. Everyone's boots were equally worn, it appeared, although differing in size, but the trails went over each other repeatedly. Harry waved a general track illumination spell and the whole ground lit up in one color, the tracks were too close in time to allow them to be distinguished. Harry crouched and lowered his wand and touched one of the prints and then incanted the spell he couldn't manage to repeat earlier. It took three tries and a nearly empty-minded focus on the magic, which wasn't easy over Aaron's and Babs Blackpool's heckling. The trail of nondescript prints illuminated pink as though an invisible

person were rewalking them. The ghostly footprints went left, in a circle, then right and then just stopped, somewhere near the middle.

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

"No," Rodgers replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's official?" Harry asked carefully.

"You're dating Ms. Belluna."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

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

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

"Harry?" Kerry Ann prompted. When Harry turned a level gaze on her, she said, "Come on, I didn't mean that personally. I was bucking myself up with that thought,

not bringing you down. Or that wasn't what I meant to do. You two make a cute couple. And her parents like you I hear."

At Harry's dark, narrow look, Aaron bust out laughing. Aaron's feet hit the floor with a slap as he straightened up in his desk, unable to laugh in his overly-lounging position. "Bloody, no relationship could survive that kind of scrutiny. None of mine could, anyway." He stood and said, "What IS up?" before going to the door.

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

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

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

"Do you have a req-?" Mr. Weasley began.

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

"Tonks," Mr. Weasley prompted, holding his hand out.

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

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

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

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

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

Tonks tossed her arms at her sides, fists balled. "Arthur . . ."

"Ms. Tonks," Mr. Weasley said, more sternly.

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

"Here," Tonks muttered. "I'll put it in a box-" she started to say, but a quick crash of breaking pottery interrupted her. Percy gasped and turned fully red again. Tonk's eyes and hair were visible over the top of the cubicle when she straightened up. Her pink eyebrows were nearly in her pink hair. "I didn't mean to . . . "

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Tonks," Harry said.

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

"We're not sure. Something someone doesn't want us to have. We only had a broken piece of it anyway. Discarded unwisely. Something the Department of Mysteries thinks is too dangerous for us to have. What does it feel like to you, Harry? You gave it a good scope there."

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

"A what to your what?" Tonks asked, thoroughly amused.

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

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

"Most things do," Harry ventured.

She gave him a sideways look. "Aren't you supposed to be in training?"

"It's lunch," Harry pointed out.

"Is it?" she asked in surprise.

⊢

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

Harry,

This weekend will be the first chance that I can possibly get away. I assume you are behaving yourself and keeping to your studies – certainly no one here seems to be.

Minerva asks after you – perhaps you could send her an owl. Lovely photo of you in Witch Weekly, by the way, you can thank Minerva for showing it around.

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

Author's Notes:
Thanks everyone for all the encouragement! I've been writing on the story, but not in the mood to fix up in preparation for posting. Finally got a quiet day to do that. is going to the betas today.
Yes, Charlie is married. I'll be fixing that. Thanks. (I blame book 6 for the confusion)
The plot will be picking up the pace in chapter 3, hopefully to not slow down until the very end, given all the subplot ideas swirling in my brain above and beyond those in the outline.

Chapter 3.

Twilight

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

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

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

Harry straightened up and avoided frowning. "Why's that?"

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

Harry stood beside the chair across from her. "So you're officially, finally split now?"

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

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

Hermione tossed her thickly clad arms. "You know . . . without Ron. So, how are things with Belinda?" she plowed right in and asked, which returned the breath to Harry's lungs.

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

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

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

Hermione laughed. "Oh dear, you aren't dating a member of your fan club, are you?"

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

"Butterbeer would be lovely," she said.

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

"You are turning into Dumbledore!" she exclaimed.

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

"Are you sure?" she challenged, pouring for herself.

"Very."

"How are things at the Ministry?" she asked.

"Power struggles are already starting with Fudge," Harry complained.

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Harry, that's wonderful."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Next time I'm at the London library I'll look too," she said, sounding motherly.

"I've looked there, but I'd appreciate any help."

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

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

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

"Yeah," Harry assured her.

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you know who you're paired with?" Harry asked him.

"I expect Mr. Shacklebolt," Vineet intoned without turning to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pair of old witches beside them were listening in. Harry shrugged. A brown owl fluttered by and landed on someone's shoulder. A family emerged from the hearth in

a blast of green and, with a shriek of metal corners on the hearthstones, towed their luggage to the stairs.

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

"Shacklebolt accused me of attracting trouble," Harry teased.

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

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

"Muggles dress better and bathe regularly," Tonks said. "If you haven't noticed that, Harry . . ."

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

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

"You can't just tell by . . . feel?" Harry persisted.

"No. Don't know anyone besides Moody with his eye, who can."

"Oh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um, Demise of Voldemort Day?" Harry suggested.

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

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

"And how shall we celebrate? Parade? Honorary Quidditch match?"

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

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

Harry almost folded in relief.

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

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

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

Her expression remained strangely flat. "Um . . . Maybe not."

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

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

Harry was back inside himself and feeling offense flowing into him. The files rattled again and this time Fergus jumped back in surprise since he had been bending over them to look more closely. Something snapped like small hungry jaws. Harry did

not really wish to rein himself in; he wanted to let this all loose. He wanted to point out that her father wasn't the best of company, frankly. A second later he did calm himself, for no one clear reason, perhaps just reason itself. He let go of her arm and her expression revealed that she realized she had made a mistake.

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

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

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

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

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

"Have you told your wife about your power yet?"

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

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

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

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

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

Harry was certain that this man – who honored him above anything Harry had encountered previously, had changed his life path even because of him – didn't want

to hear the truth. "It's hard to explain," Harry hedged. "I just had a little tiff with Belinda, is all."

"Ah," Vineet uttered. "Such an inefficient process, this dating."

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

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

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

"You looked!" Harry said, laughing.

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

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

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

"Didn't find anything, eh?"

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

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

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

"What happened?" Harry asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Want what shared?" Harry asked.

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

"Still."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. Not fully. Not yet," Tonks countered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Master Harry waiting for Master to have dinner?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

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

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

Harry must have fallen asleep. He rubbed his eyes and asked, "Who's MM?"

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

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

"Mad-Eye Moody?" Snape suggested.

"Doubtful," Harry answered. "Besides those aren't his real initials."

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

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

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

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

"You needn't have waited," Snape said, rolling a tumbler of something between his hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dragon," Harry answered simply.

Snape studied Harry's gaze as though looking for an alternative truth. "Goodness."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still on automatic, Harry went to training the next few days and answered owls from both Hermione and Snape. His replies, when he reread them before sending them, sounded as though someone else had written them. His momentary instinct to confess to Snape was overwhelmed by the memory of Snape's own derisive words when Harry had long ago asked what he should do if he started seeing the Dark Plane all of the time. Get used to it, I should think, still rang clear enough in Harry's mind that he sent off the mundane letter exactly as he had already written it. He was so far inside himself that he didn't even get angry when Tonks informed him that Rodgers had nixed a briefing for them right now on the department's mystery investigation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whoa," Aaron breathed.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

Belinda angled her head up and stared at Harry, agape. "But why? What's wrong?"

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

"Really," Harry insisted. "I'm sorry."

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

"Nothing," Harry insisted. "It's me. Really, it's just me." He Disapparated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4.

Refuge

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

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

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

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

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

Sounding intentionally patient, she said, "Yes, Severus; I did. First off, I believe this castle capable of holding back such a doorway, and second this school owes it to Mr. Potter to do all that we can. Go and fetch him . . . he is clearly at wit's end."

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

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

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

"Master."

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

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

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

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

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

"No punishment for Winky?"

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

Back in Harry's room Snape finished packing the trunk and latched it before moving to rouse Harry. Harry's wand lay loose in his hand lying across the desk. Snape considered slipping it away before risking startling him, but instead, trusting him not to jump immediately to a dangerous spell, simply patted Harry lightly on the

shoulder and called his name. Harry's head jerked up and he did clutch his wand, but he didn't raise it.

"Severus?" Harry mumbled and rubbed his eyes.

"Come with me," Snape instructed him.

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

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

Harry swallowed hard. "Fetch me where?"

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

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

"Yes. Come."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Send me a silver message if you do."

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

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

"VanEschelon, what are you doing out of your tower in the middle of the night?" Ginny demanded. Erasmus, shrunk down behind the railing a moment before relenting and coming around the balcony, feet dragging. Ginny huffed, "Stay RIGHT HERE. I have to deliver this before it burns my fingers off."

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

"Yes, sir," Erasmus replied obediently anyway.

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

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

"Harry isn't here," Ginny interrupted, stopping suddenly.

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

The man yawned. "Someone came up this way, towin' a trunk. Professor Snape was leadin' –im." Ginny was off up to the fifth floor like a shot.

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

Ginny stepped closer on quiet feet. Harry was indeed here and he was quite soundly asleep, lying with one arm extended, his head tilted to the side, lips parted just slightly. He looked, Ginny had to admit, highly kissable. Feeling tingly she shook herself, remembering that stupid day she had taken her twin brothers' bravery enhancing Hutzpotion and ended up in Harry's bed, to Harry's dismay. Rolling her eyes, which helped drag them away from the well-studied angles of his face, she stepped back, resisting the still sharp urge to lean in just a little closer. She huffed at herself and backed up again before dredging up enough self-disgust to turn to leave.

A dark figure loomed in just as Ginny turned, making her gasp and raise her wand. "Professor," she breathed, wincing badly.

Snape's wand ignited blue-white and he stepped by her with a swish of his robes. She watched him circle the room, dropping the wand low at his side as he reached each corner of the room. With growing mystified curiosity, she watched him stop in the corner where the cages sat and lift his wand to study Harry's sleeping pet for rather a lengthy half a minute. Snape then moved to the bed and, wand held at arm's length to reduce the light, leaned over Harry to study him as he slept. In the glow of his wand Snape's face took on a rather uncharacteristic look of deep concern. Ginny's brow went up under her hair, stunned to see that look on this man.

In the next instant, Snape was striding past Ginny again and the door to the bedroom soundlessly closed. "Ms. Weasley," Snape sternly snapped. Ginny followed him out and down to the Defense office.

"Sit down," Snape ordered her, and Ginny did so, wondering what was in store. "First off," Snape said, staring down at Hedwig who still sat on the back of his chair. "How did you find out so quickly that Mr. Potter was here?"

"Oh, Nearly-Headless Nick told Erasmus VanEschelon and I found him making his way up to the fifth floor. I thought Harry would still be awake if he'd just arrived. Actually didn't imagine he'd be here at all. Is Harry all right?"

Snape paced to his ingredient cabinets. "At the moment," he replied cryptically. "Tomorrow the Prefects will be told that he was in need of a rest and has come here to get it."

"But that's a lie?" Ginny suggested.

"No, it is quite true, but hardly complete." He turned to face her, placing his hands on his hips. "Harry is having difficulty with a new power he has acquired, the nature of which he can share with you if he wishes."

"Is he dangerous?" Ginny asked, then quickly added, "Sir."

Snidely, Snape replied, "Not while he is here. The castle renders him safe . . . for others and himself."

"Can I go visit him, then?"

"I am certain he would appreciate that," Snape replied neutrally although his eyes were oddly knowing. Ginny bit her lip. Her professor went on in a more stern tone, "And you were out of the tower, why?"

She cocked her lips in amusement at his gruff change in demeanor. While trying to square both the sneering professor she was accustomed to with the look she had seen on his face just minutes ago on the fifth floor, she replied a little cockily, "I was getting soup for Algie who was sick at dinner time, sir."

Snape's eyes narrowed in on hers and an instant later, his look went befuddled before he turned away with a jerking motion. Ginny blinked and wondered that he was checking for a lie in that; she was a Prefect and any decent excuse usually sufficed to be out of the common area during the night. She stood. "It's late . . . may I go, sir?" He gestured with a wave of his hand that she could.

In the corridor she walked slowly to the tower while considering things. Professor Snape was still a little strange but as long as he took care of Harry . . .

Harry awoke when the sun streamed through the dormers. He hadn't closed the drapes around the bed but the sun was up late enough this time of year that it made

an acceptable alarm. Dobby appeared by his bed in a sparkle, bearing a covered tray. "Morning, Dobby," Harry greeted the elf.

"Breakfast for Harry Potter, sir," Dobby squeaked.

"Thanks." Harry accepted it and set it on the bed. The scent of ham and fried potatoes made his stomach rumble. Dobby departed only after many assurances that Harry didn't need anything else. A knock sounded on the door, and Harry invited in whomever it was.

Snape glided inside. "How did you sleep?"

"Good morning to you too," Harry teased. "Not bad."

Snape stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed. "No dark creatures?"

"None. So what am I going to do . . . move into Hogwarts?"

Snape's lips twitched. "No one would mind if you did . . ."

"I would mind," Harry complained. "Not that I don't like it here . . . I just have other things to be doing. Speaking of which, I'm supposed to be at training in less than an hour."

"I took the liberty of sending owls to both Rodgers and Tonks."

Harry nibbled on a bite of ham since he was too hungry to resist it. "Saying . . . ?"

"I requested for leave for you . . . I did not know how much you had told them-"

"Tonks knows," Harry supplied, rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture.

Snape said, "I gave them an outline of the truth. It is not the easiest to explain to the Ministry that their star future Auror is attracting the attention of the vilest of dark creatures. Plus I am not certain exactly where we stand." He moved in closer. "Go ahead and eat, Harry," he said. "I can hear your stomach growling from here."

Chagrined, Harry picked up his fork and ate while Snape talked. "Minerva has owled a number of witches and wizards with the intent of finding someone who can help, as have most of our staff members. Most of the letters need to travel quite distant, so it will be a few days before we receive replies. Also, according to research I set Madam Pince to, several Shaman in Mozambique have experience with opening a gateway for some of the creatures you are sensing, usually to intercede with powerful ancestors, but it would be a start. Certainly one does not call forth something one cannot send away again." More dryly, he added, "At least I certainly hope not."

"Mozambique?" Harry asked doubtfully between large bites of toast.

"I am not keen to send you so far, but we will do whatever is necessary, Harry."

Harry frowned, but then shrugged. He didn't have any choice, really. "I wish . . ." he began, then trailed off. No more wishing, he told himself firmly.

A knock sounded on the outside door and a moment later, Ginny stepped through the doorway to the bedroom. "Morning, Harry."

"Ginny!" Harry said. "Good to see you."

"Good morning, Professor," Ginny said brightly.

"Ms. Weasley," Snape muttered grimly before turning and stalking out. Ginny and Harry both watched this departure with some surprise.

When the outside door had closed, Harry asked, "What was that about?"

Ginny shrugged, but a moment later was distracted inward. "So how are you?" she asked after shaking herself.

"Better," Harry admitted.

Ginny plunked down on the end of the bed. "So what is up with you?" she demanded.

Harry slowed his chewing. "I'm sensing the Dark Plane," he admitted, figuring he could trust her not to tell anyone else. "Actually, I've been sensing it a long time, but now I'm some kind of gateway and these terrible creatures can come into our world whenever I get angry or even just annoyed." As he spoke his shoulders tightened and his hand gripped his fork fiercely. But the room remained still and he allowed himself to relax again.

"That doesn't sound good," she commented.

"It isn't. It's really awful," Harry said, feeling good to complain to someone. "I'm stuck here for a while, I think."

"Yeah, yeah, I've been stuck here since September. Don't tell me about stuck here."

Harry laughed, which eased his heart rather a lot. "You need to get down to breakfast."

"Yes, Professor," she teased. But she stood and left with a grinning promise to visit later.

Harry had barely finished breakfast before another visitor arrived. Rodgers came marching into the room with a sharp knock that didn't wait for an answer. He crossed his arms and stood at the end of the bed, a disgruntled twist to his lips.

"What is this about?" he asked stiffly. "I received a rather bizarre owl early this morning. Something about you having Dark powers you can't control. I would have ignored it except the letter was signed by the one dark wizard that I happen to know personally . . . who happens to legally able to send owls," he snarkily added.

Harry was tempted to point out to Rodgers that he and Snape had remarkably similar tones of voice sometimes, but he held back. "I'm apparently, without trying, opening a gateway to the Dark Plane. Here in this castle it doesn't happen. So that's why I'm here. Last night I got into a spiral of frustration that kept feeding on itself and it was too much. . . anyway."

Shaking his head, Rodgers said, "A little warning, Potter. A little . . ."

"I told Tonks," Harry countered, happy to be able to get a little angry. "I can't help this. If I could help this I wouldn't be here right now." Harry banished his breakfast tray and stood up, only putting his wand back away slowly. Rodgers tracked him doing this with far too much attention. "So, do I get leave or are you just going to kick me out because I need a break?"

"We'll see," Rodgers snipped, looking Harry up and down a few times. "Keep up with your reading at least."

Harry gestured at his Auror books lined up on the otherwise empty shelf on the wall, very grateful Snape had the foresight to bring them. "I will."

With a deeper frown Rodgers departed. Harry, feeling annoyed and helpless, pulled down a book on sneaking and tracking techniques and buried his nose in it.

The day passed quickly enough considering how very quiet it was, given the thousand pupils below him going about their day. Harry moved his wardrobe directly under the dormer in the bedroom and sat atop it, reading with a view over the frozen lake and the mountains beyond. His breath froze on the cold window when he leaned close. Harry had another visitor just before dinner. Headmistress McGonagall seemed a little surprised to find him huddled up on top of a piece of tall furniture. Harry jumped down and greeted her properly.

"Would you like to come down to dinner in the Great Hall?" she asked.

"Not really, but thanks," Harry replied.

"Are you certain? There is plenty of room at the head table . . ."

Harry grinned, thinking that didn't help her invitation much. "No, really. I'm enjoying the quiet." In all honesty he was a little stir-crazy already.

"All right, then . . . perhaps tomorrow if you change your mind."

Or the day after, or the day after that, Harry thought darkly.

She stepped a little closer and touched his arm. "Anything you need, Harry?" she asked kindly.

"No. I'm all right, right now." He dropped his gaze. "Thanks for letting me stay."

She squeezed his arm. "You are quite welcome."

When she had gone, Harry felt the warmth of her hand on his wrist still. He didn't particularly like being treated as though he were a terminally ill patient. Focusing his stubborn anger, he returned to his assigned readings, this time while lounging on the couch in the sitting room.

Over the next day, the room grew oppressive, so Harry decided to explore the fifth floor a bit. It required a few complicated unlocking spells to get all the way to the far attic, but once Harry started walking he didn't feel like letting anything block his path, even as the rooms grew successively colder. In the last gabled section of the last wing, an array of broken statues stood like blind sentinels. Harry read their plaques. Iris the Irascible, who's headless body clutched a thick stone book of hexes, was followed by Ivan Invisible who had been reduced to just a marble platform. Or perhaps he had always been just a marble platform and Filch finally decided that was too silly and shoved it up here. It certainly wasn't broken. Harry turned at the end and found himself facing the familiar.

Sighing, Harry stepped over to the Mirror of Erised and made himself step directly in front of it because, if he didn't, his curiosity would make him come back and do so. His parents were gone. Harry stared at his reflection smiling confidently out from the glass. It was him, unbothered by any dark creatures. Yup, he thought, that was exactly what he was desiring right now. He didn't need the mirror to tell him that. More illuminating was the familiar arm hooked around Harry's and the bubblegum pink Mohawk the arm's owner was sporting. Harry shook his head in annoyance.

A foot scuffing on the dusty floor brought Harry's attention to the robed figure standing by the status of Iris. "Everything all right, Harry?" Snape asked, seeming unwilling to invade Harry's private moment.

"Yeah," Harry said, moving away from the mirror to join his guardian.

"Learn anything?" Snape airily asked as they stepped from the room.

"No. I could have figured it out for myself. Any owls today?"

Chapter 4

"You should relock the door," Snape said as Harry closed the door to the attic.

Harry obliged, using a spell even harder to break than the one that had been on there. If it made trouble for Filch later, that would be fine. "Any owls?" Harry repeated.

"Two, both recommending the same Shaman. I will owl him tonight, but I wanted to borrow Hedwig."

"Sure," Harry said, his spirits lifting a little. "Is he African, then? I could use a break from the cold weather, I've decided."

"No such luck," Snape replied. "He is in Finland."

"Oh," Harry said, following along back through a disused corridor with faded tapestries on the walls. "What's his name?"

"Per Hossa," Snape replied. "Master of the Dark Plane."

"Seriously?" Harry asked, sounding doubtful.

"So he is reputed."

"What kind of wizard is he?" Harry asked, wondering about trusting him.

"Standoffish, so I am informed." They had reached Harry's rooms where Harry handed Hedwig over after insisting that she carefully deliver this letter Snape would give her.

When Harry was alone again, he found he really didn't want to be. He put on his cloak and headed down and out to Hagrid's hut, stopping halfway along the snowy lawn to be certain either his emotions were controlled enough or the castle's wards extended far enough. All seemed quiet, so Harry followed a trail stomped through the drifts by boots the size of a small trunk. Hagrid gave him a hug when he opened the door, and warned Harry that he had to get off to class in half of an hour.

Harry settled into a mug of tea and cauldron cakes that seemed to have improved a bit, at least one could bite into them, sort of. Harry dipped it in his tea, determined to actually finish one for once. He explained to Hagrid why he was visiting, to exclamations of certainty that everything would work out all right.

"I don't know, Hagrid. This is fighting something inside, not someone outside."

Hagrid stood to poke the fire up a bit and the little gamekeeper's cabin warmed up even more. Hagrid's small place with its massive hearth was always toasty even on the most blistering days. "Yer always fighting yerself, Harry, even when it's driven by meetin' up with someone else who wants to do you harm."

"I suppose," Harry uttered, giving that surprisingly philosophical view due consideration.

The new log on the fire sent a pop of sparks out onto the floor. Fawkes fluttered his wings in the wake of it and cocked an eye at Harry.

"How is Fawkes?" Harry asked.

Quietly, Hagrid answered, "Right ornery bird that is. Doesn' pay any heed when ya' talk to him, barely deigns to be a class demonstration, and can't keep any kind of molting schedule."

Harry sipped his tea and secretly thought Hagrid didn't believe the bird dangerous enough to respect. "Does he carry you places if you ask, like he did for Dumbledore?"

Hagrid gave a burst of laughter that nearly shook the cauldron off its hook over the fire, let alone forced Fawkes to flit back to his perch. "'E's got no interest in that."

"Dumbledore was his favorite, I guess," Harry said, eyeing the bird knowingly.

In his office Snape penned a polite letter and addressed it after no short deliberation. He had two different addresses for the man in question, one in Finland and one in Norway. The addresses were possibly seasonal, but both were at the same extreme latitude, making distinguishing them impossible. Worse, a quick second look at the atlas showed both to be north of the artic circle. Eyeing Hedwig, Snape decided that she was smart enough to work it out if the first address was wrong, so he wrote out one followed by the other on the front of the envelope.

With the letter off the only thing to do was wait. Well, that and grade essays on Dementors. After the third one that expressed rather creative guesses about the creatures, he was half-tempted to call on Harry to grade them.

A knock sounded on the door and Professor Cawley put his head inside. "You sent me a message?" he asked, fidgeting with the door handle.

"Yes," Snape said, "I have a question for you. You studied African magical arts . . . do you know any Mekonde Shamans, by chance?"

"Mekonde? No. Totally other side of the continent from my expertise. Most South American African slaves came from the west coast."

Chapter 4

"Ah, well, never mind then." Snape thought to himself, that would have been too easy.

"Oh," Cawley said, leaning back in after beginning to close the door. "Can you do a little demonstration for my class this week? I asked Headmistress McGonagall and she suggested asking you."

Dryly, Snape asked, "What is it?"

"I want to do an Animagus demonstration . . ."

Snidely, Snape asked, "And you aren't one?"

"No, no. I am, it's just that . . . well, my shape is not the most conducive to a class demonstration. It ah, well, it's a sea slug . . . you see," he explained in the voice of a man who sees no hope for putting off the truth. "It is most inconvenient and embarrassing, frankly. Headmistress McGonagall is a rather attractive house cat, but she is too busy, she says. She suggested you,"

"Perhaps you should ask Mr. Potter. He has copious time on his hands."

"Ah," Cawley uttered, looking a bit put-upon at having been handed off again.

"But if Mr. Potter is unwilling, I can probably arrange to be available for a short demonstration." Cawley thanked him and started to depart, hesitating only when Snape began muttering something along the lines of: "There's been a shortage of screaming around here lately. A bit too quiet really."

Per Hossa glided to a stop outside an empty corral and kicked his skis off the curved toes of his boots with practiced ease. His pale slate eyes scanned the twilight-lit snow. A figure emerged from the trees, also on skis, but stouter and shorter than himself and gave him a wave. Siri Blind approached and accepted the supply sack Per carried.

"Have you finished charming the area?"

"For all the good it will do in the winter talking to rocks . . . it is charmed."

Per scanned the hillsides of the valley that led into the corral. During summer calf marking, the reindeer at the end must be driven downhill against their nature. "I

think this will be good. Did you ward those erratics there?" he asked, pointing at the tall stones dotting the distant hillside.

"Yup," she answered. "Now I'm ready for coffee." Before she slid off toward the snow covered goahti with a plume of smoke emerging from it, she asked, "How long has that owl been following you?"

Per huffed. "Since yesterday. Stubborn. Won't even go off to hunt."

"Lucky it's an artic," She held up her hand, breaking the wards Per had up to keep the owl at a distance. The snowy owl immediately launched from the branch it rested on and glided down to land on her woolen-covered arm. She took the letter from it, then reached into her hide bag for a strip of smoked reindeer meat. Despite Per's scoff, she held it out for the owl, who snarfed it hungrily. "You shouldn't make the animal suffer. It is only loyal to its master's command."

Per used a glove to clean the ice off the bottom of his ski. "It should learn to think for itself in that case."

"Mr. Hossa," she began aloud, translating the letter into Saami, their native tongue. "I am writing to you on behalf of my son who is experiencing grave difficulties with the Dark Plane."

Per dropped that ski, base up, and began scrubbing at the other one.

"I am only taking this extraordinary step of contacting you because I fear he may be on the verge of causing harm to himself or those around him. The only option I see is to arrange for him to receive training in controlling the gateway he is inadvertently opening to this other Plane. You are highly recommended by wizards from both Britain and Denmark, so I am appealing to you to consider providing-"

Per stuck his feet back into his skis. "Don't bother," he interrupted. "Silly man has a typical teenage son with brooding dark magic he'll outgrow on his own and assumes the worst."

"He signs the message as professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," Siri pointed out before folding the letter and holding it out. Hedwig swayed on her shoulder when she moved, but held fast.

Per paused and then scoffed again. "Send the owl away," he said, before skiing off, retracing the bands through the snow he had just broken.

Chapter 4

Friday morning came with ice crystals covering the dormer windows so there was no view out from his usual perch. Harry had been at Hogwarts all week. His only scheduled task was to happen today when he had agreed to help with a demonstration in Transfiguration at 10:00 a.m. Mostly he had agreed to this because the very notion, after years of struggle in that class, had made him chuckle. He occupied himself before then with wondering how he could get Belinda to reply to his owls. He had sent two letters to her, explaining, but not really, truly explaining. Harry frowned and scratched his head. He didn't fancy writing yet another dodgy letter to her and he couldn't bear laying the full truth out, so by the time class arrived, he hadn't written anything.

Harry stepped into the Transfiguration classroom just on time. It looked much the way it used to with its tiered seats and animal cages lining the tall shelves. Only Snape, who stood cross-armed beside the teacher's desk, was a unique addition. The class was of fifth-years – the oldest Cawley taught. Harry accepted the professor's welcome and introduction as though perhaps, just maybe, someone in the room wouldn't know who he was. A glance around the blue and green uniforms showed keen interest in him. Harry wondered at this point what exact rumors were circulating to explain his presence.

"As I said last class," Cawley continued lecturing, "Animagia is one of the hardest Transfigurations attempted by ordinary witches and wizards. Few succeed, although this school has an unusual number of registered Animagi seventh-years, due, I am told, to Mr. Potter here."

"Hermione Granger, really," Harry supplied.

Cawley gave him a distracted smile. "Of course." He went on with the lecture, "Animagia is the ultimate self transfiguration. Metamorphmagia is a quick make-over by comparison. If you will demonstrate, Mr. Potter."

"Most everyone here has seen this," Harry pointed out, "But here goes." Harry transformed on the spot after only an instant of concentration, it had become so natural. A few students ohed and stared up at him with wide expressions. Cawley on the other hand, fell backward in surprise.

"My Merlin! What is that?" he exclaimed, picking himself up after scuttling to the first row of seats.

Harry transformed back so he could reply. "A Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis. It is native to the Ural Mountains."

Cawley closed his mouth with a clap of his teeth. "Well, amazing, just amazing. And do you fly?"

"Yes."

"Ah," Cawley muttered, looking disturbed and perhaps jealous. "Must be nice. All right then, Professor Snape is also an Animagus." He gestured for Snape to approach and quietly asked, "You aren't anything quite so big, correct?"

"Not at all." Snape leaned back on the demonstration table before transforming so he could slither into a tall coil on top of it. At least two students, both Ravenclaw, ducked behind their desks when the asp hissed at the room, long teeth bared.

Cawley seemed to be frozen in place beside the table. At least, Harry expected that if he could have moved when Snape slid over beside him, he would have.

"Be nice," Harry teased and it must have come out as a hiss of Parseltongue given Cawley's further, frozen, unblinking dismay now turned upon him instead.

Snape returned to his human serpentine self and gave his colleague one of his thin-lipped smiles.

"Do we get to learn that?" one of the Slytherins asked, hand raised in the air. She sounded intensely interested in the prospect.

"Well, if we get through your O.W.L. preparation . . ." Many students began madly pulling out their notes and sat straight and attentive, quills poised. "Well, we'll try . . ." Cawley began before dismissing the two of them. "Thank you, Professor, Mr. Potter, for the demonstrations. I think," he muttered more quietly.

In the corridor the afternoon sunlight shot straight along the floor, glinting on a nearby suit of armor. Snape said, "I will be finished with meetings and detentions after 4:00 today if you would like to play a bit of chess."

Harry thought ahead to his extraodinarily open afternoon. He was tired of doing his readings even though he had intended to reread nearly all of his books so as to impress his trainer when the opportunity arose. "Sure," he replied.

Snape was unaffected by Harry's delay in replying. "Come down to my office around then."

Harry really needed to find something productive to do to combat this boredom or he might go stir-crazy. "I think I'll go to the library in the meantime."

"Madam Pince has done an exhaustive search-"

"Yeah, but she doesn't really know what to look for."

Snape conceded this point with a tilt of his head. Small figures had gathered nearby by passing along the corridor and then slowing with artificial casualness. Harry

recognized two of the first-years who composed the unofficial Harry Potter fan club. They gave him shy giggles, half hidden behind hands or books.

Snape's stern voice cut through their wide-eyed trances. "Is there something you need?"

Sobering, they shook their heads and moved slowly on, large eyes darting back over their shoulders. Snape growled in annoyance.

Harry said, "It's hard to be cruel to them."

"No, it isn't," Snape countered forcefully, making Harry grin. Ginny stepped up in their wake with a warm greeting. Snape turned suddenly, sending his cloak billowing. "I'll see you in my office later, then. It is good to see you out of your chambers," he added over his shoulder while stepping briskly away.

Harry watched his rapid departure and said, "That's the second time he's done that. What did you do to him?"

Ginny crossed her arms and casually replied. "I think I showed him his soul, but it was his fault."

"What?" Harry uttered.

"I'll explain some other time." She adjusted her backpack and stepped away in the other direction.

Harry watched her turn the corner and considered going back to his chambers instead of the library and trying another letter to Belinda. But failing to get a reply yet again would only frustrate him more. He really needed to go talk to her, or send someone else to go talk to her. Snapping his fingers, he realized that there was someone who could go talk to her for him.

"Dobby?" Harry called out in the nearly deserted corridor. A moment later the house-elf appeared, pulling nervously on one ear. He had scaled back to wearing only one pair of socks at a time but today they were a huge pair of white and red striped ones that spilled around his stick-like legs.

"Harry Potter called Dobby?"

Harry crouched down before the elf so as to talk to him more easily. "Yes. I need you to do something for me. Is that possible?" The elf nodded vigorously, sending his ears bobbing. "All right, then. Can you go see Belinda Belluna? She's Madam Bones' receptionist at the Ministry. She hasn't answered my owls and I think she's upset with me. Can you tell her that I really care about her, but I just can't fully

explain some things." Harry frowned, frustration at himself overtaking him. "Just say that, I suppose."

"Dobby will deliver this message, Harry Potter," the elf promised.

"Thanks." The elf disappeared in a bang. Harry wondered anew at how he did that inside the school, getting around the Apparition barrier. As he straightened and stood, he found Ginny standing nearby with an uncomfortable smile. "Hi again," Harry said.

"Sorry, forgot to tell you something," she said.

Harry assumed she had heard his message to Belinda. He shrugged, "All right."

"There's a party in the Gryffindor tower tonight . . ." she offered.

"Thanks, I'll think about it."

She twitched one shoulder. "Okay. Maybe see you later. . ."

"Sure." Harry headed toward the staircases, firmly deciding that moment on going to the library. Dobby sparkled in ahead of him, hands clasped, looking humble.

"Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said. "I delivered your message."

Harry glanced back and saw Ginny again turn the corner at the far end. "What did she say?" he asked the elf.

"She said that if Harry Potter doesn't trust Belinda enough to tell her what is happening that she is glad to be knowing that now."

"Tell her Harry Pot- tell her, I don't know how to explain, but there are some things I just have to take care of on my own, without explaining." Dobby spent a dubious moment taking that in. Harry added, thinking grimly that his not explaining had become a bigger issue than the terrible new power itself that he didn't want to explain. "Nevermind, don't tell her anything. No," Harry said, pointing for emphasis. "Tell her she should trust me."

Dobby bowed and disappeared again. Harry stalked off to the library thinking that he had bigger things to worry about and he couldn't let her bull-headedness get to him. He would sort it out later with her when it was easier to.

Professor Snape returned to his office to find Hedwig waiting there. He glanced around the desk, but didn't see any new envelopes. "Did you deliver the letter?" he asked the empty-clawed owl. Hedwig dipped her head up and down a few times. "No reply?" The white owl looked out the window and back and tilted its head. Snape made

a tisking noise with his mouth and the owl looked up at him. It was dangerously unpredictable to Legilimize an animal, especially one with such radically different instincts than a human, but needing to know; he delved into the bird's thoughts.

Flashes of distorted memory flickered by. White fields and forests of pine. A man. A barrier. Hunger. Being forcefully sent away for her own good. Snape put Hedwig in Franklin's cage and sat rubbing his fingertips together in thought for many minutes. The sun came and went from behind small white clouds, sending many transient beams through the numerous panes of the tall windows.

When Snape did move it was to rapidly assemble a good quill and fresh ink.

Mr. Hossa,

Your lack of answer leaves little chance for argument, forcing me to guess what your objections may be. Were you not my only option, I would not be bothering you again. Certainly, I can send this disturbed young man to an African Shaman, but I fear he will be seen as a tool rather than an unskilled wizard in need of guidance and I cannot risk that unless it is truly my only option.

My first guess as to your objection is that you believe I am sadly mistaken and do not have the skills to recognize the Dark Plane. Let me assure you that I am no stranger to the Dark Arts as a teacher nor as a practitioner.

Snape hesitated. He needed this man's help badly enough that he felt this second and possibly only chance had better get the Shaman's attention.

I have stared straight into the eyes of evil many, many times – into the eyes of Voldemort himself as one of his servants – so trust that when I hear the sounds from the corner of the room and see the odd injuries to my house-elf – that I do indeed recognize what I am encountering.

Your second likely objection is that you belive this young man is not worth your attention. I do not know how bad things were in your particular village during the previous reigns of the Dark Lord, but trust that here they were most grievous. And here in Britain, at least, we feel that we owe every last effort of assistance to the one who freed us from this horrible Dark Reign. For the young man I am asking you to instruct in your rare skill is none other than the Destroyer of Voldemort himself, Harry Potter, my adopted son.

I will be concrete in my request. All I ask is that you see him and judge the first for yourself. I will send him to you strictly for this consideration with no further expectation. Simply tell me where and when and I will see to it that he is there.

Responses

Pronouncing Candide – Like the Opera. CanDEED. I figure her parents liked the name but were too clueless to know the origin. Candide (a man, by the way) in the opera maddeningly always sees the bright side of even horrendous circumstances. I figured someone who was with Snape had to have a bit of that.

Harry/Hermione – I'm just going to shoot this here. I'm not going that way. That one instant of Harry's panic at a potential misunderstanding actually emphasizes how much he needs her purely as a friend.

Demise of Voldemort Day – Wizards can't have a cool/catchy name for something; that would be unwizardish. Besides, this makes it d-v-day, which harkens to other vaguely similar holidays.

Why doesn't Harry just tell Snape? – Well, that wouldn't be very much fun... Better reason though is he is in denial, which is not rational. This has been remarkably hard to write with Harry as my primary point of view, because it makes him an unreliable source of information and reasoning on unfolding events. It means the events he observes and his internalization of them have to not match so that the reader is ahead of him. I may be failling on pulling that off – and thank goodness we are past it, it made for very slow writing – but I wouldn't feel bad if I failed, because it is tough to do. And by the way, I don't know jack about writing; I'm just making this up, really. Sounds good though, doesn't it?

Chapter 5.

Foundations

The Hogwarts library was nearly empty, as it usually was on Fridays. Harry went straight for the gate at the back and let himself into the Restricted Section. It was quiet and musty and the sun streamed in, lighting tilted columns of dust motes between the shelves. He walked all the way to the back where hooks held extra lamps and a wooden lectern sat against the wall for reading the heavier lead-bound grimoires. Harry moved down the row, reading faded titles in gold on cracked leather: Suspicious Suppositions, Trident's Inheritors: Powers of the Water Dwellers of the Lake District, Pyres of the Vampyres. . . He was set upon this as a long task, so he went on to the shelf below, reading each title there. He pulled Magycle Manyfestation out and flipped through it, grateful that it didn't bite, scream or slam shut again when he did so. It appeared to be mostly about Ghouls and Poltergeists, but he thumbed through it slowly, glancing at phrases on every few pages, looking for anything even vaguely related to the Dark Plane or the creatures he knew to dwell there.

Madam Pince stepped back in from having her tea, something she never did in the library because of the crumbs. Hungry things attracted by cake crumbs often didn't stop eating when the crumbs were gone. She headed for her desk at the front but stopped instead in the middle of the floor and turned around, feeling something was not quite right. Her eyes scanned the room, the high upper windows visible over the shelving, the two young students whispering over a small pink-paged book of affection charms. Unable to shake the out-of-place sense, she stepped toward the gate to the Restricted Section and stopped just short of it, breath unusually loud in the hush. She studied the tall still shelves, the swirling dust motes. Her predecessor had mentioned

watching for this, but she could not recall, thirty-five years later, what he had said regarding it.

A figure moved into view, scanning the small shelves on the end of the farthest row. "Mr. Potter," Pince uttered, not a greeting, more a quiet exclamation.

Harry looked up. "Madam Pince. Sorry, you weren't here when I came in . . . I assumed it was all right for me to look around in this section."

Her face relaxed into an odd little smile. "Of course, young man."

She turned and departed, trying not to appear to hurry. At the top of the stairs to the Headmistress' tower, she knocked and when called to open the door, discovered why it was closed – she and Professor Snape were having a meeting. Files and a few long-tasseled scrolls were open on the large desk.

"Oddest thing," Pince said. "The books, every last one, are all quiet right now. I've never seen it before."

McGonagall's brow furrowed in response. Snape finished reading a parchment before glancing up, back down, and then back up again, slightly startled. "Harry is in the library, isn't he?"

"Yes," Pince replied.

McGonagall shook her cloak out and sat back in her chair. "Never know with that boy."

Pince rubbed her hands together. "Well, but I was wondering, you know, if that meant Her Book might be . . . calm as well."

This returned McGonagall's attention directly back to the librarian. Snape appeared confused. "What book?"

"Her Book," McGonagall echoed as she came around her desk. "Why don't we see," she suggested with a keen look about her.

Back in the library the last students had departed. The trio of Hogwart's staff approached the gate to the Restricted Section and stopped, listening. Sure enough, there wasn't a single sound from within. Not a creak of leather, a groan of binding, a rattle of shelf, nor even a rustle of paper. McGonagall reached for the gate and several books on the immediate shelf jostled each other, banging their metal covers on the oaken shelf. She pulled her hand away. Harry stepped into view near the far wall, carrying a book over which he was hunched, reading. He appeared to be pacing.

Chapter 5

"Harry," McGonagall said, drawing his attention, which grew curious to see them there. In particular he eyed Snape questioningly. The headmistress went on, "I wonder if you wouldn't do me a favor, young man? Do you see that cabinet over there just to the left of the lectern?"

Snape turned sharply to her. "You don't mean-"

She cut him off and continued. "Take a look inside for me, will you?"

Harry, looking a bit as though he questioned their right-headedness, went over to the brass metal grate mounted flush in the stone wall where a stone block was missing. He peered inside as best he could. "There's a book inside," Harry said. "A very dusty one."

"I would imagine," McGonagall intoned. "Put your hand on the latch if you would . . . see what happens."

Snape said, "Do be careful."

Harry turned back and looked at each of them. McGonagall appeared unusually eager, Snape vaguely alarmed, Pince somewhere between the two. With a shrug Harry grabbed the handle and opened the grate. The book was barely discernible through the inches thick layer of dust blanketing it. Without preamble Harry waved an Expulsion spell at it to clear it out. A gasp brought his head around and he found the three staff members ducking even though they stood on the far side of the metal barrier.

Giving them all a doubtful look, Harry, with a modest effort, set the book out on the lectern and looked it over. It had a chiseled stone cover with the four house mascots, one in each corner. He opened the cover and blew the dust from the cover page, which had the same mascots repeated in a row of fanciful hand drawings. Below that a message was penned.

"There's a letter," Harry said, thinking it an odd introduction to a book.

The metal gate rattled as McGonagall put her hand on the lever to open it. The stone cover of the book slammed closed with a resonating boom! Harry pulled his nose back, although it would have been too late had it actually been in the way. He shot McGonagall a chastising look and she backed up again. Several books rustled on the shelves around Harry, and he waited for calm and for the noise to cease echoing before reopening the cover.

"The letter says . . ." Harry said, squinting dangerously close to the unfamiliar handwriting. "Knowledge should never be mistaken for learning, information, or

insight. Herein collected are the notes of the builders. So forced by apparent betrayal, I present this: Warning: take only a pure heart inside, take only pure knowledge away. You have been warned." Harry stared at the signature before exclaiming, "It's signed by Rowena Ravenclaw."

"Yes," McGonagall said, keeping her hands locked behind her back now. "She collected all the information about the castle's construction and locked it away in there. After someone . . ." Here she sent a glare at Snape. "Disturbed the very foundation of this place by building a secret chamber of dark power within it."

They glared at each other, making Harry grin in amusement. He turned the page. A diagram of the lake and forest stretched across the next two pages, with no castle but with measured landmarks. Next was a list of materials, like a thousand, thousand gross of stone and brick, 1375 tall straight oaks, 500 men to dig, 400 Mules and Thestrals to pull carts, windmills even. The list went on for pages. "Neat," Harry said.

A glance up at the teachers showed McGonagall looking pained and, ironically, caged. "Harry, I don't suppose you could flip ahead to anything regarding the basement retaining walls and the waterproofing spells used on them?"

Harry thought that sounded rather dull, but he reached to thumb the disparate cut and torn edges of vellum and parchment to look ahead. He barely got his hand out of the way before the heavy slabs snapped closed. "Feisty book," Harry quipped.

"It has done much worse," Snape muttered, and then directed at McGonagall, "Hence the always empty painting in your office of Wilfredus Thurgoodmaster . . ."

She waved him to quiet. Harry waited for stillness and again opened the book to the cover page before trying to turn to the next. It banged closed again with an ear-splitting clap of stone.

"Perhaps, this is not the best-" Snape said, sounding exasperated.

"No, I think I need to read the letter again," Harry insisted. The cover refused to budge when he pulled up on it. Annoyed, Harry put his hands on his hips, and insisted, "I'm pure of heart." The cover still would not move. It felt as though the book had become a solid block of stone. Miffed at the notion that the book could believe him the enemy, he went on, "Hey, who do you think kicked Slytherin's heir out of the Chamber?" The book still refused to open and Harry didn't want to pry too hard. He calmed himself and assumed his earlier attitude of easy curiosity. It still held fast. "Hmf," he muttered and looked up apologetically at the teachers, noticing that Snape had his wand in his hand although pointed at the floor.

Chapter 5

"I don't think that's helping, Severus," Harry said.

Snape frowned and reluctantly stashed his wand away, garnering accusative glances from the other two. This time the book opened. Harry read the letter aloud, just in case, and then turned each page forward. Diagrams of floor beams, roof beams, and enchanted circles of tower stone were followed by instructions for landscaping the lawn and rose garden. No Quidditch pitch appeared in the plan map, Harry realized. Uninterested, he merely glanced at the rose garden planting and upkeep notes. The book slammed closed.

"What happened?" McGonagall asked.

"Er, I think I have to learn every page before going on."

"That would be rather like Ravenclaw," McGonagall breathed.

Harry pulled over a stool and settled in before the book. The cover opened easily and again he read the letter aloud before turning to the first page.

"Thank you, Harry," the headmistress said with affection. "If you need anything, please let Madam Pince know."

Harry waved them off, conjuring up an interest in perennial flowering plants as he studied the gardening notes.

Twilight brought gloom to the library's Restricted Section. Harry moved the largest lamp closer to the book and peered dangerously close to a diagram that apparently explained the original layered spell barriers at the edge of the forest. Harry didn't recognize some of the spells and worried that paging ahead without fully understanding would force him to begin yet again.

A sound from the gate brought Harry's attention around. A lamp hovered on the far side held by a familiar figure, who gave him a small crooked smile. "I brought you dinner," Snape said.

Harry rose from the stool to discover how very stiff he had become from sitting there. He opened the gate from his side, which didn't disturb the books, fortunately. "Thanks," he said, accepting the tray.

"You are being rather diligent. The lake water has been flooding the lower dungeons for over three centuries."

Harry peeked under the plate warmer. "I don't have anything else to be doing," he pointed out. "But I found reference to a Compelling Barrier Charm that I don't

know. Maybe you know something of it? If I can't figure it out, and I'm stuck on this page."

"You don't mean Repelling do you, like the spells at the edge of the forest?"

"It is at the edge of the forest but it definitely says Compelling."

"I don't suppose you could show it to me?" At the far end of the room, the book rattled on the lectern. Snape said, "I guess not. No sign of foundation sealing spells?"

"Not yet. I found another likely hidden passage though," Harry said, while plucking a bite of ham off the plate. "Madam Pince better not see the tray." Talking around another bite of ham, Harry went on with, "I'll give it another hour and then hope that I can continue tomorrow where I left off."

That night Harry dreamt of stones being stacked into arches and raised up, of men with sharp axes carefully whittling massive trees into notched ceiling beams, of windmills and Archimedes screws. When he woke in the morning, the castle felt less like a home and more like a piecemeal construct. Feeling lighter of heart, he decided to go to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"Harry," Ginny greeted him warmly. The Gryffindors made space as the hall buzzed louder and many glanced his way in curiosity. "I hear McGonagall locked you in the library all night," she teased.

"Ravenclaw locked me in the library last night."

"The house?" Dennis asked.

"Rowena, the Hogwarts founder," Harry clarified.

"You have such an odd life, Harry," Ginny declared while passing him the butter and juice.

"I learned a few things, though," Harry said with a mischievous grin. He pulled out his wand and glanced up and down the hall. "Watch this." He tapped his hand with his wand and then pointed up at the ceiling with his index finger. The usual four vertical Gryffindor banners above their table vanished. Harry tapped his hand again and again pointed with a sweeping motion. A very long single banner appeared, hooked near the walls and draped low in the middle, a dazzling gold lion outline stretched across its length.

"Wow," Ginny said, gazing at it. "I like that one much better."

The rest of the hall quieted and turned their heads up at the new banner; mostly the reaction sounded positive. Harry ate a few casual bites before hazarding a glance in

the direction of the head table. McGonagall shook her head. Snape stood and came around and off the dais.

"I think you're getting detention," a younger student said in concern.

"I'm already in detention," Harry retorted. "Professor," he said sweetly when Snape came up behind their bench. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"Headmistress wishes to remind you that magic is not allowed in the corridors or the Great Hall between classes. That said," he went on factually, "She suspects that was tame compared to what you could have done and requests that you replace the other three in the same style, as she rather . . . likes this one."

Several students giggled. Harry turned on the bench and repeated the spell, pointing above each of the other tables. Even he had to admit that the silver Slytherin snake was best suited to such a very long banner. Most of the magical ceiling was hidden now. Snape raised a brow as he studied his house banner. "Very nice," he conceded. He clasped his hands before him and said more quietly, "I am a little worried about what else you may be able to do."

"If the puddings for lunch were ready I could call them up to the tables. Not terribly dangerous. These are the stormy sky banners, by the way. There are several sets for different ceiling conditions."

"Are there? I'll inform Minerva, I am certain she will wish to have you show her the spells. I believe her banner repertoire is limited.

"Harry Potter," Dennis teased after Snape was back out of range. "Hogwarts housemaster."

"Watch it or I'll see that your tower room is shrunk down," Harry threatened.

"Can you do that?"

"Haven't you noticed that years with extra students have extra-large rooms, even though the tower is the same size all the way up on the outside? –Course I can do that."

"What else can you do?" Ginny asked with quite the twinkle in her eye.

"I'm not completely sure, but I'm going to wander the castle today to find out. After I try the library again," he added less enthusiastically.

In the Restricted Section, Harry retrieved the book from the brass cabinet and read the letter aloud. He paged – one slow page at a time – to where he left off and let

out a loud sigh of relief upon arriving at it successfully. Late into the night he had researched Compelling Spells to determine which one would be at the edge of the forest. He assumed it wasn't one to compel customers into a shop or Quidditch fans into a queue – two of the most common Compelling Spells. He looked over his notes again and looked back at the notation on the diagram. It was a circle with two lines and an M drawn over it. The only possibility on the list was a Compelling Spell for amphibians. The notation could be a crude drawing of a frog. But why anyone would want to compel amphibians to live along the edge of the forest?

Harry remembered Neville's constantly wandering toad and slapped his hand on the lectern. He put his notes aside and biting his lip, turned the page. The book mercifully remained open. The next page contained instructions for framing paintings. He settled in as though revising for an examination and simply tried to memorize every notation.

"Going all right?" A familiar voice asked from the gate.

"Hello, Severus. Yes, I finally figured out the spell I didn't know and now I'm . . ." Harry studied the page before him. "Learning about art. Still nothing in detail about the foundation. The notes aren't in much order, but since you have to learn them all anyway, why should they be?"

"Are you coming down to lunch?"

Surprised by the question, Harry glanced up at the time. "Wow, sure." He shut the book and put it back away, hoping he didn't have to take it out too many more times.

On the way down the quiet corridor, Harry asked, "Any reply to the letter?"

"No, not yet," Snape answered easily.

"It's been a long time," Harry pointed out.

"It had more than one address."

"So maybe Hedwig is having a hard time locating him," Harry conjectured.

Snape remained silent. They reached the main staircases and a commotion from a painting behind them drew Harry over that way. A drunken Sir Cadogan was in the middle of disrupting a tea party on a lovely lawn before a lake. The other painting's occupants were dropping their frilly umbrellas and running. Harry drew out his wand. "I've always wanted to do something about him. Resetum Provenance!"

Sir Cadogan was sucked like a flimsy paper doll out of the picture, through the nearby pictures, and disappeared down the line. Harry restashed his wand with a cocky motion. "There. That's better."

Snape tilted his head at him. "Ravenclaw does not know what she has done."

"Haven't you seen that spell?" Harry asked.

"No."

"You're saying I know a whole bunch no one else does?" Harry asked with a delicious gleam in his eye.

They made the floor of the Entrance Hall. "No one has been able to open that book for eight hundred years. Much has been forgotten."

"But don't the old headmasters remember?" Harry asked, stopping before the doors as a few stragglers entered the Great Hall. "Why else keep all those paintings around?" Harry was remembering a spell for the Entrance Hall, one, like many of them, that he knew no good purpose for.

"They are kept around for their memories, but what they mostly are is what the painter can capture, which is personality."

"Why is the book letting me read it?" Harry asked. He tapped the floor with his foot four times and whispered the incantation Pupilprism.

With a vaguely disdainful sneer, Snape said, "You are pure of heart, remember?"

"Really," Harry insisted. The stones in the floor where changing color, forming zones leading to the doors.

"I certainly do not know what the book is thinking, nor does Minerva. It is either reacting, like the other books in the Restricted Section, to something about you that calms them down-"

"Or scares them to death." The uneven stones were now tinted green, yellow, blue, and red, lined up with the tables inside.

Snape went on, unaware. "Unlikely. Ravenclaw's book has dealt out only violence to those seeking to abuse the knowledge within it." Snape studied Harry as Harry studied the stone floor. "Or, perhaps it is as you said, in jest I believe, that you have done more for this place than anyone in a very long time."

Harry tapped the toe of his trainer against the brass plaque in the floor, now surrounded by blue-tinted stones. "Maybe," he said. "What purpose does this serve?" Harry asked, gesturing at the floor.

Surprised, Snape glanced down in all directions. "Did you just do that?" At Harry's nod, he calmed and said, "I expect it is for organizing students for the Grand Entrance to the Grand Feasts."

"Why don't we have Grand Feasts anymore?"

"We do: Christmas, Easter, Welcoming, Leaving . . ."

"Oh. Hey, did you know there's a spell to make all the windows black to avoid taxes?"

"Best forgotten, I expect," Snape said, pulling open the broad door beside him.

"It wasn't permanent. It went away when the assessor went away."

"And on that note . . . " Snape waved at the floor behind them.

Before following into the hall, Harry tapped the floor four times with his foot and the stones returned to their usual grey selves.

That night, Harry had a bad dream; his first in a long time. He was running down the longest Hogwarts corridor on the second floor, except it continually grew longer ahead of him. He was desperately trying to find Dumbledore, because in his mind, Harry believed he had gone to face the dark creatures himself to distract them from Harry. As he ran, Harry had a terrible vision of the dear old headmaster in the Defense classroom, dragged down to the stone floor, flesh shredded and consumed by all manner of distorted hungry things. The corridor continued to have no end no matter how fast Harry pounded his feet and, frantic, Harry began shouting for the old wizard, insisting that he not face the darkness for Harry – that he himself must do this.

"Harry?" A voice sharply cut through the dream.

Harry groaned and rolled away from the eye-stabbing lamplight beside the bed. "Yeah?" he muttered.

"Are you quite all right?" Snape asked.

"Yeah," Harry spoke into his pillow.

The bed tilted as Snape sat down on the edge. "Willing to tell me what is in your nightmare?"

Harry closed his eyes into his pillow and rather than answer, asked, "How did you know I was having one?"

"Hm. This," Snape said. Harry was forced to turn to look at the glass ball Snape held; it previously had been sitting on the nightstand.

"I thought that was a sneakascope someone had left behind."
"Not exactly." Snape set it back down with a dull clunk. Harry picked it up and peered into it. It had color stripes of glitter inside of it, waving slowly. On the bottom it read: Toddler Tattler, by the spellbinders who brought you Wee-Watcher.
Utterly aghast, Harry said, "You put a baby monitor in my room?!" He set it back down hard, hoping it would break. It just thudded loudly. He tossed himself back on his pillow with a huff. When he finally did turn a glare on Snape, he found only vague amusement on his guardian's face.
"Quite finished?" Snape asked.
"You make me wish I were home."
"That would not be wise."
Still miffed, and unable to come up with a response equal to his disdain, Harry demanded, "Get a reply yet?"
More soberly, Snape replied, "No. But I am still hopeful."
"That's saying a lot," Harry muttered.
Snape sat straight and looked up at the nearby wall and the painting of a herd of ponies on the Dartmoor. "I realize that you are impatient with your situation. But do try to act your age."
"Hey, I'm not the one who put a baby monitor in my room," Harry retorted, appalled all over again.
"I wished to be informed if there were any disturbance in the room. Such as a horde of Lethifold slipping in," he stated firmly. "I was not prepared to be as trusting as Minerva."
Harry picked up the flattened glass ball again. "Can this thing really detect Lethifolds?"
"According to the user's manual. Goblins and Ghouls are its primary detection mode, however."
"Goblins?" Harry queried. "What, in case they come into your kid's room in the middle of the night and ask them to open an account?"
"Goblins have a much older and worse reputation than merely exorbitant exchange rates," Snape informed him. He took the monitor from Harry and set it gently back on the nightstand. "In any event, was your dream meaningful at all?"
"Just stuff I'm worried about," Harry hedged. "The only person dying in it was Dumbledore, and he's already dead." He shifted to a more comfortable spot and pulled the covers up in the cool air. "I'm all right. You didn't have to come." He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. After a long pause the lamplight went down and a hand brushed his shoulder as the edge of the bed lifted.

Saturday night, a restless Harry took a stroll around the grounds just outside the castle. He felt less certain out here of the protection from the Dark Plane, but he was too in need of diversion to care. He bundled his old cloak tighter as he rounded the wall and an icy breeze lifted it. The snow absorbed Harry's footsteps and at the next turn the wind quieted too. The rose garden lay ahead of him. Harry, with renewed interest in it, headed closer to wander through it. One couple walked hand-in-hand, too absorbed in their whispering to notice him as they stepped down a path lined with brown-leaved bundles of dead stems. Closer by, a shock of red stood out from the deep bluish snow.

"Hello," Harry said as he came upon the curved stone bench where Ginny sat.

She brightened instantly. "Wotcher, Harry. Have a seat."

"A little late to be out," Harry commented.

"Yeah, I was going to take points away from them, but I didn't have the heart." Harry realized then that she was referring to the wandering couple. She asked, "How are you, Harry?" When Harry merely shrugged, she said, "Still the secretive Harry."

"No, I'm not. I told you what was happening . . . much more than I told Belinda."

She crossed her heavily insulated arms. "Sounded like that was causing trouble."

Harry didn't reply. He was feeling stubborn about this issue and didn't feel like examining it any more. He examined the moon – only a sliver, but it looked to be waxing – took out his wand, and used a Winter Bloom spell from Ravenclaw's book on the rose bush beside him. A single green stalk grew up out of the snow and slowly blossomed into a blue rose. Harry picked it and handed it to Ginny.

"You're a tease, Harry Potter," she said, breathing in from the center of the flower. The other couple was wandering back to the doors.

"Sorry, just thought you might like a flower."

She sniffed it again. "I do like a flower. But you're still a tease. Maybe you don't know what that's like."

"No. I do know what that's like," Harry said, thinking of seeing Tonks every day.

During the resulting silence, Ginny looked around the broad, snow-blanketed garden. "So, what are you going to do? You've been here a week."

"Severus is trying to find someone to give me some instruction. It's taking some time though. He could only find one good book on the topic and it isn't very useful. He isn't going to give up, though," Harry heard himself go on.

"No, of course not," Ginny said reassuringly.

"Right now I feel as though I could just go back home and it would all be okay again. But it isn't true. I've been having this happen for months now where these creatures try to come into our world around me. At first I just heard them and felt them, sorta, this oily evil they bring to the air." Harry sighed. Ginny patted his leg. "Knowing that I'm channeling evil doesn't bother you?" he asked her.

"No. Why should it? It's not as though you're doing it on purpose." She waited for a reply and when none came, said, "Professor Snape does seem worried about you."

"He hides it well around me. Speaking of which," Harry said, turning on the bench to make another rose. "What about that comment you made yesterday?"

"Oh." Ginny glanced around them, but the expanse of snow leading to the castle was empty and the torches framing the doors were the only thing moving in the dim air. She accepted the second rose, putting it with the first. "The night you arrived I heard from Erasmus that you were here and I came up to the fifth floor to see you. But you were asleep already. Of course I must not have detected all of the charms on the door because as I turned to leave, Professor Snape was blocking the way. Scared me silly for a second and I almost hexed him. It was close. Anyway, he goes into your room and circles it, checking the corners, maybe for monsters, and then he comes back over and checks on you."

"I don't remember that," Harry said.

"You were completely out. You didn't even hear the door squeaking when I came in." She sighed and continued, "So, as I said, he was checking on you with a lumos . . . anyway, he had such an odd look on his face. Like one my mum would have and I would think she was completely overdoing it. But this was Snape." She shook her head at the befuddling memory.

"But you said-"

"Yeah, so he takes me down to his office wants to know how I knew you were here and when I tell him – the truth – he Legilimizes me. But at the moment I was thinking how funny it was that he could also try to be so mean, you know, after that look. So, I think he saw my memory of the look. At least that's the only thing that would have set him off so."

Harry blinked as he thought this through. He laughed lightly and said, "And this is making him avoid you?"

"Harry, you didn't see it. Like my mum when Ron was made Prefect . . . remember that? I think she cried, even."

"What about when you were?" Harry asked.

"No. She just said, 'Well, why wouldn't you be?'"

Harry gazed over the snow to where it met the grey mass of the forest's dormant branches. His nose was growing too cold as he breathed. He said, "That would explain the baby monitor in my room."

Ginny laughed in a sharp bark, carrying loudly even over the snow. "The what?"

Harry stood. "Come on, I'm getting cold."

Ginny was still chuckling when they stepped inside the castle and relocked the doors.

Harry, armed with extensively moldy knowledge from the school's builders, followed Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Snape down the dungeon steps. As they approached, Greer stepped out of her empty classroom and glared suspiciously at him and Snape as they passed. Snape ignored her and Harry tried to do so as well, until she brightly asked, "Oh, Professor, need any extra extract of Ociumum?"

Harry stopped and spun, wand in his hand without thought. In that instant of turning he had fallen into a state of concentrated clarity, prepared to do battle. A hand grabbed a hold of his wrist as he raised his arm to aim. "Harry," Snape said sharply.

Greer had dropped her arms and stepped back to duck into her office, but she recovered quickly and smirked. "Quite a temper on that boy. One would think he'd never learned an ounce of discipline in his life. Oh. . . that would have been your lacking, wouldn't it, Professor?" she sneered at Snape.

Snape's hold tightened. "Harry. Put your wand away," he stated easily, perhaps to avoid catering to his nasty colleague.

The sudden fury didn't let go of Harry though. He relaxed his wand hand but stood leaning toward the Potions classroom door, breathing rapidly, glaring at the

pudgy, badly make-uped women who so casually tossed such painful words at them. McGonagall stepped into the fray. "Gertie, I know you don't agree with Mr. Potter being here, but that was uncalled for," she chastised tiredly.

Spells flashed through Harry's mind, vicious takedown spells for a dangerous opponent, followed by more subtle castle altering spells. His arm ached to toss a series of them at her taunting face, to wall up her classroom with immovable stone blocks, for example, with her inside.

Still holding his wrist firmly, Snape twisted around to block Harry's view of Greer by stepping in front of him. "Harry," he said, more gently. "Come, there are better things to expend magic on." Harry gave in reluctantly, feeling raw and almost hungry at giving in. But he let himself be led to the end where McGonagall opened a large door with very rusty metal braces holding its warped boards together. The scent of mildew and cave wafted up from a set of stairs leading down into darkness. A wave of the headmistress' hand lit the torches.

"This is the alternative route to the cave entrance from the lake," McGonagall explained as they descended a curving stone staircase, stone blocks on one side, but cut directly into the rock on the other. Her footsteps began to sound wet, even before she reached the bottom. Doors led off this lower corridor, but they were missing their bottom foot of wood due to rot and their hinges and latches looked sulky about opening. The lower hall had inches of stagnant water covering it and patches of green algae near the torches. Harry held up his robes like the others did as he looked around with interest at the wide, low arches that held up the mass of castle above them. This part of the castle wasn't on his Map; he would have to add it.

"This way," McGonagall said, sounding the tour guide.

At the far side a short set of steps led up to the end of the ledge where the boats docked with the first-years before the welcoming feast. That explained the water, Harry thought. He walked along inside, parallel to the ledge, ducking under an arch. Water was seeping between blocks higher than he estimated the lake to be on the other side. Perhaps it was rainwater or condensation. The stones were worn and round at the edges where the water lapped at them. Harry took out his wand and selected an area that didn't look quite as bad as the others to try out the spells. He tapped one stone with the incantation Lapisvigil then tapped all the stones that touched it before returning to the first and reciting Aqua et Igni Interdicere Aqua. At first there didn't seem to be a change but as Harry watched, something like mortar rose to fill the cracks around that stone and solidified.

"Bravo, Harry," McGonagall exclaimed from beside him.

Snape glanced around the arches with a baleful eye. "Rather a lengthy task."

"Not so bad," Harry said. "The other stones are still awake. The book had some suggested patterns." Harry demonstrated by tapping in a ring around the first ring with the first incantation and then repeating the second with the inner stones. The area of solid wall expanded as they watched.

McGonagall moved to her own area and began spelling. After a short while, she stood straight with a groan and said, "Perhaps I will send Grubbly-Plank down to learn the spell." She looked at Snape standing behind them, arms crossed. "You are not going to help?" she asked him.

"I . . . think I will just observe," Snape replied a bit haughtily.

McGonagall gave him a sharp look until Harry said, from his crouched position to reach the very lowest stones that were mostly underwater, "He tried the spell and it didn't work."

"Convenient," McGonagall grumbled as she stalked off.

Harry slopped in the water to shift to the left. His trainers were wet all the way through now, but he kept at it, finding the task strangely satisfying.

"Minerva will have to find or make up a medal to give you for this," Snape stated. Harry wasn't certain if he were serious.

"I'd prefer one for not turning Greer into a giant octopus the next time I see her. That's going to be harder."

Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I realize you are frustrated, but I expect you to behave, even when so provoked."

Harry pushed himself to his feet. "I lost myself," he admitted as he ran his hand over the newly smooth surface before him. It was only a fraction of the area between just two of the arches. "You're right, this is a huge job." Harry stretched his arms to the sides and over his head and started on a new area that would expand to meet the one he had just finished. When that circle grew too large to continue, Harry stopped again and let out a yawn. A few seams had been missed and he went back and did those, which required waking all the stones around the cracks again.

Harry shook out his arms yet again. "Why doesn't Headmistress order Greer to do this?"

"Professor Greer, Harry," Snape pointed out quietly.

"Fat chance," Harry retorted.

Snape started to step away. "For that, finish this section before you come up." He stalked off, high-stepping in the water, which only seemed to be getting higher.

Harry rolled his eyes, but once Snape's footsteps faded the only sound was the amplified lapping of the water in the cave, a lulling sound. Harry, humming faintly, tapped his wand against a new, unsealed array of stones.

By the time Harry finished, just that one section, his arms ached terribly from holding them up to tap repeatedly with his wand and he couldn't feel his cold toes. He used the boy's bathroom off the Entrance Hall to wash up for lunch and dry his shoes with a spell. He was feeling surly about what had turned into a kind of detention, so he didn't look up at the head table as he made his way to where his friends sat.

"Wheh," Colin said. "You smell like a crypt."

"Thanks," Harry retorted sarcastically. "I apparently did get detention for learning too much about the castle." At the raised heads, he added, "Well, that and threatening to turn Greer into a cephalopod." Numerous giggles followed this, which made Harry smile faintly, but Snape was right, frustration was beginning to rule him. Trouble was, knowing this didn't help, perhaps the opposite. "If I show the next D.A. a few spells can you get a few members to help me with something this afternoon?"

"Sure," Ginny answered eagerly. "What do you need help with?"

"Sealing the castle foundation against lake and groundwater."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. "You're so secretive, Harry."

"You think I'm kidding."

After lunch twenty students Harry knew well from his school days followed him down to the lower dungeon. All were quite excited to see such a remote part of the castle. Suze stepped down last, seeming reluctant to get her tiny cloth shoes wet.

"Clearly you have not spent enough time pawing around in the bowels of this place, chasing monsters, chancing Voldemort," Harry criticized them, half-playfully. "Chasing Ginny," Harry added, elbowing his friend. Ginny rolled her eyes and frowned – still a sensitive topic, apparently. Harry moved on quickly, "So this is the spell . . . "

Two hours later when the footsteps on the staircase revealed themselves to be McGonagall, they were almost halfway finished. "My," the headmistress exclaimed. She studied the newly sealed arches a moment, looking nostalgic. "Well, we'll have to

come up with a treat for all of you in appreciation for this, and I'll send some staff down to assist."
"That's all right," Ginny piped up from where she sat on Wereporridge's shoulders so as to reach the upper part of an arch. "We're fine." Everyone else seconded this.
"Perhaps I'll have the elves send some butterbeers down then?"
Strong ascent greeted this suggestion. Someone quietly suggested real beers would also be welcome. McGonagall either didn't hear or ignored it.
It was nearly evening when Harry, after heartily thanking his friends and the other students, like Wereporridge, who consented to be dragged along, headed to his fifth-floor chambers. Upon opening the door, he found Snape sitting on one of the couches, grading papers. Snape gave him a sideways glance as Harry stood in the doorway, taking this in before moving to his room with the intent of changing into something fresher smelling. Snape's voice stopped him as he opened the door to the bedchamber.
"Just because I correct you, does not mean I am not on your side."
Harry tweaked the door handle, making the latch clatter. He wanted to get angry, just to feel it. He teetered at the cusp of hot anger before letting it go. "Yeah, sure," Harry said. He went in and returned presently in a fresh set of robes and clean trousers. His ankles, tired of having damp cuffs pressed against them, thanked him as he sat down across from his guardian. After a pregnant silence, Harry said, "What are we going to do if this Finnish Shaman-"
"Saami," Snape corrected.
"What?"
"He is actually a Saami."
Harry didn't know what that was, but he went on with, "If this Saami Shaman doesn't respond or says no?"
Snape didn't look up from his grading. "We will find an alternative," he replied easily.
"It isn't like you to be so optimistic," Harry pointed out with a grumble.
"We have no choice but to find something . . .unless you relish the roll of housemaster?"
"No."
"Pity." Many minutes and two essay markings later, Snape asked, "Still angry?"
"No."
"Even though you have nothing to look forward to but sealing stone walls?"
"That's finished." Snape did look up at this proclamation. Harry went on, "Although I'll go down tomorrow and make sure no joins were missed. Likely some have been. The D.A. are now the D.A.A.W.I.–Dumbledore's Army Against Water Infiltration."
"It pays to have lots of friends."

Chapter 6.

Arctic Flight

Snape wandered through the Ministry of Magic atrium where something had clearly gone very wrong. Shredded wall hangings were strewn across the floor and ash from the hearths had been scattered and tracked across the broad wood boards of the floor and hovered in a ghostlike haze in the light. No one guarded the dreamily glittering gateway at the end of the atrium and Snape hurried his pace to the lifts, feeling a surging sense of doom. The metal gate on the lift had to be forced closed to get the lift moving and only then did it move reluctantly with much squealing of damaged parts.

The chaos only grew worse on level two. Shredded parchments were piled in the corridors, scattered with discarded pointed hats and gloves, many of which appeared to have been gnawed upon. In the main Auror's office a barricade of desks had been hastily erected and Tonks crouched on the near side of it. Snape stepped around it, not even pausing when the Auror hissed a warning to be careful.

Beyond the last desk – the only upright one in a sea of spilled files, ink bottles, and a few wounded, fluttering memo airplanes – crouched Harry, one arm covering his head, the other clutching his wand, although not in a manner that would allow him to spell anything. Something rustled under a pile of parchments and chattered at Snape. It didn't sound like anything terribly dangerous, but Harry started badly at the noise and rather than raise his wand properly, ducked farther into his arms.

"Harry," Snape called his name and when he didn't respond, hauled him to his feet by his raised arm. This was his old Harry, a head shorter and much narrower in

the shoulders. "Come. Let's go," Snape said, sounding confident to help bolster his charge.

Snape turned to lead the way out, but Things were emerging from behind the toppled furniture, from under the piles of parchment. Harry stepped closer to Snape and finally raised his wand. Stick-like limbs and distorted bulbous bodies crept out of hiding, sensing the dominance of their numbers.

The next instant, without consciously Apparating, they stood in an utterly grey world. It was silent here as though vastly open and empty. Harry shifted the aim of his wand back and forth, but there was nothing to point it at. "Where are we?" he asked, sounding hopeless despite being relocated from obvious danger.

Snape moved closer still and gripped Harry's bony shoulder blade with the intent of not losing track of him. Not recognizing this place of vague light and meaningless distance, he was forced to answer, "I do not know."

Snape started awake. As he stared at the almost equally grey ceiling of his chambers, he had to admit the truth of the dream: he truly had no idea what he was going to do for Harry.

Alert now, Snape considered that he had not checked on him since the alarm several nights ago. Motivated by that concrete task, one that would certainly mollify the dream, Snape tossed on a heavy robe to face the chilly winter castle.

At the door to the guest chambers, Snape removed the alarm spells, including the two that Ginny Weasley had not detected, and crept inside. Harry had trustingly not added any others. The door to the bed chamber was open and Harry lay deeply asleep in the streaming pale moonlight and orange glow of the flickering hearth. Snape clearly needn't have worried, given the lightly snoring slumber going on.

Kali rose up in her cage, fingers tweaking the bars like strings on a musical instrument. Snape went over and released the door latch. She groggily climbed on his arm and accepted a ride over to her master. The normally vicious Chimrian had accepted Snape ever since Harry's kidnapping, and he patted her head once in memory of that before she climbed down and curled up between the pillow and Harry's shoulder.

"We just need to tame a few more monsters," Snape whispered wryly to the sleeping, tossle-haired visage. "Trust that no matter how vile and dark they are, I will not abandon you to them."

Harry shifted in his sleep before falling still again. Snape closed his eyes and grimaced, he probably looked about how he had the first night, a mirror of that bizarre vision

he had seen in Ginny Weasley's eyes. If he grew too weak, he was not going to be fit for this task, and he feared that he already had. Had the vision been of anyone else, he would have believed them already far too fatally sentimental. Spinning sharply on his heel, Snape purposefully departed for his own chambers.

The sun, as usual, woke Harry, who proved reluctant to close the drapes around his bed at night. He didn't have drapes at home and perhaps they reminded him too much that he was back at Hogwarts. He dug through his trunk in search of clothes for the day, deciding that he should just hang everything up in the wardrobe. It depressed him a bit to do this, since it meant he was moving in longer term. A welcome knock interrupted his chasing the worst of the dust out before putting in his clothes.

Harry found the petite Suze at the door. "Is it all right if I visit?" she asked, blinking her white eyelashes nervously.

"Of course it is," Harry said, inviting her in with a sweep of his hand. He retied his housecoat and said, "As long as you don't mind if I haven't gotten dressed yet . . . Have a seat," he said.

She pulled a spindly straight-backed chair from the corner to beside the bed while Harry returned to sorting out his clothes. "You haven't unpacked?" she asked.

Harry's shoulders fell as he shook out a crumpled shirt from the middle of his trunk. Snape had stuffed the entire contents of his wardrobe at home into it, it seemed. "I was kind of hoping to not be here so long. That was wishful thinking."

"I hope you're feeling better soon," she said with almost innocent encouragement.

"I do too." As he sorted out his socks, he considered asking her what the current rumors were about him, but then he decided he didn't care, which felt better than knowing.

Suze said, "We have Quidditch practice this afternoon, if you wanted to come watch?"

Harry gave her a grin. "Not afraid that I'll tell the Gryffindor captain what I see?"

"You wouldn't do that," Suze asserted with a laugh. "And we don't play Gryffindor –til the end of the year."

Harry was almost to the bottom of his trunk. "Planning on beating them?" he asked as he plucked up the dingy grey jumper that he had inherited during his last visit to Hogwarts. Snape needn't have brought it since he was going to use the old thing for gardening and that was months away. Age had softened its woolen threads to the point of near disintegration.

"We always plan on beating everyone," Suze pointed out.

Harry considered a response to this as he fingered the Glad Rags tag on the jumper. He flipped the tag up and stared in frozen fascination at the faded initials T.R. inked on the back of it. Suze had said something but Harry didn't hear. With slow movements he held the sagging jumper up and looked it over. It looked old enough all right.

"Harry?" Suze's sharp prompt pulled him away from his deep thoughts.

"Um, sorry." What should he do with it? Should he throw it into the hearth? He turned to do that and then thought perhaps he was overreacting. It could have belonged to anyone with those initials.

"Harry, you all right?"

Bundling the jumper up and clutching it, Harry said in a little embarrassment, "Yeah. Just, um, thinking." He held the jumper out and said, "Old thing, I think I'll just toss it on the fire."

With no little distaste, the primly dressed Suze said, "Good idea."

"Good idea," Harry echoed.

Irrational or not, Harry felt better just getting rid of the jumper. It burned up rapidly in a halo of bright blue flame from the dye.

"Another letter for you?" Siri demanded when she met Per outside the supply store in the nearest village that had one. It sat on the same lake their village did, but lakes were long, many armed things, so the distance was significant. The same white owl was perched on the roof edge of the store waiting for Per to reappear from within, apparently. Its feathers showed bright against the perpetually twilight sky behind it.

"You may answer my post whenever you wish. I can do without it," Per said dismissively.

Siri called the owl down and again fed her after taking the letter. Per was skiing away, and Siri needed nearly a mile to catch up to the much longer-legged Shaman. Fortunately, he had skied away along the shore, out on the flat frozen lake. Footprints and snowmobile tracks also ran along on the snow-coated ice and Per used the well-packed paths for his skis. The white owl followed along with ease, dodging and stopping in trees ahead of them.

Chapter 6

"Are you coming with me to see if this boy down the lake really is a Stauncher?" Per asked.

"If I may. Mostly, I am delivering your post." She handed him the letter. It fluttered in the wind, blowing steadily off of the sheer expanse of the lake.

Per grumbled but accepted it. He opened it and handed it back to her to translate for him. Siri read the letter aloud until Per interrupted, with, "Are you certain it says that? That you have it right: Voldemort's servant?"

Siri reread the sentence out loud in English and then shrugged that it indeed read as she had originally translated. She read out the rest, Per growing more perplexed as the letter went on. When Siri finished and folded it, Per said, "This British wizard presents us an enigma." He shook his head as though he had water in his ears.

"It does seem likely that . . ." Siri began.

"Harry Potter is a foci of the Plane. He is another enigma on his own. Two enigmas . . . bound together by an adoption. And the father wishes to send the famous Boy Hero here to us . . . begs us to be allowed to, in fact." He stared out over the lake with his bright slate eyes. "Well, how can we resist, if only to unravel some of these mysteries." He stashed the letter inside his coat and skied on toward the cluster of pole and turf goahti at the bend of the lake shore, each with a banner of smoke trailing out the top of it.

Monday morning, just as Snape collected his things together for class, Hedwig scratched at the window. He quickly moved to open it, grateful that she carried a rolled up letter this time. Well, a letter of sorts – it was written on the inside of a piece of cardboard packaging for a box of Muggle cereal. In the brightly colored picture a bear wearing a bib was holding a spoon before a bowl of puffy yellow things in milk.

But the letter read. "Oulu train station, 8:00 Saturday. Hope you have a safe place for him until then."

Snape sat down in his chair a moment before he gathered his wits and put the letter away where Harry wouldn't see it, having to admit that lack of proper parchment didn't inspire confidence in the sender. He gave Hedwig a toss out the window to go to the owlery and went to class, an unusual five minutes late. Lunchtime was the first chance he had to find Harry and give him the news.

"He'll take me then?"

"He agreed to assess you," Snape clarified as they strolled quickly down toward the Great Hall. "But it seems likely he will take you, I believe. We now must work out your travel arrangements. I think an airplane flight is in order. We can limit it to one, if you wish."

"Can't I just take my broom?" Harry asked.

"To Finland?" Snape asked derisively. "Across the North Sea . . . in winter no less? NO."

"How about my bike-"

"NO. You will take Muggle transport." They had reached the doors to the hall so the debate was cut off.

Harry spent the week getting as far ahead on his readings as possible, since he couldn't carry all of his books. Midweek, Snape had presented him with stiff pieces of paper like those he had seen his Uncle Vernon with a few times, but Harry had never taken a very close look at them before. They were covered in confusing robotic numbers; even the date wasn't locatable without rather a lot of hunting and deciphering. With the airplane tickets beside him on the desk, Harry swallowed his pride and wrote out one more letter to Belinda after he had written to all of his friends.

In a fit of pique he ended the letter with: To avoid turning into a dark wizard I have to visit a wizard in Finland who knows something I don't. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Minister Bones most likely knows this from the Auror's office, so tell her if you like. Even knowing that was an unfair thing to say, didn't stop him handing the letter to one of the tawny school owls to take away.

Friday night, Harry packed his things into his backpack, the limit Snape believed that Harry should carry. He had taken perverse pleasure in not packing a single book, but had packed excess parchment at Snape's insistence. His two extra thick woolen weasley jumpers, Harry tied to the straps of it and set it down where he had laid out his new boots, knee-length woolen coat, mittens, gloves to fit inside the mittens, and fur muffler purchased just for this trip.

A knock on the door brought Harry's thoughts out of the dark loop they were caught in. It was McGonagall. "Harry," she greeted him warmly. "All packed?" At Harry's

nod, she fetched a silver flask out of her pocket. "You should bring a gift and I believe this is most appropriate."

Harry sniffed the contents and his eyes watered at the whiskey assault they suffered. "Thanks," he said and turned to make a space down the side of the pack for it.

"Ready to go?" she asked in concern.

Harry shrugged; his initial excitement had been worn down over the course of the week and now he felt numb as an alternative to feeling hopeless.

"You may always return here, Harry. Your friends will certainly not abandon you, no matter what."

Kali rattled frantically in her cage at that moment. Harry went over and took her out and let her climb to his shoulder. "Even though this was my first real home . . . I don't want to be here any more," he admitted. Kali chewed on his hair, which he had unintentionally let get long since the New Year. He shrugged his shoulder to get her to stop. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful . . ."

"No, no, Harry. I understand. You will watch yourself while you are gone?"

"'Course."

She patted his arm. "Have a good trip, Harry."

Harry stood before a series of gateways, each with a row of flashing lights atop them. People and bags were queued up leading to them. He was told by a chubby guard that only people with tickets were allowed through. Harry had to be told everything today, it seemed, and he felt very wizardishly lost in the fast-moving complexity of Heathrow Airport.

"She says only people with tickets," Harry said to his guardian, who, in his cassock and robes, continued to attract unwarranted attention from the uniformed and armed people helping usher travelers through the queues.

Snape's eyes again swept the strange place they stood in. People towing small wheeled bags swept past in one direction; people pushing orange trolleys maneuvered by in the crosswise direction. "You will watch yourself, correct?" Snape demanded.

"Yeah," Harry said. He had been careful with his emotions all day but the feeling of oily dark watchfulness from elsewhere had only increased as he tried to push it away.

"Take the potion if you have any difficulty. There are several doses."

"Yeah," Harry said, impatiently. He wasn't keen on being half-sedated while traveling, but if it came to that . . .

Snape unhooked his fur-lined cloak and folded it lengthwise before handing it over. "Take this, just in case your new coat is not sufficient."

Harry hefted the heavy faded cloak under his arm. "Thanks. I gotta go," he said. "See you . . ."

"Take care, Harry. And behave yourself," Snape intoned, sounding as though he wanted to be sterner but failing.

Harry nodded and said goodbye before moving to join the shortest queue. Snape stood waiting until Harry made his way forward through the square plastic gateway. On the other side Harry turned and waved and at that moment, seeing those strained dark eyes, wished no one cared for him so; the burden was too much on top of everything else.

Sighing lightly, Harry collected his bag from the conveyer when it was disgorged and stopped to decipher the lit-up signs hanging from the ceiling to determine which way to go.

The airport was a very busy place but not a single person gave him a double-take or sharp look of recognition. He found his gate eventually and was relieved to see "Helsinki" printed on the lit-up display behind the counter. He sat down between a man in a suit and a woman who chatted into a mobile phone. Startling numbers of people streamed past in the wide corridor and continued to do so pretty continuously until the man behind the desk spoke into a microphone. Trouble was, Harry didn't know his row number. He peered at the additional piece of round-cornered stiff paper he had received when he arrived at the airport and read it, eventually locating this information. Many other travelers were also squinting at their tickets as though they needed stronger glasses, which made Harry feel better.

On the plane, Harry copied everyone else and stashed his bag overhead like he would on a train except with latched doors before sitting down and strapping himself in same as he used to in his uncle's car, not because his aunt and uncle ever told him to, but because they always made sure Dudley did. Harry peered out the window at the row of airplanes beside theirs. They didn't look like contraptions that wanted to fly without magic. They were ungainly, weighty monsters that looked perhaps able to roll easily, but certainly not get aloft. Harry, as he puzzled this, thought that he

could better understand Mr. Weasley's fascination such things. The woman who sat down next to Harry immediately took out a magazine covered in snapshots of people and buried her nose in it, for which Harry was grateful.

While they all waited for something to happen, Harry played with all of the interesting things around him, like the air nozzle and flip-down tray, until the woman beside him asked in a very posh accent, "First time flying?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry admitted, figuring he couldn't fake this given how poorly he had navigated things so far today.

"Visiting family?" she asked.

Harry kicked himself for attracting her verbal attention. "No. Visiting someone I know in the north, in Lappland."

"Primitive up there," she pronounced, raising her magazine again.

After the day Harry had had, that was a welcoming thought.

Sure enough, the metal contraption was more than willing to fly – with enough of a running start, which Harry could understand rather well. The ground fell away and soon clouds fell from above, obscuring it. Within minutes they were higher than Harry could go on his motorcycle and he grew interested in the view again. His feeling of security from Hogwarts was slipping away as fast as the ground and he dearly hoped he could hold out until they landed; this fragile, unCharmed, tin can he was riding in wouldn't take much to come down.

Fortunately, they landed safely with a screech that at first made Harry grip his armrests in alarm, but it was only the tires. Off of the plane, Harry felt as though he were chewing on a piece of the twins' Babble Bubblegum, which made everything you heard incomprehensible. He moved through the Helsinki airport well enough but found the swell of gibberish conversations around him unexpectedly disturbing and he kept trying to listen closer as though that might let him understand. Fortunately, the first person he asked for help – a man in a long overcoat who had just put away his mobile – spoke perfect English and pointed to where one could catch a shuttle to the train station.

The bus ride was long but Harry had plenty of time since he was taking the overnight train. He watched out the window at the city and people bathed in the angular light. He thought he heard the chittering from the Dark Plane a few times but with the loud motor of the bus it was hard to be certain. This uncertainty did not help. A well-bundled infant in the seat across from Harry stared at him with wide eyes; Harry turned to watch out the window instead, calming himself as best he could.

Harry had a few hours to wait at the train station. He wandered through the shops and sat on a bench on the platform for a while, letting the flow of passengers in and out wash over him, wishing he had brought just one of his books to read. The yellow warning track stretched out before him. That was what he himself needed around him, Harry thought, a warning to others about the hazard he represented. He couldn't even conceive of the chaos that would ensue if hordes of grotesque dark creatures poured into this world here in the train station. Was there even a Finnish Ministry of Magic to clean up such things? Harry rubbed his eyes; he could always take some potion, he reminded himself.

Finally, his train arrived with a hiss of its brakes. Harry stood by one of the doors while the incoming passengers stepped down. He had a reserved seat in one of the few cars without sleeper compartments and when he found it, he fell into it with relief and closed his eyes.

Harry woke from his drowsing when the train stopped at the next station, confused about where he was. The landscape outside was shrouded in black but the lights of the station revealed snowy ground and snow-laden pine trees. The train lurched forward and the station slid out of view. A young blonde man sat down in the seat across the aisle. Harry peered out into the blackness, using his hand as a shade for the lights which had been turned low after they resumed moving. Harry wished he wasn't here, or that it was bright enough to see where "here" was. The distinctive chitter sounded nearby. Harry wasn't the only one to hear it; the young blonde man ducked down to look under his seat in curiosity. Harry reached for his backpack and fished the potion bottle out of the front pocket and downed a gulp. Moments later the world grew soft and meaningless and blissfully silent. Harry stared at the reflection of the carriage in the dark window for a long while after that. Whenever that grew boring, he took another small sip of potion.

The train pulled into Oulu at 7:30. Morning only by the clock as the sun gave no hint of rising yet. Harry bundled Snape's cloak around himself after almost forgetting it on the shelf in his dazed condition. This prompted him to go back and check again that he had everything. Ominous noises of the train decoupling hurried him off.

The platform lights illuminated cones of misting snow in the greyness. Harry looked up and down the platform but didn't see anyone waiting. He walked with the small crowd through the station out to the front. The other passengers moved off, including the young man from across the aisle, who unlocked and boarded a bicycle, despite the deep snow piled alongside the pavement. Harry around this white-shrouded area but didn't see anyone waiting. Back inside, he settled on a bench across from the ticket booth and relaxed; he was a little early for the meeting.

Chapter 6

At 8:00 a.m. Harry again made the rounds, first checking the platform and then the front of the station. This time a squat figure stood on the pavement in a thick grey belted tunic and yellow rubber boots. Harry stepped in that direction and the woman, he realized, looked up curiously at him. She had deep weathered lines in her face and nearly Asian eyes. She gave Harry a slightly cocked smile and with an unfamiliar accent said, "Harry Potter, I presume."

Harry swallowed and nodded. She held out her hand, Harry believed to shake hands, but she took his wrist and the front of the train station disappeared.

Harry stumbled on uneven ground and caught his bare hand on frigid, wind-swept stone. The woman was gone. Thick snakes slithered over the dim flat plane surrounding him, slithered bizarrely through boiling, steaming snow. Blasting icy wind sucked the breath from Harry's chest the way a Dementor sucked happiness.

Harry struggled to pull his mittens out of his pockets and put them on, fighting the wind that tried to rip them away from him. He then struggled to tug his cloak tighter, relieved that Snape's cloak was as heavy as it was. There were no snakes, he realized after finding his breath by angling his head diagonal to the wind, only trees growing horizontally in the twisted shelter of the crevices in the rock, and the steam was just finer snow lifted into the air in billows. He drew another breath with effort and scanned the area. Two figures stood a distance away, one significantly taller than the other. The taller one stepped away. The smaller one turned too, but gestured for Harry to follow.

Harry tried another breath through his mitten with more success. He stepped forward into the wind, losing the grip on his cloak which let the wind cut through him as though he were merely a skeleton with no flesh to warm his bones. By the time he made the edge of the plateau, his stunned bones rattled with the cold. Dazed and having a hard time focusing for the bursts of white filling the air, Harry was given skis, which he had never worn in his life. They were strapped over his boots and the man bent for a minute as though talking to them, but that must simply have been Harry's deranged impression. The woman tested the weight of Harry's cloak and waited while he added his gloves under his thick mittens. She then nodded in apparent approval and two of them turned gracefully to slide away. Harry's skis moved to follow of their own volition. After a dozen strides, Harry got the feel of the motion and managed to move with the long clumsy things, rather than fighting them.

They slid down-slope a long, long way, through gloom and blasts of snowy air. Harry truly began to worry about the future as his clothing although the best he could get, seemed unsuited to this climate. Perhaps if he wore all of his jumpers at once,

he thought hopefully. After a time, the repeated movement began to warm up his middle, at least, and eventually even his hands.

The blue-tinted dark-grey world flattened out and they crossed a low treeless expanse where the wind held less sway and one could see a bit farther between less frequent waves of airborne snow. Harry's skis followed in the exact tracks of the man's until they reached the far valley side where the Shaman stopped before one of a row of very small hills, the grass of which showed through . The man left his skis behind and walked around the nearest one. Harry, with a grunt of cold-stiff limbs, moved to follow only to discover that this hill had a perfectly ordinary window in the side of it, and opposite the window, a door, albeit a small one.

A candle flared as Harry ducked inside the darkness. He was directed by gestures to sit on a log to the left and he copied his hosts as they removed their boots and deserted them on the bare dirt. Behind him, furred hides were piled over dense tree branches spread on the frozen ground. The walls were lined with closely spaced, barkless branches of the size a wizard might use as a staff. The woman quickly went to work at the firepit in the middle of the hut. Harry shucked his pack and climbed backward to settle on the surprisingly springy and soft fur pile. He watched as the woman lit a curl of birch bark and drop small twigs onto its eager flame. Across from him the Shaman, Harry assumed, was shucking his ice-matted hat, revealing short light brown hair. He reached for his boots next and pulled bird's nests out of them. Well, they certainly looked like nests. Harry watched, mystified, as these were pulled apart and spread with great care on the edge of a hide. Harry scratched his head and tried not to wonder what he was doing here. The hut was filling with smoke from the sputtering fire. Harry removed his ice-coated mittens and set them on a rock near the fire – but not too close – and warmed his hands. No one spoke, so Harry remained silent as well.

As he watched the fire catch, Harry concentrated on the world around him and, surprisingly, felt safe. He relaxed with an exhausted sigh. Maybe this strange place was charmed, he thought. When his hands had warmed, Harry took out parchment and found his never-out quill would not work; it was frozen apparently. He placed this on the rock beside his mittens to thaw and put the parchment back away. Snape had said he would send Hedwig to fetch a message. She may be outside now. Hopefully she could find him all right; she certainly had in the past when Harry had made unexpected moves.

The hut warmed a bit more and the air cleared out as the fire rose higher and stronger. Everyone still sat in total silence. Harry tried his quill again and found it working

well enough to write out a message telling Snape he had arrived all right, but found he couldn't put down much more than that without sounding terribly uncertain. He wrote that he wasn't bothered by dark creatures at the moment, but he wasn't certain what was blocking them. He stashed the letter back in his bag to send when Hedwig arrived.

Since no conversation, nor anything else, was expected of Harry, he laid down on the furs using his cloak as a blanket, and closed his eyes. He was awoken a short time later by two things, one was his host leaning very close over him and the other was a conversation that he couldn't understand. Harry studied the lined face and bright slate eyes of the Shaman above him. He was examining Harry's scar. Apparently satisfied, he moved away and said something to the woman.

"He is a gateway but it doesn't seem to have anything to do with that mark upon him," Per said as he settled back beside the fire and took up a knife and a piece of antler.

"So what is your plan, other than settling into a summer home in the middle of the winter?" Siri asked.

"Lars used to live here all year," Per pointed out. "We are here because no one else is."

Harry, used to being discussed as though he weren't there, rested back and re-closed his eyes; the cold had leeched a lethargy into him that he didn't feel like fighting.

Per went on, "As to my plan . . . I need to know him better. Then we shall see."

Harry woke next to the most unexpected scent of bread baking, his stomach growling plaintively as he breathed in the wondrous odor. Siri was turning a flat circle of bread on a large flat stone balanced over the largest logs of the fire. Harry stretched his neck; he needed to find the toilet, or equivalent. No one said a word when he moved to put on his boots, re-hooked his cloak around him, and fetched his mittens, now toasty warm, from near the fire. Outside, the slightly brighter sky revealed a new trail in the snow, which led to an outhouse where apparently an ax had been utilized just recently to hack away the ice around the door.

On the way back to the hut, Harry stopped and looked up in amazement at the sky. It was ablaze in color as though a giant were throwing buckets of fairydust through the atmosphere. Harry had seen the aurora borealis before but it had only been yellow and green and sparse. This was a festival of the night sky and he stood transfixed by the silent spectacle.

Harry apparently stood gaping too long, because the hut door opened and the Shaman looked out. He had pulled on only his boots and tunic. He stepped out and looked up where Harry's chin was still pointing. He grunted and went back inside. When Harry followed, the woman spoke as he removed his boots.

"There are wolves nearby, you must be careful. They are hungry."

"Wolves?" Harry confirmed.

She handed him half a loaf of bread when he had settled back on the hides and passed him a stone bowl which turned out to hold butter of all things. Harry happily spread some on the warm and wondrous bread before passing the bowl around to the Shaman. Harry was glad someone was talking . . . in English especially.

She went on in a warning tone, "They go for the hands first so you cannot knife or spear them."

Harry didn't know her name, introductions had not been made, were not expected to, apparently. "I'll watch out," Harry said with confidence. "Thanks for the bread . . . it's delicious." And it was; Harry quickly devoured his half loaf and was immediately handed another from what turned out to be a pile lying on the coals. Before total silence could rule again, he asked her name.

"Siri Blind," she replied. Harry glanced over at the man but she didn't expand the introduction. Harry assumed he was Per Hossa, whom Snape had written to. What Siri did say was, "His English isn't very good."

"Oh," Harry said. "I don't speak Finnish."

She smiled then, which completely took over her face. "His Finnish isn't so good either."

"Oh." Her smile made him relax. He settled back with his second loaf of bread and ate until he thought he might burst out of his double layer of jumpers.

After sleeping, Harry had to check his watch to assure himself that it indeed was 10:00 in the morning. The sky was still merely a dull grey-blue and only the glowing snow made the world apparent, although misleadingly so. Harry discovered how flat the light rendered the snow when he tripped over a two-foot high snow-covered rock while wandering along the row of what he now knew to be huts, looking for Hedwig. He picked himself up and brushed off his face which burned from the cold crystals adhering to it. Harry had never experienced cold like this, it changed his very spirit, simultaneously dampening and awakening it. The woman, Siri, came aside Harry

as he walked and at that moment Hedwig appeared over the trees and alighted on Harry's arm. Harry greeted his owl, very happy to see her. He gave her his letter and she took off again, instantly disappearing into the surroundings.

The day passed quietly after some things were attended to around the hut. A metal cage on top was removed and repaired. The ice on the lake was hacked open to fetch water. The wood pile was uncovered and wood moved to just inside the door. Harry practiced on the skis while the sun was highest, meaning that the light revealed at least the largest rocks and dips under the snow. He headed out 20 yards onto what he now knew was a lake, turned around with very ungainly movements, and returned. He repeated this many times until he was out of breath and his fingers numb from clutching the poles. He hoped he didn't have to go very far on them anytime soon.

The scent of coffee brewing filled the hut when Harry returned to it. He accepted a cup of it gratefully. It tasted odd as though it had been salted. He swallowed forcefully and also accepted a bowl of what appeared to be green leaves mashed in milk, which it was, except highly sweetened. Harry sat back and forced the food and drink down without any outward sign of the strangeness of the meal. As he dug in his pack for fresh clothes, Harry found the flask McGonagall has given him, but that he had forgotten about. Per wasn't in the hut and it didn't feel like the right moment for a gift presentation, so Harry restashed it.

Night came again. Harry curled up to sleep until a dull thrumming made him lift his head again. Per sat cross-legged on the other side of the hut, pounding on a shallow drum with a forked piece of antler. Harry sat up and scooted closer, curious. The drum had silhouetted animals and stick figures drawn on it in red. A deer, a wolf, a hut, a wolverine, something demonically grotesque, a hut, a bear, the sun, the moon, the mountain and more symbols Harry couldn't make out. Per drummed lightly for a while before dropping a ring onto its surface and whispering something. The ring bounced when he resumed striking the hide. It bounced around and halted its slide when it reached the demon where it simply bobbed up and down. Per grabbed up the ring and set the drum away, not looking up at Harry who finally laid back in the resulting silence.

Harry slept very soundly but had an odd dream about a following a bear while wearing skis. The bear skirted the edge of a deep ravine and Harry struggled to keep from sliding into the misty depths to the left of him, yet he had to keep following. Harry woke to a howling outside nearby. The fire was down to glowing coals. By that poor light he saw Per rise up from his side of the hut and go out, not even taking the time to put on his boots; perhaps he was still dreaming.

The next day when the light was good enough, Harry went out and investigated the little settlement again. He stashed his wand in his cloak pocket in case the wolf came back. He had little concern for his skills against it. As Harry paced back, Per was towing a sled, which he left before the door of their hut. He spoke in Saami to Siri in response to what sounded like a question from her.

"I cannot rest and watch the boy. I am going to set up some wards."

Harry stepped over at these unknown preparations and asked Per, "Can I help?"

Per gestured at the skis and Harry moved to put on the pair he had practiced with yesterday. He had to hurry to catch up to his host as he skied off, towing the sled. When Per finally stopped on the hillside above the settlement, Harry was long since out of breath and his arms were drooping with fatigue from keeping himself from sliding backwards downhill. He coughed and didn't fail to notice the odd look his gasping was garnering. Per shook his head and bent to uncover a rock. He looked it over and uncovered the snow from the next. This one had an odd twisted shape to it. Per pushed it with his foot hard until it rocked up and then he bent as though to heft it in his arms. Alarmed, Harry took out his wand and said, "Do you want me to do that?" Per ignored him, Harry tapped him on the shoulder and repeated the question.

Per released the rock and turned to look at Harry, obviously annoyed. "Sorry," Harry said. "But . . ." he held out his wand and mimed moving the rock to the sled.

Per looked between the rock, the sled, and the wand before standing and gesturing that Harry should give it a go, in the way one might if one sincerely doubted the outcome. At that, Harry hesitated. He hadn't used any magic since arriving. What if magic were different here? Why didn't either of these two have wands if they were magical? Harry swallowed and swished and flicked at the rock. It obediently lifted into the air, oblivious to Harry's doubts. Harry directed it to hover over the sled and down again.

Per, hands on hips, considered the rock in its new location. He tilted his head like an animal might before moving to secure it to the sled with ropes and grab the harness to tow it away. Harry would have offered to hover the rock the whole way but he didn't think he could manage a hover while also managing himself on the skis.

Back at the hut, Siri came out and a discussion ensued. Per cleared a spot in the snow and gestured for Harry to move the rock. Harry did so. Per made some final adjustments to the positioning and then crouched before it as though communing with it.

Chapter 6

"Come inside," Siri invited. "Talking to rocks in the winter is slow."

Harry, with one last look at his host bent over an inanimate object, followed her inside. "Do rocks talk back?" he asked.

"No," Siri said with a laugh in her voice. She handed him a cup of coffee. "Trees sometimes do though. Water always does."

Harry nearly spit out his coffee. He swallowed finally and, to cover, asked, "Is there salt in this?"

"Yes. Tastes awful without salt, snowmelt coffee does."

Some time later, Per leaned his head in, barked something in Saami, and let the door close. "He wants you to help again," Siri informed Harry.

It took until the end of the day to find and move two more odd-shaped stones to form a triangle around the hut. As they came back in for the last time, Per gave Harry what sounded like a long string of instructions Harry didn't have a chance of understanding. Siri piped up immediately though with, "He says the rocks will keep the Dark Things away and that you should remain nearby. Don't leave the village unless you are with him."

"Oh. Sure. Thanks," Harry said. His host though made no acknowledgment to this, simply stretched out on the hides and fell asleep.

Bored and not tired enough to sleep so early, Harry reached for the antler his host had been bent over the night before. It had a fantastically detailed pattern carved into it of a bear walking along a ridge. This felt queerly familiar to Harry, who had forgotten his dream. The antler was stained with grey fingerprints around where soot had been rubbed into the carving to make it visible. Harry carefully returned the antler as he had found it.

"Would you like to try?" Siri asked from where she sat working over something in the stone paved area of the hut. She didn't wait for an answer, just dug out a piece of antler and gave Harry one of the knives from her belt. "Knife's sharp," she warned before returning to her task.

Harry, very carefully, tried to work out how to carve antler. He didn't manage much more than scratching it randomly. Clearly there was some trick to it. Harry would have to watch more closely next time Per was working at it, or maybe even risk asking for a lesson.

The next few days passed this way, in regular chores to keep the hut livable, such as clearing the vent holes of snow, cutting new birch branches for the floor, hacking the

ice of the lake, and always, always, chopping wood. Harry had never wielded an ax before, but it was handed to him without ceremony one day and he spent most of an hour working out the trick of splitting logs. Hitting them along one of the radial cracks was the only way to avoid strain. Otherwise one was required to either lever and heave the heavey, razor-sharp blade back out of the log, or pound the log and wood into submission until the ax re-emerged. As he stretched his unbelievably sore arms, Harry thought wryly that at least his physical training was continuing while he was away from the Ministry.

Harry went back inside. Per had headed off some time earlier and had not returned. Siri was weaving something on the right side of the tent. They seemed to leave the left only for Harry's use. Curious what she was doing, he sat on the log on the right and tried to catch a glimpse.

"It is a shoe band," Siri explained, holding the colorful strip of red and white zigzag weaving up for him to see. "To keep the snow off of the socks." She bent her head back over it and resumed plucking the treads from a notched piece of cardboard and swapping them with one of the opposite color.

Harry started to remove his boots until Siri, without looking up, said, "Per is off hunting if you wish to help. We are low on meat and he has scented an unmarked and unburdened Vaja in the area." Harry replayed that sentence in his head without much illumination. Siri went on, "If you want to help you can put on your skis, go up the hill and circle along the ridge of the hill, through the trees." Harry wondered how she knew this. She sounded far away as she spoke. "Take that bucket with you," she said, pointing at the one nearest the fire.

"Okay," Harry said for lack of an argument against this task.

"It is probably unnecessary to tell you to make noise as you go."

"Probably," Harry said, thinking of his sorry skiing ability.

Harry carried the skis up the hill, trudging through waist-deep drifts at the deepest parts. The wind and cold now didn't seem so fatal when he was out, rejuvenating almost as his body rose to the task of keeping itself alive. Harry strapped on the skis and poled himself forward. It was hard going over the deep, unbroken snow, but he made his way well enough. He was so much in the rhythm of his skiing, in fact, that he didn't notice the reindeer until it flushed from the cluster of small trees where it had been standing, grazing on hanging moss.

Harry froze and watched the animal, the size of a small pony, turn one way and then charge back toward Harry only to turn yet again, snow pinwheeling off its hooves.

Chapter 6

As it leapt a thicket another figure flew by, low to the ground. With a growl the wolf bit firmly around the back leg of the reindeer and was pulled forward through the snow. Harry, stunned, scrambled for his wand, which was stupidly tucked in his jumper pocket. He dropped the bucket and one of his ski poles and scrambled to get into his coat. The deer dragged the wolf to the edge of the clearing – the wolf braking with its feet the whole way – where the prey fell and was immediately seized at the neck. Thrashing ensued while Harry tried to extract his wand with cold clumsy hands. Blood-flecked snow flew as the deer thrashed and Harry started to think that it didn't matter anymore. As he raised his wand, the deer fell limp.

The wolf turned to him and Harry recognized the light, slate-blue eyes. He lowered his wand and pocketed it, picked up his pole and the bucket and started across the clearing. When he arrived, the wolf was washing its paws clean of blood with its tongue, turning Harry's stomach. He held out the bucket and seconds later Per was standing there, blood smearing his face. He wiped up with a cloth from his pocket and with a knife he made a cleaner slice into the animal's throat and let the blood drain into the bucket.

Per fingered the animal's ear. "No mark," he said. "No owner. Any season is legal for wolves to hunt." He laughed then; this was apparently a more humorous statement than it sounded. He moved very quickly after to skin the animal and hack it apart, saving even the tendons. Harry was given the skin, now frozen into an ungainly shape, to carry. The heavier meat such as the ribs was propped up on poles and Per put the neck meat and smaller scraps into a sack he carried and they headed back. Red quickly soaked the bottom of the cloth sack.

"You never see wolf I think," Per said awkwardly, carrying the bucket so as not to slop the blood out.

Harry could barely ski as fast as his host walked. "No, just werewolves," Harry admitted.

Per came to a sudden stop and for a moment Harry felt his vision blurring, but he attributed it to his physical exhaustion. "Just werewolves," Per repeated. Harry wondered if Per thought he were lying.

Harry rested the edge of the heavy, frozen hide on his skis. "Yeah. My good friend is a werewolf, for example. And my friends fought Fenrir Grayback in the final battle."

"Voldemort's servant?" Per asked, his English suddenly improved.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed.

Per didn't move, just gazed at Harry with his abnormally bright eyes. "Like your father?" he asked, picking the strange words out as though taking them from Harry.

"My father?" Harry echoed in confusion. "Oh, you mean Severus," he said, understanding then. "Yeah," Harry admitted, wondering how Per knew that.

Per's eyes narrowed as though seeking something behind Harry. He eventually turned and walked on. Harry, fighting the dizziness again, picked up the hide as best as possible and used his other hand to hold both ski poles together.

Back at the hut the neck meat was put in a roaster and set over the fire. The scent that soon filled the place was heavenly. Per made a show of making a notch in one of the thicker wall sticks near the kitchen. There were at least twenty other notches above it. Per collected the remaining meat from the forest and when he returned Harry helped him arrange wood in one of the other huts that turned out to serve as a smokehouse.

By the time they finished, reindeer meat was being laid out into bowls. A bowl of liquid was placed on a wide board balanced between the entryway logs. Per dipped his meat in it before eating it. Harry did the same, only to discover the bowl was filled with melted reindeer fat. It tasted pretty good though, once Harry got used to the mouth-feel of it. He dipped his next piece as well.

"You hunt with that wand?" Per asked in slow English.

"Only dark wizards," Harry admitted.

Per laughed, loudly, and continued to chuckle between hearty bites of meat balanced on his knife, cut against another wooden board. Harry's meat had already been cut, he realized, making him feel a little chagrined. Harry remembered the gift and figured the moment didn't get more congenial than this. He fished out the flask and handed it over. "A present," Harry explained.

Per's eyes went very wide as he accepted the silver flask. With a crooked grin at Siri who shook her head, he unscrewed the top and took a deep sniff. "Scottish," he pronounced.

"I expect," Harry agreed.

Per took a sip. "To the hunters," he toasted. He handed the flask back to Harry who took a very small sip and still had to clear his throat to avoid coughing.

After the meal, Harry, from his usual seat on the left-hand pile of hides, asked for an antler carving lesson. Per shrugged and picked up the antler he had been working

on. Eager, Harry picked up the antler piece Siri had given him and started across the hut to the other side. "Uh, uh!" Per said sharply when Harry was about to step onto the stone floor between the window and the fire. Harry stopped in confusion. Per gestured with his hand that Harry should go around the other way. Less certain, Harry obeyed, crossing from one log to the other to avoid the dirt floor in his socks.

Harry settled in, accepted a knife and a lesson in pressing hard and rocking the knife to produce straight deep lines. Then he was shown how to tilt the knife just so to get a curved line. Harry's appreciation for the myriad different lines and detail of the bear carving went up considerably after these explanations. Harry set back and worked at his own antler, careful to keep the knife from slipping.

Harry paused in his work to shake out his hand and slowly asked Per, "What is your plan for me?" Asking this made a chill go over Harry's neck, but he needed to know. He waited while Siri translated.

Per didn't answer; Siri did. "He knows what is outside trying to get in, but not what is inside to meet it."

"Oh," Harry uttered, and bent back to his antler. Carving occupied the rest of the evening until the candles were snuffed for the night.

Chapter 7.

Blind Magic

The next day a buzzing noise invaded the quiet and Siri said, "Scooter," to explain, which actually didn't explain. A snowmobile finally came into view around a tree-covered point in the lake. The rider got off and spoke with Per. Something like an argument ensued, where Harry was certain the rider wanted Per to come back with him. Per waved him off and the man reluctantly departed, slower than he had approached.

Per and Siri then exchanged words. "Come," she said, "we should not keep them waiting." She moved to get the skis and re-tarred them quickly. Per stalked off to check the smokehouse. He made a point of moving more wood inside. Harry moved to help but Siri restrained him with a shake of her head.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, quiet enough to not be heard four huts down.

"The village over the mountain needs a Seer," she explained.

"Per is a Seer?" Harry asked with interest.

Siri frowned and tilted her head while she worked at smoothing a ski bottom. "He used to be."

"Oh," Harry said, grasping at understanding.

"But used too much it is like staring wide-eyed into a blizzard and going snow-blind," she explained. She finished the last of the skis. "Fortunately, I am a Seer," she breathed more quietly.

Chapter 7

"Why don't you go?" Harry asked, accepting his skis back, hopeful that they would work better somehow.

She gave him a wry grin. "Woman cannot be Shaman," she explained.

"Why not?" Harry asked sharply.

"There is not supposed to be any magic at all anymore. Per is accepted, but I would not be," she explained gently before going inside to collect a pack together. She came out and silently handed Harry a light sack of supplies to carry. Harry must have still looked difficult, because she pointed out, "You hide in your home country as well," which Harry couldn't argue against. She added, "Per is a very old friend to me, do not look so judging."

Per reappeared, looking sullen. He took up his skis without putting them on and grumpily held out his arm. Siri grabbed it and they both disappeared. Maybe I'm not going, Harry considered, although he held a freshly tarred pair of skis. Siri reappeared with a bang and took Harry next.

They Apparated into the forest and Per was already gliding away. Harry struggled to get going and get into Per's trail where he stood a chance of not being a drag on their travels. They slid down into a village composed mostly of cabins with a few of the turf-covered huts. The simple wooden cabins looked like the life of luxury to Harry with their metal smokestacks out the top and tightly sealed walls with no drafty airvents for the fire.

People gave Harry glances and then ignored him. He took off his skis and propped them on the side of a cabin with a long row of others. Then he hung back and watched as a discussion involving the lake ensued. Per gazed out over the water and the crowd fell silent. People were ice fishing out in the middle, otherwise there was nothing of interest. Per stalked away to the left along the frozen surface of the lake. Only Harry spotted that Siri had tugged the back of Per's coat in that direction, and the group made their way down the lake shore following him. Harry followed as well along the top of the low hill that bordered the village. The wind was stronger up here, but it was warmer here in general, so it felt almost balmy.

Per led the way, Siri just behind. Eventually they stopped about a half mile down the lake. Harry had long since moved in closer, keeping himself just outside the crowd. Per pointed at the ice below him. A chain saw started to life and a stout man moved in to cut in the ice. Harry, intensely curious what exactly was going on, moved farther on away from the crowd to see better. The chain saw whirled higher pitched and was plunged again into the ice to form a square. When the ice broke loose, the saw was

pulled with a jerk out of the way of the water that surged in as the ice block bobbed. The chunk was leveraged out of the way and a pole with a hook was put down into the hole. Surreally, someone sobbed just once, a woman. Harry leaned against a sapling and stood on tiptoe to see better. The hook had grabbed on something bright blue with red and white tassels. It matched the hats some of the villagers wore. Hands reached in and a body was heaved onto the ice.

No one made a noise; everyone moved efficiently to lift the body onto a tarp and away back toward the cabins. Per and Siri remained behind. Per, with a great shove of his foot, slid the block back into the hole with a splash. He then gestured impatiently at Harry to follow. Harry hurried over. Strands of red and white yarn had frozen to the ice where the body had laid, only for a minute. He hurried past, jogging to catch up to his hosts, who seemed in an even less talkative mood than usual.

It wasn't until they were back to their own hut and having a meal of reindeer meat, bread, and tiny berries that Harry couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. He turned to Siri and asked, "Why was that person under the ice?"

"Accident or he was old," Siri explained.

Harry puzzled this, wondering bizarrely if somehow the man accidentally didn't stay above the ice, forgetting it was there because of a failing memory. Another possibility then occurred to him. "Oh," Harry said.

"The home is death too," Per muttered.

"The home?" Harry asked.

"The state-run home for those who cannot be cared for in their village," Siri clarified. "It is considered a slow death by some."

"Ah," Harry said, understanding that, but not feeling any happier.

"Come in, Severus," McGonagall invited when a black-robed figure appeared on the staircase to the Headmistress' tower.

Seeming distracted, as he had the last two weeks, Snape accepted the indicated chair and stared into the hearth. A jangle of porcelain brought his attention to the teacup and saucer the headmistress held out to him.

"Have some tea. I have chocolate as well . . ."

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"What?" Snape uttered, pulling himself into the present finally.

A crystal model of Hogwarts Castle drifted nearby, suspended on a thin metal arm off the corner of the desk. It swung over Snape's teacup when he set it down, scattering miniature snow into it, creating a puff of steam.

"How is Harry?" McGonagall asked over her own steaming cup. "You have heard from him, I assume?"

"Yes. Hedwig is reluctant to make the trip, but I have convinced her to do so twice and will do so again soon." Snape clasped his long-fingered hands in his lap and resumed staring at the hearth. "He is living in a turf hut, apparently, despite the arctic temperatures and nearly nonexistent sunlight, but he insists that his host is keeping the Darkness at bay. He is also learning to ski," Snape added as an afterthought, sounding wry.

McGonagall didn't respond right away. The bright partial moon appeared and disappeared from the charcoal clouds out the tall window behind her. Two clocks ticked in tandem, setting a rhythm to the crackles of the fire. A portrait near the ceiling snored faintly.

"So, what is wrong?" McGonagall finally prompted.

Snape huffed. He had not moved at all in the silent minutes. "I do not know if I am doing the right thing, sending him off like that to someone I barely know anything of."

McGonagall smiled lightly. "You'll never know if you are doing the right thing. You just have to try your best," she stated philosophically. "Things in the end always seem to work out."

Half a minute later, Snape snorted.

"Your tea is getting cold," McGonagall pointed out.

Snape stood and excused himself, gaze still inward.

"Severus," McGonagall called when he had reached the doorway. "It will work out."

"Are you branching into Divination, now?" he asked with some derision.

"No," she said, smiling against his harshness. "I have just never seen Harry defeated by anything, that's all."

Short days passed north of the Arctic circle. In the mornings before Per got around to it, Harry fell into a routine of hacking the hole in the lake ice back open and splitting a fresh supply of wood from under the big tarp. The task was easy now – his aim as good as a practiced Quidditch Beater – but also satisfying, because the benefits of it so stark, as in, having water to drink and not freezing to death overnight. These meaningful, athletic tasks left him relaxed and almost tranquil for much of the day.

The sky glowed blue-grey earlier in the day now and stayed that way longer. The temperature didn't seem to improve much as a result. Hedwig returned again with a bundle of letters from all of Harry's friends. Harry impatiently finished the chopping before returning to the hut to answer them all. His hand cramped as he wrote out replies, already growing unaccustomed to holding a quill.

After Hedwig headed off with an equal bundle of letters, Harry swallowed a sigh at the notion that he had nothing else to do now. Siri's narrow weaving was hanging from a nail on the wall. "Can you show me how to make one of those?" Harry asked, pointing.

Rather than getting annoyed at being interrupted from the work of pounding something in the stone-floored kitchen area, she gave Harry a broad smile. Without speaking she located a folded and sliced plastic card and long lengths of yarn. She started a weaving by tying each thread to a stick, notched to hold the yarn securely. At the end she made a hoop with the excess, just the size to hook it over a toe. Then she meticulously slipped each length of yarn through a slot on the card, alternating edge and fold for where they passed through. Folding and flipping the card up easily swapped the two layers of thread to make a weave. This didn't produce a pattern though, Harry noticed, after he passed the longer weft thread back and forth a few times, getting corrected in silence with slow re-demonstration. The trick of using one's finger to bunch the weave the same tightness after each pass of the weft was going to take some practice, Harry could see.

Harry only had two colors to work with, white and red and the old shoe band Siri laid beside him had a pleasing, and dauntingly complicated diamond pattern on it. She took the weaving back from him and slowly showed him how to swap selected threads from the edge of the card to the middle to get the colors to change. Or, alternatively to skip selected thread when passing the crosswise weft thread through. Harry realized that even a simple diamond was going to take some concentration, which explained how someone could bend for so long over the task.

She handed the rig back to Harry who hooked it on his toe and stretched his already stiff back before hunching over to try the next line. He undid it many times before

deciding he had finally gotten it right. Siri moved back into the kitchen and said, "I will make you a matching hat. Then all you will need is some reindeer." She was grinning broadly as she said this.

When Per reappeared, Siri announced, "We need supplies."

Without further discussion, they put every empty sack over their back and shoulders and, towing the sled, skied to the village at the far end of their lake. Harry's skiing was almost acceptable, he thought, although he was by far the slowest. Siri didn't suggest Apparating this time and Per started out fast, getting far ahead, which implied that he did not want to. They made the distant village in four hours and some, by Harry's watch. Most of the good daylight was gone the fires inside the huts windows glowed even from a distance. There were three cabins in this village, one of which housed the store.

"We will stay here with a friend for the night," Siri informed Harry.

This raised Harry's spirits. He waited outside as his hosts greeted and caught up with acquaintances. A pair of girls trudged by wearing tunics with colorful belts around the waist and thigh-high fur boots. They giggled at him standing there and glanced back many times before going out of sight. Harry doubted they spoke English, but he wouldn't have minded a little conversation with someone his own age, even one-word sentences. He sighed, leaving a puff of breath in the air.

A group emerged from the hut, including Harry's hosts and they all trudged down to another hut and piled inside. Harry bundled his feet under him to keep them out of the way. Conversation bubbled and then quieted. Harry looked around at the various faces, all worn and lined except for the very young. A plastic bottle of something alcoholic was passed around. Harry, feeling like he should remain alert, passed it up. The offerer said something insistent and Per explained – Harry assumed – that he didn't speak the language. An uproar of sorts ensued at the stranger in their midst and explanations and questions went back and forth until the topic was dropped as suddenly as it had been taken up. The small children were lying down, Harry wished he could too; it had been a long trip getting here although neither Per nor Siri showed any effects. Harry shucked one of his jumpers in the warmth of the hut and hung it up where the other guests had, on one of the crossbeam poles. His clothes were looser, Harry realized as he straightened his soiled shirt. They needed a wash but that had only come up once and had involved tediously heating lake water and very cold hands and in the end, even with the help of some spells that Harry had never been very good at, things hadn't gotten all that clean, or at least not house-elf clean.

Pipes were drawn out and the hut filled with blue smoke. Harry was offered a pipe that he turned down also, to much amusement of the assembled. The women sitting

at the edge of the stone floor by the window gave Harry small smiles of sympathy at the ribbing. Eventually the crowd thinned and Harry could stretch his sore legs out. Their hosts were a man and woman and two small children. The man made a strange sound after he put the children down to sleep as though singing but not like any singing Harry had ever heard. It put him strangely in the mind of waterfalls and rolling waves. He had to shake his head to clear it in fact, the image was so strong. Harry lay down now that no one was paying any attention to him, making certain to leave space for Per and Siri who were also sharing the left side of the hut this time. The singing sent Harry directly off to sleep despite the loudness of it.

Harry woke in the middle of the night when the fire shifted. Per was adding wood, carefully lining the logs all up in the same direction. Harry raised his head and looked at the sleeping forms around the hut. Per sat back, reclined against the entryway log and sucked on a pipe. He gestured impatiently with his head that Harry should go back to sleep. Harry lay back then, realizing that Per had to stay awake to guard everyone from the Dark Plane. Harry glanced at the fur bundle on the far side that held two children and hoped he was indeed a Master of this.

A commotion interrupted their fish breakfast. Someone was knocking on the door and calling for Per. Siri followed quickly out the door, both dressing as they went. Harry was slower but the crowd still huddled in the middle of the village when he made it out. Several people were talking to Per with animated gestures. Harry watched as Siri looked around, gaze distant. She had to pretend to be nothing, Harry thought, and do Per's job. Harry at first had wanted to think less of the Shaman, but anyone willing to stay up all night to keep Harry's Darkness at bay, Harry could hold nothing against. The conversation went on. When Harry saw Siri shake her head every so slightly at Per, Harry moved into the crowd.

He tugged Siri by the sleeve away from the others and asked what was going on. Per either noticed this or just happened to step away, moving the villagers with him. "What is happening?" Harry asked, feeling like himself for the first time since he had arrived. His wand felt warm in his cloak pocket.

"A child went missing in the night. The villagers believe the Shaman from the neighboring area is responsible." At Harry's mystified look, she explained quietly, "It is believed the Shaman take the form of wolves to wreak havoc on rival Saami."

"Do they?" Harry asked, thinking that Per had made a point about the reindeer he had taken down not having an owner. Perhaps that wasn't ordinary care.

"Perhaps," she replied. "Partly they believe this because Per is here now. Coincidences are not readily accepted here."

Harry, feeling danger on more levels than he had recognized before, said, "I know some tracking spells. I can find the child," he said. He had even practiced in the snow, he thought gratefully. "What house did the child disappear from?" Harry asked insistently.

Per led the crowd farther away. Siri said, "Per is explaining that he doesn't have his drum, but he doesn't really need it."

"But he isn't a Seer anymore," Harry insisted.

"He can often manage. He can be stubborn about these things, and sometimes the trees tell him, I think. Or he uses a wolf's sense of smell." The crowd had moved far enough on. Siri headed the other way and stopped before one of the cabins. "This one," she said.

Harry pulled out his wand and looked all around. "No one is supposed to see," he explained, although the British Ministry of Magic certainly wasn't going to know. Harry wondered who else might notice magic in the middle of a nonmagical village; not knowing made him more careful. Siri moved to stand between his wand and the crowd, which wasn't paying any attention to them.

Harry whispered the tracking spell which caused glowing trails to appear on the packed snow, colored according to how old the tracks were. There was one set of small tracks leading away, orange because they were old and then a gap in colors until red for this morning. The orange trail disappeared between the buildings.

"Nice magic," Siri breathed.

"Why don't you have a wand?" Harry asked.

Siri tilted her head side to side. "It would be talking to me all the time. I would have to get rid of it."

"This has never talked to me," Harry said as they moved to follow the trail. "Although it has gotten me into an awful lot of trouble with its silence."

Rounding the next cabin hid them from view. Harry repeated the spell and the tracks reappeared leading up the hill and disappeared from sight in the copse of trees beyond. Snow hadn't fallen in a few days so the physical tracks were not distinguishable from the general pounding the ground had taken. "I'll fetch Per," Siri said.

Harry stashed his wand away and stood off to the side. Per passed a minute later, leading the crowd. He turned and with a sharp argument and a gesture, insisted they stay behind. They clearly didn't want to do this. Siri stood in their path and the

crowd seemed to deflate, letting Per walk away. Harry took a few quick steps to join him. Per walked on without speaking, with Harry jogging occasionally to keep up. They made the trees and Per kept going. Harry considered repeating the spell but he would have to stop to do so. Per seemed to know where he was going, so Harry followed beside along the well-used trail of packed snow.

Per stopped suddenly and Harry had to turn and step back to rejoin him. A trail crossed the main one, a trail of large dog tracks. Per started out again. He stopped again a few steps later and turned left, following a small set of prints through the close brush. Harry wanted to ask if children were silly enough to run off at night often. It seemed a self-limiting behavior. He remained silent however. Per shifted to wolf form and sniffed the air before shifting back to himself without breaking stride. The trail stopped at the edge of a steep downhill of rocks. The view would have been breathtaking if the situation had not been so serious. Snowy hills stacked up on top of one another all the way to the pink horizon. Harry tried the tracking spell but it came up empty.

After they stood there for a cold minute, Harry suggested, "Maybe she turned into a bird?"

Per tilted his head and appeared to give this due consideration. "Perhaps an äparis took her off in revenge," he replied, suddenly speaking clearly, although Harry's eyes seemed to be blurring strangely as Per spoke.

"What's an äparis?" Harry asked, when he decided that wasn't just an English word he wasn't hearing properly.

"A ghost we don't want to meet without Siri here to put it to rest." He finished this in a way that made Harry's skin prickle. Per turned back into a wolf and scanned the distance before transforming back to man. "Can you take us?" he gestured forward ahead, seeming angry at himself.

"Sure," Harry said and took the arm held up for him. Harry focussed on a point three hilltops away and bunched them both down for the trip. They reappeared on uneven stone and struggled to stay upright.

Per turned into a wolf again, and this time he growled before he transformed back. "There, a wolf leads her." He pointed. Harry followed along where Per indicated and with a great deal of squinting and pushing his glasses up his nose, could barely make out a figure in blue moving among the rocks following something grey. Per transformed yet again and started down, slaloming easily between the rocks. Harry followed slower, not wanting to intervene in something he wasn't completely clear on.

The invading wolf heard or smelled them approaching and it turned and snarled. Per continued forward, weaving around the larger boulders. Harry realized as Per got close that the invader was substantially larger, with a collar of long thick fur and beefy haunches. Per on the other hand was as boney a wolf as he was a man and the match didn't look so promising. The wolves faced off and growled in unison, fangs bared. Per lunged.

"NO!" Harry shouted, fearful of the mismatched outcome and perhaps remembering too starkly the fight between his godfather and a werewolf. Harry transformed and leapt from the nearest high-jutting rock, flapping twice to get above the fight, his wings relishing the cold wind. The invading wolf turned its snout up in surprise as Harry angled his wings and dropped forward fast. The wolf dodged as he descended. Harry swerved as well, cutting him off and then swerved farther to separate the invader from the other two figures. The girl let out a squeal of panic. Harry's claws hit and he hefted the thrashing wolf into the air and tossed it aside. It landed hard and struggled to its feet, red streaked on its flanks. Harry wondered if it were truly animal or just a man.

Harry used his wings to hop agilely from rock to snowcapped rock, following the creature as it angled away. It turned and lunged at him, but a powerful flap took Harry easily out of reach and, as he drifted back to earth, he took a swipe with claws as long as the wolf's snout and much sharper than its teeth; it heeded and jerked away.

Harry, not fully understanding the situation, wasn't keen on seriously injuring the wolf, which was now slinking off with purpose, belly low. Harry hopped a few more boulders to follow and make certain it slunk away for good. Eventually, it found a wash and disappeared more rapidly. Harry landed and looked back. Per, now human and leaning down to talk to the girl, gazed at Harry in wonder. Harry flapped his way back over to them. The child gaped at him, eyes like tea saucers before burying her face in Per's coat. Harry transformed back to himself, but Per gestured for Harry to go, holding the girl's eyes against him so she could no longer turn to see the human Harry.

Harry transformed again and flew back up to the ridge where he watched Per carry the girl over the rocks and up to the top much farther down. When they were gone, Harry flew down to the wash and made sure the wolf had continued to retreat, and indeed, it was crossing over the next hill already, moving fast. Harry followed and landed ahead of it. With a last sweep of his wings for balance, he transformed back to himself and pulled out his wand.

"Are you man and not beast?" Harry demanded and then berated himself inside because were this another Shaman, he probably didn't speak English. The wolf growled. "One bark for 'yes'," Harry joked and to his surprise the animal barked once. When the wolf tried to advance and pass him, Harry aimed his wand and said, "Don't."

The wolf turned to him with a furious glare in its eyes. "What were you thinking?" Harry snarled, making the wolf pull its head back in surprise. The wolf simply glared balefully at him in response and finally Harry ordered, "Get out of here."

The wolf sidled away. "And don't come back," Harry added.

At this the wolf turned and gave Harry a look of derision. But Harry's anger was opening gateways again. Things slithered and snapped their jaws. Many, many things. An oily air blew around the rocks. The wolf froze for just an instant, eyes wide, ears back, before it loped away in a panic.

"Oh well, that worked," Harry said, calming himself with the humor, which helped the noises considerably.

Worried now that more villagers were in the area that might see him, Harry Apparated back to the top of the first ridge, rather than fly, and then began walking, reversing their earlier route. "Sure, sure," Harry said aloud. "That idiot is going to go home and insist some friggin' British dark wizard has invaded Finland." He sighed and shook his head. "Talking to myself is not helping."

When he reached the trail finally after two wrong turns, Per was there. He seemed relieved to find Harry. "I scared him off," Harry said. "Or the Dark Things scared him off, anyway." Per shook his head, looking like someone who had been in a panic and now realized it was for nothing. "Sorry," Harry said, regarding the gateway. "I got angry with him." Per didn't comment just started walking back the way they had come.

A party was in full swing when they returned. They were urged to stay but Per shook his head repeatedly and they went back to the hut to collect their things.

Packs laden from a visit to the supply story, which opened just for them, the three of them headed back over the frozen lake. Harry's legs felt like jelly and he really didn't think he could make it all the way back, even with his pack as light as it was compared to the others'. After they were out of view he was going to ask if they wouldn't mind him just Apparating the rest of the way, but after fifteen minutes or so, his legs unstiffened and warmed to the task and the miles disappeared behind

them. When they arrived, he helped unload and immediately curled up for a nap under his cloak, even though the hut was icy from the fire being out.

Harry woke again to a meal of reindeer meat and more of the bitter leaf mush in sweet milk, which wasn't half bad now. As well there were now oranges from the store. Per and Siri ate bites of the peel as well as the middle. The coffee could lose the salt still, but this serving had whiskey in it, so it mattered less. Per ate, seeming impatient about something before dressing again and disappearing out the door. Harry sat twiddling his thumbs without anything to do.

"Do you wish to help with the bread?" Siri asked.

Harry shrugged, bored enough to take any task. She gestured for him to come to her part of the hut. Harry moved to join her, but stopped at the edge of the stone floor. She gestured again for him to come closer. Harry pointed out, "Per said I shouldn't be on the stones."

She gave Harry a narrow, doubtful look. "Are you certain you defeated Voldemort?"

Bemused, Harry replied, "Yes. Very."

"Per did not say to stay off the stones." She gestured with her arm back and forth. "He told you not to cross the stones. To go around the goahti the other way."

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that made more sense, but then thinking again that perhaps it didn't. All parts of the hut seemed more or less equal to Harry.

Harry made loaves of bread, kneading and flattening with his fingers. Siri started a lesson but halted it to just watch. "You are good at this," she said suspiciously.

"What?" Harry's thoughts had flown off elsewhere, to Hogwarts, to the Ministry, to Belinda, which had sunk him into a moment of anxiety. "Oh, yeah. I had to do a lot of cooking for my aunt and uncle, to earn my keep, I guess, when I lived with them." He set that flat loaf aside and started on another ball of dough that was handed to him.

"The stone should be hot enough soon," Siri said, putting a crooked, time worn finger on it. "Almost."

Per returned later and crouched beside Harry, taking a chunk of the bread that was on the stone and eating it. He looked Harry over as he ate, seeming to be thinking about what to say. Instead, he spoke in Saami to Siri who returned a question and a long conversation ensued.

Siri finally said, "He says you can become a monstrous cat griffin. He didn't think the British had this art."

"It isn't very common," Harry admitted.

"He says you took on the Skolt Shaman without hesitation."

"I wasn't sure it wasn't just an ordinary wolf," Harry pointed out, moving the bread from the stone to the coals to brown. "And at the time I was a beast too. Besides, how evil could he be? He doesn't have a wand."

Sternly, Siri said, "Do not underestimate powers you do not see."

"I'll try not to," Harry said, but found himself dismissing the events, nonetheless. "What did he want with the girl?" Harry asked.

Siri replied, "Probably just wished to increase the rivalry between the groups. When people lived closer to the reindeer, slaughtering a few guaranteed this, but now the reindeer are on their own more, so the dead ones aren't always found."

Harry frowned at this explanation. "I didn't know if I should kill him or not."

His hosts gave each other a long look. Siri said, "Sending him off defeated is best. He will be embarrassed to return."

Per was still eyeing Harry very closely as though they had just met. Eventually, he backed up and occupied himself with looking for something among the lockers. When all the bread was baked, Harry returned to his side of the hut and relaxed on the soft furs, enjoying the heat of the fire. The wind was lower today so the smoke trailed obediently out the hole at the top of the hut and the place was actually quite pleasant.

Per took out his drum and eventually the brass ring. Again the ring ceased its bouncing over the distorted stick demon. Per put the drum away and took out his pipe instead. After a long span of smoking he said, "Tell me a story."

Harry wasn't certain who was being addressed but Siri was looking at Harry expectantly so he said, "A story about what?"

Per shrugged, gaze far beyond the sapling and turf walls.

Harry sat up and crossed his legs. His socks were wearing out, he noticed, and his big toe was peeking out on both feet. "Um, you want a story about me, or Britain . . .?" Per didn't respond, just puffed on his pipe. Harry waited for an answer but these two were good at silence, so he didn't get one. "I could tell you about Dumbledore, he was the greatest wizard of our time. When he died, he was over a hundred and sixty years old-"

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"A story," Per repeated.

Harry stopped and thought that over. A story. He had never really told a story before, he didn't think. "Um . . ." Harry finally began. He wanted to tell a story about Dumbledore, but where to begin? When he and the old wizard first met, Harry was too young to remember, although Hagrid had described the meeting often enough. "Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was already older than most when he took over being headmaster." Harry paused, this was hard, he thought. Especially since Harry really didn't know the old wizard all that well, really. He had to guess. Harry waited for Siri to finish translating before going on, "He needed to live longer, though, because he suspected that one of his old students was going to sink deeper into evil and would need to be countered. So he and another wizard by the name of Nicolas Flamel created a Philosopher's Stone. Flamel was a master of this and was already eight hundred years old."

Per sat up a bit at that with a sharp look and, for a moment, ignored his pipe as he took in Siri's version in Saami. Harry went on when it was quiet. "Dumbledore didn't just finish Riddle off though, I don't know why," Harry said in frustration.

"Story," Per insisted sharply.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, forgetting. Also forgetting where he was going with the story. "To combat Voldemort's rise to power, Dumbledore gathered his friends and others together in an organization called the Order of the Phoenix. The Ministry didn't believe in the threat that he warned of, so they had to operate in secret as well. They also had to operate in secret because when Voldemort learned who they were, he would seek them out and kill them, or send one of his Death Eaters to." That is what happened to my parents, Harry wanted to say, but it needed to be a story, so he said, "More than a decade into this struggle, Dumbledore heard a prophecy that said that one was coming with the power to destroy Voldemort. Lily and James Potter, who were members of the Order, fit the prophecy and went into hiding. They had defied Voldemort three times, that's what the prophecy had said, and they had a son at the end of July, which fit as well. So they went into hiding and assigned a secret keeper to make them impossible to find.

"But the old friend from school they had trusted to keep them safe, instead betrayed them, and Voldemort came to where they were hiding, intent on killing their son." Harry paused for longer than it took for Siri to translate. It was harder telling it this way, as though it wasn't himself. It was easy now, through practice, to say, Voldemort killed my parents, but it was all so complicated and it so easily could have worked out differently.

Harry was seeing the scene clearly now as he spoke. "My fa- James Potter was downstairs when Voldemort came in, black hood pulled over his head so that he looked only out of the depths of it. But . . . James, despite being a . . . pretty good wizard, didn't manage to stop Voldemort." Harry stopped; he could imagine this confrontation too well, having been in that position himself. Had his father made a mistake? Had he been too surprised or panicked with a wife and young son to defend? Harry released the pent up breath he had been holding. He didn't know why his father had failed. Maybe he was just overwhelmed and not good enough. "Voldemort went upstairs where Lily Potter was left guarding their son. She pleaded with Voldemort." That I know, Harry thought and swallowed hard. "But Voldemort was hardly going to heed her. He killed her too and then turned on the boy. But in dying for him, Lily had created an old magic charm more powerful than anything Voldemort had, including the Killing Curse. So when he used it next on the boy, it bounced back at him and nearly killed him instead."

Per sat in silence after Siri's retelling. Harry didn't feel like telling any more; the rest of the story was too long. He hugged his knees even though he wasn't cold and stared at the tiny blue flames flicking occasionally above the red coals of the fire. The sudden silence turned out to be acceptable, since no one spoke.

"You are exceptionally quiet this afternoon," Candide observed over a steaming mug of butterbeer. The Three Broomsticks was quiet as well, the only movement coming from Madam Rosmerta wiping down the bar.

"Yes," Snape uttered, sounding not quite present.

"Worried about Harry?"

Snape didn't bother to reply to this, just continued to stare at the far ceiling.

"How long is he supposed to be gone?" she asked. When Snape shook his head to indicate he didn't know, she added, "The Prophet has been full of all sorts of theories. Rita Skeeter's last column said you refused to talk to her. Why don't you just set things straight?"

Snape laughed mirthlessly. "She does not truly wish to print the truth. It would be better if she made something up."

Candide appeared dubious but dropped the topic and moved to collect her things. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go out this weekend, but I expect the answer is no."

Quietly, Snape stated, "Harry always comes first."

Candide leaned forward over the table and said, "Harry isn't here to come first. That and he is eighteen." She shook herself and hitched her pocketbook over he shoulder. "Sorry, forget that. Of course he comes first," she conceded. She moved to stand but then held off. "You're making me feel sorry for you, Severus." His angled left brow and sharp disbelief made her confirm, "Yes. You're tormenting yourself."

The bitter wind made the window rattle. Snape said, "I should have been able to help him. He has already gone beyond me." Candide dropped her gaze and he said, "If you wish to do something, perhaps a distraction is in order."

She shook her head with a wry grin. "All right. I'll owl you then." As she stood, she said, "Who'd have known you were a sucker for sympathy?"

The next morning, Per pulled out a waist-high corkscrew and the three of them trouped off carrying a small tent to sit on the lake for the day and fish. Harry watched his host speak to the ice drill and it must have listened because the task of cutting a hole went quickly, and Harry didn't ask if he should use his wand instead. The task of fishing did not go quickly, and a quarter hour into it, Harry decided this had to be one of the most boring activities in the world. It was cold on top of mindless and Harry constantly tugged Snape's fur-lined cloak even more thoroughly around himself as he sat on a crate beside Siri. Even an extra inch of overlap of the cloak seemed to make a difference in his comfort.

Per fished not with a pole but with a large empty tin with a line tied around it. He could wrap and unwrap the line with ease though and soon a pile of stiff fish sat on a plastic sheet laid on the ice. "Tell me a story," Per said after an hour of silence. "O red winged one."

Harry, who had opened his mouth to dive into a story about Quidditch that he found he must have prepared without thinking, shut it again and tried to read what was behind that comment. He was forced to decide it was merely playful, because he couldn't sense anything else. "It was a beautiful day and Gryffindor had a Quidditch match against Slytherin," Harry began and decided from Per's expression of dismay upon translation, that he had gotten even. "Harry Potter was only a first-year, but he had been allowed on the team anyway as Seeker, which was a first in over a hundred

years." Harry felt himself warming to this method of telling, especially given the rolling of Per's eyes when he heard what Harry had said.

Per baited his hook from a worm that had been staying warm in his mouth, and dropped the line into the icy water. Harry had even gotten used to that.

"Terence Higgs was the opposing Seeker for Slytherin and had at least played in a match before. Harry had practiced a lot but he had never played, but he had a very good broom that the teachers had bought him and he was small and light enough to be quick on it. That and he made a very small target for the Bludgers." Harry paused to huff into his mittens for warmth while Siri translated. "But well into the match, Harry's broom began to jump about, trying to toss him off. He was high off the pitch and had a long way to fall.

"Harry's two best friends were watching this through field glasses and noticed that Professor Snape appeared to be the one cursing Harry's broom. He was looking up intently and mouthing something constantly while the broom kicked around."

Per appeared to decide that this story was perhaps interesting after all, so much so that he let a fish tug his bait away by being half a second too late in jerking on the line. While Harry continued, he re-baited the hook with a fresh worm from his mouth.

"Harry's friend Hermione was one of the smartest students in school. Maybe the smartest. She hurried around to the other bleacher where the teachers sat and lit Professor Snape's robes on fire. Harry's broom calmed down immediately in the commotion and he caught the Snitch, thereby defeating Slytherin, Professor Snape's house. It was the first time Harry had won anything, so he was pretty happy."

Indeed, Harry re-felt that moment of primitive joy even this many years later. He sat enjoying it again, until Per said, "That isn't the end."

"Yes it is," Harry countered. "It's my story."

Silence ruled for a long while as fish after fish was pulled up out of the water after patient waiting in between. Per said something to Siri and she said, "Didn't you or your friends complain about Professor Snape?"

"Oh, yeah. We complained to our friend Hagrid, the gamekeeper. He told us we had to be mistaken. Then he accidentally confirmed that the Philosopher's Stone was being held at the school to protect it from being stolen. We decided that Voldemort wanted to use it to return to life and that Professor Snape was trying to steal it for him."

Chapter 7

Per relayed through Siri: "Did you know he was a Death Eater?"

"No. We just didn't like him. Didn't trust him. In the end after finding my way to where the stone was hidden, I found another Professor, Quirrell, trying to steal the stone, and he told me he was the one cursing my broom and Professor Snape was countering him to save me."

Another long silence was finally broken by, "So, what happened?"

"Quirrell dissolved when he attacked me trying to get the stone. He was harboring Voldemort like some kind of parasite so he couldn't touch me. The charm from my mother was still on me."

Per again missed a fish. "So, how did you get the stone?"

"Ah, that's another story," Harry said tiredly, to his audience's dismay.

Per rolled up the line and hook, scooped up the plastic sheet with the fish and said, "Tomorrow we take a journey."

Harry stood when they did and, given the complaints of his muscles, thought his legs could use a little more rest, but he didn't argue.

Author's Notes:
Quidditch Schedule – If there was a canon fixed order of games (I honestly never noticed), then McGonagall must have rearranged it when she got the chance ;-)
Lappland – The Saami culture presented here is an amalgamation of 1970's setting and 1600's pre-missionary Shamanism. (Nearly every Shaman drum was burned, for example, and just a few remain in museums. Their owners may not have fared any better.) The culture is changing very rapidly, due to imported goods and techonology, tourism, land use rights issues, flooding of grazing areas to build hydroelectric dams, and now, and probably the clincher, arctic warming. (Warm is worse in the artic because the snow ices over and the reindeer can't dig for moss to graze on.) Do the Saami exist as written here in 1999? I'd imagine some still do since it is only 30 years since the publication of the books I read to write this part, but it is fast disappearing or reinventing itself for tourism, so a distorted snapshot is perhaps all you could ever capture unless you want to try to capture change itself, which I didn't attempt.
I finally put up a page of my own: darkirony(dot)com If you want links to all other stories.

Chapter 8.

The Journey

The next day Harry waited for his hosts to get the skis ready or to settle the foodstuffs into the lockers or some other sign of departure. Instead, after the fish were tended to in the smokehouse, Per worked at a powdery mixture on the other side of the hut. He was using a mortar and pestle to grind things up which he then poured into a tanned animal bladder. Eventually, he tied this closed and said, "Come," to Harry, who quickly put his boots, gloves and cloak on and followed outside.

Per cleared a firepit in the snow. There had been no sign of it from the white trampled surface; apparently, Per knew the area well. Per then started a fire without speaking. Harry sat on a sawed off log and watched and waited. The sun was trying valiantly to clear the low hill to the south and an occasional streak of orange would cut across the snow as a few stray clouds drifted by.

Per piled small twigs onto a burning curl of birch bark and when its flames grew to survive the tossing of the wind, he added three split logs, arranged in a pyramid. He pulled a moose hide from the hut and spread it on the snow beside the fire and gestured for Harry to sit upon it. Harry did so, pulling his feet close and hugging his legs beneath his cloak for warmth. The bare sunlight seemed to make it feel colder than usual. Per stared in silence into the flames as they stretched higher.

Siri came out and joined them, carrying the ungainly cooking stone. Her round, flattened face appeared even more deeply lined in this light. Per held his hands out to warm them and then placed the stone before Harry; upon it, he placed one of

the well-lit logs, letting the other two collapse flat. He then swept the old blanket from his own shoulders over Harry's head, stretching it out over the stone. Smoke stung Harry's eyes and he turned his head to the side to breath. He watched Per untie the bladder and pore a handful of its contents onto the glowing wood. Acrid smoke billowed, and the blanket was pulled down to trap it in. Harry didn't want to breath but instinct made him and the world before him, the moose hide, the red glowing log, his own legs, twisted bizarrely. Another shallow inhale and the acrid smell became bursting color, sound became scent, color became noise. Harry tried to toss the blanket aside but it was too late; he couldn't lift his arms.

Harry opened his eyes. He was crouching on the ground, not snowy ground, but gravel and dirt. Around him, waist-high hillocks strewn with rocks and saw grass blocked his view except for Per standing before him. Harry dizzily got to his feet. The whole landscape, to the horizon, was composed of these same little clumps although some sported tangles of rusty metal wire. It was dim, but the light seemed to come from the ground itself rather than the sky, which was a flat grey, with no clouds and no stars.

Per gestured for Harry to follow and, on unsteady legs, he did so. They walked a long distance, their footsteps crunching on the gravely sand. Harry, still confused, fell behind a bit. Something clapped its jaws together nearby and rocks shifted over dirt. Course metal snaked suddenly around Harry's leg, ensnaring him. Per spun back and stepped right up against Harry, lording over him, suddenly taller. His gaze was sharp as it swung around the nearby ground. The metal released Harry just as suddenly and whatever creature he had heard, scrambled away. In the distance, so did many other things. A breath of oily air touched Harry's cheek and he froze in stark horror. They were in the Dark Plane and Per truly was master here.

Per backed up a step and gestured for Harry to keep close this time. Harry stutter-stepped quickly to make the pace, having little interest in being left behind, unescorted. They walked a very long time, weaving around the hummocks and clumps of jagged metal. Eventually, they reached the edge of the world and below and beyond lay only greyness. Harry's eyes blinked, trying to find a distance to focus on, but there was none. The ragged cliff edge beyond his boots fell away into nothingness.

Per finally spoke, "When you understand this, you will rule here."

Understand what? Harry wondered. There was nothing here; although, as he thought that, a drift of icy fresh air struck his face before returning to stillness.

"Of course, you must believe that you rule. That is important," Per added. He eventually led Harry away again and they met another cliff, and again they stopped

and looked out. Harry swallowed his frustration and confusion and let his eyes lose focus, trying to be open to what it might mean. Per turned away and gestured back inland. "Can you lead us back?" he asked. Harry realized that Per had no accent here, perhaps because he wasn't really speaking. Harry looked out over the ubiquitously uneven land that revealed no significant landmarks. Harry shrugged.

"Go on," Per urged.

Harry only had a vague notion of what way to head so he started out that way, making certain Per remained close behind.

Harry was accustomed to finding his way by broom and Sirius' bike over the hilly landscape around home; that wasn't too different from this. Rubbing his suddenly dizzy head, he made his way more to the left, since that felt correct.

It was difficult to decide if they were close. Per gave no hints either way, just kept close behind, driving the slithering, chattering, hungry things before them until they scrabbled away in a panic. Finally, Harry, whose dizziness was only increasing, stopped and said, "I think we're there, but I don't really know."

Per said, "You did better than expected. We are running out of time. Come."

Harry followed his guide's faster footsteps as he made his way farther to the left, detouring around an exceptionally large weaving of metal, looming like a giant old box spring. By the time they stopped, Harry could barely keep his feet his legs had grown so wobbly and his head so dizzy.

Per reached out and put his palm flat on Harry's forehead and Harry collapsed.

Harry awoke while he was being carried into the hut and placed on an extra high pile of hides. His skull felt like a log which had an ax lodged in it and was being repeatedly pounded against a sawed off tree trunk. The only other time Harry had felt this awful was when Voldemort had taken him over. Same as that time, he was truly thinking death was a viable option. Someone knelt nearby and lifted him up to press a cup to his lips. Bitter liquid tasting of nettle slid down his throat and the pounding in his skull eased to feeling merely as though reindeer were dancing on his temples. He closed his eyes as he was laid back and blissfully fell asleep.

Harry still had a nearly blinding headache when he next awoke and, as he levered himself up on his hands to look around the darkening hut, he found he dearly missed Severus, not only because if he were there, Harry was certain his headache would be cured, but because he wanted desperately to return to the familiar.

Chapter 8

Siri handed him another cup of bitter tea and Harry rested back. The board blocking the air vent nearby had been removed, letting in a steady breeze of cold, but wonderfully fresh air. Harry pulled his cloak closer around himself and drifted back into sleep.

It was a whole day before Harry felt like sitting up for more than five minutes at a time. Per was out and Siri was weaving her shoe band again. When his headache receded, boredom moved in. Needing something to do with an almost psychotic ache, Harry found the piece of antler he had been practicing scrimshaw on. The previous scratches looked a little like a broom shape, so he decided to extend them more in that direction. Given his errors though, he may need to add a rider as well. Harry worked at adding a tie to the bristle bundle, which meant making a short, deep cut in the antler. He pressed hard with the knife and rocked the blade side to side to make it bite deeper. His hands were not up to this much carving though and his hold on the work slipped. The knife broke loose and flashed downward into the fleshy part of his hand.

Harry let out a cry of dismay and closed his uninjured hand around the blood that oozed forth. Siri was up in an instant, calling out the door to Per in a long string of Saami. Harry felt very odd then; his cut hand went cold and compressed as though already tightly bandaged. When he lifted his covering hand the bleeding had stopped.

The hut door banged open and Per ducked as he came in. "Did you do that?" Harry asked, indicating his red streaked hand by lifting it before him.

Per nodded before kneeling on the hides beside Harry, booted feet carefully hooked on the entryway log. He inspected the wound and then released Harry's hand, seeming less concerned.

"That's pretty good," Harry said as he dug his wand out of his backpack one-handedly. "You weren't even here." With careful concentration Harry used the wound sealing spell he had just learned but had not practiced for real. The cut was shallow enough that it closed up and disappeared on the first try. Harry moved to put his wand back away but was forestalled by Per grabbing up his now uninjured hand and gazing in total shock at it. "Oh, come on," Harry said. "All Aurors know that one."

Again, Per was gazing at Harry as though they had just met. He then pushed himself to his feet and stalked out.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked Siri, who had returned to her weaving.

"Nothing," she insisted in a singsong.

Harry threw his cloak on and stumbled to his feet where he struggled to put his boots on. Moving was making his head pound again, but he ignored it and went out.

Twilight ruled the landscape. The snow glowed that eerie blue that made it seem the lake below them had risen up and now stood above them as a flat hill. Harry walked disconcertingly downhill toward this elevated vision where Per was chopping a fallen tree in half. Harry stood back and watched each long arc of arm and ax, the chips of wood scattering before the razor edge at the end of it.

Breathless, with the tree broken into three long logs, Per finally stopped and leaned on the ax handle. He was probably around forty but looked a worn down and weathered sixty and in his native shapeless outerwear, he almost seemed menacing. Harry wasn't certain what to say and Siri hadn't followed to translate anything complicated. Harry didn't want the Shaman annoyed with him, and he definitely seemed in a fit of jealousy. Harry had no interest in this being a competition; he needed help with only one thing, at which Per was an undisputed master.

"Look," Harry started, trying to think of simple enough words to express himself. "I really appreciate that you're helping me. I'm very grateful for that." Nope, none of the words were getting through, Harry could tell by the furrowed brow, but the tone might be. Per used the back of the ax head to knock the snow from his rubber boots. "Look, I didn't ask for this much power, but since it's the only reason I'm alive, I'm not complaining," Harry was talking more to himself now. "I don't want this other power for certain. I don't want to be Master of the Dark Plane, no offense. What I really want is a chance to live my own life for once."

Per had returned to leaning on the long ax handle and simply watched Harry as he ranted. Just as well he can't understand, Harry thought, I don't have the right words anyway. "Well, just . . . thanks. Thanks for trying to help me." Harry gripped the front of his own cloak to make more of a point of his feelings. "That's all that matters to me."

Per's bright slate eyes flickered to Harry's ungloved hands. In the heat of trying to be understood, Harry couldn't even feel the cold on them. He waved his earlier-injured hand. "I'll leave it cut next time if that makes you feel better," Harry offered, half serious.

"That would be silly," Siri's voice came from the stand of birch nearby. Harry hadn't noticed her approach. She spoke a few words to Per then and walked away.

Per rested the ax against a birch tree and approached Harry. When he stopped a foot away another world slid hazily on top of the current one, but oddly, upside down.

Chapter 8

Harry froze, trying to feel what this was around him. The breeze had stilled. Per spoke and Harry understood him perfectly.

"How did you, with your dark wizard hunted life, your prophecy-weighted childhood, with your . . . Death Eater father . . . how did you preserve such purity of heart through all of it?"

Harry relaxed a bit and half shrugged. "I don't know. This is just me."

Per laughed through his nose. "That Charm of your mother's still working upon you?"

Harry considered that. It was strange standing here in stillness with the wind clearly tossing the snow and pine branches around them. It was as though, somehow Per had pulled a pocket of the Dark Plane around them. "I don't know. I wouldn't mind imagining that." The effect fell away in the next breath and the wind cut through Harry. Per returned for the ax and they started back up to the hut where they ate smoked fish and bread in the usual silence.

Rather than return to carving after injuring himself, Harry worked on a letter to Snape and had a difficult time explaining how his instruction was going. He felt now like he was learning something, but when it came to writing down what, he realized he had only learned what he needed to learn.

Severus, Hopefully Hedwig comes soon to take this letter. I still have not seen any other owls delivering post here. I saw today the depths of Per Hossa's power over the Dark Plane. You chose teachers well. Harry imagined Snape being pleased by that. I'm still doing well. My skiing has gotten quite passable and I've gotten used to the cold, so don't worry about me, if you have been.

Harry folded the short letter, trying to count the days since Hedwig's last visit. He found that he couldn't, but it felt as though she should be returning soon. Every cold, dimly lit day stretched into the next, it seemed. Harry put the letter into his pack and stared into the fire, letting his mind relax.

He picked up the shoe band he had been working on and, noticing how much better the weaving was at the end versus the beginning, he painstakingly unwove and untangled it all in order to start again. Unfortunately, the previous weaving had reminded him of the pattern of it and with just loose threads it wasn't so clear how he was to start. He experimented a while until he had something that looked okay and had a nice pattern of interlocking zigzags but it wasn't how it had been woven before.

As he sat pondering it, wondering if he should start yet again, Siri said, "Every group has a pattern. You may invent your own, if you wish."

Harry shrugged. He was mostly doing this to pass the time so he continued on rather than restart.

Before the sun completely set, Per led Harry out on skis to the top of the nearby ridge. He gestured for Harry to stay and skied away about 20 yards before stopping and turning to look back. Harry slapped his arms around himself a few times to warm himself, wishing he had taken the time to put on more than one jumper under his coat and cloak. The wind pressed the cloak against his legs where it prevented a wave of blown snow from battering them and Harry felt very grateful to have it; although, given the wear it was taking, he was going to owe Snape a new one.

Per stood watching for long cold minutes and Harry realized that he was being tested. Per retreated another 20 yards and stopped again to wait. Harry had been starting to feel confident until then. An oily feeling came over him like an oddly warm breeze and Per immediately came back half the distance. Harry frowned in frustration and after that, 20 yards was too far. Per returned to Harry's side in two long strides of his skis.

"Sorry," Harry said. He really wished he could do better. He really wanted to go home.

Per started away without speaking. Harry followed, certain this wasn't the direction that led to the hut. They skied for half an hour or so, until Harry had wonderfully warmed even to his fingertips and toes. He was glad to be warm if only because he couldn't complain about cold feet when his skiing companion was using grass for socks.

Per came to a sliding stop on a flat area and Harry managed a clumsy one and stood just as still. Head tilted as though listening, Per scanned the sky. He finally pointed at a small bird flitting through the bare tree branches.

The otherworld calm slid over Harry and Per said, "That band Siri has you weaving, do not ever lose it in the snow." Per was still watching the bird, which had fluttered to a stop on a high branch. Per explained, "I thought I heard it crying out, but it is not carrying anything."

Harry pondered this without luck. "What would it be carrying?"

Per shrugged. "A piece of clothing. A shoe band. Because you create it, the band holds a part of you in it, so it is most dangerous to lose. That is a gouttalvis bird . . . it is deadly."

Harry eyed the tiny thing, which didn't look large enough to survive the winter, frankly. It flitted up a branch. Harry still was not following the logic. Per adjusted

his ski binding and straightened up, giving Harry an expectant look. Harry was busy trying to see the otherworld layered before him like a window reflection, but the snow was too bright. He hadn't asked more about the bird because he worried he was being put on.

Per continued, "If you see such a bird carrying something and you recognize the person's voice that it cries in, you must call out their name to make the bird drop the thing it carries. If the bird reaches the graveyard with its burden, the person is cursed to die." Per started away. "Do not lose your shoe band," he repeated sternly.

"Got it," Harry said, and they slid out of the overlaying otherworld into the fresh, sharp breeze; this time in the direction of home.

The next few days were quiet ones of chores, weaving and carving. Harry tried hard not to think of home or of the Ministry and what his fellows were working on without him, because it made him feel left out and even more isolated. It also made the twice daily testing sessions with Per go much worse.

One day, up on the same ridge on a cloudy evening, Per came in close and eyed Harry with impatience. Harry heard himself apologizing again and when Harry spoke, the otherworldly feeling descended, presumably so Per could understand. "I don't know why I can't do better. I used to have lessons similar to this with Severus." Harry took Per's interested look for an invitation to explain further. "Voldemort used to get into my head when I got too emotional so Severus was assigned to teach me Occlumency. But Occlumency doesn't work against this. I wish it did."

A long pause and then Per asked, "Those would be difficult lessons. Is that how you came to understand each other?"

Harry burst out laughing. Clearing his throat with effort, he answered, "No." After he laughed a little more, Harry admitted, "It took me a year to get a handle on the Occlumency. I really hope this doesn't take as long."

"You need to believe in your power. You do not."

And with that Per skied away to try again. Harry did a little better that time and after three more rounds of approaching and retreating, Per led the way back to the hut for the night.

The next morning, Siri got her things together and said, "Since you do not need me for communication I am going to see my family and to delay the others from coming here early if they get it in their heads." When she had everything together she said, "Keep weaving," to Harry and then held up her hand to stop him, when Harry started to say goodbye.

Harry looked up and down the row of huts; he hadn't considered that others might start arriving. Per was here in an empty, seasonal village to keep Harry isolated and that wouldn't last forever, he now realized.

It was the very next day that a snowmobile could be heard approaching. Per led the way out to greet it and spoke to the rider incomprehensibly. He came back and collected his things together in a pack and started off with an admonishment in Saami to Harry and a gesture that clearly said he was to stay put.

Harry watched the snowmobile as it seemed to rise up with the vision of the floating lake and finally disappeared over the hill bordering the far shore. Harry fingered the wand in his coat pocket before fetching his gloves to stack the day's wood inside the door.

A very quiet day and night passed. Harry lay awake listening for wolves. A low distant rumble went by in the night that made him squint at the ceiling in curiosity. Going out to investigate wouldn't get him far since he shouldn't go more than 20 yards from the hut and its wards. Although, Harry thought, no one was here and all he would put at risk would be himself.

With that thought Harry, by the light of the precious batteries in the torch, threw on his cloak, mittens, and boots and went out into the night. The moon was shrouded by clouds and Harry didn't see anything when he circled the village, wand out. Back before the hut he stood in the stillness, his breath puffing fog into the air around him. The rumble had stopped anyway, so he went back inside and tried to go to sleep.

The next morning broke slowly through the clouds. Bored and frustrated, Harry took up his weaving and carving in quick succession only to hang each of them back up again. He decided on an early lunch, and as he looked around for more butter he came across the skin full of powder that Per had mixed for the journey to the Dark Plane. Harry untied the top of the bladder and very carefully sniffed. It didn't smell like much more than dried leaf. Per hadn't needed this for the journey, Harry realized now, rethinking that day.

Harry ate a little plain bread and smoked fish, trying hard to ignore the tanned bladder lying on a shelf on the other side of the hut. With the point of the blade Harry was painstakingly attempting to carve a Snitch above the broomstick on his practice antler, when he could resist no longer.

He dropped the knife and carving where he sat and put his outdoor things on with fierce purpose. He found the firepit and after several failed tries, got a good blaze going in it. He arranged everything as before on the moose hide, the bladder beside him, stiff from the cold air.

Chapter 8

A light snow had begun to fall when Harry picked up the well-lit log by a cold corner and placed it on the cooking stone. He bit his lips as he held the blanket at ready and reached for the bladder with unsteady hands. The tie almost defeated his chilled, uncertain fingers, but he finally opened it and, using his palm, tried to measure out the same amount as he remembering from last time. Heart beating fast, Harry lifted the blanket over the glowing coal before him and tossed the powder over it.

One choking breath and then, before taking the second, he dizzily lifted the blanket off of the stone to avoid having it catch fire when he passed out. A second tainted breath and the world twisted away, even though Harry grabbed desperately for it with a second, more rational instinct.

Harry came to on the same gravely ground as before. Things shifted around him, including the thick rusted metal. You need to believe in your power. Harry quickly got to his feet and rather than retreat from the onslaught of scrabbling claws and snaking metal, he stood his ground. There was no choice. If Per could master this, then he could. The noises slowed, but things still moved in closer. A tall shadow flitted by as though trailing a cloak, but it didn't look like a Dementor. A creature crept out from behind the nearest hillock, long clawed fingers – half jointed the wrong direction – pulled the sawgrass aside to better peer at Harry with slitted eyes.

Harry met the rancid yellow eyes and didn't blink. The beaked creature tilted its bulbous head and brought another limb around. This one was capped by something like a lobster claw. Harry wondered if it was the powder that distorted his vision of the thing, or if it revealed its true form.

Pointedly ignoring it, real or not, Harry started off, passing it as though it wasn't there. It balefully watched him step by. Farther along, Harry could hear it, and many others like it, moving to follow. Metal windings shuddered threateningly as he passed them. Even they felt hungry.

Harry's confidence in his actions faltered as he picked his way around the misleading ground and the air grew oilier. "No," he uttered and mastered himself out of sheer fear of failing to do so. He turned and looked behind himself, trying to mark the spot where he had arrived so as to find it again. Then he turned with purpose and hiked toward the edge of the world.

By the time Harry meandered his way beyond the worst of the metal barriers and stood at the cliff edge, he had attracted quite a following. Dark shadows with pin wheeling light inside them hovered above salivating Shetani which jostled and climbed over things that looked like thorny puffballs except with human mouths on the bottoms. The shadowy cloak folded down into a bat shape and flitted around Harry's

head. Many other slightly less aggressive things scrambled around behind the first line of creatures. The stench of them all resembled fermenting rancid earth and as their numbers increased, the air grew weighty and slow like being underwater.

Harry studied the grey vastness before him beyond the edge, then turned and looked back at the hungry distorted things trapping him in. "No going back, I think," he muttered aloud. He had gotten himself into this; he was the only one who could get himself out.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, Harry stepped off of the cliff.

Bitter wind and blinding light bombarded Harry's senses. He couldn't breath and below his chest he couldn't move. He shaded his eyes with his blessedly mittened hand and tried to see through the onslaught of cutting white wind. He was buried up to his waist in powdery snow but it was the intense sun, slicing through the thin atmosphere, which was hitting him the hardest.

Harry, feeling his poor footing with alarm, drew a difficult breath into his lungs and looked about himself. Snow-shrouded mountains of indescribable beauty spread out before him. The vision of it alone stripped his breath away. From each reaching craggy peak streamed banner-like blowing snow which mixed with the thin clouds hugging the mountain flanks. The air was too thin; Harry stood still but breathed as though he were running a race. He wondered where in the world he was. It could be any one of many mountain ranges. The clouds prevented him from seeing down into the nearest valley to gain any clues.

Precise questions of geography were tossed from Harry's attention by his feet slipping again and his body plowing forward through the snow. He stood just a hundred yards below the actual peak. To the right and below him was a slightly flatter area where a smaller side peak rose, grey and unforgiving, out of the snow. Harry lost what little breath he had as his feet slipped again and a tiny avalanche poured down the endless slope before him, fading into the clouds.

Harry stared off a hundred miles into the distance, gathered his wits, and launched himself off the face of the mountain as a Gryffylis. The wind caught him as he cleared the peak, throwing him eighty miles an hour into the open space above the nearest valley. Harry oriented himself by shifting the angle of his wings to dump the air carrying him along. The peak he had arrived on was miles distant by the time he had himself stabilized in the buffeting gusts. He twisted his largest wing feathers to reduce their lift and flapped back to where he had started. This required wide zigzagging passes against the wind, but eventually, Harry dropped low enough to enter the lee

of the mountain. He then flapped easily up to the small bowl between the peaks. His four clawed feet found easy purchase on the rough granite and he folded his wings and ducked under the breeze. His Gryffylis lungs were fine at this altitude and he was warm from the flight and the sun on his fur.

He seemed to have two choices. Fly down to civilization – whatever kind that might be – or find his way back to the Dark Plane. Harry found the best spot he could, cleared it of snow with powerful kicks, and transformed back to his breathless, unfit-for-this-environment self. He had gotten here by stepping off of a cliff and he had arrived at the top of a mountain. That probably wasn't merely coincidence. Every time Per had pulled the Dark Plane around them to talk, it had felt upside down. Harry pondered all this as his limbs numbed and his head grew faint.

Somehow the Dark Plane was close here; as in the Alps when he had sensed the Shetani on the train. It was an easy place for them to cross as well, apparently, although they hadn't followed Harry into the blazing sunlight. Harry needed to re-invert himself into the mountain again somehow. He adjusted his boots on the granite and imagined the uneven cliff edge as the inverse of the mountains here. He replayed what it felt like when the otherworld was pulled down around him by his host. He let his mind go and his eyes lose focus and fell, backward, into the sheer granite.

Harry's heels barely caught the edge of the cliff and he almost slipped back into the abyss-which-really-wasn't. The still air of the Dark Plane was a relief to his frozen limbs, and the burst of cold fresh air that came with him dissipated quickly. Something howled hungrily behind him and he turned forcefully to face it. The creatures that remained backed off a step or two and fell silent. Harry turned from them dismissively and walked along the cliff, zigzagging along with it for a long distance. He had to try that again to feel absolutely at ease with it.

As he walked, he let his mittens slide off his overheated hands. His earlier belief: that only his mind had traveled here last time, was apparently mistaken. And he had gone out the other side – a staggering thought.

Harry stepped off the cliff edge again, this time not at the very deepest scarp but somewhere along an edge. He arrived in much deeper snow and slid a long way downslope until he reached a bowl that was fed by a massive glacier. The sun was low in the sky here and the glacial ice glowed with an unearthly blue. Its hulking creak and groan could be felt even miles away.

Harry took flight again and circled the area. That was, until he spied an encampment, an actual cabin surrounded by tents in the middle of the miles-wide white bowl. Marks

in the snow hinted at a landing strip. Harry veered away, hoping that he really had not seen someone pointing up in his direction. Time to go, Harry thought and quickly returned to the exact markings in the snow where he had appeared. He was, after all, bright red and hard to miss against the snow and white sky.

Again, Harry cleared a spot to stand, although this one was precarious. He didn't have much time to work out the falling, and he didn't manage it on the first attempt which required sliding down again on his cloak to fly back up and try it again. The second time he was successful and scrambled for the cliff edge again on the other side. This time he saw the creatures cower at the burst of air that arrived around him. Something larger snarled and snapped at him. It resembled a disfigured werewolf with one human arm and bare patches of pink skin on its sides rather than fur. Its flesh was torn away revealing white boney ribs. It snarled again and flattened its mangled pink ears against its head.

Harry lifted his cloak edges upward and took a confident step forward, toward it. It made a yelping snarl and twisted away to growl quietly from a safer distance. The other smaller things scampered backward to peer at him from behind cover. Harry's lips quirked; he was whole and could move at will in and out of this place of rot and twisted nightmares; he didn't have to let it touch him.

He stepped away, in the direction he had originally come. He had to find the exact place where he had arrived; his last test.

Harry walked a long time, growing dizzy and weary as he did so. His heavily booted feet began to drag, sending small stones before him and making him trip more and more often. His arms quivered from generating the willpower it took to keep moving.

Finally, he found the large pile of twisted metal resembling an old box spring. He was close. He moved to the left and meandered around more metal. The ground was disturbed here; it looked like footprints. Elated, Harry followed them, intending to stop when they did. He shuffled along, following the disturbed ground for a mindless time, until the ground began to dip. Harry didn't remember that from before and he came to a halt and lifted his head to look around. He was in a completely unfamiliar area, making his heart skip in momentary panic. Things shifted around him, closing in, claws snapping, limbs sawing together. He had walked into a trap, or was just about to; the trail had been faked. Harry turned and surveyed the ground. He had been paying too much attention to the trail to notice where he had travelled. It may or may not be safe to follow the same trial back out again as it may have been erased and recreated behind him as a further trick.

Harry rubbed his pounding, swimming head. He picked a direction and walked, ignoring the trail he had just followed, including his own new footprints. Turning

back repeatedly to gauge his current view in that direction against his dizzy memory of just minutes before, he managed, with much backtracking and much anxiety, to make it back to known territory.

Utterly exhausted and even shakier, Harry stood before the same twisted metal box spring as before. He walked in a widening spiral away from it, hoping dearly that he would recognize where he had first arrived. He trudged for half an hour, long after the adrenaline surge from his near miss had worn off. He stumbled repeatedly now, unable to reliably sense what direction was up though his dizziness.

Harry stopped and turned a slow full circle. This looked like the right place; although he couldn't be certain given his blurred vision. He rubbed his eyes and turned again. The creatures had perhaps grown bored with him because few moved around nearby now.

So, if this was the right place, what to do? Should he fall into the ground? He was going to fall, literally, any moment, drop like a dead weight and then who knew what the creatures would do to him. Even the shyest Lethifold could get him then. Desperate now, Harry let go again as he had done on the mountainside and fell. He hung upside down on the ceiling of a white world for just an instant, and then darkness overtook him.

Per Hossa stepped off of the back of the snowmobile before it even stopped. As they had made the far side of the lake, he had felt uneasy, as though there were an opening to the Dark Plane nearby. The snowmobile driver raised his arm in a wave as he turned the noisy machine around and departed. Per pounded quickly up the shallow hillside to the village. He found Harry unconscious beside the fire pit, now long since cold. The bladder of hallucinogenic powder and the blanket tangled around him made it clear what had transpired.

Per knelt beside Harry's unmoving figure and tugged the snow-sprinkled blanket aside to feel how cool the skin of his neck was. Harry had been lucky to get wrapped in as much of the blanket as he had or he may have frozen to death after the fire burned out. But he was here in the Above World, apparently whole. Per quickly rewrapped Harry and carried him inside the hut. Siri usually sensed that there was trouble, and Per expected that she would arrive shortly.

Per piled the new wood from inside the door – Harry must have put it there – onto the fire pit. He needed a lot of heat, right now, not in half an hour when the wood

caught fully. He crouched before the pile of fresh wood in the center of the pit, a circle of half-blackened stones. When he was younger, he could have ignited this pile to a blaze with conceited ease. It had been a long time since he had even risked the pride in attempting it. Were Harry awake, Per expected the British wizard could light a fire without effort. Having Harry around had worn more roughly on Per's pride than he had expected, especially given the pleading letter to take him in.

Per took up his drum and pounded it lightly. When he was learning Shamanism, it had been a necessity, but he later decided it was a crutch. Perhaps, a return to the beginning was in order. He let the drumming set his mind into focus and summoned heat from the surroundings, the way a master herder can summon and direct his dogs without speaking.

Unblinking, Per knelt before the hearthstones, gathering and summoning warmth in a place that had very little to give. He grimaced and almost gave up; except, the slightest wisp of smoke trailed up from the center of the pile. Bolstered by this, Per drummed louder and clenched his hand on the drum rim. He used to do this with ease, he reminded himself and rather than get dissuaded by that disgusted thought, used the heat of it to narrow his summoning to a single spot, which ignited in a pop of sap. He broadened the focal point, using the new heat that was escaping the small blaze to spread the fire quickly out the lengths of the logs.

Per dropped the long antler he used for drumming and more carefully set the drum aside. The heat was building fast from the fire, but it gave him more relief than victory. He re-approached Harry, noticing in the confined space that his soiled clothes were going to have to be taken care of.

Harry awoke to a not quite blinding headache and he swam up from unconsciousness into confusion. He was hot, very hot, and more confusingly, naked. Cracking his eyes open, he squinted around himself. He was in a different hut. This one had only wooden benches around the walls and a large fire in a sawed off barrel in the center with rocks placed on top of it. A bucket of water and wooden ladle sat near the fire. Harry managed to sit up and nearly passed back out again when he did so.

A sauna . . . he was in a sauna, Harry's cottony brain decided. This was unexpected. He was warm though, all the way through, which he had not really been since arriving. He leaned over and used the ladle to pour water on the rocks. A satisfying sizzle of steam erupted into the air, raising the heat considerably.

Chapter 8

The door opened and Per put his head in, spied Harry awake and reached in to hand him a pile of clothes. They weren't Harry's clothes – just the boots were his – but he put them on anyway. Wearing a heavy tunic edged with white and red weaving and the warmest trousers he imagined existed, he staggered out the door. The sauna hut was the last one on the end. Harry trudged through the snow beside Per who had been waiting outside for him. Per didn't speak and Harry's head hurt too much to try a conversation. At their usual hut Harry discovered that Siri had returned as well. She handed him bitter tea without a word and Harry honored the silence while sitting cross-legged to drink it.

Silence raged for nearly an hour. Harry's headache was almost manageable by the time his hosts began talking, in Saami, of course.

"You were very lucky," Siri said. When Per didn't respond, just continued to work at his ski binding with a tiny pliers, she said, "He is very famous. His death would have caused quite an uproar."

Per snorted. "He is unthinking, childish and impatient. I had no imagining he would journey without me."

Harry watched their faces for clues as they talked. Per sounded more like Snape than ever as he spoke. Harry figured that for a bad sign.

After finishing his binding repair, Per laughed as he set it by the door. "He is utterly unharmed. I would not have survived my first two visits were I not a Stauncher."

Siri handed Harry bread and smoked reindeer meat as well as two apples, which tasted like sweets. Harry started to settle in to rest his still vaguely aching head, but Per stood and said, "Come," sternly.

Harry followed his lead and put on his boots and cloak. The rest of his clothes were boiling in the large pot on the fire, apparently, or someone's were. Outside Per put on skis, so Harry did as well, slowly, because bending down made his temples pound. He followed behind as they skied up to the ridge. Using the well-worn trail from previous trips, they made very good time.

Per stopped and gestured for Harry to go on ahead. Harry did so, stopping 30 yards away, or so. Per leaned on his pole, waiting. Harry pounded his feet to warm them, sad that the residual heat from the sauna hadn't lasted longer.

Long minutes passed and there was nothing. No strange sounds, no oily hunger. Per backed up farther. Harry felt something then, but he easily pushed it away, instinctively walled it off. He bit his lip as hope tried to swell his chest. Per waited

rather a long time before skiing back over. His pale eyes looked pleased, perhaps. Without a word he turned and skied away. Harry hurried to follow.

As they set their skis upright in the snow, Per said, "You are good."

"You're saying I'm done?" Harry asked eagerly.

"You are foolish boy," Per stated slowly.

Harry swallowed at the fierce look he got with that admonishment. Per gestured with his head toward the hut. Inside he spoke to Siri, "Explain to the young wizard that he is finished. I have nothing more to teach him."

Siri relayed this and Harry simply stood in the dirt entryway, trying to accept it. He felt lightheaded with elation. He could go home! Harry scrambled into his bag to write a letter to Snape. Hopefully Hedwig would come soon, he thought, as he pressed the nib of his never-out quill against a warm rock to get it flowing.

Severus, I have completed what I came to learn. I have the return ticket and will come home-

Harry stopped. "What day can I get home?" he asked.

Siri said, "You should stay for the Equinox. There is a little gathering in the village at the end of the lake we can attend."

"The Equinox?" Harry uttered. "That won't be until . . . March 21 or so."

"Two days," Per grunted.

Harry failed to breathe for many seconds. "I've been here a month and a half?" he whispered, stunned. Back at the Ministry his fellows must now be very far ahead of him. Belinda must think he was nutters. His plans for making it up to her seemed pale given the time that had passed. Harry's heart, which had been flying rather high, now sank. "A month and a half," he uttered again.

Harry returned to his letter, having a hard time focusing on the parchment with his thoughts circling around so many distant things. ... and will come home on the 22nd. Sorry it took so long for me to master this. Harry was sorry; he wondered if he were still in the Auror's program at all. Snape would not have forwarded anything regarding that to him, for certain. But I have mastered it, rest assured. I am looking forward to being home and seeing everyone. Harry then wondered what state his Chimrian was in. Hopefully Snape kept her with him at school; she seemed to tolerate him now, so perhaps she was all right.

Chapter 8

Hedwig arrived the next morning. Harry accepted the thickest yet stack of letters, fed her, and immediately sent her off with just the letter for his guardian. Unable to sit still, Harry put his cloak on over his borrowed clothes – his were hanging in the sauna to dry – and skied out across the lake. He followed in the trail a snowmobile had recently left, which let him make very good time. When he was out of breath, he turn around with an almost graceful maneuver and skied back, stomach rumbling in the hopes of lunch.

Per and Siri were quiet through lunch, but it felt like a different kind of quiet this time. Per almost seemed melancholy. Harry returned to his weaving, determined to finish at least one shoe band before leaving.

"Thank you," Harry said. "For everything."

Per shook his head and continued to load his pipe up with something that didn't really smell like tobacco, it smelled like wood. It was a long time before he spoke. "You go back to hunting dark wizards?"

"Yes. If they'll let me," Harry added grimly.

"How can they stop you?" Per asked, confused.

Harry grinned. "True."

Per gestured with his pipe at the notched stick in the corner. "How many marks . . . for you?" he asked.

"Oh," Harry said. "I don't know. I lost count." Per favored Harry with a most disturbed look. Harry said, "I wrote them all down once, but I didn't count them. And there are more since then."

Siri provided a translation of this when Per looked her way.

"Some I've had to catch twice," Harry complained. "Three times even."

"Best get back to it, then," Per commented through Siri.

Harry grinned again, feeling happy despite the uncertainties he faced when he returned. He had survived this, the other details should be easy.

Chapter 9.

Home, Part I

The next day Harry regretted his long skiing practice as they headed out for the Equinox party in the nearest village. He had noticed that Per was resistant to Apparating unless there was no choice, so Harry did not suggest it out of deference to his host. The second half of the trip, carrying everything he possessed, was all sheer willpower against lead-weighted limbs. The others gradually slowed down for him and even stopped occasionally to give him a rest.

Harry caught his breath and said, "We don't do this at home. Although I kind of like it so maybe I'll start." He breathed in deeply a few times, leaning heavily on his poles to bend over comfortably. "Okay, I'm ready."

The long meditative trip left Harry too much time to think and he began to wonder seriously how everyone, Snape in particular, were getting along. Of all the letters he had received, the ones from his guardian had been the most reserved and now Harry wondered if he had been keeping things from Harry to avoid distracting him with events out of Harry's control. As his skis made their own gliding way in the packed trail, Harry, for the first time in a month, experienced that haunting memory of finding Snape beyond death. Trying to ski too hard with his lungs constricted, required yet another rest stop. When they started moving again, Harry ached for tomorrow to come and did so for several miles.

In the village a bonfire was blazing, filling in nicely for the sun which had just dipped sideways out of view. People were drinking glögg and sitting on sawed off logs around

the fire. Per and Siri joined their friends and Harry circled outside the small crowd, just observing. Another group were having a lassoing competition and a dog barked excitedly every time the rope was tossed. While Harry watched this activity, someone giggled nearby. He glanced around and found the two young women he had met in the village last visit. One of them spoke and Harry found himself surprised to recognize the words, despite being foreign, and even returned the greeting. His pronunciation elicited another giggle.

The shorter one with her hood pulled up asked, "English?" At Harry's nod she went on, "You are far from home. You have been staying with our cousin Per, I think."

"He's your cousin?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Her companion gestured in the other direction toward another fire lighting the trees and cabins. "She wishes to join our friends," she explained. They started to walk away, but she turned and said, "If you want to come. . ."

Harry eagerly followed to smaller fire with another a girl and a young man sitting at it. The boy was telling the girl about a great wolf his grandfather had once killed and wore every winter except for herding when it would scare the reindeer. Harry recognized the little girl as the one he and Per had rescued, but of course she didn't recognize him.

Harry sat down without introductions, something he still found very odd. The fire crackled and spat, lighting the trampled snow. Conversation went on, although Harry found himself understanding a few common words here and there.

The boy asked about Harry and the young woman explained that Harry was staying with Per. Harry caught almost all of that sentence, even if he couldn't have spoken it himself. Watching the Saami teens talking, Harry realized how dearly he missed all of his friends including Belinda and his fellow apprentices. He sighed; a sound taken away unheard by the wind in the boughs around them.

The young woman moved closer to let the little girl sit on their side, away from the smoke. "You dress like a native," she said, referring to the borrowed tunic Harry still wore. "What is your name?" she asked.

Harry smiled, feeling better knowing some names. "Harry. And yours?"

"Anna."

"And yours?" Harry had to specifically ask each of them, leaving him feeling maddeningly foreign.

They chatted for a long while, interspersing some English for his sake. Eventually, Anna stood and said, "Do you want to go for a walk? The wind is gone."

Harry, whose exhausted legs were stiffening from the rest they were getting, stood also and agreed. When Anna's friends declined to follow, Harry wondered how far they were going. They walked around the backs of the cabins and up the small rise behind the village until the fires were out of view. The stars were thick like sand in the sky and a few green threads wove randomly in the north.

"It's very beautiful," Harry said. He stared up and tried to take it in despite wishing for home more strongly than before.

Anna stepped closer. Very shyly, she said, "You are beautiful too. Or is it cute for boys? You are dressed like a herder," she then teased.

"Er," Harry began, but she had grasped his arms and the next moment they were inside somewhere.

After some scuffling a candle flared. "You Apparated us!" Harry said in surprise.

"Siri taught me," she said, sounding sly.

"Ah. You should study more magic if you can do that."

She carried the candle and its halo of warm light to a table. "Not much use for magic here. That Sending is useful. It is easy to get stranded in the snow, and I can always get home, although I am not supposed to let anyone see. Since you are with Per and Siri . . ." She poked at the coals in the stove to make them flare before coming back to where he stood. "Is this all right?"

Harry, not wanting to bluntly dissuade her, took a chair at the table. "I guess. Where are we?"

She took the chair beside his at the small table. "My house."

Harry studied the stove with its metal pipe running out the wall. "It's very nice. It's not a . . . goahti."

She giggled. "No. Much warmer." She stood suddenly as though unable to sit still. "I have a few of these," she said and pulled three magazines from the end of a shelf on the bottom. When they were laid out in the candlelight of the table, Harry saw that they were Swedish wizard magazines, worn ragged with the staples rusted. Still sounding like she couldn't contain herself, despite trying, she said, "In the south, Stockholm, they have, um, witches, women shaman." She turned a few pages. "You have these where you come from too, right?"

Harry nodded, feeling pained at her excitement; she wasn't allowed to practice witchcraft here and the notion of it clearly pulled at her. Harry could identify with that agony from his own fights with the Dursleys over his returning to school.

"And here, flying carpets!" she said with a laugh, pointing at an advertisement. "But I think I am boring you."

"No, no," Harry denied, but she closed the magazine anyway and clasped her hands between her knees.

"You have girlfriend?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, mind leaping to Belinda and her shining hair and attractive turn of her head. He was glad also to settle the issue.

"Ah," Anna said softly. "Would you like tea? I can show off my other charming." She heated the pot by placing her hand upon the side of it until she couldn't hold it there any longer. "I know it is hot enough then," she said with a laugh as she shook her hand to cool it, clearly enjoying the audience. "It is nice to have someone to talk to about magic," she said wistfully. "You do not mind?"

"No," Harry insisted. "Not at all. I'm going home tomorrow and we talk about magic all the time there." He shucked his outer coat and hat as she poured since the fire had warmed the small room.

"I do not think I could talk only about magic," she said, clearly disdainful. "There are so many other things, like reindeer and stories. Singing," she added.

Harry grinned and cradled the cup she handed him, which on this journey he had come to associate with the immeasurable pleasure of warming his hands. Anna did the same a while before drinking. She also folded herself in the familiar slouch that kept one just a little bit warmer.

"But you do lots of magic?" she asked.

"A fair amount," Harry answered between sips.

Anna studied him now that his outerwear was off, eyes going over his hair, which must have been sticking up everywhere. She gasped. "You have this," she uttered, pointing at her forehead.

"Yeah," Harry said. The candlelight must be making it stand out; mostly it was becoming less noticeable.

Anna studied him in strange alarm before turning back to her magazines and flipping through the one whose cover had a family wearing tall pointed hats posing before tall

pointed mountains. She flipped hurriedly before stopping and turning it toward Harry. On the right hand page was an article on the Tri-Wizard Tournament with a big photograph of the four school champions, or more correctly, three school champions and Harry. The text wasn't readable, being full of strange letters with cross-outs and dots in odd places, but Harry said, "That takes me back. That's Cedric," he said, indicating the smiling boy, confidently pulling his shoulders back. "And Fleur Delacour, and Victor Krum." Fleur was tossing her long hair and primping a bit. In the lower right was an ink drawing of Harry holding the cup as though he had just won it, looking like he might have done if everything had gone normally. The artist had actually drawn him as though he were happy to have won.

"You are this wizard?" Anna asked.

"Yeah, that's me."

"This wizard?" she asked again, pointing this time as though he might not be easily recognized out of that disparate group.

Harry laughed lightly. "Yep."

She looked at the picture of one very uncertain, much younger Harry and then back up at him to compare. "You are very powerful wizard in this case," she said.

"I work hard to be," Harry said.

This comment was greeted by more wariness. Harry sighed silently and poured himself more tea while she reread the article.

"It says something mysterious happened at the end. This boy died."

"It was bad what happened," Harry confirmed. "And a very long story . . . even if you like stories."

She didn't get a chance to come up with a response. A rapid knock was followed by the door creaking open; the other girl's head peeked in. "Dad is coming!" she said in Saami, but Harry understood it and the tone conveyed the rest. The door closed again and Anna started to clean up rapidly and a bit clumsily as a result of panic.

"We're only having tea," Harry stated.

"Still," she breathed.

Harry stood and restrained her arm. "Stand back." He pulled out his wand and with two quick spells – Pack for the magazines and candle and Tiptop for the teapot and dishes – the room was untouched. But the sound of boots on the wooden steps meant the cleanup was probably a mistake.

"Don't," Harry hissed when she moved to grab his arm as though to Disapparate them. The noise would be too loud, he feared. He tapped her on the head with a Disillusionment charm and then himself. He pulled her into the corner and waved a quick Muggle illusion barrier before them. He hadn't done so many spells in a row in a long time and it felt good to feel magic flowing so freely and easily through him as though the holiday from it had made the path for it clearer and wider than before.

He touched a finger to her lips and held her fast behind the small barrier. She stood against him, small and rigid under her tunic and fur. Wane light seeped in from the open doorway until the electric light overhead switched on. Anna gasped quietly as her father's eyes stared in their direction before roving around the room. The man turned his wind-worn face around with a frown before he stomped out with his thigh-high reindeer skin boots. Anna almost collapsed with relief.

"He didn't see us," she whispered, confused. "We were right here."

Harry cancelled the spells and re-stashed his wand. "We should get back to the others."

"What else can you do?" she asked.

Harry shrugged but couldn't help grinning. "All kinds of things." He took her hand and Apparated them both back to the ridge above the village. In silent consensus they walked along the ridge and then down through the trees beyond where the smaller fire burned. Fish-drying frames stood, incased in ice along the lake edge. The two of them came around the long way and joined the larger group at the bonfire. An old man was speaking slowly and gesturing as the other's listened.

Per turned at their approach, but his expression revealed nothing. Harry, intending to claim that they had been wandering nearby all along, didn't move in any closer until the story ended. Same as at the end of all speech, silence descended. A few men took out their pipes and lit them, staring into the fire contemplatively.

Harry had gotten used to the length of the silences and began to feel the end of it was near and wonder who was going to speak. Per finally did, and everyone looked up at him. Harry couldn't understand any of what he was saying, but he turned and gestured for Harry to come closer.

In question Harry pointed at his chest with his thickly mittened hand. When Per nodded, Harry approached the inner circle. Siri, sitting beneath him on a long log cut into a bench, said, "He wants you to tell a story."

"Me?" Harry glanced around the expectant crowd. "Are you going to translate?"

Teasing, she said, "If your Saami is not yet good enough . . ."

"No, I definitely need a translator," Harry muttered. With a deep breath, he composed his thoughts and wondered what story to tell. Leaning down close to Siri, Harry asked, "What was the last story about?"

"Gregov was telling about the time when he was young that he saw a ghost herd and managed to throw a lasso over their heads to bring them from the underworld. He still laments that he only got five of the hundred he saw."

Harry straightened and thought that stories about magic might be all right in that case. "Once upon a time," Harry began, "there was a . . . an evil Shaman named Tom Riddle." This opening seemed to capture the wandering attention when Siri provided a translation. Anna's father stepped up to the far side of the circle, looking angry, but he held silent.

"Riddle loved power and he wasn't afraid to use dark magic to get what he wanted. For ten years he worked his evil magic, growing more powerful and gaining more followers as the years went on.

"One good Shaman, a very powerful one, stood against him but it wasn't enough. One day this good Shaman, whose name was Dumbledore, heard a prophecy that one was coming who could destroy Riddle. Unfortunately, this person wasn't yet born and soon after he was, his parents had to hide him from Riddle and his followers, who wanted to kill him. They didn't hide well enough and Riddle came one October night and killed them, but when he tried to kill the infant, his evil curse bounced back and nearly destroyed him. But it left a strange scar on the boy, in the shape of lightening."

As the attention grew more intent on his story, Harry suspected Siri of elaborating a bit. She looked up at him when she had caught up.

"For ten years Riddle was nothing more than a spirit haunting the forest, his dark heart – that could feel nothing warm and renewing, like love – refused to die completely. He roamed like this until someone very weak sought him out and let him live upon him, like a parasite. This began his rise back to power and he tried still to kill the boy from the prophecy but failed, twice, each time returning to being a mere spirit. Finally, years later, with the help of his most traitorous follower, he set up an elaborate trick that brought the boy and his schoolmate to him at the end of a contest. He had turned the trophy into a magical portal, so instead of winning, they were taken away to a strange place, a graveyard. Riddle killed the boy's schoolmate, the way one might kill . . . a fish – without thought. He then tied the boy to the

tombstone of his Riddle's father and took his blood and brewed a fantastical potion from which he emerged a whole man again, no longer just a spirit."

Harry glanced down at Siri and found her gazing at him oddly. She shrugged though, and dove in with retelling.

"Riddle intended to kill the boy but the boy was more a Shaman than Riddle expected. As well, the ghosts of his parents and even his schoolmate cheered him on in his battle and the boy got away back to where the good Shaman could protect him.

"Riddle had to plot again to trap the boy and this time his godfather died trying to rescue him, which made him very sad. The boy had lots of friends though and despite efforts by those in charge to keep their magic weak they worked in secret to increase it. And one day Riddle came to their school with 22 of his evil followers. But the boy's friends stood with him, fighting his followers and giving him time to overwhelm the evil Shaman. The good Shaman had told him how to do this. He had said that feeling love was his best weapon, so that is what the boy did – he made the evil Shaman feel love by showing him the longing for his lost parents and his affection for his friends, who would do anything for him.

"This was enough to paralyze the evil Shaman, which left him defenseless. The boy then killed him with the same curse that had bounced off of him as an infant. And now Britain is quiet again, and people can go about their lives without this dark threat over them."

Harry waited through the translation. He had wanted to say that Voldemort was dead once and for all, but he couldn't find the words for it. This left him with cold prickles under his collar. Silence had fallen; Siri was waiting for more; the audience was waiting for more.

"Riddle, who threw away that name and called himself Voldemort, is gone, not even a spirit anymore, and his followers are all in prison. And the boy found a home and a father, finally. Not his original one, but a pretty good one."

Someone asked Harry something and Siri translated. "He wants to know where you heard this story." She was smiling slyly as she spoke.

"It's my story," Harry said.

Much murmuring followed this pronouncement. Per stepped forward and spoke then. Siri quietly supplied, "Per is explaining that you were sent here by your new father to learn magic from him." The crowd seemed impressed with this – more impressed by Per than Harry, perhaps.

Eventually things quieted in the usual way and pipes were refilled. "Was that story all right?" Harry asked Siri from a spot beside her on the log.

"It is true. How can it not be?" she returned with a wink. "And it had a good ending."

"It did," Harry agreed, feeling that everything was all right in the world at that moment. He leaned back and watched the sparks from the fire swimming up into the blackness. The aurora was gone and the stars glittered thickly across the whole dome of the sky when Harry's breath wasn't obscuring them.

Anna's father stomped over to them and looked down at Harry with uncertainty. He seemed about to speak as his eyes roamed Harry's face and finally fell on his forehead. In the end he stomped off without saying anything.

Siri leaned closer. "He is an important man. You should not have gone off with his daughter."

"She went off with me. And we only talked about magic. And by the way, you should send Anna to Britain; her magic is very good."

"That would just make her more unhappy, I think."

Harry frowned but didn't argue. He studied the orange glow on the faces around the fire, finally coming around to Per's with his unusually light eyes. Per looked up at Harry as though sensing his gaze and Harry stood and took the two steps to close the gap between them. Quietly but eagerly, given that he didn't have much time left, he asked, "Can you teach me how to Staunch?"

Per glanced over at Siri, apparently needing a translation, and Harry realized now that Per only pulled the Dark Plane around them to understand when they were alone. Per stood, collected Siri without any indication he wanted her, and wandered from the immediate circle into the cold. Harry repeated, "I was asking Per if he would teach me how to Staunch wounds." Harry, feeling even more eager, removed his mitten and held up the hand he had cut. The ache from the day before came back and Harry, thinking that he need not have been almost too late to save his adopted father, was almost prepared to plead for a lesson in this.

Siri said, "One does not teach a Stauncher, one simply is." Per held up his hand to stop her speaking. He spoke and Siri translated, "It is a dying skill, so he is willing to test you."

They stepped over to the second fire in the trees, which was now unoccupied. Per tossed two fresh logs on the flames and sat across from Harry on a tree stump that,

given its gouged surface, must frequently be used for chopping wood. Per took a knife off of his belt and removed his mitten. Harry tried to stop him. "I don't want-" Per gave him one of those looks that Snape favored and Harry quieted and watched as Per nicked his hand, letting the blood course down his palm.

Per watched Harry as Harry itched to take out his wand; this wasn't a test of that kind of magic, though. This worked at a distance, which was what Harry desperately wished to learn, believing that the knowledge would help staunch the haunting ache that still occasionally reared up inside him.

Siri spoke, "You need to concentrate." She translated for Per then, "Like a weaving, blood holds its owner's spirit inside of it. If you can sense its escape you can squeeze down the opening it leaks out of. Per says that he imagines packing snow around the wound. But first you must feel its escape."

Harry cleared his mind and watched the trickle of blood, which was slowing on its own. His focus relaxed and for an instant, Harry had the same sense he had with his quills, the sense of their Radiance. Per's leaking blood would be radiant, Harry realized. He relaxed again and the sense came quicker this time, although the bleeding had stopped naturally.

Per took the knife, still held at his side as though expecting to need it again, and reopened the wound, making Harry flinch at the necessity. The Radiant sense was stronger now as the blood ran thicker and dripped into the snow between them. Squeeze it closed, he had been told. Harry imagined a binding and then a cold binding, cold like the biting wind that came off the frozen lake. Per stiffened discernibly, even through his thick clothes. Harry lost his concentration and a new trickle of blood emerged. Trying harder to imagine binding and cold simultaneously, Harry focused on the point of leaking Radiance again. The bleeding stopped again. Harry held that imagining a full minute, long enough that the small wound should remain closed on its own. He raised his eyes to Per, half expecting another bout of jealousy, but Per had a crooked, pleased smile on his face instead.

Per spoke and Siri provided, "He says now he truly has nothing left to teach you."

Harry glanced in the direction of the rest of the villagers before pulling out his wand and healing Per's cut for good. Per scoffed and shook his head as though Harry were cheating.

"Thanks for the lesson," Harry said as Per held his hand to the fire to warm it. "That's a good skill to know."

"You knew all along," Siri said, "You just did not know that you knew."

Home, Part I

Harry watched the black logs settle lower on the fire and said, "Most all magic is that way, isn't it?"

"The kind we have here, yes."

They spent the night in the same goahti as last time. Harry woke long before the sun when their host was carefully laying logs on the low fire. Harry was immediately wide awake and eager to get on with his travels home. For once he was the one waiting impatiently for others to put on their outdoor gear. This was after a quick, and he assumed his last ever, smoked reindeer and coal bread breakfast.

The village was quiet when they put on their skis and slid away around the first bend in the lake shore. Breath heaving in clouds of steam, they stopped. Harry removed his borrowed skis and handed them to Per. The wind blew blasts of biting snow down the lake and Harry was not unhappy to be leaving on that regard.

"Thanks for everything," Harry said to his host. When Per simply nodded in silence, Harry went on, "Really, if you ever need anything, just owl, or post even."

Siri removed her skis as well and held a hand out.

"I can make it on my own," Harry said, thinking that he could easily relay himself using the Oulu station as a halfway point.

"I will take you," Siri insisted. Harry shrugged. "You may take the train from closer, if you wish, now that you are not a risk," she pointed out.

An impatient Harry could not imagine the extra long hours of worry. "No, I'll Apparate the rest of the way."

"Goodbye," Per said when Harry held up his arm for Siri.

Harry, who had been stopped from using that word earlier, replied in kind this time. With a clap! the icy flat expanse disappeared and a snow-covered rail yard appeared. They had Apparated behind a concrete block building adjacent to the Oulu train station.

In her methodical speech Siri asked, "Do you have an uncrowded place to arrive to in Helsinki?"

Harry nodded. "I was thinking of the employee toilet at the bus station. It was locked," Harry added with a crooked grin. "But I used it because I couldn't find another."

"Well, Harry," she began. "It is difficult to say goodbye but I think we should."

Harry was glad to hear a sentiment that implied he had not been strictly a burden. "Goodbyes are that important?" he teased.

"One only says goodbye if one never expects to see the other again," Siri explained.

Harry understood then why he had been kept from saying it earlier. He pulled off his cloak and removed his woolen coat which he had seen Siri admiring as she hung it up to dry after its sole wash. "Here," Harry said, "in trade for the tunic and hat."

With slow movements, she accepted the dark grey coat and slipped it on; it nearly reached her ankles. With a little bow she said, "Goodbye then . . . you have far to go."

Harry bundled his fur cloak around himself and pictured the dingy little toilet carefully before saying goodbye yet again and Sending himself away. The small closed space of the toilet was a shock after the open air, but he hadn't impinged on any walls or porcelain. He lifted his hand from his wand pocket where he had held it in case he had needed to do a quick memory charm.

The corridor was empty. The noise of his arrival had mixed in with the rumble of bus motors and the hiss of brakes. Harry purchased a ticket to the airport and found the proper stand for that bus. The others standing there occasionally tapped their feet against the cold. Harry thought it quite balmy this far south. The sun was even shining for real here, glinting blindingly off the icy road.

At the airport, Harry got another round-cornered ticket, this time to Edinburgh, and again waited in line to pass through the plastic gates. This time his backpack was pulled before it arrived at the end of the conveyer. The guard searched through it, staring dumbly for a moment at the quills he pulled out. He then pulled out something Harry didn't recognize and measured it with a ruler and handed it to Harry along with his backpack. Harry looked down at a small knife with the familiar bear carved into the antler handle, but he was holding up the queue, so he quickly stashed it back away and moved on.

When he sat down he found a note in his backpack, written on a sweet wrapper: We cannot send you off on such long travels without a knife. Touched, Harry carefully packed the note where it wouldn't get crushed more and fingered the expert carving that seemed to speak more than its simple picture could.

Given how much time he had before the flight, Harry backtracked to where he had spotted a row of gift shops promising authentic souvenirs of Finland. Inside one store he found little burl wood cups like those he had seen people drinking glögg out of at

the Equinox party. Each one had a leather loop to go over one's head – an essential feature for a long night of drinking when one is likely to misplace one's drink. Harry, despite the high price, bought a handful of them. He also bought a jar of cloudberry preserves for Belinda and smoked reindeer meat for himself. All of this he managed to add to his bulging backpack as he waited for the plane to board.

When they finally allowed the passengers on, Harry took his seat with an insufferable ache of anticipation of being home. He couldn't rightly worry about the immediate future because he would know very soon where he stood with his training and Belinda. Instead of worrying, he sat tensely, watching the men load luggage onto a conveyer that went into the belly of their plane.

This flight was only sparsely occupied and no one took the seat beside Harry. He watched the snowy preparations for departure with a vastly different outlook than the flight out. This time he had no fears, just a painful longing for home to occupy him. Sitting back with a sigh, Harry imagined he was already home, seeing his guardian, his friends, and with the happy prospect of his own actual bed to sleep in.

The flight passed quickly and it wasn't until he felt the dip of the airplane and the steward announced that they were descending, that Harry remembered he wanted to test a hover spell. With a glance around him he pulled out his wand and set his foam tea cup on the tray before him. The stewardess was rapidly coming down the aisle to collect rubbish and he didn't have much time. The man across the aisle was reading a newspaper, and he conveniently turned the page and held it up so it blocked his view of Harry.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered. His swish and flick was limited in the small space, but the cup flitted upward and hovered half a foot above his tray. Harry caught it, and with a smile dropped it into the stewardess' rubbish sack while hiding his wand under the tray.

Hm, he thought. Snape had not thought that would work. Harry would have to tell him that it did. He put his wand away, stowed the tray, and then crossed his arms, impatient to land.

Harry disembarked late from the back of the plane and he wasn't looking around much, so when Snape stepped up beside him, just as Harry passed the gate counter, he started a bit.

"Severus!" Harry said in pleased surprise. He almost reached out automatically to give his guardian a hug, but immediately thought better of it given how public this place was. To his complete surprise, Snape gave him one, albeit a quick and stiff one.

"How are you?" Snape then asked while eyeing Harry about as closely as he ever had, which was saying a lot.

"Good," Harry assured him.

As Snape continued to hold his upper arms firmly and verify that with his dark gaze, Harry noticed that Snape looked a little more worn than he had expected and that a few strands of white were sprinkled along his part. He looked noticeably older, even though Harry hadn't been gone that long.

Snape backed off and looked Harry up and down with his brow furrowed. "You have gone native," he uttered at the sight of Harry's belted tunic with hand woven diamond trim and the matching hat Harry clutched in his hand, half covered by Severus' cloak which he also carried.

"This was much warmer than what I brought. I traded the coat for it," Harry explained. "They joked about getting me some reindeer, but said my skiing was still too atrocious and I would lose them."

Snape smiled lightly then. "You are probably eager to get home . . ." he said, finally releasing him.

Harry nodded and they stepped away with Snape's arm around Harry's shoulder. Harry wondered if he were just misremembering his guardian after a month and a half, but he didn't think so. They passed between a large pillar and the back of a display of nuts at the first shop and Snape halted them, took a half step back, and after a glance around, including the ceiling, Disapparated them to their main hall.

"So that's how you got past security," Harry teased. He glanced around the house; it was just as he remembered it, full of dark varnished wood and grey stone.

Snape said, "I took the liberty of allowing a few of your friends to invite themselves over this evening . . . if you are up for it, that is."

"That's brilliant. I'd love to see them." With a glance down at himself, he added, "After a bath, though. And I should check in at the Ministry since it is only half past one."

Harry's heading for the bath was interrupted by Snape saying, "Your letters were tantalizingly short on detail. I would like to hear a bit more . . ."

"Sure." Harry gestured at himself. "I'm dying for a bath, though."

"It smells it."

"Thanks," Harry countered in a hurt tone, but he was laughing. It was too good to be home, and Snape's frankness certainly didn't detract from that. "How is Kali?" he asked from the doorway that led down to the bath.

"She is fine. A bit subdued. She is in Hagrid's care today."

"Oh good. Thanks for taking care of her."

"It was no problem," Snape answered softly.

Harry put a foot down the first step but turned again. "You aren't really Molly Weasley using a Polyjuice potion, are you?" Snape's fiercely disturbed expression answered for him. Harry muttered, "No, I guess not," before he escaped down into the dimness of the corridor to the toilet.

The first tub full of water grew alarmingly dingy even before Harry got around to soaping much of himself. He drained that water and started again, wondering how he had grown so used to not bathing given how happy his skin was to be clean.

Harry hadn't brought any clothes down. so he wrapped the bath towel around his waist and padded out toward his room, leaving damp foot prints on the stone floor. On the way, though, he found his bag still in the hall and decided to sort the gifts out of it for giving to his friends that night. As Harry crouched on the floor, wet hair sending rivulets of water down his neck and back, Snape came out of the dining room.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked.

"What?" Harry replied, as he considered whether to give the reindeer meat to Ron or keep it. "No, not at all." He reached farther into his bag and found the knife.

"You must be cold. There isn't even a fire in the hall hearth."

Harry stood, pulling the antler sheath off the knife to look at it more closely; it glistened and the edge looked quite sharp. "Severus, this is a house . . . it can't not be warm." He held out the knife. "Look at what they gave me," he said.

Snape accepted the knife but did not look at it. He said, in the unmistakable tone of an order, "Get a housecoat on, now."

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Severus," he uttered in disbelief.

In an equal tone of disbelief, Snape said, "You are making me cold. And I have on a cassock and a robe. Go."

Not really hurt by being ordered in such a manner, Harry gave in. "All right."

He returned shortly after dressing, wearing his ragged old Gryffindor slippers. His trousers had to be cinched at the waist with one of his old, smaller belts. He returned the fur-lined cloak to Snape. "I think I owe you a new one," he apologized. As Snape looked the threadbare garment over, Harry added, "Thanks for letting me use it, though. I don't think I'd've made it otherwise."

Snape examined a long ragged tear that Siri had sown up. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"Oh," Harry hesitated. "I'm not sure, but I think it was Tibet. I slid a long way down a slope, on the cloak fortunately."

After a pause, "Tibet?"

"It's kind of a long story," Harry hedged. "Can I tell it to you after I check in at the Ministry?" he asked hopefully.

Snape failed to find an immediate response. He finally asked, "How did you get to Tibet?"

"I'm not sure it was Tibet," Harry pointed out, starting to get impatient. "It could have been somewhere else in the Himalayas."

This only dismayed Snape more. "How did you come to arrive in this place that you aren't certain was Tibet?"

"That's the really long story part," Harry explained with extra care.

"I see," Snape muttered. He stood and in a sudden change in topic, said, "While you are gone then I will fetch Kali."

"Thanks," Harry said. He wondered if Snape had decided that deferring understanding wasn't such a bad idea.

At the Ministry, Harry interrupted the afternoon reading review session. The room erupted with noise that seemed far more than three people could produce as his fellows leapt up to greet him.

"Hey!" Aaron said, giving him a slap on the back. "Rumor had it you'd be back today."

Harry looked past them to Rodgers, who stood beside the front table, wearing a displeased expression. "Sir," Harry said in his most respectful voice.

"Potter," Rodgers uttered. "Going to be in tomorrow?" he asked with a hint a snide.

"Yes sir."

Using a tone that implied someone else was making him do this, Rodgers said, "Give him the reading list, someone."

Harry's heart leapt – he was still in the Auror's program, and at the moment, he didn't even care who's influence it had been that had kept him in. After Kerry Ann wrote down the readings from memory, Harry quickly departed so as not to try Rodgers' good will any more than necessary. The only thing Harry said as he departed was that they could all come to his place that evening.

Hoping his luck held, Harry then headed directly for the Minister of Magic's office.

Later, when the Floo deposited Harry in the dining room, he discovered a serious deficiency of arriving that way – there was no door to slam. Furious, in a way he had not been in months, Harry stomped into the main hall after resisting tossing the fireplace irons across the room. He only carefully set down the jar of cloudberry preserves because he was certain that Hermione or Elizabeth would be happy to have it. His ranting attracted Snape from the drawing room.

"What is the matter?" Snape demanded, sounding uncharacteristically alarmed.

Harry stopped in the center of the floor, far away from the single lamp so as to not make it too easy to smash. "Belinda . . ." Harry began but was too stung to go on. Snape's sigh penetrated Harry's red thoughts. "You knew didn't you? It's been in the paper's Crystal Ball column I suppose?" he demanded.

Snape ignored the tone that could have been construed to imply he was somehow at fault. "Yes. It was hard to miss given the lack of other things to print lately. I did not tell you because it could not have assisted you to know."

"It would have saved an awful lot of embarrassment just now," Harry countered, smarting from his confused response to Belinda's dismissal of him when he arrived at the Minister's area.

Snape crossed his arms. "Ah, your pride is all that is at stake, then?"

"No!" Harry argued, but immediately wondered if that was honest.

Snape glanced around the room as Harry continued to fume, and finally put his wand away; Harry hadn't seen him take it out. "You are not having any difficulty with this anger?"

"No," Harry said. He had learned to instinctively shut out the Dark Plane and hadn't even thought of that in his rage. He felt around himself. The interstice was there but it was idle and quiet.

"Well, good," Snape said in clear relief. "An interesting little test then."

"An interesting little test," Harry mocked. "Thanks."

Snape still refused to be baited. Calmly, he said, "I am indescribably pleased that you have control now. And besides, should you wish for meaningless companions, you are well positioned to have as many as you have time for."

Harry stared at him. Was pride all that was bothering him? He rethought the confrontation of just minutes ago. Belinda had been smug and that had bothered him the most. "But she's going out with Percy now!" Harry argued, cringing again as he tried to visualize that. "Says he's nice and attentive," Harry quoted, wondering now if that meant she hadn't thought him to be so. "Doesn't that bother you?" Harry demanded, thinking even Snape could see how disturbing that was.

"I am only pleased that you are better," Snape stated flatly.

"Didn't fancy having to lock me in a Hogwarts dungeon for the rest of my life, eh?" Harry taunted..

Quietly serious, Snape responded, "By far the least-disturbing choice available."

This sober sentence brought Harry up short but to really get past the anger he needed a distraction. "I have to get ready for my friends," he said. When Snape simply nodded, Harry stalked off up the stairs. At the top he leaned over the railing and stated, "I have total control," in an almost dark voice. Snape's unreadable gaze had lifted up to follow him. He didn't respond, prompting Harry to assert, "I'm a master of the Dark Plane now too." This statement flowed through him as though it were a spell. He could feel it even in his fingertips clutching the cold railing. "Those vile creatures stay away from this world now because they have to come through me to get in. And they are frightened of me," Harry asserted, pointing at his own chest.

When Snape again failed to react, Harry pushed away from the rail and stalked into his room.

When Snape approached, a short five minutes later, Harry sat sorting through his Auror books, just removed from his Hogwarts trunk, marking his readings for tomorrow. Harry wished he hadn't blown up like that and his unease made Kali circle his shoulders. "Sorry," he uttered. "I actually am feeling pretty good, despite dealing with maddening Belinda. I'm still an Auror's Apprentice, for example."

Snape hadn't moved, forcing Harry to look up at him. He didn't look like himself, making Harry's earlier accusation about Mrs. Weasley return to mind. Harry was

beginning to suspect that the last month and half had been as hard for Snape as it had for him.

"I regret having been unable to help you myself," Snape said.

"How could you have?" Harry said. "You don't know . . ." he began, then stopped. "He took me there, you know, into the underworld, the Dark Plane, whatever you want to call it. I wouldn't have expected you to know how to get there. I wouldn't have expected anyone to know how to get there."

After a pause Snape asked, "What is it like?"

Harry put his books aside and said, "It is all grey, even the sky, with these small hills of coarse grass and lots of twisted metal everywhere. And the creatures follow you everywhere. Shetani and shadowy glittering things that I've never seen in any book, and ancient werewolves . . ." Harry was stopped by the notion that Lupin could someday end up there. The thought made him cold all the way through. "But it is the edge of the plane . . . where there is a cliff. When you step off you are suddenly in the mountains. I think the Plane is closest there; that's why I sensed the creatures on the train in Switzerland."

Harry paused, thoughts far away. Snape didn't interrupt his silent musings for a long time, but eventually he sat on the bed beside Harry and said, "I had no idea what Mr. Hossa might be able to teach you. But if it is effective at rendering you safe, I believe the ends justify the means."

Harry neglected to mention that he had gone to the Dark Plane on his own the second time, garnering the wrath of said teacher at his impudence. "I don't think he ever expected to teach this. He spent most of the time figuring out who I was. He seemed a bit fascinated by you too . . . knew you were a Death Eater."

"I told him that in the letter to get his attention."

"Oh," Harry uttered, surprised.

"So you know as much as Mr. Hossa about the Dark Plane?" Snape asked.

"I doubt it. He just said he didn't have anything more to teach me."

Snape clasped his hands before him and stared down at them. "I am very pleased you are home, Harry."

"Not as pleased as I am to be home," Harry countered.

Snape's lips curled a bit as he stood. "Your friends are most eager to see you, but given that you have training tomorrow, do try to make it an early night."

"I will," Harry promised, even knowing how hard that might be.

Snape turned at the door. "And if you should feel warm wandering wet in merely a towel, you are free to do so. It did serve to reveal how very much in need you are of a week of good meals."

Harry plucked at his loose shirt. "I ate a lot, but I was out on skis a lot too. And I'm used to an Arctic hut, you know."

"So your letters stated. They were not reassuring," Snape pointed out.

Harry laughed. "I didn't mean to worry you more. I just wanted to share what was going on."

"And so I wished to hear. If you need anything, Harry . . ."

Snape still sounded very much unlike himself, but Harry didn't want to tease him about it again. "Thanks," he said instead.

Author's Notes:

Harry's foolishness – Harry did not think ahead at all to returning and that the cold might be an issue. At worst, returning would be a luxury that would seem easily dealt with. And Per and Siri, while Harry may have learned to be a bit more circumspect in general while with them, were not going to cure him of being Harry. If they did, there wouldn't be anything left to write.

Marks – The marks were Per's, noting how many reindeer he'd gotten, presumably in wolf form. He was asking Harry how many dark wizards were on Harry's own marking pole at home.

Dark Plane – The Dark Plane exists just below Harry's feet so he has to invert himself into it. Stepping off the edge is just an absolute way of being forced between the worlds. I suspect that Per thought the edge exceptionally meaningful because that is how he figured out how it worked. The whole thing is bit fanciful on top of logical so spelling its function out completely is going to lead to literary trouble. The second mountain range was someplace with a high bowl like Denali that actually does have a cabin and a landing strip. Harry's mastery – Maybe fast, but he only needed to learn that confidence in his power was all he needed. The power to open the gateway is equivalent to controlling it, but if you don't know this you are merely a victim of your own situation. Which is why after one visit Per kept testing Harry, assuming he would catch on. Per could have taken Harry for another visit at the end to be sure, but he is more blunt than hospitable and assumes Harry would like to get on with his life now that he is not a danger. If rushing this is the only serious problem the story ends up having, I'll be pretty happy, and maybe I can rework 8 to fix it.

Chapter 19.

Home, Part II

"Good to see you, Harry," Candide said as she came out of the hearth, almost the first guest. Hermione eyed her with interest as Candide then greeted Snape in what might have been a restrained manner. She handed Harry the triple layer collection of Honeydukes chocolates with a red ribbon around it. "I assumed you were probably missing these."

Harry eagerly accepted the box. "Yes, thank you. Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure, something small . . . I can't stay long."

Harry glanced at his guardian, realizing that he didn't know what the status was in this department, but Snape's neutral expression gave nothing away and Harry led his guest to the drinks table in the main hall.

People began arriving in earnest after that and the hall filled with the pleasant rumble of conversation. Harry welcomed Vineet in from the front door. "You could have used our hearth," Harry pointed out.

"I did attempt this. I was redirected to a very nice house up the street," Vineet explained.

"Probably the Peterson's," Harry said, as he hung Vineet's cloak up on top of three others on the overloaded hooks. "Elizabeth, the daughter, is here. Where's Nandi tonight?"

"Visiting with our mothers," Vineet replied evenly.

It bothered Harry that he couldn't read anything into that, positive or negative. "In India . . . didn't she just visit last month?"

"If her mother were not willing to pay for these tickets, to make this trip she would not be able." As they entered the noisier main hall, Vineet had to bend closer to say, "I am thinking the weather may have something to do with these repeated visits."

"This feels like typical March weather," Harry pointed out, thinking it wasn't too bad, really.

"Precisely," Vineet intoned.

Fred and Ron pulled Harry away then, through the many chatting clusters, undeterred by Harry's attempt at doing introductions. "We just got it working, you have to come," Fred insisted. "George is with Dad, just for this, rather than here."

Harry was pressed down into a chair before the desk in the drawing room. Upon it sat something similar to a large crystal ball, although a badly scratched one.

"Look inside it, then," Fred insisted, pushing Harry forward so his nose left yet another mark on the old glass. Harry squinted at something that seemed to be moving inside of the globe. The shape came into focus and Harry sat straight when he recognized Mr. Weasley. Fred leaned over Harry and said, "He wanted to welcome you home. Said he was sorry he was in a meeting when you stopped in today."

Harry hadn't actually gone to look for his department head. After his stop in the Minister's office, he had forgotten. "Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked the exceptionally large-nosed vision of his friends' father.

"Harry!" a very tinny voice said. "Good to, uh, see you my boy!" Mr. Weasley appeared to be getting as good a picture as Harry was, given his close squinting. "Everything all right, then?"

"Yes, sir," Harry assured him, just as he had assured every guest that evening as they had arrived. This had inevitably been followed by assertions that he was better off without Belinda.

Mr. Weasley was saying, "Well, that's just splendid, Harry, my boy. Do stop in as soon as you can at the Burrow. Molly'd love to see you and it is just too quiet. We've even let the gnomes move into the broom shed, just to get a little noise."

"I will, Mr. Weasley," Harry promised.

Mr. Weasley began to reply but the crystal sphere went blue and then clear, flickered in and out a few times with bright streaks, and then went clear for good.

"Aye," Fred said in a very tired tone. "Well, you were finished, right?"

"Yes. That is slick. Did you invent that?" Harry asked while Fred carefully wrapped the crystal ball in black velvet and tenderly lowered it into a battered pink Muggle bowling ball bag.

"Yep, but it only works about a quarter of the time. Still working out the glitches and also getting the charms to stick long-term, and not cancel each other out . . ." He sounded worn down by the notion.

Ron said, "It's ruddy brilliant and it'd be a real seller if you could get it working better."

Fred tilted his head from side to side. He was wearing a violent purple smoking jacket with tails this evening which made him look like a showman. "Yeah, but I'm blasted tired of working on it. I think I'll put it aside for a bit."

"That put-aside cupboard of yours must be getting rather full," Ron criticized.

"Hey," Fred countered as he hefted the bowling bag. "Some of our best new ideas come out of that cupboard – usually on their own," he added in tone of confession. To Harry he said, "Dad really does want you over for dinner."

Ron added, "Yeah, he's been making us right crazy with asking us if we've a new owl from you and how we thought you might be doing. I kept telling him it wasn't worse than most stuff that usually happens to you."

"No, it wasn't," Harry agreed, wanting dearly to put it behind him and return to normalcy. Maybe after this party everyone would return to treating him as they had before, rather than with the extra curiosity and side whispers he had been noticing early in the evening.

Harry left them packing up and returned to the drinks table only to discover that he had forgotten where he had put his cup. He retraced his steps around the room with some dismay. "Looking for this?" Aaron asked, grabbing up the burl wood Finnish cup tethered to Harry's neck.

"Oh yeah, thanks," Harry said. "No wonder I couldn't find it." He went back to the punch bowl and filled his small cup, drank it down, and filled it again before joining Aaron and his date as they discussed the upcoming Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match.

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Over near the door to the quieter library, Kerry Ann abandoned Vineet to intercept Fred Weasley, the only interesting male in the room who was reputed to be unattached. Vineet watched the house-elf creep in to hand a steaming mug, smelling tantalizingly of chocolate, to Hermione. Using this interruption as an opening, he followed the elf in.

Hermione was just closing her eyes with her nose over the mug. "No one makes a hot cocoa like Winky," she reverently stated.

Vineet put his hands behind his back as a way of resisting a bout of chocolate jealousy. "Harmony," he intoned with a small bow of his head.

"Hi," Hermione said, gesturing with her mug. "Lots of interesting books." She sounded as though she wished to excuse herself for hiding away from the party, but she couldn't help continuing to peruse the shelves.

Vineet stepped over and looked the shelf up and down. "The collection is incomplete, I think."

"Is it?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Flight or Fright, should be here beside Goldwing's Duel or Die," Vineet pointed out.

"Oh," Hermione uttered. "I have to admit . . . I'm not as well read in offensive magic, more defensive . . . as well as general knowledge." She lowered her mug to the small desk, careful to set it on the blotter. "Like these old Wizard Encyclopedia Albion Annuals. I don't remember these here before." She pulled one of the tall thin books off the bottom shelf and flipped it open. "Nineteen Hundred and Seventy Five, that was ages ago. 'Harvey Meyers becomes the first assistant to the Minister in five years to survive more than six months in his position before he mysteriously disappears . . .' Bad times, I guess." She put the book back away, as though that long ago was not worth dwelling on. "It's Vineet, right?"

"Few call me that, actually," Vineet said, running his brown finger along a high shelf. "Usually I am called by Vishnu."

"Oh, that's a nice name," Hermione said. "Why does Harry call you Vineet?"

"It is officially my name. I was mistaken in introducing myself in this way to him, perhaps."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Is the other your dachnam or something?"

Vineet ceased his shelf browsing. "Yes. You know of such things?"

Hermione blushed lightly and shrugged. "I've . . . done a bit of reading."

Vineet eyed the abandoned mug on the blotter and bit his lip before saying, "Harmony, you have been Harry's friend for a long time, I think."

Hermione replied, "A very long time, and my name isn't Harmony."

The evening wound on and the party was beginning to thin out. A glance at the clock showed it to only be 10:00, which meant that many people had responsibilities the next day. Harry wandered into the dining room. Snape sat at the table, apparently sharing a pot of tea with Hermione who stood beside the hearth. Harry, his feet unaccustomed to so many hours standing on a hard stone floor, sat heavily across from his guardian.

"How is the party?" Snape asked.

"'S good," Harry replied. "People are going home early, though."

"Fortunately," Snape said, the flicker of the hearth making his expression unclear. "As it may be getting to be that time."

"You think?" Harry asked in disappointment.

Snape sat back and turned his teacup in his long hands. "I expected that you would wish to impress Rodgers upon your return . . ."

"Yeah," Harry breathed. "I do wish."

Aaron came in then, arm around his date. "I'll see you tomorrow, Bro. Good to see you again, Professor." They were gone moments later. Even less sound came from the main hall after that.

"I have a question," Harry asked Snape, thinking of Aaron's arm comfortably around his date's waist. "If you had to arrange a marriage for me . . ."

"If I what?" Snape interrupted. "How much of that punch have you consumed?"

Harry stared into his cup, still tethered to his neck. "I lost track."

Snape appeared highly disapproving of this. He sighed and said, "Better mix you a dose of neutralizer before you go to sleep."

"Thanks," Harry uttered gratefully; he really did need to be at his best.

"Do not expect it next time," Snape growled lightly. "But . . . you were in the middle of some bizarre question . . ."

Harry regrouped his thoughts. "Yeah. So if you HAD to arrange a marriage, who would you pick?"

"For you?" Snape confirmed sharply.

"Yeah," Harry persisted.

Snape fell thoughtful a few seconds before replying. "I expect I would choose Ms. Weasley."

"What?" Harry uttered in surprise.

Hermione giggled and said, "That would go over well all around."

"Why her?" Harry asked.

Snape crossed his arms. "Why not? Seems to tolerate you well enough."

"Well, she's like a sister, for one thing," Harry countered.

"I also think she'd be a good match," Hermione offered.

"Don't you start too," Harry complained before he glanced around, "Did Ron go?"

"No, I think he's still here," Hermione replied. "Ginny and he are very different, you know."

"No, they aren't," Harry argued, sounding difficult.

Snape sipped his drink and retorted, "You did ask." Eyes sharp he said, "Perhaps you were hoping for a different answer?"

Harry looked away. Maybe he had been.

After the few remaining guests had gone, Harry yawned and rose to go to his room. "Are you going back to Hogwarts tonight?" he asked.

"Others are covering until morning," Snape replied. "I will go then."

Harry smiled broadly at this news, making Snape glance away from his bright elation. "I'll see you in the morning, then," Harry said.

Snape stood as well. "I'll mix you a bit of potion . . ."

Harry rubbed his forehead where a mild headache bit at him. "Thanks."

Harry was sitting on his bed reading a bit more for training the next day when Snape entered, carrying a mug half-full of thick fizzing pink liquid. As he accepted the mug,

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Harry said, "Maybe I should have held off on the party. I barely skimmed tomorrow's readings."

"Rodgers cannot kick you out," Snape stated.

"And you would know this, how?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Snape's lips curled. "I work closely with a member of the Wizengamot, remember?"

Again, Harry found himself not caring that such influence had been brought to bear on his life. "Tell her thanks; will you?"

"Certainly," Snape intoned. "And I think sleep will serve you better than reading more at this point."

Harry closed the book on advanced distraction techniques and set it on the nightstand. When Snape moved toward the door, Harry said, "Thanks for everything."

"Thanks are unnecessary, Harry," Snape stated soberly.

Harry considered Snape as he stood in the doorway, worn robes lit both by the chandelier behind him and by Harry's beside lamp. He had changed in Harry's absence; he had mellowed and his hard edges were no longer sharp enough to cut. Harry too had changed, but he hadn't yet figured out how, exactly. All he knew was that they had drifted apart and he couldn't see how to pull them back in sync.

"Should you need anything, Harry . . ." Snape intoned with a dip of his head.

It was queer for Snape to be so outwardly caring yet feel more the stranger for it. "Sure," Harry said.

After a long look Snape departed and a minute later the chandelier went dim.

The next day Rodgers treated Harry as brusquely as he had before Harry left and seemed resigned to his resuming Auror training. To Harry's relief, he didn't expect him to produce spells that Harry had missed, nor did he select him more than average to discuss the readings and Harry managed all right on that part, to his relief. His mind felt clear and uncluttered, and remembering what he had read the day before was unexpectedly easy.

The day passed quickly, bringing with it the wonderful feeling of a life back in order, and soon they were packing up their things to head home. Mr. Weasley appeared

while Harry was chatting with Tonks, who had given him a very welcome hug upon his approach to her desk. It was Mr. Weasley's slap on the back that really reminded Harry how little physical contact he had had during his time away.

"Everything all set, my boy?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, unable to avoid dropping his eyes as he replied.

"Good to have you back. Things sure are busy around here . . . we could use the extra help." With that and a wink he was gone.

"Don't listen to that," Tonks breathed when Mr. Weasley was out of range.

Harry merely snickered, too happy to be back in these surroundings to care if he were being teased and by whom, happy enough to be near Tonks that he found himself caring much less about Belinda's breaking up with him.

Folded up on the desk was the Daily Prophet. Tonks scooped it up and opened to an inside page. With a mischievous glint in her eye, she asked, "The Regionals are coming up for London. Think I should enter?"

Harry stared at her dully. "Regionals?"

"Gosh, you don't know? Harry, you're the judge, aren't you?" She quickly folded the paper and said, "Oh, only for the championship . . ."

Harry grabbed the paper away from her and read the article.

Free Field Filling Fast

The 1st Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Competition enters its first phase when the London Regional commences this Saturday at the Ministry of Magic Atrium. The Minister herself will introduce this inaugural competition. It is expected that the Championship judge, Harry Potter will make an appearance, as he has recently returned from a mysterious and previously unannounced retreat in the Far North. The finals will also be held in the Ministry Atrium on May 10th. Tickets are available at the Leaky Cauldron and all Gringott's locations, or by owl to our offices here at The Daily Prophet.

"Wow," Harry uttered. "Bones really is putting together a dueling competition."

"It was your idea, wasn't it?" Tonks asked as she took the paper back.

"Severus' actually . . . he suggested it as a joke."

"It's brilliant," she said. "Think I should enter?"

"Why not?" Harry asked.

She twisted her mouth and said, "I'm not really a dueler."

"Yeah, but you're an Auror, doesn't that already give you an advantage?"

She looked up at him with a grin. "I'm pretty sure some others around here are going to be in that regional. You and me have a history, does that give me an advantage?"

"Uh . . ." Harry began, having not thought ahead to having to judge his friends, should they make it to the finals. "I would try to make it not," he insisted.

"You're no fun," she teased.

"It has to be fair," Harry asserted, unable to imagine a tournament that wasn't.

That Saturday, Harry, and a surprisingly large number of others, made their way to the Ministry Atrium. Harry emerged from a hearth at the far end from where a dueling platform had been set up and had to weave through the audience filling the hall to get closer. Minister Bones stood off to the side, near the golden gate; she was reading a parchment and put it away then as though ready to start. Right beside the platform, the crowd was packed tightly and Harry had to push his way through. He was hurrying because he expected the Minister would be looking for him before she started.

"Aye thare!," a middle aged witch in old maroon robes complained when Harry slid in front of her.

"'Scuse me," Harry said. The witch's eyes widened from annoyed to meek when he glanced back.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones greeted him offhandedly when he finally made it to her side. Belinda already stood at Bones' side. She glanced away, down at the papers she held, and then off over the crowd. The Minister spent undo time giving detailed instructions to another member of her staff regarding registration requirements, so Harry had far too much time to glance repeatedly at Belinda and attempt, unsuccessfully, to imagine her and Percy out on a date.

Their long, awkward moment ended when Bones stepped up onto the wooden platform and announced the opening of the First Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Tournament. As she spoke, a broad-shouldered figure gimped up beside Harry.

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"Potter," Moody muttered in a kind of greeting.

"Sir, are you competing?"

Moody snorted. "I'm judgin'"

The gathered spectators began clapping and Moody gave Harry a shove toward the Minister. Harry wondered, as he put his grimy trainer up on the polished wooden platform, if he shouldn't have worn a bit nicer robes.

"Mr. Potter is deeply disappointed that he cannot compete, but that means the field is wide open for the rest of you. And . . ." With a flourish she pulled out a stack of note cards and waved them. "There are rather a large number of you wishing to claim the title of Britain's best dueler. So we will have a long show for you today while we eliminate all but the toughest, fastest, and smartest of you all."

She invited the competitors onto the platform and handed the introductions over to Moody. Harry tried to depart the platform with the Minister, but Moody clamped a hand on his shoulder and held him fast. Harry had to turn his head hard to see the whole line which ran the gamut from a stooped old man who must be well over a hundred and twenty, to a housewitch, still in her flowered apron, to a pigtailed girl who looked as though she should be just starting at Hogwarts next year. Harry glanced back again when he thought he recognized his trainer, and indeed Rodgers stood on the very end of the line beside one of the Weasley twins.

Moody went over the rules in a voice that sounded more threatening than informative. He finally released Harry when he selected two competitors for the first round. As he passed them, Harry gave Rodgers and the Weasley twin a wave. He wondered where the other twin was.

Harry spotted Mr. Weasley in the crowd and made his way over beside him. "Fred or George?" Harry asked.

"Fred." Mr. Weasley replied and then leaned closer to whisper, "George is registered in the Wales/Midlands Regional. Used our cousins' address to avoid one of them getting eliminated so early."

The crowd howled in delight as the first pair – the little girl and the old man – simultaneously wrapped each other up in toffee. Moody waved the sticky sweet away and growled at them to start anew and warned that if they did it again, they were both disqualified.

As the competitors' numbers were whittled down, few showed any real dueling ability and ones that did went through untouched until the final round where Fred and

Rodgers faced each other. Real spells banged forth then rather than exaggerated pranks. The crowd made appreciative noises –and backed up a few steps – after Rodgers' dome block sent Fred's ice curse shattering to the floor and off the edge of the platform. In the end though, Fred could not hold out against someone who spent hours everyday drilling. Time was about to be called for a draw when Rodgers demonstrated that he had been holding back all along. He sent a polymorphic chain binding at Fred who didn't recognize it and attempted a Charmer Counter probably because the chain did seem to snake a bit as it flew out of Rodgers' wand.

Rodgers didn't leave Fred in a helpless heap for long. Rather than wait for Moody to do the cancellation, as had happened after most of the rounds, Rodgers freed Fred and helped him to his feet.

The crowd cheered, most likely for the winner being determined rather than any acts of sportsmanship. Moody handed Rodgers a half-size brass wand on a chain with a tag attached upon which Moody used a spell to inscribe Reginald Whitherspoon Rodgers below the tournament name. Rodgers accepted the award with more delight than Harry would have expected from him. The crowd clapped again and the Minister returned, calling Harry back up just long enough to remind everyone to return for the Finals.

"Congratulations, sir," Harry said to his trainer, and then turned quickly to say, "Good try, Fred," to his friend, who merely mumbled something unintelligible in reply.

When Fred had joined Mr. Weasley, Rodgers, apparently still captivated by victory, gave Harry a quirked smile and assured him, "Easy win. Hope the Finals present more of a challenge." He said this while holding the brass wand up by the chain and letting it swing back and forth.

Harry hurried home from the competition to see if his guardian had arrived yet. He had not, but Winky had put out chocolate biscuits and hot cocoa and the scent greeted Harry upon his arrival. Harry was looking forward to the next day's lunch at the Evans', idle thoughts of which lifted him lightly above the troubles of the last few months.

Halfway through the plate of irresistible treats, Harry finished reading the day's Prophet and sorting the post. The Floo flaring preceded Snape into the room.

"Hey, Severus," Harry greeted him. "I wasn't sure McGonagall was going to let you off two weekends in a row."

Snape put down the small trunk he carried and helped himself to a biscuit. "She was remarkably amenable. I think she may believe you to be in need of closer watching."

"That's not true," Harry complained. "Everything's fine now."

Snape ceased nibbling and said, "I did not attempt to dissuade her assumptions, I must confess." He picked up the post and tapped the nearly empty biscuit plate with the edges of the letters. "I see Winky is working to fatten you up."

"Is she?" Harry said in surprise. He tugged at his exceptionally baggy shirt. "I suppose that is easier than buying new clothes."

"They fed you there in Finland?" Snape asked snidely from the doorway.

"Yes, rather a lot. You should try five hours of Nordic skiing in one direction and five hours back the next day."

The two of them had a quiet dinner with Harry absorbed in his far-behind readings, but asking Snape about anything of interest in the text. "So, it says here a repelling barrier rarely holds around a cursed object. But it doesn't say why."

Snape put down the two chunks of bread he had just torn in half. "I don't believe a good theory exists to explain that. Magical theory is a spotty affair, you do realize."

"Speaking of theory, I didn't tell you that I tested a hover spell on the airplane."

"Did you? And the result?"

"Worked like a charm."

"Did it?"

Snape sat thoughtfully for a while until Harry said, "You missed the first Regional today at the Ministry. Rodgers won it." When Snape responded only with a raised brow, Harry added, "Only Fred provided any real competition for him and not really that much, so he won easily."

"Did he?" Snape confirmed in a tone that indicated he had changed the topic of his deep thinking.

"I think Fred was lucky Rodgers was in a good mood," Harry opined.

The logs in the hearth shifted, throwing sparks into the room. "And the other twin?" Snape asked.

"Registered for a different Regional."

"Still flaunting the rules," Snape muttered.

"Does it really matter if it's not your rules they're flaunting?" Harry teased.

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"They flaunt Ministry rules all of the time in that little shop of theirs. Those would be your rules now," Snape pointed out in a deceptively mild tone.

Harry frowned and tried to pretend to be reading, but the book was not holding his attention. A little peevishly, he said, "You know, they won't let me do anything at the Ministry, so I don't think of them as my rules yet."

"And when they are truly yours?" Snape continued to probe, which Harry wished he wouldn't.

Harry put his nose closer to his book. "I'll figure it out then."

A minute later Snape said, "Some believe in allowing a little cheating. I find it leads to an uncontrolled atmosphere of poor behavior."

"I'm reading about curse limitations here," Harry pointed out.

Dryly, Snape said, "Rather slowly. You have been on the same page for ten minutes."

Harry couldn't deny that. "Want to play some chess?" he asked brightly, prepared to close his book.

"Your readings . . ." Snape commanded, tapping Harry's book with one long finger.

"All right . . ." Harry breathed and redoubled his efforts at taking in the words before him.

Polly Evans' small house, as usual, was overflowing with the scent of cooking and home when they arrived. The sight of the children gave Harry a painful twinge that he might have been isolated forever from all of this. Patricia's husband stood to shake hands and Pamela gave Harry a hug. Basel, Patricia's son, toddled up and handed Harry a toy rocking horse with almost grave seriousness.

"Thank you," Harry told the boy as he shook off his cloak. He then took a chair near where he and his sister played. Snape sat on the end of the couch and considered the room with a hooded gaze. Conversation resumed and Harry noticed that Snape was drawing into himself.

Feeling he needed to make up for Snape's lack of sociability, Harry launched into a long description of his trip to Finland. "So, I can ski rather well now and it feels downright warm here," Harry concluded, holding back a frown at Snape's continued reticence. It was almost as though Harry's story had sent his guardian farther away.

Briar handed Harry a toy plastic goat during the silence, so Harry shifted to sit on the floor to play farm with the children, occasionally hiding toys or holding them out of reach in the hopes of inspiring some magic in the children to get them back, but he had no luck with this and the children were deciding he wasn't a very good playmate.

Greg departed to run to the store for something and Pamela immediately moved to plunk down beside Snape. "How are things in the magical world? Can I see a spell?"

Even though she had asked this of his guardian, Harry took out his wand and said. "I learned this one this week. Repulsum Captum," he uttered while drawing a circle in the air around a toy sitting on the table. "Try to pick it up," Harry said.

Pamela gave it a try, but when her hand got close, the toy house moved away in a little burst as though magnetically repelled. She tried again, with a quicker motion and the house slid off the far side of the table onto the floor.

"Oops. Usually we use it on large, heavy things," Harry explained.

Snape said, "I think that you have been doing so for practice because larger objects are harder to charm. Small objects one does not want stolen are the most common use for that spell."

"Maybe," Harry said. "It would be like our trainer to make learning something as hard as possible."

"Aw," Pamela sang in false sympathy and Harry was surprised to find Snape smiling lightly in the wake of it. She slapped Snape on the arm. "Let's see one from you now."

After a moment's thought, Snape tapped Briar on the head with an Obfuscation Charm.

"She's melting? Where'd she go or did you make her invisible?" Pamela asked. "Oh wait, I still see her . . . no I don't."

"This spell does not impart complete invisibility," Snape explained, sounding as ever the teacher. "If one knows the person is present and concentrates, they can see the person just fine." Pamela called for Briar to come over to her and had to use her hands a lot to locate the girl to pick her up.

"That's a eerie one." She stood up and carried the invisible girl to the kitchen. "Hey Patty, take a look."

"Uh, oh," Harry uttered.

Patricia stepped to the doorway and with some surprise, accepted the invisible, giggling burden. "Who did that to you?" she asked.

Pamela said, "I'm not telling."

Patricia seemed a bit alarmed, even though Briar, from her conversation and giggles, was not. Harry stood and cancelled the charm. Briar re-melted into clear view and clapped her hands. "I hope neither of you turns magical," Patricia said to the girl. "It's hard enough keeping track of you when you aren't." She set Briar on the floor, where she quickly returned to her playing.

Pamela returned to her seat and said wistfully, "We missed a lot of fun growing up, I see." To Snape she said, "So, how is teaching going?"

"Same as always. The students are unruly, uninspired, and unrepentant about doing poor work on their assignments."

In a mock serious tone Pamela said, "But you keep trying anyway."

"Yes," Snape admitted quietly, and Harry thought he was unsettled by the unaccustomed teasing.

Lunch was being carried to the dining room and Harry jumped up to help. Minutes later they settled into eat and Harry enjoyed two heaping plates full of lasagna while listening to Pamela untiringly keep a conversation going with Snape. For once, Snape was putting some effort into his side of things, despite the lack of topics in common between them that were safe within earshot of Greg.

It wasn't until Harry caught sight of Polly's furrowed brow as she listened in on this conversation from the far end of the table, that Harry thought anything of it. He watched more closely then as Snape was saying, "The Board that oversees our school, for example, was influenced too easily in the past by the interests of a few, but now with these people gone, it is in a state of lethargy and the headmistress and I have been working out ways of injecting our own agenda into their discussions in the hopes of moving some things along."

Harry expected this dry political topic to fall flat, but Pamela leaned in slightly on her elbow and said, "When it was manipulated before, what purpose did they put it to?"

Snape paused, presumably to formulate a Muggle-safe response. Harry let the bite on his fork go cold as he glanced between the two of them and attempted to overcome the sense that they were getting along startlingly better than they had been just a half

hour ago. At Harry's welcome-home party Candide had been distracted and hadn't stayed long at all and had only cursorily interacted with Snape. After listening to Snape and Pamela's continuing friendly conversation, including Snape's highly unexpected outgoing contribution, Harry found himself sending a small helpless shrug at Polly, who he hoped wasn't as unhappy as she looked.

By mid-afternoon, when Patricia began bundling her children in layers of outerwear, Polly seemed resigned, although the conversation had not gone beyond general amiability, but for Snape, that was odd enough. Harry found himself shaking the notion that something was possibly budding between his guardian and his cousin. Pamela was just curious about magic, Harry argued to himself regarding her extra attention to Snape.

But when they arrived back in their own hall, Harry heard himself say to his adopted father, "You were having a good time."

Snape turned sharply, his boot scraping on the stone floor. "What of it?" he asked, clearly defensive in an instant, which spoke volumes.

Harry, careful not to appear to backpedal, said casually, "Well, last visit you were baiting Pamela terribly, not exactly cruel, but pretty close."

Snape hesitated as he formulated a response. "I wasn't in the mood to be bothered," he finally said and headed for the stairs.

"Bothered with what?" Harry asked, pursuing him.

Snape turned at the bottom of the stairs and said, "Muggle females. Overly curious ones who are inspired by what they see as a challenge."

Harry took this in and instead of arguing on the merits said, "You use that Legilimency a little too much."

"Don't you?" Snape countered.

"No."

"Really? I find it almost always useful." His tone turned against Harry then. "I cannot imagine working in the Ministry without knowing what was going on around me. Nothing is on the surface there."

"It is with Mr. Weasley," Harry argued.

"Well, consider yourself fortunate to have him, then. Honestly, you have never used that skill at the Ministry?"

Harry gave in trying to steer the conversation and thought back. "Once, accidentally with Minister Bones."

Snape seemed intrigued. "Learn anything useful?"

"That she likes me well enough but is mostly very happy I'm not opposed to her."

"Very useful information," Snape pointed out.

"I suppose. It's not fair to people to do that all the time though. You aren't at risk anymore, Severus," Harry argued to Snape's back, because he was now heading up the stairs.

At the midway point Snape turned and said over his shoulder, "Survival habits can be very hard to break."

By the time Snape reached the balcony, Harry remembered the original topic. "But what about Pamela? Polly didn't seem exactly pleased."

Snape leaned over the railing to say, "There is nothing with Pamela except an unexpected possibility and unlike you, who must supposition, I know Mrs. Evans is displeased." He leaned away and then back again to add, "And I know Pamela would be pleased to have displeased her so." Then he was gone.

"Wonderful," Harry muttered under his breath.

Harry went to his own room and took out his nicest parchment to send a thank you letter to Per and Siri. His gratitude flowed easier now and he was glad he had waited to write the letter. He also wrapped a box of Weasley Wizard Wheezes Fruit Metamorphos Sweets in brown paper for Hedwig to take as a present, but when he collected his owl out of her cage she didn't hold out her claw for the package and nipped him instead.

"Hey," Harry chastised her. "This is hardly the first time you'll have made this trip," he pointed out to her. "And this will probably be the last time." Her head bobbed a few times but she still didn't hold out her claw. Harry pondered this unusual behavior. "Do you want me to address the letter to Siri?" Harry asked. When Hedwig tilted her head as though interested, Harry put the letter in a new envelope with a different address. Hedwig took the delivery this time without hesitation.

After finishing his post and faced with the prospect of poorly defined worry, Harry went to the door of the drawing room and asked, "So is anything up with Pamela?"

Snape's shoulders fell in annoyance. "Nothing at the moment. Probably nothing ever. What is this leap to conclusions about?"

Harry stepped in and would have dropped into the chair before the desk, except it held a pile of large parchments. "I just don't want you to upset Polly, is all."

Snape lowered his quill and straightened up from the document he was working on, although his hair still hung before his face. "I do not intend to put your extended family at risk of wishing you had never entered their lives. Besides, blood relatives cannot be lost so easily." He bent forward again and muttered, "Believe me, I know."

Tuesday's training still hadn't started and it was already a quarter to nine. Aaron and Kerry Ann sat joking and exchanging prank spells while Harry stared off into the distance, wondering again if Belinda had really meant everything she had said when Harry had stopped in to see her after his return, or if some of it was just anger speaking.

"Someone should check, perhaps, what is going on," Vineet suggested without looking up from the book he held open before him.

"I nominate Harry," Kerry Ann chimed in.

More than willing to be distracted from his thoughts, Harry shrugged and went down the corridor to the office. It was empty, as was the file room. Growing more curious, Harry wandered down to the department head's office. Mr. Weasley was sitting with his feet up on his small desk with a report open before him. He quickly sat up normally when Harry greeted him. "Harry, my boy, what can I do for you?"

"Do you know where everyone is? Rodgers and Tonks aren't around, nor is Shacklebolt or any of the senior apprentices."

"Hm," Mr. Weasley huffed, put the report down and passed Harry in the doorway.

Harry moved to follow but jerked his head back to glance at the report which was entitled, Magical Threats Post-Voldemort. To his displeasure he didn't have enough time to read even a sentence of it, since Mr. Weasley had turned around to see if he were following. They reached the office and Mr. Weasley was just confirming for himself that the whole staff were absent when Tonks came flying down the corridor from the lifts.

She looked frantic and her spiked hair drooped raggedly. She held out a parchment for Mr. Weasley, who read it with his brow lowered. Harry leaned over a little to try

to see. The title line read, Muggle Liaison Office followup request to telephone call of 8:27 a.m. "Why the panic?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Tonks said, "Reggie kept that office number in his wallet, and he hasn't come in yet this morning, and there's no word from him."

"Something happened to Mr. Rodgers?" Harry asked.

Tonks replied, "We don't know, but I want to check. The police found someone in the Docklands with, as it says on the note: a strange wooden rod in his cloak pocket, no apparent identification in his wallet but a note saying to call that number in case of emergency. And its the number for the Muggle Liaison desk here at the Ministry." To Mr. Weasley she said, "Note says whoever it was 'as been taken to the Royal. I can nip over and double-check in just minutes."

Mr. Weasley handed the note back. "Tone down the hair and take someone with you."

Harry tried to appear available. Tonks looked through him as she said, "Fetch Kerry Ann; will you?"

"Sure," Harry said, feeling let down as well as worried about their trainer, even as little as he liked the man personally.

Kerry Ann bounced to her feet when Harry explained the little he knew. From the doorway, Tonks said. "Harry, you too. The both of you," she looked at Vineet and Aaron, "Go man the office with Mr. Weasley, just in case."

Aaron, who moments before had been jesting, immediately fell serious and obeyed.

Tonks said, "I picked you two to come along because I know you have Muggle clothes with you. Change and let's go."

The information desk at the Royal London Hospital was not cooperative in helping them locate one Fred Bloggs. The overly made-up woman insisted that they speak with the police if they had information. Tonks was about to launch into something sharp, when Harry tugged on her sleeve. She allowed Harry to pull her aside, where he said, "I know whom to ask."

She gave him a coy look and said, "Your Legilimency is getting as good as Severus'. Lead the way."

Harry went to the directory to find the right department and they rode up in the lift in their own silences. The nurses at the station outside the lift were more than willing to give them a room number.

Chapter 19

As soon as Tonks opened the door, after receiving no answer to her knock, she breathed, "Oh, Reggie."

In the first bed the Auror trainer was lying unconscious with a pale sheen to his skin and unusually deep-set eyes. His roommate was intently watching a loud television and didn't even look over at their entrance.

Tonks pulled the curtain to separate the beds and leaned over Rodgers. "Reggie," she prompted, shaking him lightly. He didn't look capable of coming around, but his eyes cracked open and zeroed in on Tonks. "Still with us?" Tonks prodded. At Rodgers' weak nod, she straightened and said to Kerry Ann, "Go over to Mungo's and arrange for an ambulance transfer." Kerry Ann appeared a little doubtful, but headed out. Tonks said to Harry, "Stay with him. I'll be back as soon as I can." She started away but then turned and whispered, "Consider yourself on guard."

Harry pulled over a chair and sat beside the bed. He tossed his cloak over his shoulder and held his wand before him under it, ready for use. Rodgers' gaze found its slightly unfocussed way over to Harry. "What happened?" Harry asked.

Rodgers raised his hand to rub his eyes. A thin tube was taped to the back of his hand. Harry traced it up to a plastic sack of liquid above the headboard. "I'm not sure," his trainer admitted. He narrowed his eyes as though lost in memory and said, "I was investigating a call about some silent fireworks in the abandoned Titan warehouse. I heard some strange noises and when I stepped inside a Blasting Curse hit me. I didn't even see anything move. I got a block up for the second one but it was the hardest one I've ever had to counter. And then another one came . . . and another. I couldn't see a target and decided to beat a retreat." He hesitated then, eyes unfocused as though he were back at the scene he described. "I got outside behind a hunk of equipment and tried to Disapparate. I don't remember anything after that."

Rodgers stared at the ceiling, his sunken eyes pink. Harry unexpectedly found himself feeling sorry for the man.

Tonks returned then, with Mr. Weasley in tow. Harry had started to pull his wand around, but hadn't revealed it. He put it back away. Mr. Weasley leaned over the other aluminum rail on the bed. "All right there, Reginald? Who got the best of you?" he asked, sounding his most caring self.

Rodgers hmfed wryly. "I didn't see who hit me. And I couldn't seem to hit anyone back, even though I threw some serious spells in the direction of the attacks."

"Not just cloaked?" Tonks chimed in.

"They didn't move," Rodgers insisted in annoyance. "I can hit someone in a cloak who isn't moving between casts."

Mr. Weasley patted Rodgers shoulder. "Well, we'll get you to St. Mungo's and get a fuller report there."

Harry followed the two of them as they arranged to fill in many crinkly thin white sheets of Muggle paperwork. Finally, they wheeled Rodgers to the garage where an antique, but well-kept ambulance, waited. It had long, gleaming chrome horns on the roof and resembled a large old London cab except that it was white. The orderlies loaded the patient and then walked around it, pointing at the whitewalls and brass oil headlamps in astonishment.

Mr. Weasley rode inside, leaving Tonks and Harry behind. They walked around the garage until they were out of sight and Disapparated back to the Ministry. Tonks didn't speak, just went to her desk and with hard-set features, began filling out a report. Moody was also there now, intent upon something on his desk. Harry hovered beside Tonks' desk a minute before returning to the workout room and filling in his fellows, who were quizzing each other out of the assigned readings.

Figures stepping rapidly down the corridor drew all of their attention away from that and down to the office where Shacklebolt and Munz had just returned. Shacklebolt held out curved broken pieces of orange ceramic. Tonks took one of them and turned it in the bright light from the ceiling lamp.

"Found it near where Reggie was picked up. I think we have it all this time, so I was going to piece it together." With a clink Tonks set the piece back into his broad hands.

"Don't use magic to put it together," Tonks said. "There might be some residual charm on it."

"What is it?" Aaron asked. Harry had held back and was glad his fellow had dived in and asked.

"We still don't know," Tonks said, returning to her report. "But we keep finding them in suspicious places."

Mr. Weasley returned. "Ah, Kingsley," he said, sounding haggard. "Find anything?" When Kingsley held up a piece of the object he was reassembling with the help of a bottle of Almers glue, Mr. Weasley was at his side to take it up. "So we can tie this to Merton, then," he said idly.

Tonks looked up sharply.

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"Who's Merton?" Harry asked.

The room had grown a little tenser. "Someone we've been wanting to talk to but we can't seem to find," Tonks replied.

"His first initial 'M' as well?" Harry asked, feeling as though if he didn't receive an answer he might get extremely angry, now that he was free to.

"Maurdant," Mr. Weasley supplied. "Maurdant Merton, perennial trouble for years and years. Collector of unique objects, who isn't above stealing them when the owner refuses to sell or be coerced into giving them up. When we aren't investigating him, he comes in and raises a stink about someone he doesn't like. He's taken up new lodgings all of a sudden and we don't know where. Every time we get close we find some inexplicable things left behind."

Shacklebolt held up the patchwork object, the grey glue still oozing from the seams. Mr. Weasley gingerly took it. It was bulbous with three lobes melded together in the middle and three opposing fluted extrusions not unlike a vase might have. The main body wasn't much bigger than a crystal ball. "So, what is this?" Mr. Weasley asked rhetorically.

"Give it to Harry," Tonks suggested when the room remained silent.

Mr. Weasley seemed mildly surprised by this suggestion but gamely gestured for Harry to come take the specimen. Harry, curious, but also aware of all the eyes upon him, approached their department head and reached out to take the orange object. Before his hand got close he felt a queer shiver run through him and he pulled his hand away. That retreat wasn't enough though; as if a channel had been opened between himself and the object, his chest buzzed with a queer vibrating alarm. Harry must have stepped back because he bumped the cubicle partition, knocking down a pinned up photograph of Shacklebolt's dog.

"Harry?" several voices said in concern.

Harry focused on the object held in Mr. Weasley's hands. He couldn't imagine how the man was surviving that. "Put it down," Harry insisted in alarm.

Mr. Weasley did so, setting it on Shacklebolt's clean desk. "Harry?" Mr. Weasley prompted.

"It's evil," Harry explained, but that didn't seem to cover it. Most cursed objects radiated their dark power with the personality of their spellbinder. This strange thing felt mindless, like a machine, but at the same time malevolently powerful.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley prompted again from much closer, although Harry hadn't noticed him approach. With him stepping between Harry and Shacklebolt's desk, the effect snapped off and Harry drooped, limp with relief. Mr. Weasley surveyed the others in the room as though looking for advice. "Maybe no one should touch it without dragonhide gloves or metal gauntlets on. You all right, Harry?"

Feeling his face heat up at all of the odd attention he had attracted, Harry said, "Yeah."

"Well, fortunately Reggie is going to be all right . . . should be out tomorrow, in fact, although I told him to take a few days off. Moody and Munz, can you two work out handling the junior Apprentices until he gets back?" He didn't wait for a reply to this before departing.

Moody heaved himself to his feet and led them back down to the workout room. Kerry Ann said, "We can do our reading review . . . that's what we've been doing in fact."

"How about drills?" Moody growled.

"Not today yet," Kerry Ann admitted.

"We'll do some o' those then." Moody then uttered something that made Harry's bones ache in unpleasant memory. "Potter, you up here in front. Two others o' you pair up there."

Harry pulled out his wand before even returning to the front of the room.

"You disappointed me last time you were up here, Potter. And you've been gone. Getting out of practice, I'll wager." He tapped his wand on the ring on his hand as he spoke. "Let's see how bad the damage is then."

He threw a chain binding that Harry dissolved with a combination fire curse and blasting counter. They weren't spells he had ever used together before; they had simply flowed out of his wand as though it was natural for them to.

Moody lowered his wand. "That was interesting," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, taking that as a compliment.

"Overconfidence, Potter," Moody growled and Harry guessed what was coming as soon as Moody's wand started turning in a circle. Harry had the counter ready and actually had to wait to cast it.

"Jabbajabba," Harry calmly incanted just as the maroon ballooning beast emerged from Moody's wand.

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It popped like a giant bubblegum bubble, momentarily leaving jagged maroon splotches on the walls and ceiling. The other apprentices, rather than running their own drills, had stopped to watch this unexpected duel.

"You asked your dad about that one, I suppose?" Moody asked.

"No," Harry honestly answered and then declined to explain further.

Moody huffed but returned to drilling normally after that, before finally switching off to work with Kerry Ann instead.

Harry felt a bit like he had won his own Regional dueling competition.

> Author's Notes:
> Thanks for the Britpicking. Would not have thought the perfect tense of "get" would be different.

Chapter 11.

Tangled Webs

Harry's training continued to be chaotic until Thursday when Rodgers returned, looking a little run down and moving stiffly and slowly.

"How are you, sir?" Kerry Ann was the first to ask.

"Mostly here," Rodgers returned in a tone clearly intended to deflect sympathy.

Aaron asked, "Was someone getting even for losing in the dueling competition, do you think?" This suggestion had been floated around in the Department.

Rodgers replied, "If he or she were that good they should have just won it outright. I'm not sure what the motivation was. Let's get into some real training, though. I have a meeting and some paperwork to attend to as well once you are set on the new spells this morning."

He taught them some new blocks, which were not on the agenda – dome-surrounded crystalline blocks that were extremely hard to produce because they were really two blocks, one inside the other. Despite his stooped posture, Rodgers patience was higher than normal and he worked meticulously with each of them for most of the morning, only mentioning once in a stab at being snide, that he would have expected Harry to have mastered it on the second try. His attempt at being difficult came off so badly, that Harry actually felt more sorry for Rodgers after he had said it.

They worked on the new spells by themselves until Tonks came in and told Harry that Mr. Weasley wanted to see him. Oddly, she followed Harry down to their department head's office and even knocked on the door before Harry had the chance.

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"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley said graciously. "Come in, have a seat. Shut the door."

There wasn't much space in the office with the door shut, since visitors usually sat half in the corridor. Harry managed to sit only by propping his knee up against the closed desk drawer. Mr. Weasley clasped his fingers together in his lap. On top of his filing cabinet, his gloves did the same. Harry noticed how much older Mr. Weasley looked with his hair thinning away to nothing on the top of his shiny head.

"I need to talk to you, Harry, about the issues that drew you away so unexpectedly."

"I'm sorry about that," Harry said truthfully. "If I'd been a little more honest with myself, I could have given you more warning."

"It isn't the lack of announcement that matters at this point," Mr. Weasley clarified. He fell silent and looked around his desk. Harry was used to silences now, but didn't expect them from Mr. Weasley. Releasing the corner of the folders that he had lifted, Mr. Weasley finally said, "It's like this, Harry. There are concerns about your sudden attractiveness by dark creatures and I-"

"From whom?" Harry interrupted.

"Uh, it doesn't matter who initiated the investigation; it is an organizational issue now." Mr. Weasley rearranged folders on his desk for no purpose.

Harry sat back; he had thought that he was clear of this. Someone had used influence, in fact, on Rodgers to keep Harry in the program. The likely candidates for that influence were Minister Bones herself and McGonagall working through the Wizengamot. Someone else with influence was still working against his presence, apparently.

"What do I have to do?" Harry asked.

"Just go through this interview with me," Mr. Weasley answered reassuringly. "Others tried to insist on conducting it but I pulled rank, so to speak, as your departmental superior. On the other hand if my report isn't sufficient, the issue may not be put to rest." He pulled out a scribbled note that Harry couldn't read due to handwriting that may have been done while flying top speed on a broomstick. "So, Harry, I need a list of the dark creatures you have encountered. Severus provided a few to me, although I don't think he realized it would end up in an official report. He said his research indicated that you were seeing Shetani, Lethifolds, and Rakshasas at least."

Harry replied, "I don't know the names of all the things I saw. There were shadows of vampires and at least one decrepit old werewolf. These other small things like sea creatures but with human mouths . . ." Harry cast his mind back to his walk alone

through the Dark Plane. "Lots of other shadowy things and small things like black mice with spider's legs." Harry shrugged. "I don't know what else. There were too many to pay close attention."

Mr. Weasley looked concerned as he wrote out just the things that were identified by name. "Dementors?"

"No." As Mr. Weasley wrote that out specifically, Harry asked, "What is the Ministry worried about?"

"The obvious, I should think. That if you show signs of dark wizardry that you shouldn't be in the employ of the Ministry . . . at the very least."

"I'm not a dark wizard," Harry said, half laughing nervously. He said that now without hesitation, partly from living with Per for six weeks who, while capable of traversing the underworld, was clearly not evil. "I just have this weird skill."

"I know you're not a dark wizard, Harry, but my vouching for you only goes so far. People are still nervous, almost more nervous, even with He-Wh– Voldemort gone." He put the quill down and sat back. "Word's traveled around that you are quick with that wand at picking up even the toughest spells and that you aren't short on raw magical power."

"That should make people happy," Harry pointed out. "I'm trying to be an Auror, here."

In a calming tone Mr. Weasley said, "I know that, Harry. Anyone who knows you at all, knows that as well. But not every last wizard in this Ministry is so confident and some of them carry the burden of not doing enough last time and that makes them overzealous."

Fudge, Harry thought to himself. "What else do you need to know?" he asked, glad to have identified the enemy.

Mr. Weasley pulled out an old, stained booklet with the title Dark Wizardry's Dementia and flipped through it. "Have you in the last three months considered or acted out magic that would do harm to another whom you disdained?"

"Greer," Harry replied, feeling perhaps too honest for his own good.

"The Potions professor at Hogwarts?"

"She said something very cruel," Harry elaborated, jaw clenching even now. "I wanted to wall her up alive inside her classroom."

"She said something very cruel to you?"

"No, to Severus."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. Told me to put my wand away."

Mr. Weasley scratched his nose and peered at his pamphlet. "Let's see, A. Physical Harm or permanent disfigurement. No. B. Verbal threat of A or another dire action."

"I didn't say what I wanted to do," Harry provided.

"No? Well, that's good. C. Curse placed upon subject or subject's descendants. Not that either. D. Destruction of subject's property or business interests. E. Torture until subject relents. No. I guess that one doesn't count, then," he said. "That was the only time? No evil thoughts targeting anyone else?"

"I certainly don't like Lucius Malfoy very much."

"No one does," Mr. Weasley said, flipping the pages of the pamphlet. "What would you do to him, if you could?" He asked this rather conversationally.

"What I really want is a chance to duel him," Harry explained honestly although he sensed Mr. Weasley's easy tone as a kind of trap. "Be across from him on a platform and really show him that he isn't made of much, even if he is a pureblood."

Mr. Weasley considered Harry a moment before saying. "I'd pay to see that. You haven't been plotting to kill him though?"

"Only if he shows up at my house."

Mr. Weasley put the pamphlet down with a slap of his hand. "Harry, if he shows up at your house, you have my permission to make him wish he were dead." He didn't release Harry, though, after this pronouncement. He stared at the battered photographs pinned to the wall over his desk of the many Weasley children at various ages, all waving vigorously or performing acts of mischief upon one another.

Harry waited, wondering what was going through Mr. Weasley's mind. While he waited, Harry flipped his hair behind his ear off of his face; he really needed to get it cut.

Finally, Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, there is no doubt in my mind that you are as kindhearted and humble, frankly, as you always have been. Those Muggle relatives of yours didn't leave you much of a legacy, I don't think, but they did make you very aware of what it feels like on the bottom of the pile, and that's important for someone

destined to have too much power." He pulled out a report form that had the words Official Inquiry printed across the top. Harry forced himself to breath deeply. Mr. Weasley dipped his pen and said, "I just have to figure out how to write that up to convince everyone else."

"And if you can't, what will happen then?" Harry asked, wondering where his own state of calm was coming from.

"Someone else will probably interview you."

"Like whom?" Harry wanted to be prepared, didn't want to get caught unexpectedly before a more strident questioner than Mr. Weasley.

"Alastor, perhaps . . . he's roundly considered to be paranoid enough to judge anyone with a critical eye. Worse case, would be the Wizengamot itself, I should think, but you have a lot of allies there." Harry realized with a prickle on his arms that he had been feeling too secure over the last week and wondered what he had been thinking. Mr. Weasley said, "You can go. I'll do the best I can on this."

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley." Harry stood but held off on moving the door latch. "Has Severus been drawn into this?"

Mr. Weasley didn't look up from neatly filling in the form. "No, not that I know of. I'll be honest and open with you, Harry . . . I think he could easily be, mostly because it is detrimental to your case." He did look up then. "Keep your nose clean, Harry." Here he pointed at Harry with the quill. "And keep that temper of yours in line."

"Yes, sir."

A subdued Harry ate his lunch quickly while the others talked. He wandered into the Auror offices to see if Tonks was there. She was, but she, Rodgers, and Shacklebolt were having a discussion around Rodgers' desk in the far corner. Harry, figuring this for a secret discussion, turned to go, but Tonks waved him over.

She said, "So, Harry, we are deciding on which applicants to accept for testing this year."

"Applicants?" Harry echoed.

"First, we have to decide if we are going to have any at all," Shacklebolt pointed out.

Tonks argued, "Shouldn't we offer the test and see if there isn't someone we would want no matter what? That's how it was done for Munz and Blackpool. We didn't have a set number of Apprentices in the past."

Harry blinked at her, stunned at the notion that he had been at this long enough to see new Apprentices coming in.

Rodgers said, "We took four only to make up numbers, and honestly we can't handle six." He sounded extra tired as he said this, and no one argued.

Grinning too much, Tonks held up a sheaf of applications before Harry and said, "What do you think of this applicant?"

Harry squinted at the tiny writing on the familiar grey parchment form. "Ginny?" At that, he took the stack away from Tonks and read over the application. Her responses read pretty standard, only really boasting where she mentioned having a flying Animagus form and fighting in the final battle against Voldemort. "What did Mr. Weasley say?"

"He hasn't seen it yet," Shacklebolt explained.

Rodgers rubbed his eyes and looked up at Harry, "What do you think his reaction will be?"

"Er . . ." Harry tried to imagine it. "I . . ." Really, he thought, any reaction seemed plausible. Mrs. Weasley on the other hand . . . "I don't know. I think he'd be all right with it. Molly Weasley though might not be so sanguine."

Shacklebolt sat back in his chair. "Hadn't thought about that."

"Are you considering inviting Ginny to apply?" Harry asked.

"She has the application that looks the most like yours did," Tonks teased. "But if we aren't planning on accepting anyone, we shouldn't invite anyone to apply."

"In the old days, we did that all the time," Shacklebolt argued. "Everyone knew that they had to convince us to let them in."

Rodgers said, "I agree with Kingsley. Last year was an exception and, because it was more open, the number of applicants went up enough that we didn't need to drop our standards to fill out even a large cohort."

"Harry?" Tonks questioned, apparently looking for support.

Harry shrugged. "I guess make it clear that you are back to being extremely selective when you send out the examination invitations."

Tonks tapped her fingers on Ginny's application. "And we'll deal with this if we have to. If we don't have testing this year, we can skip dealing with this."

Harry said, "I don't think Ginny's N.E.W.T.s are going to be sufficient anyway. But she might manage if she really wants to get in," he added quickly, because it felt wrong to be so negative about a good friend.

Tangled Webs

April brought not just the long-awaited promise of spring to the air, it also brought decent weather for Quidditch. Harry met his friends in Hogsmeade, most of them already heavily into the cask-aged mead. Ron put a chummy arm around Harry and said, "Good to see ya, Harry. Good to see ya."

Harry waved to Madam Rosmerta and said, "I think I need to catch up."

Hermione said, "I wouldn't try."

"Hermione's a spoilsport," Ron complained.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry changed the topic. "How are the trolls, Ron?"

"Good," Ron assured him, while rocking unsteadily on his feet. "Too good," he pronounced soberly seconds later. "Sometimes I think they are smarter than we think."

Harry started in on his own mug of mead and found that the first sip explained the state of everyone here. He held the stone mug angled into the light to peer at it better. "I think this stuff would burn," he said.

Hermione giggled. Ron just looked at him oddly as though he were being stupid. Dean came up then, looking ready to burst. Ron interrupted him before he could talk. "You're late," he accused the other.

"I was at the Devon Regional," he said in excitement. "Wouldn't have missed it for the world." He leaned in conspiratorially and said, "Draco Malfoy lost in the final round to a total unknown. He was livid. I thought he was going to curse the judge and he might have if it hadn't been Whitley, this old retired Auror. Guy was strictly regs, which messed up Malfoy as you could imagine. Deducted a whole point, he did, for Malfoy spelling out of turn even though it was blocked all right."

"So who beat him?" Hermione asked.

"Some little guy named Vogle. Never heard of him but he was fast with his blocks. Had to be, the field was much better than the London Regional."

"Wished I'd seen it," Harry said, feeling the spirit of the thing from Dean's excitement. "Speaking of which, we should go up and get seats. It's getting late."

They needn't have worried as the match didn't start on time. Madam Hooch marched between the gates of each of the changing rooms and stopped before the Gryffindor one with an impatient posture and chatted with someone inside.

Aaron arrived then and everyone made space for him beside Harry. "Thanks," he said. "I must say that about Gryffindors, you are all deathly polite. Have I missed anything?"

"Not yet."

The teams, Hufflepuff on the far side and Gryffindor on the close, were finally coming out, leaving little puddled footprints on the soaked spring field that positively glowed in the intermittent sunlight. The players took flight and circled once before falling into formations. Harry looked for Ginny and found her, tying her hair tightly while steering her broom with her knees.

"Ginny really likes your broomstick," Ron leaned over to say. Harry noticed then that he had snuck a full mug of mead in under his cloak.

Aaron chuckled and then cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"What?" Ron queried.

"You brought more mead," Harry said, hoping for a distraction.

Ron grinned broadly and toasted Harry in the air. "Yeah," he said with pleasure.

Aaron nudged Harry with his elbow and gave him a knowing glance.

"Knock it off," Harry grumbled.

Aaron leaned in closer. "You don't find someone else, Witch Weekly is going to run another essay contest."

"Don't say that," Harry pleaded.

Hufflepuff put up a long fight, but in the end lost the Snitch while they were only down one goal. Ginny shook the Hufflepuff captain's hand, then bounced over when she spied her mum and dad just coming out of the stands, and received a hug from each of them.

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder, distracting him from somewhere farther away than he realized. It was Aaron. "Going back down to the pub?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." Down on the pitch when he spied the teachers ducking under some low-hanging bunting above the steps leading up to their seating, Harry told his friends, "I'll catch up."

"We'll wait," Aaron said amiably, and they all stopped in the middle of the pitch to chat in a spot of sunlight.

Harry congratulated the Gryffindor team as he passed by them, waving off a blown kiss from the Seeker, Louisa, a freckled blonde with very short hair. Harry hoped he wasn't blushing as he greeted headmistress McGonagall, who was wearing a wide-brimmed, pointed hat.

"Did you have a good week?" Snape asked when he came up beside.

Harry, thinking of his questioning by Mr. Weasley, hesitated before replying, "It went well enough."

Snape's gaze narrowed sharply, but any further questions he may have had were cut off by McGonagall linking her arm through Harry's and stepping away, asking, "How are you settling in, my boy?"

"Very well, thank you," Harry replied, glancing back to see if his friends were following. Snape and the other teachers were – Snape with his hands linked behind his back, cloak tossed over one shoulder.

McGonagall was patting Harry's hand, making him wonder if mead were served in the teachers' section. "You may come use our library anytime, Harry, you know that."

"Yes, Professor, I know that."

Harry didn't get disentangled from her until the castle steps when he insisted he had to join his friends.

"Owl," Snape commanded before stepping away.

"Have a good week," Harry offered before turning to catch up to the others.

Aaron talked Quidditch all the way down the lawn to the path beside the lake, sparking a friendly argument with Dean and Ron.

"Slytherin is back," Aaron insisted. "They beat Ravenclaw right out last month. Gryffindor is still too undisciplined on defense and we'll take them out too."

"Yeah, we'll see about that," Ron grumbled.

Back at the Three Broomsticks, which had grown very crowded, the group of them took their mugs out onto the street at Harry's suggestion. Hermione hadn't said a word, letting the boys carry on about Quidditch with a doubtful expression as though it confirmed something in her mind.

Harry wandered around to her. "How was your week?"

She shrugged. "Pretty good . . . and yours?"

Chapter 11

The attack on Rodgers hadn't been made public so Harry, despite wishing to, couldn't share his concerns. "It was an odd week. But I can't talk about it."

"I know what you mean," Hermione said, sipping from her warm cider.

Harry spied that the billboard before the newsstand had the evening headlines on it. He bought a copy of the late edition and brought it back over. "Thought I'd read about Malfoy's defeat," Harry told his friends. On page two he found the announcement and began reading, "Two of the Regionals for the Annual Dueling Competition have run their course and the second was more exciting than the first, with four nearly-matched contenders battling –til the end to see who would carry the honor of going on to the Finals. When the last spell had been cast, the favorite, Draco Pentheus Malfoy fell in the Cornwall/Devon Regional to another more worthy contender, Wesley Armanily Vogle. The remaining two Regionals will be held in the upcoming weeks and we are all looking forward with high anticipation to the Finals which will culminate the Demise of Voldemort Day festivities. The Ministry of Magic would like us to remind you that private bets over ten Galleons are strictly prohibited vis-à-vis a law handed down from the Wizengamot just one month ago today."

"Like we have that much to put on a silly duel," Ron complained.

"Duels aren't silly," Harry said. "How come you didn't enter?"

Slurring slightly, Ron said, "I can't even beat the twins. It didn't make sense to air that fact in public. I thought as long as one of them wins, it'd be all right. George can still win it." He gestured with his mug laughing, "Or Fred can try again . . ."

"How much would you be willing to wager on that?" Aaron smoothly asked.

Ron, rather than be offended, fell thoughtful, shook his pocket, and said, "Two Galleons . . . no three."

They shook hands as the rest of them laughed.

"So," Aaron said to clarify, still holding Ron's hand. "We are betting three Galleons that one of your twin brothers . . . no keep it simple . . . one of your family will win?"

"Yeah," Ron blurted.

Aaron pulled out his wand. "You don't mind if I seal that, do you."

Ron blinked. "No, go ahead."

Aaron tapped their joined hands and repeated the bet. "I have a policy of sealing all my wagers – saves enormous annoyance."

"You could take Ron on his honor," Harry said.

"I've seen that spell save any number of friendships," Aaron pointed out.

"Only among Slytherins," Hermione commented quietly.

Harry glanced at the time on the tower above the Hogsmeade branch of Gringott's and almost dropped his beer. "I have to go. I have field shadowing in five minutes." He handed his mead to Ron, who accepted it easily. He didn't even wait to hear everyone's goodbyes before rushing into the pub to Floo home for a hurried dose of fizzy pink stuff. As he stood in the before the small mirror over the sink, letting it work and halfheartedly combing his hair, it became apparent by the contrast after it took effect that perhaps he had had one too many. He quickly mixed another half dose, checked his robes and cloak, checked for his wand and Disapparated for the Ministry.

In the Auror's office, Harry, at a run, found Rogan waiting. "Sorry," Harry breathed.

Rogan stood and put his cloak on quickly. "Don't make a habit of it."

"No, sir," Harry agreed.

In the corridor Rogan stopped and turned. "How much mead did you have? You smell like the Hogs Head."

"A bit, but I'm completely sober now," Harry insisted.

"Fortunately not every weekend is Quidditch weekend," Rogan muttered. "Let's go down to the Docklands this shift. And keep an eye out."

The keystone above the large rotting delivery doors read 1814. The doors were abandoned portals to a derelict warehouse which stood in a row of similarly half-rotting buildings just on the edge of the sound of the bells. Almost no one came up the street, along which blew random newspaper pages and plastic bags, and even should someone happen to wander by, the tenants were most careful to not give any outward sign that they were lurking within.

The old oak beams of the first floor were leaden with silencing charms, which made it possible for the most fitful occupant of this place to pace at will, which is what he was doing at that moment.

Chapter 11

Maurdant Merton wasn't a tall man but he walked like someone who was. He had wild greying hair that he had stuffed under a moth-eaten beret. His tweed coat had once been very stylish but he wore it now against the chill. They could only run the kiln on rainy nights to avoid notice and ironically the sun had been shining for three straight days, so it was cold.

"This takes too long," Merton complained and turned his displeased gaze on the other occupant of the large room, a smaller, Indian man with light brown skin, a disproportionately round belly and constantly moving eyes.

This man obsequiously replied in an accent, "There is nothing for it. It just takes time."

"Perhaps if we could run the kiln . . ." Merton started to say.

Impatiently, the man interrupted with, "That would not help. We have plenty of suitable vessels. We have solved that problem."

"And our guest is still no help?"

The Indian fidgeted a bit before answering. "He is some. He is some."

"I want to do more," Merton ranted and resumed pacing. "This inaction after such success is maddening. There must be something . . ." He stopped again, sending dust into the air with his quick turn. "Perhaps another guest . . . someone who can provide more power?"

The Indian frowned and pointed out pragmatically, "Our current guest cooperates because he does not know any better. An uncooperative guest could be trouble."

"There must be something. I want to show them another demonstration . . . watch them struggle pathetically to understand something so very simple at its core." He drew himself back from this joyful reverie. "Tell me what you need and I will get it. Many people owe me favors or will simply do as I wish. I have much to offer people in trade because like the man who has found the one most valuable pearl, I have no need of my collection of trinkets anymore."

"We need time, really."

"I don't want to wait any longer," Merton growled. "The time is ripe."

Harry left the Ministry by one of the telephone boxes and walked in the sunshine to meet Hermione. His friend had sent an insistent owl earlier telling him that he must meet her for dinner. Her owl nearly bit him when he hesitated responding while he thought about his plans.

The walk did Harry enormous good. The streets were full of other Londoners getting a touch of sunshine after the long winter. By the time he arrived at the small restaurant Hermione had specified, Harry thought he was ready for anything.

Hermione ordered drinks for them both after the waiter seated them and then made a shooing motion to the waiter's back as he departed, as though to hurry him away. Leaning forward over her clasped hands, she said, "I need to talk to you."

"I'm here," Harry said.

"I need to talk to you about Vishnu."

"What about him?" Harry asked, feeling less ready for anything all of a sudden.

"So, I've owled him a few times-" Hermione began.

"You have?"

"Yeah, he seemed very nice at your party and you've never said anything bad about any of your fellow apprentices . . . So, I figured, why not?"

Their drinks arrived, for Harry just in time. "Hermione, you do realize he's married."

She didn't spit out her drink as Harry expected, just sipped at it calmly. Harry took a gulp of his.

A tiny bit patronizingly Hermione said, "I figured that out, Harry."

"Why are we discussing this, then?" Harry suddenly disliked white tablecloths over glass tables, especially turned diagonal like these were.

Hermione paused before going on, her face set as though considering things from many aspects. "I thought I could talk to you."

Harry tilted his head back to look at the dark blue paint over the mechanics of the uncovered ceiling, the ducts, beams, and electrical pipes for the lights. "Hermione, this is such a bad idea."

"Harry, in an awful way, I'm really, really happy."

Harry gazed at her incomprehensibly. He had received no sense of anything amiss from Vineet. "Have you . . . been getting together?"

"No. Just owling." She didn't say this defensively, more . . . melancholy.

Harry waved away the waiter who came to take their order. The man took one look at Harry's face and closed his mouth on whatever follow up he was going to give and moved to check the next table. Calming himself, Harry said, "Has he given you any indication? Are you misreading things, perhaps?"

In an honest voice that now sounded exactly like his old friend, Hermione said, "That's actually what I wanted to ask you." She stirred her drink with her straw. "I brought the letters, but I don't want to show them to you. I'm too embarrassed."

"I don't want to read them, anyway," Harry said.

She speared the olive in the bottom of her martini, then plucked it off the straw with her teeth. "Harry, don't you think that there is this person out there, just for you?"

"No."

Harry felt strangely numb and when the waiter looked their way, he waved him back over and ordered the first thing his eyes fell upon. Hermione didn't open her menu. "I'll just have a hamburger," she said.

The waiter executed a small bow. "Yes, madam."

When he was gone, Hermione asked, "Was there one on the menu?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know."

"I thought you'd be a little more helpful," Hermione said quietly. Harry attempted a response but was too slow, because she added, "You're too perfect, you know. No wonder you go through girlfriends so fast."

"This isn't about me," Harry came back with an edge.

"Sorry," Hermione said honestly. "I'm upset." Then a minute later: "I feel cheated."

"Hermione," Harry began softly. "He's married, forget him."

"You are almost the only person who says that. The women I work with say the opposite."

In a harder tone Harry returned, "Stop talking to them, then. Right now, no one is hurt. There is nothing going to come out of this but hurt." Harry shook the ice in his glass. "I wish it were Thursday so I could get drunk."

"Sorry," Hermione said again.

Harry felt something inside relenting in the face of that repeated honest apology. "I understand, Hermione, really. You see someone you really think is right and you just can't have them. I'm sorry you have to go through that. I'm not trying to be anything but a friend here."

Hermione's eyes had grown bright as Harry spoke. "Have another drink – I'll walk you back to your place after dinner."

Hermione nodded, apparently afraid to speak. By the time their food arrived, she was halfway back to being herself and asking how his training was going.

"Since you can keep a secret, I'll tell you one," Harry offered to take her mind off things.

She smiled finally and said, "What's that?"

"Ginny applied for an Auror apprenticeship."

"Oh no!" Hermione blurted.

Harry bit through a shrimp and dropped the tail on the edge of his plate. "What's wrong with that?"

"She's only doing it to get closer to you."

"Hermione, I don't believe that. That would be pretty extreme . . . if only because it means she actually has to study for her N.E.W.T.s like a demon to even have a chance."

Hermione conceded, "There is that. True, that is a stretch." Then more quietly, she muttered, "Like Ron that way."

Hermione didn't really need an escort home, but Harry walked slowly with her anyway until they found a good alley from which they could Disapparate directly to her flat.

Hermione shucked her coat in a dismissive fashion and pushed her piled up post aside on the table.

"You going to be all right?" Harry asked.

She shrugged while she leaned over the chair. "Yeah. Thanks for going out on such short notice."

"Anytime."

She ran her fingers over her coat. "Well, it's late and you have training. I'll see you later."

"Owl if you want to talk again," Harry said. She nodded for a reply and after a long wait to see if she spoke, Harry Disapparated for home.

His own house was deathly quiet when he arrived. He went up and woke Kali to have her in his lap as he sat on his bed and took a glance at the readings he was supposed to have done, hoping to learn at least one fact he could spill forth the next day. But despite the agitation from his dinner with Hermione, his head nodded and soon he curled up in his clothes, Kali nestled against his chest.

Harry woke groggy the next morning, stiff from the cold of not being under the duvet and sticky from his day-old clothes. A quick wash-up and change helped a lot as did coffee and soon he was yawning in the corridor at the Ministry and wondering what in the world he was going to say to Vineet.

Harry sat down in the desk beside the Indian, who looked the same as he always did. Rodgers came in right then, so Harry had to hold off. At lunch, similarly, they weren't alone and Harry wasn't in the mood to pull his fellow aside and confront him. In the end he wondered what he was going to confront Vineet with; Harry hadn't seen the letters.

Distracted during a round of afternoon drills, Harry's counter failed and that left him with a bruised elbow from smacking the wall as he flew into it. After that he put Hermione's problems from his mind as counterproductive to worry over without a better understanding of them.

Field shadowing went along quietly the next day as Harry followed Shacklebolt around while he questioned people in the area of the Docklands where Rodgers had been attacked. They were both dressed as Muggles and Shacklebolt was pretending to be journalist. Other than his difficulty remembering to click his ball point before it would work, he pulled this off all right. Harry, given nothing else to do, tried a little Legilimency on the people they talked to, but he got nothing but concerns about wayward daughters, overdue rent, sick parents, and a headache for himself.

Saturday, restless and wishing he had confronted Vineet, if only to settle his own nerves, Harry went to visit the twins' shop as a much needed distraction.

"'Arry!" One of them said, coming around from doing invoices at far too small a desk behind the counter. The female shop clerk gave Harry a glowing smile. "Come on upstairs, Harry, Verity can watch things alone for a bit. It will get crazy later, but it is early still."

Harry followed up the unlit, uneven staircase. The twin knew it well and had to stop and wait at the top. "Hey, George, Harry's here." When a mad scramble ensued

inside the workroom, Fred said, "Don't worry about that stuff . . . Harry's not going to say anything about it."

Harry had reached the top where Fred was holding the door only cracked open. "Give him a minute. How are things with you? You dating our sister yet?"

"No," replied. "Why would you ask that?"

"She wanted to know how much trouble one might get into using a real love potion. The real kind, not that pale substitute the kids brew when they think no one is looking." He peeked inside. "It's clear." He led the way inside.

"Ginny wouldn't do that," Harry asserted as he stepped inside. A complicated arrangement of glass tubing bubbled and steamed on the heavy table in the middle of the room. Boxes lined the walls, stacked to the ceiling, making the room cramped. Harry wanted to be distracted from his concerns about Hermione. "So, are you working on anything I can try out?"

Later, sporting a sour stomach and full pockets, Harry made his way back out into the sunshine. Fred leaned out the upper window and gave Harry a shout goodbye. Harry waved back and threaded his way between the shoppers who had stopped stock still upon recognizing him.

At home, Harry put away his collection of sweets in the box where the others from Christmas were kept. He hadn't touched most of those either, even though he could clearly remember a time when they would have been among his prized treasures. The gum bombs, Harry separated from the others in a small tin since they sizzled when he put them down.

His things organized, Harry settled into the dining room with his books and felt the oppression of the quiet house. He was very glad his guardian was coming home that weekend. He hadn't the weekend before and Harry had missed him. Now Harry dearly needed someone to talk to and there wasn't anyone else to which he could air this dilemma.

That evening, the Floo's activation brought Harry from his barely productive reading. Snape was in a bright mood, a strangely bright mood, but Harry was too tangled up in his own problems to wonder about it for long. Snape sat down to sort through the large stack of post, and Harry sat across from him, resting his chin on his fist to watch.

Snape looked up from a letter he was slashing open with a shining blade and stopped. "Something the matter?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, plucking up an empty envelope and fussing with it. "Hermione dragged me out to dinner this week and wanted to know if I think Vineet likes her. At least I think that was what she wanted to know."

Snape returned to his letter. "And the problem is . . . ah, he is married, is he not?"

"Yes," Harry muttered.

Snape read for a minute. "Not really like Ms. Granger to make such a mistake."

"No, but I think she's smitten." Snape paused to survey Harry, but didn't comment. Harry said, "I feel bad for her."

"There is an anti-love potion. Shall I write out the recipe for you to send to her?"

"How long does it last?"

Snape again resumed slicing letters open. "A week perhaps."

"Maybe, then. And on top of that Ginny sent in an Auror's application and Hermione thinks she is just trying to get closer to me."

This garnered a doubtful tilt of the head. "Her N.E.W.T.s will not be good enough."

"Still, it's the thought."

"So you haven't been out today? You have been moping about, worrying over things you have no control over?"

Defensively, Harry said, "This morning I went to Diagon Alley . . . got caught up at the twins' place."

"Then you have not heard the news," Snape asked.

"What news?" Harry prompted, sitting up.

Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-sized brass wand on a chain and set it on the table. Harry gaped at it and picked up the tag, which read Newcastle Upon Tyne & All-Parts-North Regional – Severus Prince Snape.

"I didn't even know you were entering!" Harry complained. "They better not disqualify me from judging, otherwise I'd have been in the competition." More forcefully, Harry insisted without forethought, "Keep an eye out, someone may want revenge."

"Mr. Vogle has not had anything befall him, has he?"

"Not that I've heard." Harry was grateful he didn't ask about Rodgers. He picked up the brass wand again to study it. "Why didn't you say you were entering?" Harry asked a little hurt.

"I thought you would come on your own to watch, in all honesty."

"I was thinking of it, but I got tied up. How did it go?"

"Only one serious challenger and that was Tertius Ogden."

"You beat Tertius Harry-you're-a-pathetic-substitute-for-Dumbledore Ogden in a duel and I missed it?" Harry complained.

Snape was about as amused as Harry had ever seen him. He seemed to be trying not to laugh. "I didn't realize you referred to him thusly."

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "What'd you hit him with?"

Snape glanced at the clock and stood suddenly. "I can give you a full recount later. As amusing as your As the Wizarding World Turns difficulties are, I do not wish to be late."

Harry had to follow him to the hall and up the stairs to ask. "Late for what?"

"A date," Snape replied from inside his room. Harry stood considering that until Snape returned a minute later wearing a better shirt. He followed to the entryway cupboard where Snape took out his dress cloak.

The preparations seemed not quite right. "With Candide?" Harry asked.

"No."

Harry's stomach did a queasy little flip. "With whom?" he asked, feeling doomed just asking.

Snape shot him a knowing look rather than reply and plucked up the tall collar on the cloak to make it stand straighter.

"You aren't," Harry uttered. It was the best he could do.

"I'm not what?"

"You're not going out on a date with my cousin." Harry wanted to make that some kind of demand but it was a statement of dreary fact instead.

"It is just a casual date, Harry."

Harry thought that had to be one of the most unexpected things to hear Snape say. "Does Polly know?"

Sounding vaguely patronizing now, Snape replied, "Yes. Her sanctioning is not required in any event."

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"What time are you going to be home?" Harry then asked, sounding methodical and very much not like himself.

Snape paused and gave him a long look that seemed on the verge of a glare, but simply replied, "Ten."

"All right."

Snape Disapparated and Harry stood alone in the entryway, feeling not all that well. He stomped out the door and almost didn't wait for traffic to pass before transforming and leaping into the air.

It had been a long time since his last meaningless flight around his house. The wet wind still flowed cool enough over him to refresh his furred and feathered limbs. Unsure where to go, he circled over the village with its miniature grid of street lamps and its sparse necklace of tail and headlights leading to and away from it. The sun was just completing its setting and the clouds at the horizon were ablaze with orange and pink. Harry thought that maybe he should have taken the bike instead. He circled once again and decided that this physical effort was more distracting. He lowered his head and flapped madly north.

Flying wasn't distracting Harry nearly enough. He turned at the edge of a city and drifted back southward, using an updraft to hover and work on his fine steering control, a skill that suffered from lack of practice; without it, he grew tired too quickly on long flights.

Too soon the Shrewsthorpe train platform was beneath him again, lit more brightly than anything around it. Harry landed in the dark square of their garden a hundred yards away and went in the back door, not feeling much better than when he had left.

He tried to study; he tried to reorganize his books; he wished he knew where Ron was tonight. He considered that he could Apparate to the Burrow and ask. He was just thinking that this might be the best course of action, when the doorknocker sounded.

Harry had thought that the evening had reached its limit on romantic difficulties, but he was mistaken; in the darkness of the front garden stood Candide.

"Sorry to just pop in, but I wanted to speak to Severus."

"He's not here," Harry said and then because he dearly wanted anyone to talk to, said, "But come on in for a spot of tea."

"Oh," she hesitated. "Thanks Harry."

"What are you doing home on a Saturday night?" she asked as she hung her cloak up and put her hat and gloves in the cupboard herself.

"I was just trying to figure that out," Harry explained dully.

"So where is Severus?" she asked.

Harry had no desire to lie. "Out on a date."

This brought her to a halt in the hall. Harry stopped beside the staircase and turned. "Oh," she said. "Really?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed.

"You . . . don't sound happy about it?" she probed with mixed feeling coming through.

Harry took a seat, wishing for hot cocoa, and expecting that would induce Winky to bring some. "Everyone's gone mad this week. My best friend has fallen for a married man, apparently, and all of a sudden doesn't have the sense I thought she did. My other friend may be trying to become an Auror because she is still holding a candle for me." Talking felt very good, and her sympathetic surprise kept him going. "The other friend that the first friend is smitten with, I don't know what is up with him. I couldn't bring myself to confront him. I don't even know if he's done anything wrong and that all of this isn't just in the first friend's head."

Hot cocoa appeared in a sparkle and Candide pulled the closer mug to her nose. "Love makes people pretty stupid – especially impossible love."

"Yeah," Harry agreed and sipped his beverage. "Did you want tea?"

"No, I wanted this, thanks."

"Good. I should have asked. But . . . Winky usually figures it out, anyway," Harry commented distractedly.

"Haven't you ever been in love, Harry?"

"All the time," Harry heard himself answering.

"Really? Where's this lucky girl?" she teased, glancing around.

Harry smiled wryly. "Not here," he answered wistfully.

"Don't tell me she's married too."

"No. My boss."

Candide shook her head. "So even Harry Potter can't have who he wants." She lifted her cocoa mug for a toast. "To unrequited love." Harry halfheartedly joined the toast and Candide said in consolation, "You know she probably isn't any good in bed anyway."

"No, she is," Harry replied, and then suspected the cocoa of having been cask-aged. Although, given how much lighter his heart felt after saying that, he didn't want to take it back.

"Harry," came the highly chastising comment. "Better not let the Press get wind of that."

"It was before she was my boss," Harry argued.

After a long pause Candide asked, "Is she good looking?"

"Who, Tonks?"

"Severus' date . . . or haven't you met her?" She downed half her mug then, even though the question came out rather smoothly.

"No I've met her." Harry pictured Pamela. "Ordinary looking. You hoping for a grotesque hump or something?"

"Something," Candide confirmed.

Drearily, Harry stated, "She's my cousin."

Candide froze. "Really?" she asked a bit bleakly.

Harry nodded. Same as with Hermione, he was on horrible footing, having little clue as to what had recently transpired between the two of them. He had to ask even though it was disloyal to. "Severus isn't . . . cheating on you or anything?"

"No," she replied easily. "We've just been getting together as friends." Currents underlied the tone she used. She flipped her mug around between her hands. "While you were in Finland, Severus was miserable, and it seemed to do him good to drag him out for a pint or a cup. It was a good thing you made it back as soon as you did."

"I'm always very hard on whoever is my parent," Harry glibly offered but it came out sad. "So, nothing is up between you and Severus?" Harry asked, wondering if there was an out here somewhere for this thing with Pamela.

"At this point in my life, accepting less than everything doesn't make any sense."

Harry pondered that. "He doesn't want to get married."

"He doesn't want to get within a hundred miles of the topic," Candide corrected with an air of bitterness.

After a long silence, Candide said, "A date. He's really on a date?"

"Came as a shock to me," Harry asserted and they both chuckled. He picked up the brass wand that still lay nearby on the table and said, "This was a surprise too."

She accepted the thing with curiosity and Harry explained, "Severus won one of the Dueling Competition Regionals."

"That's wonderful," she said brightly, reinforcing Harry's belief she really did care for Snape. She put the wand back down and rested her hand on it for a moment too long. "Well, I shouldn't be here when he gets home and I shouldn't stretch your very kind hospitality."

"That's all right . . . I needed someone to talk to," Harry admitted.

She took out her pocket canister of Floo powder, waving off Harry's offer of theirs. "Anytime, Harry, really. And I'll leave it up to you whether or not to tell Severus I stopped by."

"Right."

She was gone. Harry fetched one of his books and with a fresh mug of cocoa, began reading in earnest. He was still at it when the blast of green flame hit the hearth and Snape reappeared.

After he removed his cloak, he spied the second used mug and asked, "You had a guest?"

"You had a guest," Harry clarified a little stiffly, which he hadn't intended.

After a pause, Snape said, "Ah," before taking his cloak away. He returned and sat down.

"How was it?" Harry asked.

The tiniest of shrugs answered this, and Harry knew from his expression that he wasn't going to say anything. Harry returned to his book, wishing it were just a little later so he could go to bed.

"Would you like a game of chess?" Snape asked.

"I have to do my readings," Harry replied without looking up.

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"Hm," Snape uttered with an insinuating lilt. "At least you are turning the pages this time." He got up and left.

Harry sighed loudly, finished the chapter, and went to bed.

Author's Notes:
There will be a 2-week delay before Chapter 12. Have to work out some plot line/time line issues. Plus, learning Flash is sucking up literally all of my time, not to mention, melting my brain.

Chapter 12.

Power Play

Rodgers was feeling well enough the next week to drill against each of them while they worked on the advanced double blocks he had shown them the week before. He tired easily though, and eventually stood off to the side offering advice. Their training schedule was now seriously out of sync, but no one mentioned that fact, especially not Harry, who was getting a chance to catch up on his readings.

"It should be more like a Diamona than a Chrysanthemum, Kalendula," Rodgers critiqued. "You have almost no vertices on the inner block."

"I can't do both at once," she said. "They are too different."

"Keep trying," he replied.

Again Vineet sent a mild blasting curse her way and parts of it reflected around inside between the inner and outer blocks before fading.

"Wickem, now you and Potter."

Harry held a deep breath when the first curse came his way. He hadn't been doing much better than Kerry Ann, and discouragement was starting to seep into his attempts. Rodgers repeated demonstrations made it clear that it was possible to layer a crystalline block inside a dome. As each mild curse arrived, Harry easily blocked with a wavering, warped Chrysanthemum that was really one bizarrely twisted dome rather than two layers like it was supposed to be. His wand simply didn't want to emit two different block forms at once.

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"Still not getting it, Potter. You need to produce the inner before the outer block, as I've said countless times, I'm certain."

Harry wondered if two wands might work better. He imagined he held two in one hand and produced the crystal form of the Chrysanthemum out of one and then pretended to focus the dome out of the other. A solid structure appeared around him in the form of glowing rods and a shimmering dome. Aaron dropped his hand rather than aim another curse as Kerry Ann ooohed.

"Much better," Rodgers complimented Harry. "What was different?"

"I pretended I had two wands."

"Whatever works," Rodgers stated tiredly.

During lunch in the tea room, Harry – when Kerry Ann headed off to pick up dress robes on Diagon Alley and Aaron needed to renew his dangerous magical pet license – found himself alone with Vineet. Harry's sandwich suddenly seemed too thick to eat and he had to swallow hard. He was seriously wondering why he couldn't properly bring up this topic when Vineet did, in a roundabout manner.

"You are having another party?"

Harry answered, "Probably on the weekend before DV-Day, which is a month away. I wasn't thinking of anything sooner."

"Hm." Vineet returned to his eating his daal with a piece of flat bread.

"Why do you ask?" Harry ventured.

In his usual solemn tone, Vineet replied, "You have interesting friends."

Harry considered and disposed of possible rejoiners. All of them revealed that Hermione had spoken to Harry, and Harry didn't want to give that away for reasons he couldn't pin down. Instead, he said, "I've spent years collecting them. Most of them stood by me, or more accurately, in front of me, when things were at their worst."

"It is good to have such friends," Vineet declaimed in that philosophical way of his.

"Yup," Harry said. "It's good to have loyal friends." With that and the immediate evidence of Vineet's calm, he gave up on delving further.

Power Play

Maurdant Merton slapped open a large book with a binding so broken it laid fully flat on the table. In the corner of the hazy room, stacks of large books and grimoires stood beside battered trunks of supplies. The books ranged from worn and cracked to pristine, but all were now hopelessly dusty and marred with fingerprints of red clay. Cursed trinkets and charmed baubles lined the edge of the floor, many of them broken.

"There must be a way to speed this up," he grumbled, reading the smeared printing on the page. He tore the page free from the book and carried it to a side room where a small, round Indian woman sat with the tip of her wand inside a clay vessel. She ignored Merton's entrance and continued to stare straight ahead.

"Where is Debjit?" Merton demanded.

"Errand," she replied, still unmoving. She moved only when Merton bent down to scoop up a toroidal vessel from atop a shipping crate, and that was only to give him a sharply disapproving look.

"This one ready?" he asked as it crackled faintly.

"It is an experiment," she answered in a clearly annoyed tone. "And it is dangerously fragile."

"Another experiment?" He placed it back down gently and said, "Debjit needs to see this," as he waved the page. "We can use two wizards using a barrier technique."

Annoyed, she returned, "We tried that . . . unsuccessfully."

"We need a way to store more energy more quickly," he complained. "This requires a ridiculously long time."

"They are working, though," the woman said stiffly. "You did not manage this before."

Merton paced. "That's just it. If we had more of them, we could do anything."

A rattle of cups brought his attention to the tray carried in by their guest. "My, my but this place is such a mess!" the man declared. He pulled a battered feather duster from his sleeve and dusted the crate and the ceramic vessels upon it before setting the tray down with a last dusting of the teapot. He looked hopefully between Merton and the Indian woman. "Is it going to be cold again all day today?" he queried.

"Yes, probably," Merton replied, scooping up a teacup and filling it.

"Hm," the blonde man replied in disappointment before strolling out again, passing Debjit in the doorway.

Chapter 12

"Hello, Gildie," Debjit said in passing.

"Too bad we haven't come up with a good use for him," Merton mulled. "Holding onto him as a favor to someone who cannot touch us anymore seems a waste of time."

"He is very pliable," Debjit pointed out, putting down the grocery sacks he carried. "Some use will come of him, I am sure."

Merton put his hands on his hips and, sounding difficult, said, "We need more magic." He stuffed the page under Debjit's nose. "I am tired of waiting. I have plans I wish to execute and they have been on hold too long. We could hold the entire Ministry for ransom if we could only work faster." Here he pounded his fist on an invisible surface.

Chastened, Debjit studied at the torn page, but immediately dropped it to his side. "We are working as fast as is possible. Svaha is better than I at charging the vessels, and our guest's magic isn't so strong, even though he is willing to put in long hours trying. If only there were a way to make our guest more powerful."

Merton's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps we should look into that." He pondered his stack of books thoughtfully. "We must have someone with more power, no offense to your lovely wife." He paced to the fouled window and stared out. "Pay our good friend a visit and ask who he would recommend. I want to have enough vessels in reserve to make a statement that we can afford to take credit for. The Ministry is a sitting duck." When he turned back, he had a darkly determined look about him.

Debjit bowed his head once and went out again.

Headmistress McGonagall turned to the last page of her staff meeting notes. "The elves have been instructed to not serve bangers and mash again for the rest of the year after the unexpected incident . . ." Here she eyed Snape over her spectacles. "At the Slytherin table last night."

Snape returned a haughty look back to her. Vector chimed in with, "Those old spells never quite die do they? Some enterprising pupil always manages to dig them up."

With a sigh McGonagall let it drop. "I believe that covers it," she said, stuffing her notes away in a folder.

Everyone shuffled to their feet around the large table. Firenze clopped his way out of the staff room, followed by Hagrid, both of them needing to duck deeply at the doorway. Parchments were gathered together and eventually only Vector and Grubbly-Plank remained other than the headmistress and her deputy headmaster. When Snape moved to stand, McGonagall put a restraining hand on his arm. Half a minute later they were alone, hurried along by Vector who had noticed them waiting there, still seated.

"So, Severus . . ."

Snape gave McGonagall a questioning eyebrow when she hesitated.

"Harry has long since returned and you have not," she stated frankly. Snape flipped his raven quill over his fingers and didn't speak, so she asked, "Is anything the matter with Harry?"

"No, he seems quite himself, if not a bit more independent and with an almost eerie resistance to cold."

She folded her diary closed and pushed it aside. "Well, that is good. So what is the matter?"

Snape's gaze went distant and then he shook his head faintly while tugging on the barbs of his quill to make the vane edge even.

McGonagall persisted, "You don't wish to say, I see. But it is not Harry?"

"I don't know," Snape replied.

She sighed and began polishing her glasses with her kerchief. As she held them up before the lamp in the center of the table, she said, "I only ask because a rather unexpected report was presented to the Wizengamot two evenings ago." Snape simply waited in curiosity, so she continued with, "The Department of Mysteries has an open case on Harry right now, which I should not tell you, but I will, because you will be finding out soon enough, I expect."

"And why will I be finding out?" Snape asked suspiciously, sounding more his old self all of a sudden.

McGonagall's lips curled. "You are like Harry, Severus, you need an enemy to really get you moving." She sighed. "You will be finding out because the Wizengamot voted to leave the issue open and sent it back to the Department of Mysteries. Arthur owled to inform me that they have assigned another investigator and I expect that person will be paying you a visit."

Children ran by in the Entrance Hall outside the door, feet slapping loudly, and the voice of the Nearly Headless Nick could be heard berating them.

Snape asked in rapid succession, "Who was the first investigator? Harry did not mention this . . . was he aware?"

"I expect. Arthur interviewed him for his report. Told me in his letter that he was disappointed the matter hadn't been closed, but that there was nothing he could do. According to him, Harry has the full support of everyone in the Auror's office, with the possible exception of Alastor, who is now handling the case."

"Secretly?"

"I think he would like to be. Whether he can dole out enough memory charms to keep it that way . . ."

"Thanks for the warning." Snape stood, hands propped on the table, over which he leaned rather than move away when McGonagall commented darkly, "There were concerns among the Wizengamot that I, and several others, could not allay regarding Mr. Potter."

Snape, bent forward, hair over his face, said, "Something along the lines of his being the Lord of the Underworld."

"Something along those lines," McGonagall conceded unhappily.

Snape stared into the flame of the lamp on the table. "Harry is no danger that I can see. The day he returned I saw him raving with fury over Ms. Belluna and there was no sign of anything impugning on the interstice between the worlds. He has mastered control of it to my personal satisfaction."

McGonagall said, "I would not have believed it existed before all this."

"Every sensitive child who is deathly afraid of what lurks beneath their bed or behind an ajar cupboard door is apparently well aware that it exists." He finally stood straight and gathered his things.

"Severus," McGonagall called his attention back. "I feel you are unwilling to be frank with me because of my position on the Wizengamot. Is that the case?"

Snape gathered his diary and folder to his side. "No, that is not the case at all. I am relieved beyond measure that Harry is back. I realize now that I was expecting the Shaman would simply teach him how to close the barrier he was opening. I did not imagine he would show him how to traverse the two worlds, and becalm and

walk safely among the vile creatures of the underworld. I am still absorbing that, I suppose." With a dark huff he added, "It is not a skill even the Dark Lord had."

McGonagall stood as well and said in an official tone, "So you feel there is no basis for this inquiry?"

Snape let the diary and folder in his hand slap back onto the table. "Are you losing faith in Harry?" She started to speak, but he interrupted her. "Because I find no conflict in my trust regarding your position with the grey beards of the Wizengamot but if you have lost faith in Harry, then I cannot be so open with you."

She studied him in a tense silence before laughing lightly. "Funny, Arthur's owl mentioned that Harry's main concern was that you not be drawn into this."

Snape's shoulders dropped as he took in her words, and he looked away with a grim expression.

She rubbed her forehead. "You're right, of course. I spent too many hours last night with the overly cautious grey beards, as you call them. Harry's been through so much and has managed to remain this kind-hearted . . . there is no reason to expect that to change."

They exited the staff room. The last of the sunlight was glinting on the beveled glass above the main doors.

"Severus?" a familiar but unexpected voice said.

"Candide?" Snape returned, surprised to find her standing before the doors to the Great Hall. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to speak with you."

Snape glanced at McGonagall, but she merely shrugged and headed off. Snape angled his head toward the Grand Staircase and said, "Come up to my office, then."

"The students said you were in a staff meeting and I thought it all right to wait," she explained as they walked. They reached his office and he removed the protective charms on the door. She said, "I stopped by Saturday night, but you were out." This was clearly hard for her to say.

Snape, moving stiffly, gestured at the visitor's chair before sitting behind his desk.

She propped her hands on the arms of the chair and sat awkwardly as she said, "All the things I planned to say seem much harder now." Snape didn't reply, just clasped his hands before him. She said, "What does it take to get through to you?"

"You have asked that before," he pointed out softly.

"I know it's possible. Harry certainly has managed." As she spoke, Snape turned his chair sideways and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. She added, "Otherwise, I would have given up long ago."

"You didn't ask Harry?" Snape inquired snidely.

"No. What would his answer have been?"

Snape laughed. Still staring at the ceiling he replied, "Ah, let's see. Something along the lines of understanding me too well, I suppose," he answered dryly.

Candide glanced around the mixed shelves of Defense Against the Dark Arts books, Potions manuals, and bleached out Potion ingredients floating grotesquely in thin green liquid. "Oh, well, I'm flat out of luck then," she commented.

Snape laughed lightly again. "Was there some point you were hoping to make?" he asked, finally sitting forward, but still facing the window.

"Only to myself, I now realize," she answered, crossing her arms as though the room were too cold. "It hurt more than I imagined to find out you were out on a date."

That garnered her a sideways glance. "Surprised, were you?" he asked snarkily.

She shrugged. "Yes. Harry seemed to be too. Said it was his cousin you were out with."

"She was more fascinated by the notion of Wizardry in general than by the notion of me in particular," Snape stated. "If that is any consolation."

"Some, I suppose. Why are you rubbing it in?"

Taken aback, Snape returned with a hint of concern, "I am not trying to."

Candide looked down at her hands and said, "What do I have to do?"

Snape leaned forward over his desk and asked, "Why are you persisting?"

"Because I can't seem to do otherwise," she confessed.

Snape's head fell forward slowly but he lifted it again immediately. "You are asking too much of me. I do not mind your company . . . I will even go so far as to admit that I prefer your company, but I am not marriageable material. What would your parents say?"

"I don't care-"

"You care dearly," Snape snapped back harshly.

Candide pursed her lips. "You have an unfair advantage here."

"Yes, and I have no qualms about using it," Snape stated as though it only added to his side of the argument.

"You won't even meet them."

"It is all too quaint," Snape sneered. "I cannot take it."

Candide's brow lowered as though she were figuring something out. "You have these moments where you are utterly shallow."

"I do?" Snape mocked.

"Do you want to be alone forever?" she asked.

"I am not now. There is Harry," he pointed out tiredly.

"Oh, so I'll come back when he's gone then. That should only be a half year away," she pointed out. Snape's eyes fell distant, prompting her to amend. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

He shook his head. "No, you are correct. He certainly will be on his own, probably in London, sometime in the near future." More quietly, he added, "Though I was thinking it would be more distant than that. Perhaps I am deluding myself." He clasped his hands on the desktop again among the overlapping open books and stray parchments.

"Can we go out again?" Candide asked. "I'd like that."

"I scheduled another date with Pamela."

"Oh." Candide stood then before the desk and hooked her cloak over her shoulders. "I don't understand you," she complained.

"I don't want you to," Snape pointed out.

Candide dropped her arms, the breeze making the candles on the desk flicker. "Now you tell me." She returned to buttoning her coat. "So do you want this . . . cousin of Harry's to understand you?"

"Certainly not," Snape replied.

"Well, there's that," Candide said under her breath. "Owl if you want to get together."

Snape crossed his arms. "Silly to keep stringing it along . . . isn't it?"

She shrugged. "It is easier than the alternative."

Snape studied her closely before standing and seeing her out, appearing thoughtful.

Much later, at the eve of midnight, as he was turning down the lamps, Snape reached for his wand and spun on the instinct that he was no longer alone.

"Hmf," a voice grunted and then Mad-Eye Moody pulled an invisibility cloak off of himself.

Snape lowered his wand and criticized, "You could have knocked. Next time I will let instinct react for me."

"Wanted to see if I could get in unawares."

"Neither the castle, nor my office, is charmed to resist Ministry Aurors," Snape sneered before taking a seat behind his desk. "What is it you want?" he asked dismissively.

Moody circled the room, examining the shelves, stopping to stare up at the Pensieve before perusing the Defense books below it. "Answers."

"Perhaps try a question first," Snape pointed out dryly. "I was in the midst of retiring when you arrived . . . if you could hurry this along."

Moody didn't reply, just stomped on his peg leg around the full circuit of the room, stopping before the dangerous ingredient cabinet and letting his magical eye rove over it. "Some rather interesting things in there," he grunted. "Rather illegal things."

"You may take them with you if you wish," Snape stated easily.

Moody finally stomped to the desk. "As long as I know you've got them, you can't very well use them for anything questionable. A few of them I'm certain you are the only one in all of Britain to possess them. Keep that in mind."

Patronizingly, Snape replied. "I certainly will."

"I don't particularly want to be on your bad side, Snape," Moody said. "You are a too good a liar for one and your notion of loyalty is questionably fluid."

"Albus never questioned it," Snape pointed out mildly, fingers peaked before him.

"No, Albus never did. So what have you been teaching that boy?"

Snape laughed. "By 'boy' I assume you mean Harry . . . and lately, I have had nothing to teach him that would do him any good."

"No dark magic spells? I know you have mastered rather a large number of them over the years. I know that because I've seen you use them myself."

"I have never taught Harry a dark magic spell."

Moody leaned on the desk. "See, you are too good o' a liar to make this a job possible. The way I figure it, you groomed him for this Dark Plane skill. He is just a little too tempting to mold, isn't he?"

"You are letting your paranoia out. May I recommend a new cage for it?" Snape huffed as he stood up. "What is your purpose here, Alastor?" he asked in a tone clearly short on patience.

Moody began pacing again, rocking side to side as he did so. "I'd rather not say."

"I can guess. The Ministry is concerned about Harry given his need for rather unorthodox training in Shamanistic magic."

Moody paced for a while longer. "Could be, but I'm not sayin'" Snape rolled his eyes. Moody, not noticing this, said, "So, say your claim is correct that you have nothing to do with this, then where is this skill from? –E didn't get it from Voldemort." Here his eyes slid over to Snape. "I'm pretty sure."

Snape didn't respond.

Moody went on, "–E didn't get it from his parents."

"I don't know where he got it from. It is his own. It is not unprecedented, witness the fact that I found someone with expertise in it to send him to."

"Yeah, I was thinkin' on payin' the Finn a visit."

"By all means. He doesn't speak English and he is highly suspicious of outsiders . . . you and he should get along splendidly."

Moody came back around to the desk and faced Snape down. "Are we on the same side, here, Snape?"

"I don't know," Snape stiffly replied. "Are we?"

"Albus left you with a big responsibility," Moody pointed out after a pause.

Snape crossed his arms before him. "He had no idea how big."

"Is that so?" Moody responded as though this were exceptionally meaningful.

Snape huffed. "Have you spoken with Harry?"

"Many times. Not about this. He isn't to know." Moody backed off then and went to the door. "Pleasant evening to you I suppose. Your helpfulness is overwhelming."

"I told you nothing but the truth," Snape countered, now angry. His anger stalled Moody from turning the door latch. Snape continued, "Harry is a young man in need of loyalty, security and trust, not suspicion. Tell that to Fudge in your report." When Moody twitched just slightly at that, Snape sneered, "It isn't difficult to guess who is persisting in this. What is harder to understand is why you are here as his representative, given the feelings you have for him . . . and I know this because I have heard you speak them." Snape ended with an exceptionally mocking tone.

"I do what needs to be done. I always have." Moody tossed the cloak over his head and departed without another word, the office door swinging closed as though of its own volition.

"Gwynedd!" Harry shouted after tossing in the Floo powder. He spun around almost as long as it took to get to London before being dumped out in a hearth in a grimy little apothecary with only one small circular window in the door to let in any light.

A little man shuffled out of the back and glanced at Harry before shuffling away with a, "Ach, another one misdirected."

"Do you know where the dueling tournament is being held?" Harry asked politely.

The man stopped and, shoving his hands deep in his pockets, arched his back, and said, "Ah, is that what this diflas day is all about?" He waved his arm. "It's up at the castle, I hear."

Harry paused in taking out his Floo powder for another attempt. "Which castle?"

The man scratched his rough beard thoughtfully. "Abergwyngregyn Castle is the closest. But I don't suppose they'd be holding it outside?"

"Aber . . ." Harry blinked. "I don't think so."

"Well, then Penrhyn Castle would be it. Hideous place . . . all fancied up." He shuffled off into a back room.

Harry turned back to the Floo to give it another go, hopeful that the man had the location correct. Harry had been expecting that the Floo Network would direct

everyone from London to the right location. Unfortunately, the event wasn't large enough to warrant having portkeys set up.

When he arrived in the next hearth, Harry was greeted by robed figures filling a grand white ribbed hall, all facing a dueling platform. The competition was already underway. Whitley was again judging and two figures were battling it out relatively well. A quick look around revealed Hermione standing near a large arched window. Harry crossed over to her and they shared a smile.

The competition varied in skill as much as it had in the first Regional and soon it was down to merely George Weasley and two others. Whitley declared a round robin because of their odd number and Harry cheered along with a cluster of red heads much closer to the platform when George won his first pairing with ease and with the help of a Japanese water demon spell that his opponent had no counter for.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked his friend during a lull.

"Okay. Do you want to come over tonight?" Hermione asked.

Harry replied, "I have field work this evening . . . may have to leave early from here if it runs long, even. Fortunately, I don't have to wait for the Floo getting out. Had a real bugger getting here. Has the Floo Network been misdirecting you more lately?"

She shook her head.

"Oh," Harry uttered.

George was now facing his second opponent of the round robin, a small, older woman who was still shaking off a Jelly Limbs Curse from her previous opponent. George actually let her get in the first spell, apparently feeling gracious. He paid for it though when it turned out to be a Belt Tightening Curse that doubled him over. Gaze fierce, he clenched his arm around his middle, and returned a Hornet's Nest that chased her off the platform and then required help from the audience to cancel it completely.

Harry and Hermione joined the assembled Weasleys: Molly, Ron, and Fred, as well as the Weasley cousins as they congratulated George on going to the finals. George dangled the small brass wand before his twin brother tauntingly until Harry said, "You didn't have to face my trainer."

George collected the chain against the wand and stashed it away. "But I will next. How tough is he really? Someone took him down, I hear," he whispered and Harry wondered and immediately doubted if Mr. Weasley had let that slip. The conversation was dropped when Skeeter approached.

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"George Weasley . . . oh, and Harry. What a find, well, a few words from you, Mr. Weasley, in a moment." She peered at Harry through her tortoise-shell glasses, quill poised and asked, "Ready for the final tournament, Harry? Disappointed that you aren't competing?"

"A little, but judging will be fun."

"Even with all of your friends battling against each other? No qualms about a conflict there or . . . losing any friends?" She asked this with no little insinuation.

Harry had not worried about that. "I intend to be fair," Harry asserted and left it at that.

Ron put an arm around Harry and said, "He intends to be fair by favoring Weasleys over any others." The twins grinned at this.

Hermione crossed her arms. "Over Professor Snape, even?" she sniffed doubtfully.

George leaned in and despite Skeeter standing right there, said, "We are going to need some help there."

"I'm not favoring anybody," Harry insisted, feeling surrounded.

George stared at his fingernails and said, "No, you see you have to favor some o' us to make it even, so as to not be favorin'."

"Right," Harry said doubtfully.

Ron patted Harry and let him go. "We'll work on him," he assured Skeeter.

Skeeter was grinning in amusement but she straightened her face and turned to George. "You and your brother use rather a lot of foreign spells. Where do you learn them?"

Fred replied. "Pen pals. We trade spells with some students in Kyoto."

"Have to use Muggle post, in fact," George added. "It's too far to send an owl."

Harry had been watching the time and saw that he needed to go now to be ten minutes early rather than ten minutes late as he had been last week. He tugged on Hermione's sleeve. "I have to go. Tell everyone I said goodbye."

"Be careful, Harry," she said automatically and turned immediately back to the conversation.

> Author's Notes:
> Ginny fans – It isn't piling onto Ginny if she herself has made a point of not wanting to finish school and freely admits to hating studying and exams. Everyone else is simply locked into this notion from long association with it. Only Harry is a loyal enough friend to realize that if Ginny now wants to do better, that she could still manage to. Although, like many teens, she may be deciding too late.

Chapter 13.

A Heros Weakness

Harry stopped at home to pick up a warmer cloak for his shift and he arrived right on time. It was only six but it felt as though the day should already be over. He rubbed his arms and tried to gather up the energy for a full shift of Auror patrol. In the workout room, Kerry Ann sat reading a curled and yellow Muggle paperback. She waved hello and Harry wandered down to the Auror offices, surprised to find them empty. He was turning around when he spotted the logbook on the stand against the right-hand wall, its automatic quill lying beside it, twitching.

Curious where everyone was, Harry stepped over to read the last entry in the thick tome. The last entry was Tonks, checking in to say she had arrived at the Titan warehouse. Harry stared at the writing a long breathless moment, trying to remember where he had heard of that just recently. He checked Tonks' desk to see what files were out. The usual disorganized stacks were there but on top of them was a note stating that she had gone to take another look around where Rodgers had been attacked.

Harry had a stab of panic as he remembered Rodgers' description in the hospital of what had happened. A noise from the log stand brought Harry's attention back over there just as he set the note back down. A five pointed star was being scratched out on the board in pink, Tonks' color. Action took hold of Harry, he dashed to the corridor, looked both ways and spied the light in the workout room.

"Kerry Ann," Harry breathed from the doorway. "There is an emergency call from Tonks, who apparently went back down to the Titan warehouse where Rodgers was attacked. There isn't anyone around, so I'm going." With that, he Disapparated.

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Kerry Ann had been getting to her feet, with the usual need to disentangle herself from the desk, and as Harry disappeared she said, "Harry . . . you idiot." She ran down to the Auror's office and then around the corner, trying to find someone. Blessedly, around the next corner, light spilled out from Mr. Weasley's open door and faint conversation could be heard. Kerry Ann pounded down there, bringing Mr. Weasley to his feet when she arrived. He was alone, which seemed curious, but she disregarded it.

"Mr. Weasley, thank goodness. No one is around and Harry said he saw an emergency call from Tonks and so he took off."

"He what?"

"But, there isn't any call that I can see. And he for some reason thinks she's at the Titan warehouse in the Docklands, but she's logged in with Shacklebolt in Devon to help the Magical Reversal Squad. So, I have no idea what he's talking about."

Mr. Weasley stared at her a long befuddled second before pushing past her. Kerry Ann said, "It sounds like some kind of trap." She glanced into the office before following and noticed an old crystal ball on the desk. She hesitated on her toes because she thought she saw something in it, but having never seen anything in one, despite years of Divination classes, she assumed it must have been her own reflection.

Down in the Auror offices, Mr. Weasley was peering at the log book. "Did you see a five pointed star?"

"No."

"The quill certainly didn't log one."

"Should we go down there, sir?"

"And leave the office completely unmanned? No. We have reinforcements we can call in at times like this. Mr. Moody, for example, who should be at home." He thought a moment about direction, and fired a silver message away and slightly upward.

Argus Filch's eyes narrowed when he heard glass breaking somewhere high above where he stood. He dropped his cat – who landed easily – stomped to the nearest window, and threw open the sash to peer up. A figure high above on broomstick,

clearly in a school uniform, was whispering in a hiss to someone inside the tower. A second later the pupil took off at top speed.

Filch hurried his way along the corridor and pounded on a door midway down the line. The door swung open forcefully and Professor Snape straightened upon seeing the school caretaker there.

"Student just took flight from the Gryffindor tower," Filch grumbled. "Thought you'd like to know."

"What?" Snape didn't wait for a reply, just went to his window. "Heading which way?"

Filch stooped to pick up his cat, who was circling and bumping his legs. "South."

Snape swore quietly and went to his cupboard for his own broomstick.

Filch said, "If you catch –em can I use the manacles?"

"Possibly," Snape said through clenched teeth while mounting the window sill to push the sash wide. "Tell the headmistress that I will silver message her when I catch this pupil." With that he was gone.

Snape flew straight south, squinting into the distance. A glowing mist clung to the lowest corners of the hills despite the thinnest sliver of moon. The only lights ahead beyond Hogsmeade came from the railroad signal just before the bridge where the rail lines came together. It also marked the edge of the Apparition barrier. On a hunch, and suspecting that he saw a dark figure swooping down toward the light, Snape kicked his broom into its top speed. Whoever it was ahead of him must have a fast broom as well since he didn't gain on his quarry at all.

A crack! that sounded as Snape began descending over the tall trees indicated that someone had indeed stopped there to Apparate away. Snape landed hard and immediately used a tracking spell to find the exact spot where the person had been standing. By the red light of the railroad signal, he marched off a pentagram around it in the tall grass. Two steps, stop and set a flare, two steps... This was a Dark magic spell, but he was not going to be deterred while chasing a run-away student. Red bars rose up from the corners of the pentagram and subsided, which indicated that the spell had worked. Snape stepped into the center, activated the spell again so that it formed a glowing cage around him, and blindly Disapparated on the faith that the spell would take him to precisely the same spot as the last person had gone.

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Harry stepped along the fence surrounding the Titan warehouse. He had been down here twice on patrol since the attack so he felt he was on familiar ground. All appeared quiet, but his concern for Tonks imagined all kinds of bad possibilities that might account for the lack of obvious battle. He cut a gap in the chain link fence and ducked inside, dodging a hulking piece of mysterious, rusty equipment. The heavy padlock on the door to the warehouse had previously been cut and the door pushed open silently after Harry used a charm on it to ensure this.

As dark as it was outside on the waterfront, it was even darker inside the massive building. The vertical skylights offered the only light and it was paltry at best. Harry made his way carefully forward, aware of the tall pillars arrayed from here to the far side but not much else. His eyes strained to make out anything and he was beginning to wonder exactly how best to proceed given that there were no obvious clues as to where exactly Tonks, or the trouble, was.

Stepping gingerly and silently, Harry stopped at the first pillar and breathed slowly so as to remain quiet. He didn't want to shout or use a light, so he wasn't certain what he should do since he wasn't giving up yet.

Shaking off the quivers that the spell left him with, Snape looked around himself. He was in a tree-lined field and ahead of him the low clouds radiated the glow of a large city's lights. He took a few steps and the distinctive outline of the Burrow came into view through the trees. Swearing again, Snape took flight and flew at top speed toward the glowing sky. If she had only gone home for a visit, he could deal with her later, but he had a hunch she was headed into London. As he flew, he sent a silver message to McGonagall indicating that he believed that it was Ginny Weasley he was chasing.

A distant figure fluttered tantalizingly as a speck against the bright sky, too far away to apprehend with a spell that would not put Ginny at risk. She presumably rode Harry's Firebolt, which meant it was not possible to catch up. Snape fired several Tracker Charms in case he lost her, but none of them seemed to hit their mark and soon she dipped below the sky, out of sight against the grey mass of buildings.

Snape urged his broom forward even though it was already at its top speed; the cold wind bit fiercely into his bare hands. He slowed when he reached the lazily winding river through the city. Ginny appeared to have descended in a broad swoop somewhere in this area. No figures were on the street, so Snape swooped low to read a street sign and sent another message to McGonagall. He had been moving too fast to receive any back, if she had sent one.

Inside the warehouse, a noise up and to the left boosted Harry's already fast heart rate even higher. Moving as quickly as he could, while remaining silent, he found the metal stairs up to what appeared to be a windowed row of former offices that overlooked the warehouse floor. At the top of the stairs, glass from the mostly broken windows littered the floor, making it very difficult to move in complete silence, even while casting a silencing charm ahead of his feet.

A doorless opening led into the old office area, now empty except for a smashed telephone and some dangling wiring. The noise he had heard may simply have been vermin moving about. Harry stepped cautiously, his wand damp in his fingers but radiating his nerves back at him as energy, which made him feel more confident.

At the outer corner where the gaping window frames looked down upon the vastness of the warehouse, Harry turned. There was nothing here. His shoulders fell as he frowned into the darkness. But just as he was relaxing his wand arm, his spine prickled with a warning vibration and a sickly malevolence. Harry spun while generating his best block but he was too late to finish the spell before a blast of sparkling blue and white struck him, buckling his knees.

Fiercely angry, mostly at himself, Harry desperately fought the blackness trying to envelope him. He guessed which direction to fire a returning spell and issued a blasting curse that pounded against the window frames, splintering the rotted wood and plaster in a shower that rained down onto the floor below.

Ginny Weasley was just maneuvering herself through a broken skylight and wishing she knew some kind of night vision spell, when a first floor area in the corner lit up blue-white. Without thinking she leaned her broom into its highest acceleration and held fast to her wand. Another blast out of the windows forced her to veer severely to the left and fight the magical currents to cut a new course to the long row of side windows. She landed inside with a crunch of broken glass and immediately needed to block a shot that she thought must be cast by a cloaked person on a broomstick since it was emanating from twenty-five feet in the air beyond the glassless windows.

By the light of the clashing spells she saw Harry collapsing to the floor as his block failed, and she immediately stepped forward into the onslaught to get him at least

partially under her own block. The glass shards shivered around them on the floor. The spell finally let up and Ginny had to catch herself with her hand on the broken glass as a wave of sleep tried to overcome her. A Sleeping Curse, that's what the spell resembled, she realized. The world was tilting distressingly like a funhouse as Ginny scrambled forward. On her knees beside Harry she cast a hatchet class curse out the widened window, imagining it lodging in someone's chest and not caring if it did. It clattered to the floor far below instead and she had no choice but to find the power for a second block as another interminably and impossibly long bombardment of Sleeping Curse lashed out at them, from closer yet; although she saw no one who could be casting it.

Snape landed at the base of an old bridge that crossed the river thirty feet above the waterfront quay of cracked, sagging tarmac. The street lamps atop the bridge shed scant light around him.

As he approached a hole cut in the fence bordering the nearest property, a cloaked figure approached. Snape aimed his wand and the figure tossed back its hood to reveal Mad-Eye Moody. "Got a message that we have an errant Apprentice," he growled almost inaudibly.

Snape tilted his head. "I am chasing an errant student."

Moody's magical eye moved without his head. "What's this then?" he uttered just before a flash of light could be seen through the cracks in the rusting wall of the building. Another spell followed on its heels, accompanied by the sound of excessive debris being thrown about.

Both of them broke into a run, but Snape reached the door first, having the advantage of two good legs and far greater determination. He stopped just behind the first pillar and peered around it. Dust settling in the air caught the paltry light available and then lit up brightly when a spell poured forth from the first floor area to the left. Blinded by the spell, Snape was slow locating the stairway up and had to follow Moody, who was more cautious than Snape's blind determination would allow for.

At the top, Snape slipped on deeply layered blades of broken glass and had to right himself with his hands as yet another spell lit the area ahead of them, outlining two figures, one down and one kneeling, the latter clearly Ginny given the long hair.

Moody shouted for Ginny to duck and fired something that streamed out on a sizzling white wire before meeting up with something beyond the window opening and exploding in a blast of sandy particles and white light.

Silence fell as the debris settled with a strange rustle of the glass shards around them. Ginny shook Harry and called his name in an attempt to rouse him. Snape crouched quickly beside her, wand illuminated, and laid two fingers on Harry's carotid artery. He then exhaled in relief and asked, "What did he get hit with?"

Ginny answered, "It looked like a Sleeping Curse. It felt like one too."

"Let's get out of this confined and highly trap-like area," Snape snarled.

Moody, who was peering out into the warehouse said, "It's clear now. Although there was a barrier just a second ago. Odd."

"I don't care if you don't see anything," Snape countered. "I'm taking Harry outside." And with that, he grasped Harry's wrist and Disapparated to the shadowy area at the base of the bridge.

Moody appeared beside him a second later, Ginny firmly gripped by the wrist. "What do you want with her?" he asked.

Another voice said, "It will take some time to come up with something appropriate." They all turned and watched as McGonagall stepped carefully down the uneven stone staircase from the roadway above. "There is fortunately an old tartan shop down here that despite being closed for a decade is still on the Floo Network. What happened to Harry?" she asked in concern, pushing Moody aside to bend over Harry's supine figure.

"He was lured into a trap," Moody supplied. "A rather cleverly laid one. A Sleeping Curse got –im." As he spoke, his magical eye roved constantly around them.

McGonagall turned on Ginny, "And what are you doing here, young lady? Alastor, you can let go of her."

"You certain?" Alastor asked.

"Yes," McGonagall assured him. "We know where she lives, even if she may or may not be a student at our school after this is sorted out."

Ginny dipped her head. "I was talking to dad about George's win in the dueling regional and overheard one of the other apprentices saying that Harry had headed off here thinking that Tonks was in trouble but she said the logs and the note he mentioned weren't at all as Harry had said. She said it must be a trap and that no

one was around to take care of it." She nervously shifted Harry's broom from one hand to the other. "If I hadn't arrived-"

"Help had been called," Moody pointed out, leaning toward her.

"You were too late," Ginny countered angrily, gamely leaning into the argument as well.

"Enough!" Snape snarled, crouching beside Harry again. "We need to take Harry somewhere safe until this is sorted out. If we are dealing with insider help at the Ministry in trapping him, I am leery of doing the predictable."

"He doesn't need St. Mungo's?" McGonagall asked.

"He needs to sleep off the curse." Snape leaned farther over Harry in the dim light. "Although, he is showing nervous agitation from an overdose of the spell, it doesn't appear dangerous."

"We can use the Floo node I arrived in to take him back to Hogwarts," McGonagall pointed out.

"Harry gets misdirected in the Floo all the time, you know," Ginny pointed out. "In his last two letters he's complained about that."

"Plod's coming," Moody whispered and pushed McGonagall and Ginny a little more into the shadows. Up on the street heavy footsteps could be heard approaching the bridge.

"Take hold of my bracelet," McGonagall instructed them, holding out her arm and pulling her sleeve back to reveal a glittering gold band.

All but Moody obeyed. He stepped backward into the shadows and held his wand at ready. Snape lifted Harry's limp hand and McGonagall lowered her arm so Harry's arm could reach and a rushing two breaths later they were in a small sitting room with bookshelves lining one wall surrounding a cold hearth, a tall wing chair, into which Ginny plunked down with a groan, and a dark green sofa, where Snape hovered Harry's slumbering self. Harry's arm twitched strangely followed by his head as he was covered with his own and Snape's cloaks. Snape again checked his pulse and leaned back, apparently satisfied.

A figure came to the doorway just as Ginny asked, "Where are we?"

"Minerva?" the figure queried. "What is happening?"

McGonagall went over to him, standing close and putting a hand on his arm. "Richard, we needed a quick escape. Sorry if we startled you-"

Snape interrupted from the sofa where Harry was growing more agitated, although not any more conscious, "Do you have a Calming Draught, Minerva?"

"Yes, I'll fetch it." She stepped away, leaving Richard rubbing his arms nervously just outside the doorway.

Ginny gave him a thorough looking over, fascinated by the notion of a married Professor McGonagall. Richard appeared to be an average, middle-aged man, medium brown hair, unkempt, wearing a blue cotton shirt with a cardigan over it. "Is that Harry Potter?" he asked, leaning his head sideways to see around Snape, but not approaching.

"Yes," Ginny replied. "Foolish Harry, running after someone he can't have."

"Oh," Snape sneered. "And we don't have anyone else in this room who qualifies as foolish under that metric."

"And, I was going to add, when they weren't in any trouble anyway." Ginny finished and sat back with her arms crossed. "Sir." Harry's leg jerked this time. "What's wrong with him?" Ginny asked.

"Multiple Sleeping Curses can over-stimulate selective parts of the nervous system even as it shuts down consciousness. How many times did he get hit?"

"About two and a half but the spell was long. I tried to get him inside my block but my block was leaking since the spell almost took me out too. I've never seen anything like it; It just went on and on, unstopping, like a gushing spigot rather than a wand."

He considered her, and she held his gaze, part of her hoping she had scored enough credit with that to avoid the worst of the punishment that could be upcoming. On the other hand, she didn't regret at all what she had done. She slouched back in the tall chair and watched Harry's fitful face with no small ache of sympathy.

McGonagall returned to the doorway and murmured something to Richard. Ginny leaned forward in the chair to observe them interact, but she felt strangely heavy when she moved, as though she moved through water. A stinging on her ankle made her pull her leg over, but it resisted her tug and the pain shot higher. A high-pitched chattering noise emanated from the corner of the chair and Ginny turned and discovered the most grotesque creature clinging to her ankle. It had hair growing right out of its rancid yellow eyes, which were surrounded by wrinkled excessive flesh. It had what appeared to be a lobster claw latched around her leg and it was opening its shockingly large mouth – relative to its tiny head – as though in preparation for taking out a chunk of her flesh.

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Ginny shouted and leaped fully onto the chair, pulling her leg free and scrambling for her wand. The whole room was in motion. The floor was crawling with similarly distorted creatures. Snape had pulled Harry to a sitting position and was shaking him. McGonagall had thrown herself backwards into her husband, wand out and spelling anything that approached the door.

"Minerva, the potion!" Snape shouted over the chattering of teeth and clacking of mingling boney and chitinous limbs.

McGonagall gathered her wits and pushed forward into the room, her floor-length robes immediately caught up in claws and grasping long fingers. She tossed the potion bottle the last few feet. Snape caught it up, yanked the stopper, and forced it between Harry's lips while chanting a swallowing charm.

The noise in the room dwindled and the creatures melted into the floor. One last one was climbing over the armrest of the wingback chair and Ginny, crouched on the cushion, hit it with Harry's broom, which she had left propped against the chair. It slapped into the corner, fell, and sunk into the floor. Limbs shaking, Ginny lowered herself slowly down to sit, although she kept her feet up on the blessedly wide cushion and she kept the broom held at ready. Snape, still clenching the potion bottle, was holding Harry's limp head against his chest.

Except for the sound of everyone's breathing, the room remained silent for nearly a minute. Eventually, Richard asked in a quavering voice, "What was that?"

Everyone turned to him, including McGonagall, who released her panicked grip on the doorframe in order to push Richard away and shepherd him off. Snape, still with a slouched Harry leaning into him, stoppered the bottle and put it in his pocket. He then pushed his straggly hair back repeatedly, eyes far away.

Ginny leaned forward in the chair and glanced around the room, including under her own chair. She still didn't wish to put her feet down when she sat back. Her sock was wet. She shifted and examined the slices in her ankle that were leaking blood down into her shoe. The vision of the creature that had had a hold of her made her shudder. A sharp query drew Ginny from that memory. "Did you get hurt?" Professor Snape asked.

Thinking that it could have been worse, Ginny replied, "Just scratched."

McGonagall returned and stepped to the couch. Snape lowered Harry back and removed the potion from his pocket and handed it to her. He stood and asked McGonagall, "Did you get injured?"

McGonagall shook her head without lifting it from her scrutiny of Harry's absolute stillness. He looked as quiet as death now. Ginny wrapped her arms around herself as though the room had grown icy cold. Snape approached her and lifted her foot, yanking off her shoe without preamble.

"Did you get bit?"

Ginny shook her head, "No."

"Well, that is something." He dropped her foot and headed for the doorway. "Come."

Ginny stood and hobbled two steps before kicking off her other shoe. "What would have happened if I did?"

Snape's reply was muted by his striding away. "I do not know precisely, but nothing good, presumably."

Ginny hurried to follow as Snape stopped to check each room branching off along a linear line of small rooms. He stopped at the door to a pink tiled toilet and waited for her.

Ginny sat on the closed toilet seat and washed off the blood with the warm wet cloth she had been unceremoniously handed. Her bloody sock she tossed into the rubbish bin. The jagged slices were still bleeding so she pressed the cloth firmly around her ankle and watched as Snape prowled through the pink cabinets and the cupboard before finding what he needed. He sat on a footstool and opened a plastic bottle that boded ill with the sharp aroma of denatured alcohol. With a thick white towel under her foot, propped on his leg, Snape poured the half-full contents of the bottle over the wounds.

Ginny very nearly screamed. Without meaning to, she tried to yank her foot back, but it was held surprisingly fast. All she could manage was to rock back and forth as the crucio-level pain peaked and subsided in waves of cold and hot from the wounds. The air itself was misery on the lacerations in the wake of the alcohol. She dried her eyes and felt embarrassed to need to, but Snape wasn't paying any attention; he was opening a tin of salve and covering the wounds, which relieved most of the remaining pain. Gauze and significant amounts of white tape followed.

Ginny's foot was released to drop to the floor without warning before Snape stood and said, "It will have to be checked hourly to see that nothing is changing." When Ginny responded by pulling her leg close as though to protect it, he added, "You would look far less ladylike with a giant lobster claw for a foot."

Ginny shuddered at the thought. Snape was tossing out the plastic bottle, leading Ginny to ask, "Wasn't that sufficient punishment for leaving school grounds?" while drying her eyes yet again.

Snape's black gaze slid over to her as he closed up the other supplies. He didn't reply, and Ginny found herself lowering her gaze.

Back in the sitting room, McGonagall was in the chair Ginny had occupied and Ginny, who would normally willingly sit on the floor, opted instead to sit upon the armrest at Harry's feet, even though it wasn't her house. No one even glanced at her, so she relaxed. Harry was lying so still he did not appear to be breathing, but his color was good, and Snape stood straight after checking him over, so he must be all right.

"We should take him to Hogwarts," Snape suggested.

McGonagall tiredly replied. "There is no Floo network here, that is why I was allowed the bracelet to get home. But now it is reset to the Docklands as its second port. This is actually Richard's house and Cornelius denied me a permanent attachment because I am here so little of the year. I could reapply, I suppose now that it Amelia I could appeal to for a dispensation."

Snape said, "I could take him on my broom from beyond the Apparition bar-"

His speaking was coincidentally interrupted by twin cracks! of Apparition which brought everyone's gaze to the doorway where Moody and Mr. Weasley appeared. As they entered, the small room grew quite crowded. Ginny swallowed hard at the disturbed look her father sent her way. But she was given a temporary reprieve when he turned to the others and asked about Harry.

Snape spoke: "He was hit with multiple Sleeping Curses, otherwise he is unharmed. Ms. Weasley arrived in time to prevent further harm or anyone from taking him away."

Ginny stared, eyes wide, at Professor Snape, shocked silly by his moral support.

Moody grunted doubtfully. "We were right behind –er." His magical eye circled the room inside its socket. "No other problems?"

"No," Snape lied easily and then in an apparent distraction added, "If he is in need of further care we will take him."

McGonagall shifted in her seat, but did not speak. Mr. Weasley bent over Harry, touching his forehead and then his cloak covered shoulder. "We're still sorting out what happened at the Ministry. But if it was only a Sleeping Curse then someone clearly wanted to capture him unharmed and went to great trouble to do so . . . someone who has too much access and knows far too much about Harry," he finished grimly.

Moody looked Ginny over, noticing her bare foot with both eyes. "What happened to your leg?" he asked softly.

Ginny opened her mouth and managed to reply almost as smoothly as Snape had, "I must have cut it on a piece of glass." She held up her nicked hand which actually had been cut on a glass shard at the warehouse. "There was a lot of it about."

Snape stood suddenly and said, "Harry should recover in a few hours. We will let you know how he is faring and I would appreciate a patrol or two being assigned to Shrewsthorpe for the next few weeks."

"Already arranged, Severus," Mr. Weasley replied. "I'll assume he's coming in on Monday unless I hear otherwise." He sounded as caring as Ginny had ever heard him and she felt a stab at having to lie to him. He turned to her, glanced at the two teachers and then back to her, saying, "I'm assuming that you aren't supposed to be here."

Ginny shook her head faintly.

Her father sighed and said, "We'll sort it out later after they decide on their punishment for you. I'd say a Quidditch ban is in order."

Ginny nearly collapsed in reaction and just barely resisted swearing. She straightened up immediately, though, upon deciding she still wouldn't have changed what she did in the face of that. Against her will, her eyes were burning in frustration, but she didn't touch them in an effort to avoid drawing attention to it.

Mr. Weasley asked the teachers, "Do you want me to take Ginny home with me?"

Snape glanced surreptitiously at her ankle and said, "No, she may remain here," leaving Ginny in the bizarrely unexpected position of preferring the company of Professor Snape to her father's.

After Mr. Weasley and Moody departed, Ginny let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding. McGonagall stood and said to Snape, "If you can handle Harry alone, I need to attend to Richard."

Snape nodded and since he was sitting on the couch, hand resting on Harry's arm, Ginny took the tall chair again. That was, until Snape said, "Light a fire, will you, Ms. Weasley?"

Ginny immediately stood back up to do as she was told, beginning with pushing the chair out of the way in the small space, but still having it face the couch. Minutes and one firestarting spell later, a fire was flickering merrily in the hearth. Its warmth contrasted distressingly with recent events and failed to feel comforting.

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Brushing ash off her hands, Ginny returned to the chair and jumped poker-straight on raw nerves when Harry's hand jerked. Snape, moving with rapid confidence, lifted him upright and, using his arm to hold Harry's head up, again forced potion into him. After stoppering the bottle, he turned around to sit back on the couch and continued to hold Harry while staring intensely beyond the floor.

Ginny relaxed only after a long, quiet time passed. She found her gaze unable to remain fixed on the scene of a hunched Professor Snape cradling Harry's head on his arm and looking as though the future were grim. She finally let her heavy eyes close and drifted to the sound of the fire behind her.

Harry awoke to a pummeling from an array of confusing memories. His face was pressed into warm robes and the familiar scent of his guardian. With his comprehension of this, his immediate alarm drained away and he floated in absolute security despite being unable to piece the immediate past together. When he could, Harry blinked his eyes open and pondered the sliver of unfamiliar wall and ceiling visible beyond Snape's shoulder and the curve of his chest. Harry's hands were stinging in places and he moved them under the heavy cloaks to feel what might be wrong, startled when he was suddenly raised into a sitting position, his head lolling against Snape's breastbone.

Harry wanted to lift his hands before him to look at them but Snape had too firm a hold. "What's going on?" Harry managed to ask through what felt like a potion haze in his mind. Oddly, a potion bottle was before him as he asked this. It retreated slowly and the hold on him loosened enough for him to bring his hands up to study the numerous small cuts on them. Flashes of recent memory came back at that: broken glass, the dark warehouse. "What happened? Is Tonks all right?" Alarm brought clear thinking back for a moment, but it faded again into a general cottony pressure.

Snape set the potion bottle down nearby with a thunk. Snidely, he chastised, "She wasn't there."

Harry tried to take that in while gathering his strength to sit up on his own and not be draped against Snape. "No?" Harry then noticed that Ginny was sleeping in a chair nearby, feet curled under her, head awkwardly angled into the corner, mouth open. Harry rubbed his forehead and managed to get upright with a little help. Memories and nightmares were competing in his brain, making him woozy.

"Why don't you have another sip of this?" Snape asked, bringing the potion bottle back before Harry.

Harry put his hands around the frosted green glass bottle and tried to stare down into it. "What is it?"

Snape's arm was around him and it tightened as he replied, "Calming Draught. Just another sip and I think you will be fine. You are recovering from the effects of repeated Sleeping Curses."

Harry didn't want his limbs to be any more rubbery than they were now. He gripped the bottle in both hands thinking he should resist.

"Go on," Snape urged softly.

Harry obeyed; the potion was bitter and it reflected the stale taste already in his mouth. Snape took the bottle before Harry might drop it and set it aside. Harry's head fell to the side and Snape sat forward and let him down onto the couch to lie flat. Harry's last perception was Snape bending over him, laying his fingers on the side of his neck.

Harry awoke later when Ginny added logs to the fire. He looked around the unknown room and felt at a loss. "Where is Severus?" he asked.

Ginny turned to him and said, "Sleeping in the other room. Do you want me to fetch him?"

Harry sat up and found it easier than expected. His fuzzy memory regarding potions was confirmed by the bottle beside the arm of the sofa. "No."

Ginny stood and came beside him. "Are you certain? I'm under orders to fetch him if you so much as ask where he is."

"No, no, it's all right." Harry put his feet down on the floor, massaged his head and sniffed. "I had the worst nightmare."

"Really?" Ginny asked facetiously as she dropped back into the wing chair and crossed her legs.

Harry fumbled through his thoughts and laughed lightly. "Yeah. I dreamed I set demons loose on McGonagall's husband." He shook his head and looked perplexed.

"Ah huh," Ginny muttered. She linked her fingers together and rested them over her knee. "Now ask where we are . . ." she invited.

Harry's stomach dropped an inch. "Where are we?" he asked despite not wanting to hear the answer.

Ginny shot him a look that Snape frequently used. "Headmistress McGonagall's house."

"No," Harry breathed.

"Yes," Ginny stated.

Harry's eyes roamed the room, trying to hook this place into his memory, but he couldn't. "Did I really let them loose?" Harry asked bleakly. "Did anyone get hurt? Did Richard get hurt?"

Sounding more upbeat, she said, "Professor McGonagall went on defense for Richard. It was kind of cute, actually. The only person who got hurt was yours truly." She pulled up her trouser cuff. "And just a scratch that Professor Snape said is healing all right."

Harry studied the bandage on her ankle. "I'm sorry."

"Harry, it's all right. No harm, no foul."

"Right," Harry muttered, rubbing his hair back repeatedly. How did he lose control? he wondered.

Ginny laughed. "I was thinking that whoever was trying to kidnap you would have had a rather nasty surprise if they had captured you."

Harry tried to piece that in with the previous evening. "What happened?"

Ginny filled him in while Harry leaned far back, eyes fixed on the fire.

"Someone went to that much trouble to trick me?" Harry asked at the conclusion.

"Yes. Wanted you rather badly."

"Who?" Harry asked, and then thought he might know the answer.

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know. My dad and Moody stopped by, said they hadn't worked it out yet."

Harry shifted his head to look at Ginny again. "Moody was here?"

"Yeah. Everyone lied to him." Ginny sounded sober. "It was freaky standing by and watching Professor Snape lie to my dad. I think he needs to know, Harry."

"I think he does too," Harry agreed, although it made his empty stomach do a flip. "I need to get something to eat. Is there anything?"

"There are some snacks in the kitchen." She stood and led the way down the long row of small rooms that made up the old house. The kitchen was at the far end just past a long formal dining room. Its white walls and cabinets were blinding when the electric lights were switched on. Ginny pulled bread and cheese out as well as chutney. Harry took them and sat down at the small table to eat.

A bit of food improved Harry's outlook and he almost felt like himself after two cups of tea.

"So how much trouble are you in?" Harry asked.

Ginny sipped her tea and said, "I don't know. Professor McGonagall threatened to expel me."

"Isn't that what you want?" Harry teased.

"At the beginning of the year, maybe," she replied sharply. "Now that I've made it this far . . . no. My dad suggested a Quidditch ban."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, and if he insists on it, I think I'll insist on becoming a professional Quidditch player." She looked determined and Harry didn't doubt she would do just that. "You think I'm good enough?" she asked.

"You're pretty good," Harry admitted. "I think you'd need more training, though."

She took a cracker and munched through it. "You think Suze is good enough, though," she pointed out, sounding a little hurt. "She hasn't been doing as well this year," Ginny added, sounding as though she were scoring points.

"Don't tell anyone, but Severus changed the Snitch to a professional one."

Ginny dropped her hand onto the table loudly. "No wonder the games have all been so bloody long this year. He do that just for her?"

"I expect," Harry answered, pouring himself a third cup of tea.

Feet scuffing on the floor brought their attention to the doorway where Richard stepped in and immediately scuffed to a stop upon seeing Harry. Leery, he glanced behind him as though contemplating a retreat. Harry's fingers suddenly felt the sharp outline of his teacup handle as he fiddled with it. He felt rather bad, but didn't know what to say.

"Good morning," Ginny said easily, as though everything were normal.

After a hesitation Richard returned her greeting before quickly going to the icebox for the milk. He fumbled in cabinets he must know well, but at this moment didn't appear to know so well, to get out a glass. Harry stared at the chipped edge of the table, feeling worse. Richard put the milk away and departed.

"He'll get over it," Ginny asserted when quiet descended.

"Doesn't look like it. How many creatures were there? I didn't notice any damage."

"I wasn't counting, and they seemed to want to get at the people mostly." She frowned as though regretting saying that. "Professor Snape thinks the conditions in your head that made it happen won't easily occur again. But avoid Sleeping Curses, if you can . . . especially three in a row."

Harry's stomach felt sour and he pushed the remainder of his tea away.

"Harry," Ginny cajoled. "Everything's all right. If you hadn't been rescued, everything would still be all right because of those things. They weren't going after you that I could tell. What's the problem?"

Harry stared in the direction Richard had shuffled off to and sighed lightly. "What did McGonagall say?"

Ginny sent the dishes to the sink with a wave of her wand. An early morning glow filled the small window high on the wall. "Nothing."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "Nothing?" he repeated and Ginny confirmed with a nod.

Snape stepped in then, looking around as though still on alert. His hair was exceptionally mussed and he looked in need of far more sleep, but he stepped over to Harry and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

Harry looked away, at the salt and pepper shakers beside a jar of toothpicks, utterly mundane things. He shrugged. "All right, I guess." His stomach burned fiercely and he only felt worse in the face of Snape's sympathy. He didn't see Ginny's chagrined frown at his guardian.

More firmly, Snape said, "Harry?"

Sounding annoyed, Harry turned straight and prompted, "Yeah?" What he was realizing with grim outlook was that he was a potential time bomb for everyone around him.

"Any nervous twitches or sudden weakness?" Snape asked.

"No," Harry replied, hoping dearly that meant he was through it for now.

Snape's hand squeezed his shoulder. "Good. We should depart soon and leave McGonagall's household in peace." He crossed his arms. "As to you . . ." he said, staring down his nose at Ginny.

In his mind's eye Harry saw himself rising and raging at Snape for even considering punishing Ginny, even though a moment before he had been tempted to hypocritically point out her poor judgment himself. He imagined Snape's shock and alarm with detachment. He sat quiet, though, not even fidgeting outwardly.

"Someone had to do something," Ginny was arguing.

Snidely, Snape demanded, "Did it not occur to you, Ms. Weasley, that you could have come and informed me and that I would be more than capable of dealing with it?"

Ginny bit her lip. "I didn't think of it."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Identical bloody hero instinct. I take it back, Potter, I would not choose her . . . you would mutually self destruct."

Ginny's brow furrowed and she turned to Harry and asked, "What is he on about?"

"Don't ask," Harry replied quietly. He stood and said, "I'm ready to go home."

Familiar footsteps indicated McGonagall was approaching. She took in the room with calm eyes and greeted everyone. Harry dropped his gaze for what felt like the tenth time that morning. "Recovered, Harry?" she asked, as though he might have had touch of flu.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, eyes roving the worn laminated floor.

To Snape she said, "I'll expect you early Monday, then?"

Snape nodded and went to fetch their cloaks from the far room. Harry stood waiting awkwardly. Ginny gave him a hug, which did not aid in reducing the awkwardness. Snape returned, grasped Harry's wrist and Disapparated them to their main hall.

"I could have Apparated myself," Harry pointed out, sounding peevish on top of tired, "that didn't feel very far."

"Why don't you go to your own bed for a little more rest?" Snape suggested stiffly.

"I just had three cups of tea," Harry pointed out.

"Why don't you work on your readings then."

Chapter 13

Ginny tensed as she was left alone with the headmistress. "We should be going as well," McGonagall said. "I left Grubbly-Plank in charge, but I do not like to be gone so long . . . especially when there is apparently more trouble brewing than I previously realized. Get your things together," she commanded Ginny.

"Yes, Headmistress," Ginny responded politely, but as she stepped away, McGonagall said, "Little late for a bid for obedience, Ms. Weasley."

Ginny returned as McGonagall was collecting a broom for herself from a hall cupboard. Upon seeing Richard hovering outside another doorway, she said, "Go on ahead Ms. Weasley, but wait for me at the doors to the castle, I doubt they will be open this early."

Ginny slipped her hand-knitted gloves on, grasped Harry's broom and Disapparated to the end of the railroad bridge.

The valley and its bridge spread out before her in misty steep hills and low stray streaks of wan sunlight. It was beautiful and for a moment, all she wanted to do was to fly off into the scene rather than go back to Hogwarts. Sighing, she hovered the broom and took off on it in the direction of the school, quickly collecting moisture on her cloak as she flew. The castle walls were streaked grey as though it had rained and the torches beside the doors were unlit blackened stumps, making the castle appear unoccupied. She landed before the front steps and sat down on the top one, damp cloak tugged tight around her.

It was almost ten minutes before McGonagall appeared and Ginny had fallen into a bored stupor, watching the matted grass of the lawn flutter in the wind. McGonagall didn't speak, just unspelled the door and led the way in. A few students mingled in the Entrance Hall even this early and they watched in curiosity as Ginny trouped in behind the headmistress.

McGonagall hadn't instructed it, but Ginny continued to follow her up to her office, where she glanced at a few notes on her desk before turning her attention to her charge. While she waited, Ginny examined a glass model of Hogwarts castle that hung from a stand on the desk. It was wet, dripping the occasional water droplet onto the floor.

Still standing, McGonagall asked facetiously, "Well, Ms. Weasley, what are we to do with you?"

"If I hadn't gone, Moody might have taken Harry to St. Mungo's and he would have opened the Dark Plane there, which would have been terrible."

"Claiming the ends justify the means does not fly with me, young lady, especially accidental ends," McGonagall stated. "But the kind of trouble you caused did not put other students at risk, so I have little reason to expel you." She paused while looking Ginny over. She adjusted the bun in her hair and took a seat before saying, "But we must be hard enough on you to deter others. Three weeks detention would be a start. And would you consider banishment from the D.A. a severe punishment?"

Ginny thought a moment. "It takes a lot of time that I've been thinking I should be using to revise for my N.E.W.T.s."

McGonagall considered Ginny with what might have been a grudging acceptance of her attempt to sound the dutiful student. "Would others think it a severe punishment?"

"Probably. I'm in charge of it at the moment."

"As little as I wish to remove you from what essentially constitutes teaching duties, it does sound the best option." Ginny was just letting her tense shoulders fall when McGonagall ordered, "Give me your badge as well."

Ginny required a second to realize that it was her Prefect badge that was being requested. Frowning, she pulled it from her pocket and handed it over. McGonagall said as she accepted it, "Your behavior is not exactly becoming of a Prefect, Ms. Weasley."

"No, ma'am," Ginny agreed and felt more lacking than expected from losing that status.

"You may go, Ms. Weasley. I will ask the staff who needs extra help, so report here this evening after dinner for your detention."

"Yes, Professor."

"And if you ever again leave school grounds without permission," McGonagall threatened, "it will be a full Quidditch ban." Under her breath she added, "As little as I wish to give Slytherin any additional advantages."

Chapter 14.

Duels

Harry sat at the dining room table, mostly reading successfully until lunchtime when Winky asked what he might like. He had been up since 4:30 and thought that it felt more like dinner should be arriving and wondered if that was why she felt the need to ask. Snape was in and out of the room, sorting old piles of post and dealing with other random things. He always gave Harry a bit of a looking over before departing.

Harry, for his part, could get lost in his readings for a while but then Richard's fearful visage would float before him and make him feel ill all over again. He was resting with his eyes pillowed on his arm, trying to deal with that, when Snape reappeared and took a seat across from him.

"I'm sorry about everything." Harry said after lifting his heavy head. "You haven't even yelled at me for taking off after Tonks."

"Would you do so again?" Snape asked evenly. Harry knew that level tone meant the question was a test.

"I'd try harder to find someone to help, I guess. But . . ." Harry could not, after everything that had transpired, imagine staying put at the Ministry. He rubbed his gritty hair, and said, "I guess I would." And then he laughed wryly. "You don't seem angry. You don't seem angry about any of it."

Snape steepled his fingers before him on the table. "That instinct of yours to take action is the reason I am still here, so I cannot by rights insist that you always do otherwise. I do wish you would be more careful. Someone clearly wishes to do you harm."

"Merton," Harry said, and when Snape's head tilted with great interest, Harry said, "He also attacked Rodgers. At the same place. Took him two days in Mungo's to recover and he still isn't himself." Snape eyes were intent as he took that in. Harry added, "That's why I was certain there was trouble; it was the same place."

Snape leaned forward with interest. "Did Rodgers also get taken out with a Sleeping Curse?"

"No. Blasting Curse. Seemed like they intended to kill him. He just barely managed to Apparate away, but he passed out after that so he may have tried to go through a barrier. The Muggle police ended up finding him just outside the warehouse"

Snape rubbed his lip. "Is this the mysterious M.M. of whom you were asking before?"

"Yes. I shouldn't be telling you any of this, by the way."

Reassuringly, Snape replied, "I assumed as much." Lunch appeared before them and Snape took up the Draco pepper grinder that still annoyed Harry. Sounding unusually concerned, Snape said, "Rodgers is hardly unskilled with that wand of his."

"Whoever was spelling me yesterday wasn't either." Harry imagined getting a better shot next time, hopefully in the light, and felt a determination to do much better should the opportunity arise.

"Fortunately this Merton fancies convoluted traps rather than direct assault, or I would drag you back to live at Hogwarts." Without missing a beat, he continued with, "How are your readings progressing . . . are you catching up?"

"I am, slowly. Rodgers did a review day last week. I think someone insisted he be nicer to me and after the attack on him he's changed our lessons to strictly blocking so I've had more time to make up the older readings."

"What are you learning?" Snape asked between bites.

"Combined dome and crystalline blocks. Also rubber shields, which can also be thrown over your opponent once their energy stabilizes, but we haven't learned that yet. We're still working on the basics. It's going slow."

"As little as I like the man personally, I am pleased by the level of training you are receiving," Snape stated.

"I'm having a hard time staying on Rodgers' good side."

Snape said, "You will receive more effective training, perhaps, if you don't."

"I suppose," Harry returned. He stared at his plate, remembering, yet again, Richard's obvious fear. "You think I'm all right, though?" he asked, pained. Snape was behaving as though everything were normal, and if he didn't believe it was, he certainly wouldn't remain silent.

Snape put down his silver and put his hands on the table. "Have you had any other episodes since returning from Finland?" When Harry shook his head, Snape prodded, "None at all?"

"No."

"Then I expect you are all right . . . in general. Avoid Sleeping Curses, certainly," Snape stated easily.

Harry didn't feel so confident; he felt a bit like Dr. Jekyll must have. "I need to tell Mr. Weasley what happened."

Snape picked up his fork again. "If you feel you must."

"You think I shouldn't?" Harry challenged.

Gently, Snape explained, "I don't think everyone is going to understand, Harry."

Harry held Snape's gaze and felt relief at the reinforcement that Snape would be his ally, always, for good or ill. "I think he needs to know," Harry restated.

"Then by all means tell him," Snape continued in the same soothing tone. "It is your decision."

The next morning, just as the sky was lightening, Snape stood ready to depart. Harry, after a very early night, came down in his housecoat and slippers to see him off. On the stairs, Harry remembered dreaming that Tonks had come to his room to see how he was. At least, Harry thought it a dream and then wondered with warm insides if she really had come. He found Snape standing beside the hearth, which had just been lit and crackled with fresh wood. Harry dismissed asking Snape about Tonks because he didn't want to give away that he might have been dreaming about her, if it had been a dream.

"Have a good week," Harry said.

"I shall attempt it." Snape reached for the canister of Floo powder, but then set it on the table and faced Harry. "I should not be telling you this, but I will nonetheless. Alastor has been assigned to investigate you. The Wizengamot debated Arthur's report and left the case open."

Harry frowned lightly and said dismissively, "Mr. Weasley warned me that might happen."

Sharply, Snape said, "Do not take this lightly. Mr. Moody came to interview me and exhibited his usual extreme paranoia."

"Ginny said you lied to him when he came to McGonagall's house."

"I had no interest in handing him sufficient evidence to have you removed from the Auror's program."

Harry put his hands into his housecoat pockets. "Thanks," he uttered.

"You are welcome," Snape returned, yo-yoing back to calm. "I truly believe such circumstances will not easily occur again, but you must be careful."

"I will. You too."

Snape hesitated. "Do you need anything at all?" he asked solicitously.

Harry, with the fresh memory of the care he had needed the night before last, flushed lightly and shook his head.

"Do keep me informed," Snape said, recovering some of his snide tone.

"Yes, sir."

After his own breakfast Harry put his things together a little clumsily and, feeling less than adept, took the Floo into the Ministry. He arrived in the very farthest hearth from the golden gates, but at least he arrived in the right place. He joined the long, but fast-moving queues being checked in at the desk and arrived on his floor earlier than expected.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said from the end of the corridor. "A word with you, young man."

Harry scratched his head and followed nervously, his vague dread now properly realized. Mr. Weasley led the way to his office and took a seat. Harry closed the door behind him and leaned against it since the visitor's chair was absent. "Harry," Mr. Weasley began, sounding disappointed. "When I suggest you keep your nose clean, this isn't what I had in mind."

"No, sir," Harry agreed. He started to explain further but gave up on the belief that he wouldn't be capable of composing an excuse of any benefit. He also had no will at this moment to explain that he had opened the gates to the underworld in McGonagall's sitting room, so saying nothing seemed the best course.

Chapter 14

Mr. Weasley was happy to speak. He glanced over an official report parchment on his desk that had a detailed timeline scratched onto it. "Partially, it is our fault," he admitted. "The office was left unstaffed, and apparently invaded, to boot." He dropped the parchment. "It has also been pointed out that you have not been informed of proper procedures and that, perhaps if you had, you would have taken wiser action." Mr. Weasley's reassuring words were tempered by his continuing dismayed tone. "Procedures are usually covered at the end of the second year of training, but I've asked Reggie to cover the Ministry office procedures as soon as he can work it into the regime." He gazed up at Harry then, waiting for something.

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir." It sounded lame to his own ears.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said firmly. "You are not an Auror yet. You are not authorized to take action of the kind you did on Saturday. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded, not raising his eyes from the floor.

"For now you are a liability to this organization. We are responsible for you, your welfare, safety, et cetera. Actions like yours the other evening make our responsibilities too difficult to fulfill. I, for one, would not want to be in the position of having to inform Severus that something tragic had befallen you."

"Yes, sir," Harry repeated yet again, feeling severely chastened by that particular vision.

Mr. Weasley sighed. "On the other hand we have a traitor in our midst and that is our failing, not yours. Without inside help none of this would have happened. Nevertheless, you are on probation for two months." Here he wagged a finger up at Harry. "Don't slip up again."

"No, sir," Harry replied, sounding obedient and feeling overly so as well. Mr. Weasley's chastisement, on top of what Harry knew to be real concern, was having an unusually powerful effect on him.

Mr. Weasley appeared satisfied with Harry's reply. He asked, "Are you completely recovered, Harry?"

Harry had been staring at the worn and cracked leather of his trainers. "I'm all right now, but . . ." He took a deep breath. "But the repeated Sleeping Curses had a really bad side effect."

Mr. Weasley leaned back in his creaky office chair and laced his fingers over his slight paunch. "How so?"

"I uh . . . Severus said that an overdose of Sleeping Curses hyper-stimulates some parts of your nerves, even as you lose consciousness. I don't remember much of this, but I apparently . . ." Harry took another deep breath to fight the uneasiness beating at him. "I opened a gateway to the Dark Plane while I was out cold."

There, he had said it; now he awaited a verdict. Mr. Weasley studied him closely while rubbing his chin. He said, "I'll keep that in mind. Happens again, let me know." The second comment had a tone of finality that squeezed at Harry's chest.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, yet again. He turned to the door and Mr. Weasley said, "Molly wanted to know if you were free for a luncheon this weekend . . ." Harry nodded without turning back around. He felt ashamed all around but mostly from admitting his weakness with the Dark Plane. Mr. Weasley asked, "Sunday noon, then?"

"I'll be there, sir. Thank you."

Harry returned to the training room just as Rodgers arrived, giving him his usual vaguely disdainful glance before beginning. Harry focused on his notes and Rodgers' voice, ignoring everything else.

"I am sure you are busy," McGonagall said when she gained admittance to Snape's office late in the evening, midweek. "But there is something I need to discuss with you."

She sounded even more serious than usual, so Snape closed the grade book he had open and put down his quill. "What is it?"

McGonagall paced to the tall windows. "The incident this past weekend with you running off after Harry-"

"I ran off chasing one of our students," Snape corrected.

McGonagall turned and nodded in concession. "Nevertheless, the incident quickly became one centered around your adopted son." She clasped her hands behind her back where they fidgeted. "We had an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot this evening to discuss . . . what happened to Harry and some other incidences." She turned around. "I very much need to know: if you were faced with choosing between being here to help protect this school and going to Harry's aid, which you would choose?"

Snape sat back in his chair and considered that. While he thought, McGonagall went on, "There is a belief at the Ministry that things are getting bad again, although they are nowhere near the level they were at two years ago. In comparison, things are extremely quiet and if someone were not singling out the Aurors, no one would be noticing yet, let along worrying, I don't believe. But, it is clear that someone is testing the Ministry's strengths and if they are holding back on something larger, there could be real difficulties when they are brought to bear."

Snape rubbed his fist on his chin. "I cannot promise you what my priorities might be in the future. It would depend too heavily on the circumstances." More softly, he said, "I do not mean to sound disloyal . . ."

"I realize that." She paced to the bookcase on the other wall, the one full of Potion manuals. "I also realize that I do not inspire the same loyalty from you as Albus did."

"It is close," Snape conceded.

She gave him a small smile at that. "What I propose is this: We bring Remus in to assist in teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts because your deputy headmaster duties are taking up too much time. At least, that will be the ostensible reason for his presence. The real reason will be so he is present as backup for you, should you feel your loyalty divided too far." They considered each other. "Is that equitable to you, Severus?"

Snape shrugged.

McGonagall pointed out, "You have not got along with him terribly well in the past and have previously strongly resisted his presence here. I don't want to bring him into an environment of enmity, although given how badly he needs the employment, I don't think he would complain."

Snape sighed. "I will not resist your hiring him."

"Nor working with him?" McGonagall prompted.

"Nor working with him," Snape conceded. "But others will resist. Are you prepared to fight the board and the parents on his behalf?"

She tugged her forest green robes straight at her sides and said, "After last weekend's little invasion of my house, I find myself in the mood for a fight." With a small, knowing smile she departed.

"How are you, sir?" Harry asked his trainer as he entered the workout room. For once, Harry had arrived earlier than everyone else.

Rodgers stopped and considered Harry before replying. "Getting better."

"Are you going to be well enough to compete in the finals?"

"Oh, is that what this is about?" Rodgers snapped nastily.

"I was just curious, sir," Harry said, alarmed that his attempt at being nice was apparently backfiring so brilliantly.

"Yeah, sure," Rodgers scoffed.

"I really was only asking," Harry explained. "Just curious how you were doing. Making conversation."

Rodgers organized his notes on the table. "That Death Eater father of yours teach you how to lie that well?"

Harry frowned. "Sorry sir, I didn't mean to upset you. I was just asking for myself, not because Severus wanted to know. He hasn't even mentioned it."

Rodgers bit his lip. "He isn't even supposed to know, Potter."

Harry straightened, cringing at his error. "I had to tell him after what happened last weekend," he explained quickly. "He rightfully wanted to know what was going on. Not like I have much to tell him."

"You want him to win the tournament that badly, what?" Rodgers mocked. "Bad enough that you are judging."

Harry dropped his head and found hurt burgeoning rather than anger. "I intend to judge the tournament in complete fairness, sir." Harry took a seat and opened his backpack. "And I'm glad you're feeling better, even if you don't think I am." Harry opened the first book he took out to its bookmark and began reading, ignoring Rodgers until training started.

The whole day became an exercise in graciousness in the face of enmity. Rodgers used Harry for every demonstration, even of blocks they had not mastered.

Harry was just picking himself up off the floor for the fourth time, rubbing his elbow, which seemed adept at finding hard surfaces, when Rodgers said, "Again."

Harry held up his hand. "Can you show me again, sir?"

The other apprentices were sitting in tense silence. Harry was certain it was only their presence that made Rodgers run another demonstration of a domed Diamona. "You

were doing better last week, Potter. Something happen between then and now?" he taunted.

"Apparently, sir," Harry answered tiredly, finding stress of this kind to be a surprisingly strong deterrent to learning. He was starting to pin his hopes on making a visit to Hogwarts and getting a lesson from Snape that weekend.

Another Blasting Curse and Harry was on his knees again, his distorted block shattered and casting yellow stabs of light around him.

Finally, Rodgers said in clear disgust, "Vishnu, you come up and try it."

"Harry," Tonks said at the end of the day as Harry packed his things. She stepped close even though they were alone, reminding Harry of the dream he wasn't sure was one. "What did you say to Reggie?" she asked in a hiss.

"I asked him how he was," Harry explained, sounding hurt.

"You asked him how he was," she repeated doubtfully. "You pissed him off that bad asking him how he was?"

Harry sighed, feeling surrounded. "He apparently thought I was looking for information for Severus for the tournament."

Tonks' expression shifted into a befuddled one. "Oh," she said, sounding saddened.

Sticking with the hurt tack, which he found easy with her, he said, "I was trying to be nice."

"Don't, I guess," she suggested.

Professor Snape circled his classroom at the end of the day on Friday, checking that everything was in order and put away. A rap on the open door frame brought his attention that way, where Lupin stood, a battered leather case held before him in his hands.

"Severus," he said in greeting.

"Remus," Snape replied neutrally. He picked up his files from the front table and considered the newcomer before approaching him.

Lupin tilted his head and said informationally, "Minerva put me in an office one floor up." He pointed up. "Just above here, in fact."

Snape strode down the corridor to his own office and Lupin followed but stood in the doorway while Snape put his remaining things away. When Snape straightened and noticed Lupin still standing there, he gestured abruptly at the visitor's chair.

Lupin accepted the invitation, straightening his faded and excessively patched robes as he did so. "If you have copies of the syllabi, I can get acquainted with where the courses are before Monday."

Without expression Snape opened a file drawer and went through several folders to pull all of the requested copies. He handed them over and stood, hands on hips, while Lupin perused them.

Lupin glanced up and said, "I'm not trying to be the interloper, Severus."

"I realize that," Snape uttered flatly. He settled behind his desk and rubbed his fingers together. "You are going to be indisposed already at the end of next week."

"Yes," Lupin confirmed easily.

Snape's fingers still rubbed over one another. "Are you properly stocked with potion or do you need more?"

Lupin stopped reading. "I could use more, if you are willing to make it."

"I shall start it tonight," Snape said grimly. In a more neutral tone he asked, "In what way do expect you can assist next week? You can certainly be useful for demonstrations."

Lupin laughed dryly and stated, "Yes, I'd expect you to find me useful for that."

Snape's hand slapped the table. "You are doing me a favor by being here."

Easily, almost teasing, Lupin replied, "You certainly aren't acting like it." When Snape frowned and looked away, Lupin asked, "Minerva made clear the real reason was for my presence here. Harry still that much of a burden?"

"More so," Snape muttered.

"How's that?" Lupin asked with a laugh.

After a long pause Snape replied, "He has moved beyond me. He needs a necromancer or a mage as a keeper, not me." Snape sat in pained silence after this confession.

Lupin put the parchments down. "I thought he came back from Finland in good shape," he said in real concern.

"He did . . . from one aspect. He gained controlling power to match the uncontrolled power he was exhibiting." Snape picked up his quill and dropped it again.

Lupin adjusted himself in his chair. "So this isn't about protecting Harry at all."

Snape's hand hit the desktop again. "Of course it is about protecting Harry."

"This is really troubling you, isn't it?" Lupin asked, clearly surprised. When Snape merely rubbed the knuckles of one hand under his chin, Lupin prodded, "Severus . . ."

Snape stood suddenly and said, "It is no matter."

Lupin tried to go back to the syllabus before him. "Doesn't seem like no matter. Is there something I can do?"

"Such as?" Snape asked snidely.

"Anything," Lupin replied.

Snape paced to the bookshelf. "If he doesn't need me, he most certainly doesn't need you," he retorted quietly.

Lupin's brow went under his hair. But he closed his mouth on his initial reply and observed Snape instead. Finally, he asked, "You think Harry doesn't need you anymore?"

With his long finger Snape tugged out the binding of one thick book on pressure brewing. "He no longer asks me for help when I could provide it, which is getting rarer. He works on blocks now that I cannot produce, although I am somewhat relieved he has not asked for help, from that regard."

Lupin rested his chin on his hand and continued to observe Snape as the other prowled the Potion shelves without purpose. Lupin said, "I am really quite certain that Harry needs you and that he is doing fine."

"Good," Snape said, sounding unconvinced.

"Severus," Lupin argued, "I saw him just last week. Spoke with him in the Ministry Atrium for ten minutes. He seemed perfectly normal."

"You have no idea, Remus," Snape returned in a low growl. He had finally pulled out a book and flipped through it intently.

Remus laughed then. "He even asked me to take the stain out of his shirt cuff, claiming he could never get the spell to work right."

A knock came on the door and Ginny Weasley stepped in when called to enter. "Headmistress sent me down to see if you could put me to work for detention, preferably on

something miserable. Those were her words. Hello, Remus," she said, noticing Lupin sitting there when he turned to her in amusement.

"Professor Lupin, for now, my dear."

"Oh," she said brightly. "Of course, sir."

Snape stepped over. "How timely. I have just the thing for you to assist with, Ms. Weasley. But first, how is the ankle?"

Ginny bent as though to touch it, but didn't, and said, "Fine, sir."

Snape said, "You are certain?" in such a sharp tone, that Lupin interrupted with, "What's this then?"

Ginny opened her mouth to explain and Snape muttered, "He is not to know."

"I was going to lie, Professor," she pointed out smartly. "And it's barely visible now I've been using Roop's tincture on it."

Snape collected his cloak off of the coat rack to go to the dungeon and swung it over his shoulders. "You didn't show it to Pomfrey, did you?"

"Headmistress said not to. I got someone else to get the Roop's from the dispensary."

Lupin eyes were moving between them. "What did you get detention for?" he asked carefully.

"It's general knowledge around here, to my misery: running off to rescue Harry."

This befuddled Lupin unusually so.

Snape said, "Feel free to stay as long as you wish, Remus. The files of examinations and assignments are there . . ." He gestured at the cabinet below the window. "Should you wish to review them."

Snape led the way down the corridor, striding fast enough that Ginny had to jog intermittently to keep up. "I'm glad you have something for me to do, sir, otherwise I was going to have to ask Professor Greer."

They reached the bottom of the Grand Staircase and Snape turned and waited at the top of the dungeon staircase. "Where are we going?" Ginny asked.

"Potions classroom," Snape stated snarkily.

"Oh," Ginny groaned.

Snape released the spells on the classroom door and entered, waving up the lamps without breaking stride. "We will start three cauldrons and take them up to my office

to brew overnight." He spelled open the ingredient cabinets. One required four charm cancellation attempts before it would open.

"Professor," Ginny prompted carefully. "Is Professor Greer going to like this?"

"The classrooms are open to all teachers in this school," Snape said while moving ingredient baskets out onto the front table before crouching to look through the bottles on the bottom shelf.

"I'm sure Professor Greer doesn't feel that way."

Snape stood and shifted some of the baskets to the first bench. "Sad for her then," he mocked, making Ginny have to catch a laugh with her hand. Snape ordered her, "Come here and chop."

Ginny obeyed, finding the clean knives and a stack of wooden boards to cut on. "She's not so bad now that Harry's gone."

"Really?" Snape uttered, sounding only half interested as he dug around for more ingredients.

Ginny looked at the basket label which read Poison Hemlock Root. "Yeah, she kept accusing him of being a dark wizard. Couldn't get over the Parseltongue thing. Isn't that funny?"

Snape didn't reply immediately, not until he came over and handed her a basket labeled Helleborus Niger. "She has no idea . . . does she?" he asked with an odd lightness. "Cut those diagonally into one-inch strips. And these, grind into a powder."

Using the ruler burned into the edge of the board, Ginny began cutting. "Are you worried about Harry, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

Snape was cautiously sniffing a jar of something grey and viscous. "Your detention assignment is the only topic allowed right now, Ms. Weasley," he stated coldly.

"Right." She went back to cutting and added, "Sir," as an afterthought.

"What is this?" a strident voice came from the doorway half an hour later.

Snape answered offhandedly as he stirred a cauldron, "Brewing. I would have thought it obvious."

Ginny shot him a look of disbelief and then bent back to her task of dripping spirits over seared mandrake tongues and collecting the essence in a tiny glass phial. Greer was stalking about the front of the room the way she did in class. She picked up and

examined the crocodile claws, the high mallow, the moonwort. She stared at Snape who was ignoring her better than any student could.

Snape came and took the phial from Ginny and gestured impatiently at the next task: juicing buds of beauty of Liveremere.

"Papaver bracteatum?" Greer asked snidely, hands on hips. "Are you brewing a Lynconthropic potion, Professor?"

"And if I were?" Snape queried.

"For whom?"

Snape evenly and without any indication of falsehood, stated, "The gamekeeper insists upon a new pet and since the last time he had a dragon all kinds of trouble resulted, and then he was keeping a hippogriff, and that was . . . even more trouble. So we have finally simply found him a werewolf." Ginny was staring at him and almost squashed her fingers with the wooden mallet she was using. Snape went on, "To keep him busy, you see."

Greer turned her beady and challenging gaze upon Ginny, who said, "I've seen the werewolf, ma'am."

"Minerva knows about this?" Greer challenged Snape this time.

Snape finally raised his gaze, his hair well tangled before his face. "It was her idea," he said, disdain now clear as well as clearly honest.

"Well," Greer uttered. "Clean up when you are finished, and don't leave that noxious substance brewing in here." She stalked off.

For the next minute Ginny appeared to want to say something but in the end went back to squeezing bud juice into a sandalwood box.

Hours later, Ginny was carefully rubbing her eyes with a corner of her robe, since her fingers were foul with all kinds of odd things.

"Use the neutralizer," Snape ordered, even though he hadn't looked up to see her doing this. "It is beside the sink in the back room."

Ginny went into the back, picked up the narrow-necked glass bottle and shook drops onto her hands, which were rendered normal after a rinse. "How come we don't get to use this during class?" she complained.

Snape gave her a derisive look. "It would lead the students to be even sloppier than they already are." He peered into the cauldron he was stirring and pulled the stirring stick out.

Ginny yawned. "Are we finished, sir?"

"Yes."

"So we have been making Wolfsbane?" Ginny asked as she shook the cutting boards over the rubbish bin.

"Correct."

"Hm. Complicated one," she opined tiredly.

"One of the most," Snape said, waving the fires away from under the cauldrons.

"Do you think it will be on the N.E.W.T.s?"

"It sometimes is," Snape replied.

"I hope it is," she said wiping down the bench she had used.

Snape handed her a cauldron to carry. "Why did you apply for the Auror's program, Ms. Weasley?" he asked. When she merely blinked at him in stunned response, he went on, "You do realize dating is right out among the Aurors?"

Ginny recovered herself and snapped, "I thought my detention tasks were the only allowed topic."

Snape conceded this point with an angled nod of his head, but his own point had already been made.

The next afternoon, Snape opened the door to his office and gestured abruptly for Lupin to enter. Three cauldrons bubbled and steamed on the wide window sill. Lupin wandered over to them, wrinkling his nose. "I think it smells worse than it tastes, Severus. Just as well I can't brew it myself . . . I'd get kicked out of my flat."

Snape hooked his cloak and said, "Those are set until tomorrow. I am going home for the evening. If Ms. Weasley stops by, you may put her to some task as you see fit."

"Should I ask her about her ankle?" Lupin prodded.

Snape shook his cloak straight and replied, "You do not wish to know what happened, I assure you."

"I'll give Ginny something easy to do," he said, as Snape moved to the door.

Snape stopped before pushing the latch to say, "As you wish. Oh, and if Alastor stops by, don't tell him where I am."

"You don't think he'll figure it out?" Lupin asked.

"You're right," Snape sighed. "Lie and tell him I am in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid."

Lupin laughed. "I'll do that, but don't you think he'll know better."

"That magical eye of his has its limits and that Forest is one of them." Snape finally opened the door. "I'll return tomorrow evening, since you are so fortuitously here to cover."

"Shall I do checks on your house, then?" Lupin suggested.

Snape hesitated. "You may do so if you wish. Good luck if you do."

"Tell Harry I said hello," Lupin said before the door closed.

In the library in Shrewsthorpe, Harry looked up from his reading to see Snape striding in from the dining room. "Didn't expect you so early," Harry said in greeting, eagerly closing the book in front of him.

"Don't stop learning on my account," Snape said as he shook out his cloak and draped it over his arm.

"I was thinking you might want to do something. The weather seems to be holding out. We could go somewhere."

Over his shoulder as he crossed the main hall, Snape said, "I only have a few hours."

When he returned to the library doorway, sans cloak, Harry asked, "A few hours only, because . . . ?" Snape's response was an insinuating lift of one brow, leading Harry to drop his shoulders. "Oh. You have another date."

"You disapprove why?" Snape asked as he came into the library and sat at the small table in the corner, arms crossed.

It wasn't a pose that invited open conversation, but Harry chose to ignore the signals. "I guess I just don't know why you are dating her."

Snape's head angled sharply. "You don't trust me?"

Harry, tired of this sort of banter rising between them, said, "It's not that. Exactly. I trust you not to do anything untoward. I just can't imagine your . . . you and she's . . . understanding of it are the same." Harry huffed at himself and his trouble finding

words. He tried for something easier. "If Pamela gets hurt, Polly will be completely miffed. More so than I expect she is now."

Snape considered Harry before replying. In a vaguely lecturing tone, he said, "There are two things you do not understand, Harry. Firstly, there is the reduced risk of misunderstanding between two adults. Pamela is not one of your teenage friends; she is twenty six. Secondly, and perhaps more important to your own sense of well-being, you could not lose Polly so easily as a pseudo-grandmum, as she has clearly become to you."

Harry glanced away, mulling that over. Snape went on, "These particular blood relatives are not seeking any excuse to be rid of you. They care quite deeply for you and in fact have shown protective instinct for you that you are not aware of."

"Is this dating getting serious?" Harry asked, choosing to bypass Snape's arguments for the moment.

"Only an eighteen-year-old would ask that about a second date," Snape countered. "But to mollify you, I would have to answer no. She is merely curious and I . . . a bit bored, I suppose."

"Bored with Candide?" Harry prodded.

"Hm," Snape uttered gruffly, indicating further questioning would not be productive.

Harry sighed, feeling slightly appeased by Snape's lecture. "So, we have a few hours to do something. You're probably leaving again tomorrow morning already."

Snape shook his head. "Remus is filling in and will be present to do so for the foreseeable future. I don't need to return until dinner, when I should make an appearance and check on my house."

"You can go to the Burrow tomorrow, then," Harry said brightly. "Mr. Weasley invited me."

"You must not have told him what really happened last weekend," Snape gibed. He uncrossed his arms and now sat with his fingers steepled, looking relaxed.

"I did," Harry countered, not sensing the insincerity of the question. "I'm not sure, however, that he understood the ramifications," he confessed.

Darkly, Snape commented, "One would have had to have been there to do so."

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry about that, I-"

Snape cut him off with, "I was not fishing for further expressions of regret." Snape sat forward then, which made him appear almost candid. "Last weekend worked out

as well as it could have under the circumstances. I do not want you to take yet more regret away from that experience."

Harry started at the forcefulness of Snape's statement.

Toned down slightly, Snape went on. "The only lesson I wish you to take from it is that you must be more careful. You are not at your trainer's level, which implies that had Merton, if that is who is behind this, wished to do harm to you rather than render you immobile, you would have been gravely hurt or worse."

"I already got this lecture from Mr. Weasley," Harry quietly pointed out, unsettled by hearing it revised.

Snape fell silent for a brief spell before he asked, "How would you care to occupy the next few hours?"

They sat in the library – Harry with Kali climbing over him – playing chess. Harry lost the first game but drew the next two.

"You aren't letting me tie these matches up, are you?"

Snidely, Snape asked, "Would I do that?"

Harry grinned. "No, I guess not." He stretched, stiff from sitting, inducing Kali to circle his shoulders. "It will be warm enough to take the bike out soon."

"We could take broomsticks out anytime."

"It's not the same," Harry insisted. "We could go to the zoo on it."

"You enjoyed the zoo that much?" Snape asked, resetting the board before setting it aside.

"I'm nostalgic for it," Harry explained.

"You are not old enough to be nostalgic for anything," Snape countered disgustedly.

"What are you nostalgic for?" Harry asked, picking Kali up off his shoulder to hold her in his lap and pet her.

"Nothing, I hope. I abhor nostalgia," Snape said, sitting back to reach the shelf where a stray book needed reshelving. He dropped his arm. "Perhaps that is not quite true. I believe I am nostalgic for one thing from the past."

Harry looked up from studying Kali's tiny fox-like features. "What's that?"

"I miss Slytherin not winning at Quidditch all of the time. Used to be that way . . . in the old days."

Harry laughed lightly. "More fun to win when you have a chance of losing, or when you lost the time before," Harry asserted.

"No, it is always better to win."

"Planning on winning the dueling competition? Are you practicing? It is just over two weeks away."

"I plan to employ Remus, if he is amenable, as a drill partner." Snape thought that over. "Next weekend is the full moon, so I should ask him tomorrow evening, in fact."

Harry let Kali, who had grown restless, fly off back to her cage. "You don't want me as a dueling drill partner?" He pulled out his pocket watch. "We have half an hour before your date . . ."

Snape stood. "I could perhaps hold out that long," he muttered as he led the way to the main hall.

As Snape hovered the two pieces of furniture out of the way, Harry asked in disbelief, "Are you afraid I'm going to beat you at this?"

Snape took his place a pace from the front wall, in the wide space between the two windows. He pulled his wand and stroked it as though it were a quill in need of unruffling. Finally, he replied, "Unless I employ something underhanded against a weakness of yours . . . yes, I am certain you will come out on top."

Harry stood, wand pointed at the floor, dumbfounded. "Severus, be serious," Harry laughed, "there is no way I could best you in a duel."

Snape aimed his wand at Harry and commanded, "A crystal-dome block. Raise it." Without hesitation Snape fired a Blasting Curse. Harry instinctively brought up the double orange block they had been working on relentlessly at training and the curse shattered away inside it, between its layers. It was the best he had ever managed by far, which reinforced his belief that his stress with Rodgers was dragging him down during training.

Snape slowly lowered his wand, his expression opaque. "Very good," he said, sounding vaguely startled.

"That's the best one I've done," Harry admitted, replaying the feel of it in his mind to better replicate it.

"It was textbook," Snape said.

"But, it's just one block . . ." Harry began to argue.

"I cannot produce that block, Harry," Snape interrupted. "Despite endless attempts at it over a span of years. It is beyond me."

Harry stared him, trying to rearrange all of the assumptions in his mind necessary to accepting this. "But you know loads of spells I don't-"

"Most of them illegal," Snape pointed out with clear enunciation. "Or they would be if the Ministry officially knew of them." When Harry still didn't move as he worked this out, Snape asked, "Do you still wish to duel?"

"Um . . . yeah." Harry rubbed his hair back, still oddly unsettled. He gathered his wits and waved a chain binding at Snape, but he was befuddled a bit about how much power he should put behind it, and it appeared cracked, some of the links just hooks.

Snape canceled it with a sharp motion and said angrily, "If you pull your spells for me-"

Harry cut him off with quick excuses. "Sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I hadn't decided exactly what I was casting." Strongly desiring to prove that last was an accident, Harry cast a torpedo spell that Aaron had taught them during one of the many drilling periods when they had been left on their own. Snape didn't have a counter and had to duck and use a Titan block to deflect the pillow-sized, black pill as it zipped overhead. It turned before the wall and came back around in a broad loop, slowing as it ran out of magical energy. Snape cast a cannonball curse at it that shattered it before it could finish its turn.

"Where did you learn that one?" Snape asked. "That is an old Slytherin one."

"Aaron."

"Ah." Snape aimed again. "Modulated this time," he instructed Harry before casting a blinding beam of light at his eyes.

Ten spell exchanges later, Harry dropped his aim. "You need to go," he said.

"True," Snape admitted, sounding reluctant. But he moved off to collect his cloak. When he came back into the hall, he muttered, "Limit of my Apparition distance, Godric's Hollow."

"This relationship isn't a competition, Severus," Harry chastised.

Snape froze mid-adjustment of his shirt collar inside his cloak collar. "No, but it means I am not much help to you anymore."

"What do you mean?" Harry demanded. "You think all I care about is whether you can teach me spells?"

"No, I do not think that," Snape said, now brushing off the shoulder of his cloak with his hand.

"You better not," Harry said, feeling stung.

Appearing to take a bit of affront at Harry's tone, Snape asked, "So, what do you care about?"

"I . . ." Harry launched himself in but then had to think. "Just . . . that we're a family. What else matters?"

Snape shrugged his cloak together in the front so he was completely shrouded in it. "And what does family mean to you?"

Harry stared at him. "What a ridiculous question, Severus."

Snape stepped closer, his tone softening. "Only if you don't have an answer is it ridiculous." He stared closely at Harry a breath before muttering, "Hm."

Harry said, "It means having a place where you're always cared about."

"So you are not planning on moving out anytime soon?" Snape asked.

Harry again found unsettled surprise filling him. "No. What would make you think that?" He finally stashed away his wand which he still held pointed at the floor.

Snape again adjusted his cloak by tugging on the edge of it and shifting his shoulders under it. "Just a general expectation that you would prefer to live closer to your friends."

Harry, feeling for the first time in a very long time as though he were gaining some insight into Snape's strange moods, said softly while gesturing to take in the hall, "This is the first home I've ever had . . . I'm in no hurry to leave it. And I certainly still need you – you're the only person who understands . . ." Harry finished much quieter, ". . . what's happening to me." Speaking this so unsettled him that he dropped his gaze.

"It does not bother you that I cannot aid you in magic any longer?"

"I didn't think that," Harry admitted and re-raised his eyes. "I still think of you as my teacher, somehow." Quickly though, he added, "But, it doesn't matter. I'm certain to encounter dark magic that I need explained." As they considered each other, Harry remembered how after his letter about the Dark Plane, Snape had swooped in and

taken him off, with no hysterics, not even a flicker of stress. Harry had desperately needed that commanding stability. Flushing lightly, Harry said, "I'm still really happy to be your son . . . in case you need to hear that again."

An awkward silence descended until Harry said, "You're going to be late."

"Work on your studies this evening," Snape said, recovering his poise.

"Yes, sir," Harry responded easily. His alternative was meeting up with Ron, whom he was going to see the next day anyway.

Author's Notes:
Fell way behind in writing over the holidays. Next chapter probably will be late, but you will all be hung over from the new year and won't notice, right?

Chapter 15.

Bad Dates

In Godric's Hollow the wind, as usual, blew harder than expected. Snape stepped from the copse of trees bordering the Evans' property and crossed the narrow, cracked road to reach Pamela's house. No one was about and the house windows up and down the line were all dark or had the curtains pulled closed, giving the village a withdrawn air.

Pamela opened the door as he approached it, making him instinctively assume, and then have to dismiss, the notion that she had placed a visitor alarm charm on the property line. She had a crooked smile on her face as she greeted him. Snape couldn't help taking one last glance around outside as the door closed.

Pamela looked very Muggle in wool trousers and a jumper. She touched his arm as she led him into the sitting room. "I was hoping you'd want to go out this evening," she said. "I had a ruddy awful week at work and need to get out." She dropped onto the couch, much more relaxed than the previous date, Snape observed. She asked, "Can you zip us off to London?"

Adjusting his cloak, Snape sat in the white wicker chair across from her. "In theory. In practice it is against Ministry rules."

"Oh, like you not being able to use magic at this house?" she asked, disappointed.

"Something like that. Your mother's house is the one filed with Harry's dispensation. Very minor magic would be ignored in any location," he informed her while glancing around the room, thinking idly of the conversation he had just had with Harry regarding what made a home. This home was a mishmash of old and new furnishings in no particular style.

Snape stated slowly, "On the other hand I am quite capable of hiding most any magic I do from the Ministry."

Brightly, Pamela asked, "Does that mean we can go to London?"

Feeling strangely reckless, perhaps due to the vague flattery of her attention in general, Snape said, "Why not?" As he stood, he suggested, "You should fetch a cloak . . . coat, perhaps."

She jumped forward but didn't stand. "We're really going to London?"

Dryly, Snape said, "You expressed a desire to do so."

"All right," she cheered and fetched a long camel-colored coat. When she had buttoned it, Snape took her wrist in his hand and used his wand to cast a fogging magic barrier around them before Disapparating them to an alleyway in Soho.

Pamela gazed around them in surprise, patting at her ears from the shock of the popping air. "Very, very cool," she stated and gave him a glowing smile. "And if the Ministry of Magic decides to come after you for that?"

"They won't detect it," Snape stated, thinking then that he did know a set of spells to show Harry, ones he really should learn.

As they walked along the pavement past rows of mouldering red-brick houses darkened by rain, Pamela asked, "So, do many wizards know how to block the Ministry's magical detection?"

"No, not many," Snape replied, thinking that most of the ones who could were in Azkaban. He waited to speak further until they were clear of a little old woman towing a trolley bag. "The spells that fog what magic one is casting are themselves forbidden and most witches and wizards are basically law-abiding even if they are skilled enough to master them."

She studied him as they walked. "So you aren't basically law-abiding, is that it? When I told Mum that we had another date, she threatened to tell me things about you that I, quote, wouldn't believe, let alone want to hear."

They turned and followed the pavement beside a wider road carrying heavy traffic and well lit from the bright shop windows. The increased number of pedestrians forced the topic to remain vague.

Pamela asked, "Does she really know bad things about you, or is she, per usual, disliking anyone I date who is the least bit interesting?"

Chapter 15

They had reached a corner with steps leading up into a pub. Snape gestured for Pamela to decide to go in or not. "Sure, I'm thirsty," she replied.

They found a small, high table in the corner, near the rear door. Snape immediately tossed his cloak over the chair in the moist heat of the place. Pamela tossed her coat backwards over the chair back and leaned forward on her elbows to ask, "So, which is it?"

"You do not wish to know," Snape replied and used a touch of Legilimency to compel the waitress over when her eyes flickered over them. "Two pints of bitters," Snape told her.

"I don't?" Pamela confirmed in a teasing tone.

"Correct. Especially since I do not feel like sharing my past."

Silence fell until the pints arrived. Between sips, Pamela said, "Mum only likes incredibly boring men. Like Greg." She spoke his name with some disdain.

"You do not like Greg?" Snape prompted, mostly since it was an easy way to hold up his side of the conversation.

Pamela took another large sip of her drink. "Greg is all right. NOT my type, despite my mother's insistence that I find someone just the same as him." She considered Snape over her glass. Snape resisted reading her thoughts under the belief that the evening conversation would lose all interest if he did so. He had glanced away as part of this effort and watched a couple putting on their coats by the door. The young man was holding the long brass door handle for much-needed balance. If someone coincidentally should enter, he would be on the floor.

"Bored already?" Pamela asked with a hint of unhappiness, sounding as though the bitters were already at work.

"No. Simply disciplining myself."

"How's that?" she asked

Snape, before such long exposure to Harry, would not have spoken thusly, but he did now. "I am attempting to avoid reading your thoughts. You are an open book."

She stared at him, color gradually filling her cheeks beyond what the alcohol had already accomplished. "You can't read minds . . ." But this ended uncertain.

"Shall I prove it?" he asked airily and then paused for a response which was not forthcoming. "What is your favorite color? Ah, red," he finished immediately. An

imagine of her in the mirror in a silken red dress had popped into her head. "You should have worn that dress," he added with a touch of snarkiness.

She took that in with a vague choking movement before swallowing a gulp of her beer.

Snape went on, "Harry has been criticizing me for using that skill too often."

"I'd say," she stated forcefully. They stared at each other. "Still doing it?" she asked. She was recovering well. Muggle reactions to magic could be so unpredictable, Snape mused.

"No, I will resist," Snape assured her, feeling an odd flush from his unusual frank honesty.

She huffed and stared into her drink. "Is that what Mum was on about?" she asked.

"Goodness no, she does not know about that."

"Oh. Perhaps a new topic?" she suggested.

"Wise idea," Snape agreed.

"How did your week go?"

"It was a typical week, all things considered," Snape replied. He began fiddling with his glass and, annoyed at himself, forced his hand still. "Bit of trouble with Harry weekend last."

"Oh, what was that?" she asked in concern.

"Nothing you truly wish to know."

A group at the far table broke out in drunken song but quickly faded. "Oh, some weird magical thing, then?" Pamela asked.

"Yes. Some weird magical thing," Snape awkwardly repeated, but then half-wished he could unburden himself to her with his concerns. Fleetingly, he considered that he would willingly have told Candide.

"He's all right, though, Harry is?" Pamela asked.

"For the moment."

"Oh, that's reassuring."

Snape admitted, "I wish I could be more certain. Someone or something always seems to want to do him harm."

"Lucky he has you to protect him then," she said.

Snape frowned mildly and didn't respond.

"New topic?" she asked.

"Please."

"Even though I really want to know more about that last one."

With light snide Snape asked, "You wish to discuss Harry all evening?"

"I just want to know that he's all right."

"He is all right," Snape assured her. "I just never know what the future holds."

Pamela sipped her drink. "Is he all right with us dating? You wouldn't answer that last time."

"He was somewhat better with it this time –round."

"Oh, so he is unhappy about it. Why didn't you say?" she asked blamefully.

"It would have changed your mind?" Snape asked.

She shrugged. "Perhaps, I don't want to make Harry uncomfortable." She looked around the table, finally borrowing a menu from the next table over. "Unless we are going somewhere else to eat?"

"We can if you wish."

"Nah, just get some grub here." She read the menu over, which did not require much time as it was only six items long. "What about it upset Harry?" she asked without looking up.

"I'm not actually certain," Snape replied.

"What, you don't use that little trick on him?" she asked.

"I cannot . . . he blocks me from doing so."

"Good for him," she asserted, glancing around for the barmaid.

"I taught him how to do that," Snape pointed out.

She gave up on ordering for the moment and turned back to him. "It would only be fair for you to."

"Now, it would be fair," Snape muttered. "Used to be the only way to keep track of his overly active imagination before Voldemort was destroyed."

"Let's eat somewhere else," she said after failing again to wave the barmaid over.

They paid at the bar directly and headed out. On the steps outside, Pamela asked, "So do all . . . of you people . . ." She waited for a large group to stagger in the other direction and then spoke more quietly, "Do all witches and wizards read minds?"

"No, not many at all," Snape responded. They crossed and turned down a quieter side road and stopped before an establishment where the Latin letters of the name had been rendered in gaudy Chinese strokes.

As they pondered the hot pink menu taped in the window, Pamela pointed out, "You know how to do a lot of things only a few people do."

He considered her before replying, "Yes, I do," in a manner that was intended to cut the topic off.

Inside, they found a table near the window looking into the kitchen, Pamela said, "You play the bad boy too well, you know."

Her making light of him set off something inside Snape that he had not felt in a long time. He could sense the strength of that other, older self rising eagerly up, wanting its chance to appall her simply by setting her straight. His odd silence had unsettled her on its own. He squashed the old instincts and calmly and soberly, as though offering her important advice, said, "You truly do not wish to go there."

She bit her lip. "You're no fun. Don't tell me my mother is right about you."

"Your mother knows nothing about me," he snapped, immediately surprised to find that instinct still waiting just below the surface when he was certain he had suppressed it. "Apologies," he muttered. "Pick a new topic."

She ordered Thai noodles and then doubled the order when Snape waved that she should chose something for him as well. "Never eaten in a noodle shop?"

"No," Snape admitted.

She drank the glass of water before her, clearly wishing it were something stronger. "Most bad boys aren't really. But you are the real thing then?"

"Yes," Snape replied quietly. "Barely reformed, shall we say."

"But you adopted Harry . . ." she prompted.

"Yes," Snape said with a laugh. "My penance, I realized later. Although, I have never regretted taking him in." He breathed deeply and avoided outwardly revealing anything; her questions were bringing the past to life far too effectively. Harry's lamentations to him about not ever connecting with someone who could not understand were feeling painfully true at this moment.

"Regretting this date?" she prompted, sounding teasing, rather than displeased.

"Partially," Snape admitted, "I don't like revisiting the past unless absolutely necessary."

Silence fell until the waiter returned with their order. Snape accepted the oversized bowl placed before him containing a neat pile of shiny noodles with peanuts and chili pepper forming a hill atop them.

Snape said, "I am not who you think I am, even if I, for a delusional moment, thought perhaps I could be." He hesitated picking up his fork due to wincing at how much he had revealed with that statement.

Pamela chuckled wryly. "And since you are an expert both on who you are and who I think you are, then you would know."

Snape let his lips curl slightly at that. "Yes," he confirmed.

Partway through their bowls, Pamela asked, "So, you won't give me a chance of accepting who you are?"

"You would not," Snape stated. "Your vision of the world is too black and white. Even as much as you have an unusually flexible acceptance of magic and dark humor, you would not accept this. I have assured Harry that I will not put this extended family in any jeopardy, and I will not do so by satisfying your curiosity."

"How bad are we talking? Did you murder someone?"

"I have never killed anyone," Snape assured her quietly, lest he be heard two tables over despite the banging woks in the nearby kitchen.

"Have you been in prison? Do wizards have prison? They must, mustn't they?" She wondered aloud.

"They do. It is a magically warded island far off the coast," Snape informed her.

"Been there?" she prodded.

"No. Why are you still pursuing this?" Snape asked with some snide.

"I'm curious still despite, or because of, the warnings." She shrugged. "My noodles aren't gone yet." She grinned then.

Snape rolled his eyes and put his fork down. The dish was bizarre, tasting of oily nuts and rancid fish despite appearing to contain only chicken.

She ate a bite containing just one noodle, carefully rolled up on her fork. "So you haven't ever been sent to this island, yet you insist you are too horrid for polite company."

Snape said, "I was not sent to that island purely by the grace of someone with enough power to keep me out because they desperately needed my help. Otherwise, I most certainly would have been."

"Oh," she said. Apparently taking this as truly a bad sign, she began eating her noodles at a more normal pace. She paused though and said, "Harry, in his letters – because for some reason you have no telephone – certainly respects you."

"Yes, he does," Snape softly agreed. In his head he was realizing that living up to that respect was half of the reason he had changed so much in the last two years.

Ginny knocked on the door to Professor Snape's office. After a pause it opened but Lupin stood inside holding the door rather than the expected Head of Slytherin house. "Good evening, Professor," Ginny said. "I was just wondering if Professor Snape had anything I could do for detention."

"He isn't here, but I can find something for you. Come in." He backed off and gallantly waved her inside. The cauldrons still bubbled on the window sill although the noxious odor had muted from earlier.

"Where is Professor Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Home for the evening," Lupin replied from where he looked over the shelf of Defense books. "Ah, here. Severus said you may come looking for a task and when I threatened to give you an easy one, he said to do as I please." He handed her a book. "Amazing how mellow he has grown. There was a time he would have thrown out all the pickled rat's brains just to force students to extract and pickle more. Sit down and read chapter seven aloud to me."

Ginny peered at the spine and had to squint to read the flaked gold leaf. "Dodging Dreary Disadvantages," she read. "What's this?"

"A beginners book on Defensive spell theory."

Ginny pulled the visitor's chair closer to the desk and peeled the book open in her lap. The pages were brittle with brown age. Chapter seven was titled Sustenance for the Credible Counter. "Why chapter seven?" she asked.

Lupin, who was staring out at the lawn which was brightly lit by the waxing gibbous drooping over it, replied lightly, "Because starting at the very beginning would be discouraging."

Ginny couldn't argue with that. She began reading, "Counters are generally of the class aegidis vorare and are therefore boosted easily by increasing general magical effort. However, counters of the class compulsum resilio each require a different technique- I'm actually quite good at Counters," Ginny stopped and pointed out, sounding as though another topic would be more appropriate.

Lupin turned to her from the window. "But are you good at writing a test on them?"

Ginny frowned. "No. Probably not."

Lupin turned back to the window. "Keep reading then."

"Did Professor Snape tell you I'd applied to the Auror's program?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"Did you?" Lupin asked.

"Yes. But he didn't tell you that?"

"No." In the dim lamplight and blue glow from the window Lupin's eyes appeared less kind than normal, although his voice was its usual gentle self. "I just assumed that since, despite hopes to the contrary, you are still attending Hogwarts, that you intended to try for as many N.E.W.T.s as possible." He put his hands in his cardigan pockets and considered her additionally. "Have they accepted your application and sent you the test time?"

"Not yet," she said, sounding hopeful.

"Go on and read then. After each paragraph, close the book and summarize that paragraph for me."

After the meal and returning Pamela to her house, Snape returned home directly to his main hall, interrupting a conversation in the drawing room. After hanging his cloak in the front entryway cupboard, he stepped into the well-lit room prepared to point out to Harry that he was supposed to be studying. He closed his mouth upon encountering Aaron Wickem in the guest chair, heavy book open in his lap.

"An unusual pose to find you in, Mr. Wickem," Snape managed to recover enough to say.

This chagrined Aaron appropriately. "Harry and I are equally far behind so we are doing readings together. My date bailed on me this evening so it was either Harry's glowing company or nothing. How was your date, sir?"

"None of your concern," Snape responded flatly, but this made Harry's eyes narrow in alarm. Snape sent him a reassuring glance.

"Do you want your desk?" Harry asked when Snape came to collect letters from the middle drawer.

"No, I'll be in the library," he said, taking up a quill and inkwell. "Don't let me disturb you."

Harry, however, couldn't hold out until Aaron departed. "I'll be right back," he said after ten minutes of reading the same page repeatedly and still not knowing what it was about.

Harry stepped just inside the door to the library and leaned on the side of a bookshelf in a relaxed pose with his arms loosely crossed. "Did it go all right?"

"It was undoubtedly our last date."

Harry stiffened. "How's that?" he asked in concern.

"Do not be alarmed. It is for the best. I cannot possibly tell her my past and she is too curious to stop asking about it. As you have said previously, with unusual wisdom I might add, there is not much understanding in such a situation."

"I'm sorry for that," Harry said.

"Are you?" Snape challenged mildly.

"Well," Harry hedged, tilting his head to the side to stretch his neck. "Not entirely sorry it isn't working out, but I'm sorry for you."

"Hm," Snape uttered noncommittally. "I catch you pitying me you will be in deeply serious trouble."

Harry laughed. "I'm not pitying you," he said, lowering his voice in case Aaron could hear across the hall. "You have a perfectly good girlfriend." Snape froze at that assertion and Harry added, "Just because you are too chicken to marry her . . ."

Snape's gaze sharpened severely at that, but it rapidly faded to merely bemused. "Go back to your studies," he said.

Harry didn't budge. "Really Severus, what's your problem?"

Real anger came forth then. "I have no interest in discussing this with you."

Even more quietly, Harry rhetorically asked, "And who else do you have to discuss it with?"

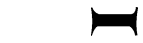
"You misunderstand. I do not wish to discuss it with anyone." His anger was gone already, seeming to have been replaced with mild uncertainty.

"I think you're making a mistake," Harry said after a pause. Snape glanced down at the parchment before him, prompting Harry to ask, "Are you writing a letter to Candide?"

Snape held off a breath before replying, "Yes."

"Oh." Harry straightened and feeling a little regretful of being so forthright, backed up a half step and said, "I'll go back to my studies now."

"Good idea," Snape said dryly, but without rancor.



Harry arrived in the Weasley hearth, met by many bright voices echoing up the blackened stone chimney. He ducked out as Snape arrived just behind him and the voices dipped and turned their way. Ron nearly dropped the heaped bowl of mashed potatoes he carried when he attempted to enthusiastically wave to Harry.

"Take a seat, take a seat," Molly Weasley invited over her shoulder from where she worked at the counter.

The old dining room table was packed tight with Mr. Weasley at the head, the twins beside Molly's empty chair, followed by Ron. On the far side sat Charlie and his wife, Bill and his date, and surprisingly Percy, mercifully sans date, and looking sulky.

"Everyone's here," Harry said, surprised. He took the last seat beside Ron, leaving the end for Snape.

"Well, almost everyone," Molly said with overdone melancholy while setting an overflowing platter of sliced roast before her husband.

Snape had pulled out his chair but he didn't move to take it. Instead, he stood considering the full table. After a pause he asked, "Shall I fetch the last of you?"

The clanking of silver halted and serving bowls froze mid-pass. Ron asked, "Wha? You're saying you could fetch Ginny?"

A tad stiff, Snape replied, "That was what I was suggesting."

"Severus, isn't that sweet of you?" Mrs. Weasley asked brightly.

"Mum, don't dissuade him . . ." Charlie grumbled at her, but stopped mid-whisper with a blush.

"Can you do that?" Bill asked, also appearing awkwardly stunned.

Snape gripped the back of the chair in his long-fingered hands. "I am the deputy headmaster . . . I expect I can." His eyes circled the table once again as though counting redheads. "I will return shortly."

After Snape had disappeared up the Floo, Ron said, befuddled, "That's awful nice of him . . . what's he up to?" Across from Harry, Percy appeared relieved that Snape was gone.

Harry grinned and accepted the platter of meat Ron passed him. "He's been trying harder."

In the long second floor corridor, Snape stopped to consider where Ginny Weasley may be. Gryffindor had reserved the pitch that morning for practice, but they should have returned from that as the pitch was usually booked solid on the weekends. The tower seemed a likely place to look, or at least ask.

Snape folded himself to step through the Gryffindor portrait hole and found his quarry in the common room surrounded by the rest of the house Quidditch team, all of whom turned to him in surprise before rapidly stuffing away large parchments with play diagrams on them.

"Ms. Weasley," Snape intoned in a manner that invited her to follow him elsewhere.

Ginny stood without complaint but Dirk Hickory, a fifth-year Beater, was having none of it. "What's Ginny done, then?" he demanded.

Not in the mood to argue, Snape returned, "Nothing. Simply being a Weasley is sufficient grounds in this instance."

Hickory flushed as red as his bottle-brush hair. "Sufficient grounds," he mocked. "What's that about? You're being unfair as usual. You just want Slytherin to win the cup."

Snape propped his hands on his hips and as though speaking to an idiot, said, "Of course I want Slytherin to win. That is why we play Quidditch . . . so that someone can win."

"Dirk, it's all right," Ginny began.

Hickory continued angrily though. "It's not all right," he said, standing as well and imposing his oversized self across the small table.

"You are inches from detention yourself, Mr. Hickory," Snape threatened.

"Dirk," Ginny, repeated firmly. "Let it go."

Hickory's glare and the other players' concerned gazes tracked them both as they departed the common room. They had traversed the many staircases and reached the gargoyles before Ginny asked, "Am I in trouble for something new, sir?"

Snape didn't reply, simply gave the password and gestured that she should lead going up the stone staircase. Ginny did so, commenting as though to herself, "I don't remember doing anything else I could get in trouble for . . ."

Snape said, "Just being a Weasley is the reason for your removal from your little strategy session."

"Is it?" Ginny confirmed bleakly. "I'm getting it for some recently discovered transgression of one of my brothers?"

McGonagall's office was empty, but many of the portraits straightened their robes and watched them as Snape led the way to the hearth. He lifted down a Persian slipper from the mantel and gestured for her to hold out her hands.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Floo powder."

Ginny stared, mystified at the grey granules cradled in her hands. She glanced sidelong at the hearth behind her. "What's this for?" she asked, dividing the pile into her two palms.

"You are the only missing Weasley offspring from the Burrow Sunday luncheon," Snape stated, sounding as though her questions were vaguely tiresome.

Her face lit up and, closing her fists tightly around the grainy powder, she jumped forward and gave Snape a lightning quick hug. Ginny jerked back immediately, apparently as startled by her own behavior as Snape was. "Sorry sir," she stammered, flushing fiercely. "I didn't mean to do that."

Snape squared his shoulders and forced himself to step forward. "I should think not," he said. An awkward pause followed before Snape impatiently commanded, "Go on, then."

Back at the Burrow both Snape and Ginny took their seats quickly – Ginny after a hug and hair petting from her mother. She sat beside Harry, crushed in close. Mr. Weasley said, "Thank you, Severus."

Snape nodded without looking up from his place setting. Harry nudged him with an elbow and received a sharp look in return. Harry grinned at him and thanked him quietly as well. He was also grateful that his guardian was back to provide a barrier between himself and Percy, who was starting to get under Harry's skin.

During a lull, Percy, in his usual nasal-sniffy way, asked, "Have a date for the VIP dinner yet, Potter?"

Snape turned to Harry in curiosity as well as everyone else sitting at their half-end of the table. Harry hated to do so, but he asked, "What dinner?" and wished he didn't sound so defensive.

Percy scoffed with a smile curling his lips just at the corners.

Ginny chimed in, "You look Slytherin with that expression, Percy. Got a place for him, Professor?" Beside her Fred nudged her as though to silence her and Harry overheard him whisper something to the regard that their mum had insisted that everyone be nice to Percy no matter how obnoxious he himself behaved.

Snape's expression of masked distaste as he considered that suggestion made Harry and Ginny both giggle. Coloring, Percy said, "Only the DV-Day VIP dinner, Potter. How can you not know about that? Doesn't anyone tell you anything?" More airily, he said, "The Minister is just sending you an invitation same as everyone else, I suppose." While Harry withheld his tongue, Percy continued, "Too bad you are in a department so very in the dark about what is happening."

"Oh, I know what is happening," Harry insisted, tossing vague insinuation into his statement. He was thinking that Percy was just using Belinda. This gut twisting thought was followed by one he should have thought of sooner: That there was someone who apparently knew more about what was going on, and that Harry should break down and go talk to him.

Harry's tone had the desired effect on Percy. Upper lip twitching, Percy colored additionally before returning to his eating, although he only picked at his plate with nervous movements.

Bill asked, "Security for the tournament is going to be tight, I hear. Some of Gringott's personnel have been hired to supplement the Ministry. You are, aren't you, Ron?" he asked.

"I'm doing sweeps the night before. But I get to just watch the show . . ." Here he glanced down the table, first at his brother and then at Snape. With a fast broadening grin, he said, "And I'm looking forward to it. People at the bank keep asking me who you're favoring, Harry," he teased.

"I'm not favoring anyone," Harry argued, suddenly almost physically aware of the black-clad figure on his right.

"The bookies have Rodgers to win by just a hair," Ron went on, then to Snape asked in an innocent tone, "Are you aware of that, Professor?"

"I do not care," Snape said in a tone that conveyed the self same.

Harry took great interest in spooning himself more cabbage as he considered that he also believed that his trainer had a slight edge. Unless Snape tried something underhanded, in which case it was up to him to penalize him for it.

Harry had spooned himself half a plate of boiled cabbage while he pondered this and began to truly wish that he were not judging.

"Hungry still?" Snape asked in his slight sneer.

"Excellent cabbage," Harry announced to the table as though to compliment Mrs. Weasley.

Ron cornered Harry again while they were all relaxing after eating. The twins were outside trying to coax more of them out for a Quidditch match, but everyone else was resisting. "I'm glad I'm not judging this tourney," Ron said in great sympathy.

Ginny gave Harry a grin as she scooped punch from a giant ceramic bowl nearby. Harry lamented, "I may have to let this Vogle person win so as to not seem to be favoring anyone I know."

Quieter, Ron asked, "I got paid on Friday and was thinking of putting more Galleons down on this match with the Goblin bookie at the bank. I'd love to see his face when I collect," he laughed. "Who do you think is favored? You aren't really going to overcompensate in trying to be fair, are you? That would really mess things up."

Harry sighed. "I'm going to be glad when this is over."

"What weaknesses would an Auror trainer have?" Ron rhetorically asked, then immediately followed more forcefully with, "What weaknesses does Snape have?"

Harry, remembering Candide teasing Snape once, said with a laugh, "He might be ticklish." At Ron's horrified expression, Harry quickly added, "I don't know that first hand."

"Oy, I hope not," Ron said, looking pale as he downed his punch. He handed his mug to Ginny to refill and shook his head. "Well, I better cut my losses then and stick with my brother. Harry here is too honest," he complained to his sister.

"Definitely," Ginny confirmed with a sly smile.

Later, when Ginny reluctantly began to remember all of the incomplete assignments she had stacked up on top of her trunk back in her dormitory, she sighed and approached Professor Snape, who sat on the old couch talking with her parents and George, who most likely had quit the backyard Quidditch match to research his opponent.

"Professor," Ginny interrupted. "Can I get a note or something to take back to Hogwarts?" At his odd expression, she explained, "I have to go back through McGonagall's office. She isn't going to believe my story."

"You don't think?" George chimed in, fully sarcastic.

Snape said, "Go on Ms. Weasley. You don't need a note."

"Did you leave Headmistress one?" Ginny said, sounding as though she now understood. She made ready to leave. "Good, I fear how she'll react if I tried to pawn off this story on her."

"No, I did not leave a note," Snape stated. "But go on anyway and see what she says . . . and do take careful note of her words. It will be most amusing to have to prove her wrong."

Ginny stared at Snape, trying to take that in. George bent over the armrest he was laughing so hard. Molly Weasley had her hand over her mouth.

Ginny said, "I think I'd prefer a note, sir. At least then I don't have to go through the trouble of being un-expelled when you do return."

"I shan't be long, Ms. Weasley," Snape insisted with a softness that could be interpreted either for good or ill.

Ginny slowly moved to pick up the tin of Floo powder. George said, "Here, I'll write you a note." He moved the stacks of magazines around on the table before him as though looking for a scrap of paper. "I can even sign it S. Snape," he added with a wicked grin.

Snape crossed his arms. "I would like to see that," he stated darkly.

George found a never-out quill, which he had to suck on to get flowing, and a sheet of parchment was eagerly handed to him by his father. George, parchment before him stretched his arms, his neck. He made circles in the air with the quill as though directing an unseen orchestra.

Chapter 15

"I'll just wing it," Ginny grumbled and scooped out the Floo powder and after an eye-rolling at her brother, departed.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Snape put his things together to leave and Harry followed him to the dining room to see him off. "Before you go, I have a quick question," Harry said before he could scoop out a handful of Floo powder. Snape set the tin on the table and gave Harry his full attention, which a moment before had appeared to have been cast ahead to Hogwarts. "Where is Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

Snape's brow lowered. "Why do you wish to know?"

"There's something I want to talk to Draco about."

Snape considered this before saying, "It is in Devon. I can draw you a map of the nearby Floo nodes, but none are particularly close. You will want to take a broom the rest of the way . . . or simply fly yourself, I suppose."

"That'd be great," Harry said, taking up an unanswered letter from Hermione from the sideboard for Snape to draw on the back.

Snape drew out a map, carefully annotating it. "This wall here, marked by the entrance gate, is not where the barriers are. They are usually spelled halfway along the main drive to the manor itself. Do not try to land inside that area. The drive winds so you can land unobserved from the Muggle road a hundred feet inside the gate. Do not veer from the drive into the wood, it is set with all manner of traps as can the drive be if they want to resist any visitors." Snape hesitated in pushing the map over. "Do you wish me to go in your stead?"

Harry tugged the map out from under Snape's fingers. "No, I'll go. Thanks."

"Owl me upon your return, if you will," Snape commanded before again taking up the tin of powder.

"Sure. Are you going to come home again next weekend?"

"No. Remus will be indisposed, so I cannot." He stood before the hearth, hand clenched around a ball of Floo powder. "You are going to speak with young Mr. Malfoy this week?" At Harry's nod, Snape said, "Owl me before you depart and if I do not receive another owl from you by 8:00, I will assume the worst."

"Severus," Harry criticized. "I think I can handle Draco."

The next evening Harry, upon returning from training, changed and made a quick second check of his appearance in the hall mirror before stepping into the hearth with the destination of a rambling wizard book shop in Devon named Dealer Démodé. The place smelled of yellowed paper and must and the other customers, with their noses buried in books as they stood before tall shelves, paid him no heed when he squeezed by them carrying his broom on the way to the door.

Outside the shop the wind was warmer than Harry was accustomed to, balmy even. He found a well-treed area and hovered his broom, which he had opted for upon the realization that he couldn't put a Obsfucation Charm on himself once he was already in his Gryffylis form and he certainly wouldn't go unnoticed flying like that.

Snape's map was accurate to a fault and Harry soon circled Malfoy Manor with its rambling, hilly property, thick with trees and brush except immediately surrounding the main buildings which were framed by a neatly cropped lawn. Harry's neck prickled as he landed one-quarter the distance up the main drive, as promised, well out of view of the road.

He removed the charm on himself and, whistling faintly, strolled the long distance to the house. He had imagined himself knocking on the door and surprising the occupants no end, but he should have thought better. Before he reached the last bend and just as the upper corner of the grey, moss-spotted hulk of the old manor came into view, a figure appeared before him, tossing an invisibility cloak aside.

"Potter," Draco breathed disgustedly.

Harry had his hand on his wand, but Draco was putting his own away so Harry returned his empty hand to his side.

"What are you doing here?" Draco asked rather than demanded, befuddled with disbelief, it seemed.

"I wanted to talk to you," Harry said.

Draco frowned and glanced behind him back at the manor before stalking down the drive past Harry, who assumed he should follow. Sunlight glowed ahead of them before sliding on into the dense forest lining the road. The new leaves rustled but no birds sang that Harry could hear.

Draco stopped and flipped his black cloak off his shoulder as he turned. His invisibility cloak was clenched in his thin pale hands and with his back bent in annoyance he resembled his father even more than the last time Harry had seen him.

"What is it?" Draco hissed.

Harry, who had been working out approaches all day during training – to the detriment of his elbows which were now re-bruised – said, "How did you know something was going on before anyone else did?"

Cagey, Draco said, "Know what was going on?"

Harry, who had to pretend to know more than he actually did, had to pretend to be only looking for confirmation, said, "About Merton. How did you know he was a threat?"

The news about the two attacks had been well enough kept secret that Draco turned to him in surprise and made a grudging sound in his throat. Harry held his excitement firmly in check at this sign. Not looking at Harry, but instead staring into the trees, Draco replied, "Like I said, I'd been hearing things."

"From whom?"

"Like I'd give you names," Draco sneered. "Old associates of my fathers – fellow collectors of objects the Ministry likes to confiscate. Merton, whom I dislike immensely, had been on the hunt for particular kinds of things and was bragging about his plans because he's an idiot. Anyone with any real sense would keep their bloody mouth shut about wielding unchecked power for his own amusement."

"What does he want?" Harry asked, truly curious.

Draco scoffed disgustedly. "I've only met the man twice; my father hated him and certainly didn't have him over often."

"Because he collected things your father wanted?" Harry asked, trying to understand.

Yet another scoff. "Better reasons than that," Draco mocked. Gaze still far away, he went on, "He came by half a year ago to buy things he had heard were in my father's collection, things the idiots at the Ministry hadn't found when they thought they had taken everything. He caught my mother in the right mood to sell . . . it's the money we're living on now," he said in utter disgust. He paced away across the drive and Harry had to strain to hear, "To think we have fallen so low; it's unbearable to contemplate."

Harry waited in silence, hoping for more and not sure how to coax it out. Draco was in the mood to rant, though, so giving him space to do it worked well enough. His blue eyes reflected the patches of blue in the sky as he paced back. "Merton wanted anything that had stored power. Figures. Wasn't interested in your ordinary cursed object, no matter how useful. My mother did make him pay handsomely. Father

would have a fit if he knew what she had sold . . . things he had specifically told her not to."

Stored power, was replaying in Harry's head. "What things?" he asked, still thinking with a kind of cold horror about the smashed ceramic vessel and spells too strong for himself or even his trainer to counter properly. Harry came back to the here and now when Draco glared suspiciously at him.

"I'll only tell you if you promise to get them back," Draco growled.

"What? Expecting your father to return soon?" Harry scoffed.

Draco pulled his cloak tight despite the balmy weather. "I don't like . . . fearing his return. I certainly don't expect it," he snapped. "She should not have sold him two of the things she did. Father specifically said they were to be kept safe – threatened to kill us all if they weren't."

Harry breathed deeply of the scented air wafting from the surrounding greenery. A patch of sunlight made them both blink as they stood measuring each other. Harry did not want to be on the hook to steal something Lucius Malfoy wanted kept safe, but he thirsted for more information. "All right. But I can only promise to try, assuming I am around when Merton's place is found."

Draco spent many seconds judging the value of this, before saying, "A golden inkwell and a seal."

"That's it?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Draco said, his posture shifting as though to downplay the request. "Father truly will kill us should such a time come that he discovers them missing. But, of course . . ." Here he gestured magnanimously. "I don't expect to see him anytime soon."

Author's Notes:
We will eventually get back on a schedule, but not for chapter 16 either since I can't assume there is much internet in hurricane ravaged Yucatan.

Chapter 16.

A Full, Cold Moon

Harry arrived just in time for training the next morning after lying awake much of the night, reliving in slow motion and guessing at unperceived details of being attacked at the warehouse. He was also thinking – round and round in his head – about objects storing magical power. Kali had been as restless in her cage as Harry had been in his mind, so he had released her to sleep beside him on his pillow and it was she who had woken him – with a sharp prick of her claws to the neck – just in time to dress and Apparate directly from his bedroom.

In the training room, each of their desks contained a tall stack of manuals with unpromising titles such as Rules and Regulations Amended Vol. IV.6 and Archives & Records Retention Policy. His fellows all had the same dull expressions as they flipped through their stacks with the exception of Vineet, who appeared intrigued. Rodgers came in and with little ceremony dropped an additional, similar book on Harry's stack. Harry almost complained, had opened his mouth to, in fact, until he spied the title: Uniform Manual on the Arte & Code of the Magical Duel.

"Minister Bones sent that down," Rodgers informed Harry in his usual hard tone.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied in his usual Best Boy way of combating his trainer's vitriol. This attitude had been wearing away at Rodgers, slowly; so Harry was hopeful. He also hoped, with a twist of his gut, that if Rodgers won the dueling tournament fair and square, that that would also improve his mood and his attitude towards Harry. Harry wanted Snape to win, though, but he would also be happy with George

Weasley winning, because the dismay it would cause Snape would be amusing. His trainer losing would only make him more annoyed with Harry, although if George did manage to beat him, perhaps he wouldn't be quite so cocky during training.

Rodgers' reading the introduction to the Magical Law Enforcement Recordkeeping Manual pulled Harry from his circular, angsty thoughts into mind-numbingly mundane and trivial rules.

During lunch, which his stomach complained bitterly about the prospect of skipping on top of lacking breakfast, Harry tried to find Tonks, but she was out on a call. Instead, Harry approached Kingsley Shacklebolt who was working at his desk and eating mixed nuts from a tin. Without comment he held the tin up for Harry, who gratefully accepted a handful.

"Something you need, Harry?" Shacklebolt asked easily.

Harry had rather a lot on his mind, and he wasn't certain what order to address things in. He settled for beginning with, "So during the attack on me at the warehouse, Ginny said that Moody fought back at something that exploded and then the attack stopped. Was it one of those orange vessels?"

Shacklebolt leaned his chair back on two legs and turned his broad body to better face Harry. "We think so. Mad-Eye said he had never seen anything quite like it."

"It wasn't a person, then?" Harry confirmed, feeling better about that notion given his poor faring.

"No, it wasn't," Shacklebolt said, sounding reluctant to say more.

"So," Harry stated, looking for a reaction if not a response, "Merton has some kind of spell casting object, like a Muggle machine gun." When Shacklebolt didn't respond, Harry said, "You aren't supposed to say, I suppose."

More quietly, Shacklebolt said, "It is being kept secret. Minister Bones isn't keen to overly concern the wizarding public and so far Merton's only gone after us, and we're considered fair game, at some level, or at least game not worth calling a conference before the press over. You understand that, right?"

"That the Ministry, as usual, doesn't want to air its lack of ability? Yeah," Harry taunted grimly. Shacklebolt's eyebrows rose halfway up his forehead. Harry added, "You don't think the average witch or wizard deserves fair warning?"

Shacklebolt rubbed his forehead while Harry helped himself to another handful of nuts from the tin still open on the desk. Shacklebolt said, "The average witch or wizard does not take simple advice about even common problems well."

Chapter 16

"Wouldn't you want to know?" Harry asked.

"I'm hardly an average wizard," Shacklebolt argued. "But, yes, I would. It isn't your place to decide to announce it," he warned.

"I wasn't going to," Harry said, stung. "I just don't like how it's being handled, is all."

"When you're in charge, you can change it," Shacklebolt retorted.

Harry considered fulfilling his original intent, which was to tell someone what he had learned from Draco beyond confirming what the department already knew, which was that Merton had been collecting similar objects. But that was obvious; how else did he learn how to store magical spells expect by studying objects that did? Harry decided the information wasn't worth revealing that he had essentially gone off and started investigating on his own; especially since he was already on probation.

"So . . ." Harry began, voice pitched low. "Has anything been found out about who changed the logs?" It occurred to Harry only now that they may not have believed he had misread the logs.

Shacklebolt's frown didn't look like the doubtful kind. "That's still being investigated, Harry." His tone ended on a note of finality.

"Well, thanks, and thanks for the nuts," Harry said and stepped away, honestly grateful that Shacklebolt had spoken as freely as he had.

At home before dinner appeared, Harry opened the dueling manual rather than his studies and began reading, intent on getting through all the way that evening so that he could study it in more detail over the next week and a half; he definitely didn't want to have to reference it before an atrium full of spectators and he definitely didn't want to get any rules wrong given who he would have to be arguing with over them.

Ginny knocked and entered when called to and found Lupin staring out the darkened window at the moon, hands clasped behind his back. Only one small candle was lit in the sconce by the door.

"May I spend detention revising with you again, Professor?" she asked.

"Certainly," he answered after a long pause.

"If you're busy, I can ask someone else," Ginny said quickly and more willingly than she truly was. She had grown clearly aware of how dearly she needed this extra tutoring before the N.E.W.T.s.

"My workload is actually quite light," he assured her.

"Is it?" she asked, taking the battered desk with half a writing top that sat before Lupin's desk in the corner. "I thought you were hired because Professor Snape was too busy."

"I was," he assured her pleasantly, and Ginny had the strangest sense that he was lying.

As she read through of a tome entitled Calamitous Charms a knock came on the door succeeded immediately by it opening. Snape strode in carrying a stone goblet that trailed a noxious stream of smoke behind it.

"For you, Remus," he said, setting it carefully on the desktop.

"Thank you, Severus," Lupin said, not approaching from the window where he stood. The only significant pool of light in the room was the lamp hovering before Ginny's reading. There was a long moment where the two professors considered each other as though facing off and then Snape departed with only a cursory glance at Ginny sitting in his path.

After the door closed, Lupin took a grimacing sip from the cup. "Keep going," he instructed her.

Merton paced along a grimy wall lined with magical objects from his vast collection. Most all were cracked, burned or broken due to investigations into their curses and charms. Broken vases – Chinese, Grecian, Roman – made up the bulk of the collection, but other odd things occupied the piles: candlesticks, a coffee grinder, a picture frame.

Merton was still angry from their failure. "Such a waste . . . I cannot believe we were foiled," he raged for the hundredth time, eyes narrow. "EVERY last contingency had been planned for. We drew away the entire on-call staff of Aurors with plots we cannot repeat. An utterly wasted opportunity," he growled again, slapping his fist into his hand and kicking at the few plates of glass still scattered on the floor – glass that had been charmed as portkeys to carry their quarry to them. "And in the end some block shielded him from the portkeys. Even that failed."

Chapter 16

Debjit stood to the side, only his eyes tracking the pacing man.

Merton paced back to the table where a thick book lay open, its iron covers chained to a slate slab – a discarded, rough-edged end of a billiard table. The book rattled against its bindings and a distant howl emanated from it. "I like your earlier idea, Debjit. We have a pliant servant . . . let us make better use of him." He trailed his finger down the vellum page, eliciting a thrashing of sorts from the book, albeit a restricted one. Debjit took a step back, swallowing hard.

"Yes," Merton cooed. "It is perfect. The spells work best on a weak personality. We have an entirely blank personality to work with. Message our friend who was so cooperative last time. I want a meeting with him myself. Let's put his bragging to the test. We need a few things that only he can get for us. Those along with a few things we fortuitously already have should put us in very fine shape."

He carefully unhooked that page and tucked it on the other side under the other loop of heavy, rusted chain. "Prepare the clay to be molded, it says. How ironic."

Friday, Harry returned home after drinks with Ron and Bill to find a parchment envelope bearing a color version of the Minister of Magic's seal among the pile of post delivered that day. It was the invitation Percy had mocked him about; the invitation to the VIP dinner to take place the evening before the second anniversary of Voldemort's defeat. Harry stared at the handwritten invitation, decorated with gold leaf cartouches in the corners which repeatedly erupted into fireworks.

In nearly indecipherably flourished writing it said that his presence was requested at 6:00 p.m. at the Wickem residence, which had been kindly offered for the occasion. Harry grinned at the opportunity to see his fellow apprentice's mother again, and hoped that meant his friend Aaron was invited or could slip in. Harry hoped someone interesting to talk to would be attending. Perhaps Headmistress McGonagall would be, Harry considered. He stood the invitation up on its edge on the mantel where the gold flickered in the dimness above the hearth. Two years, he thought to himself. It felt more like two decades.

Snape closed the door, pressing until the latch clicked. Lupin's sparsely furnished office flickered with shadows thrown by the light of one stout candle. Snape looked about himself and back at Lupin, who was making notes at his desk with avid motions.

"How long have you been completely without potion?" Snape asked bluntly.

Lupin's writing ceased abruptly. He set the quill down gently and said. "This is the first I have had in months."

Sharply, Snape said, "Then you are not fit to be in this castle. Why have you lapsed?"

Not meeting Snape's gaze, he said stiffly, "I haven't exactly had Galleons for the ingredients or the Apothecary's fee, which is exorbitant."

Snape flicked his cloak out as he paced to the window to look out at the dusk that settled over the low mountains. "Any number of people would be willing to assist you with that," he pointed out fiercely. When Lupin didn't reply to that, Snape said, "Four days of potion is not sufficient to render you sensible through the transformation . . . you must leave the castle."

Lupin drooped as though terribly fatigued, but he nodded.

"I will collect some things together for you," Snape said, and hurried from the room.

Ten minutes later they were leaving by the heavy rear doors near the rose garden. The spindly stalks were quickly awakening for spring and many tiny leaves crowned the otherwise dead twigs. "I will tell Hagrid that you are in the forest tonight, so there won't be any difficulty," Snape said, leading the way quickly over the muddy ground. Sparse cloud cover might buy them a little bit of time, but they were cutting it close.

A quarter mile into the Forbidden Forest, where the massive trees stood far apart and the forest floor was open, Snape stopped and hung the bundle he carried on a low, broken branch. "You can find your way back to this spot, correct?"

Lupin nodded, barely discernible in the dimness. The forest was eerily quiet, not even the leaves rustled. Snape used his wand to charm the bundle, saying, "Animals will leave it be. There is a bit of food and pepper-up potion as well as a warmer fur cloak, which you may keep." Lupin opened his mouth to protest and Snape cut him off with, "Once you see its condition you will not think it any great favor. Ask Harry what befell it, if you truly wish to know."

Lupin's head jerked to the side as though he heard something. "You should go, Severus."

Snape strode away quickly then, masking his trail with a spell periodically so as not to be followed out. Around the side of the castle at Hagrid's hut, he found the gamekeeper and his hound having tea before their fire, the hound using his great tongue to lap from a steaming bucket.

"Aye, –ello Professor. What can I do for you?" Hagrid said in welcome as he stood his great frame up when Snape stepped in.

Snape took in the room and said, "Remus is in the Forest this evening for the full moon. He has not been drinking Wolfsbane regularly and presents a danger as a result. If you could keep an eye on things?"

Hagrid sat back in his great chair and, with one long arm, checked the stringing of his giant bow propped in the corner. "Fang and I'll go for a few strolls this evening, then."

"Thank you. And, I have not informed Minerva of Remus' rather irresponsible lapse, just so you know."

Hagrid stirred his great fire until it roared even higher and sat back again with his hands on his patched knees. "Kind of you, Professor," he opined.

"Yes . . ." Snape said in a hiss. "I am going to regret it, I believe. But if you are keeping watch . . ."

"I will," Hagrid assured him.

In contrast to Hagrid's cottage the air outside was bitter and it stiffened Snape's robes. As he made his way back around to the rose garden he spied a small shadow moving over the lawn and arrested it with a Leg-Locker Curse. When he arrived at the errant student, he hoisted him up by the back of his robes and canceled the curse with a violent wave of his wand.

"Mr. VanEschelon, WHAT are you doing out?" Snape demanded.

Erasmus was too startled to respond immediately, eventually jabbering, "I . . . I was looking for my toad. She got away."

"You are NOT to be out of the castle at this hour," Snape snarled, dragging the small boy toward the doors.

Erasmus had trouble keeping up and tripped repeatedly, swinging by the grip on his uniform. "But, Peeves said he saw Pippin out here," Erasmus complained. "And she's a firebelly, she can't take the cold."

Disgusted all around, Snape said, "Peeves was undoubted lying."

A howl went up, echoing off the broad castle rampart before them. They were only ten feet from the door, but Snape stopped to aim his wand and check the perimeter of the lawn. Erasmus stopped struggling and whispered, "What was that?"

"Werewolf," Snape replied.

"Really?" the small voice queried.

"Yes. Let's get inside," Snape said, more levelly than before. But when he released his charge and pushed the latch, the door would not budge. He pushed more forcefully before moving his wand over the metal-strapped surface, considering several spells, but discarding them all as ineffective against the castle's exterior wards.

Another howl made Erasmus grab hold of him. Querulously, he asked, "We're locked out?"

"I believe Peeves may be blocking the door." Snape didn't really know this, but it was the only explanation that came to mind. He grabbed hold of Erasmus' shoulder and said, "We will go around to the front." He could send a silver message to McGonagall, but he held off, still bent on preserving the secrecy of his errand.

"That's a long way –round," Erasmus complained.

"We will stop at Hagrid's cottage then," Snape said, trying to soothe the boy, but as he said this, he lost his grip when Erasmus stopped and backed up four quick steps.

Standing small in the vast dimness of the dead grass, Erasmus whined, "I don't want to see Ha- Hagrid."

Snape, momentarily mystified by this unexpected fear, came back to himself and snapped, "If you don't come along now, I will spell you to a tenth your already small size and carry you back in my pocket."

This tactic was a mistake. Erasmus began backing up slowly, in the direction of the forest. Snape rolled his eyes and said more gently, "Mr. VanEschelon, come, we need to get back into the castle."

An abbreviated howl sounded. Snape wished it didn't seem closer, and in his mind cursed all things Lupin and the circumstances that made his presence necessary. Erasmus glanced at the dark mass of the trees and sprinted for Snape, who took hold of his uniform again. As Hagrid's cabin came into view, Erasmus slowed down, but his size gave him little influence on their pace.

"Hagrid!" Snape called out, but there was no answer. "He is out. No worries, Mr. VanEschelon," Snape stated evenly as though everything were all right. Erasmus certainly relaxed.

At the main doors the latch worked normally and they were soon inside the warm Entrance Hall. A few mingling students glanced at them. Snape didn't release Erasmus, but dragged him to his office. "Sit," Snape ordered. "You are in detention for the evening."

Erasmus slouched in the visitor's chair. "But what about Pippin?" he asked in a small voice.

"If you still require a toad tomorrow, I will be happy to turn you into one."

Erasmus fell quiet.

"Bloody Baron!" Snape shouted and half a minute later the Slytherin ghost came up through the floor. Erasmus leaned away from the disturbing apparition, almost falling out of his chair. Snape commanded, "Go down to the rear entrance and if Peeves is there, banish him to the lower dungeon for the week. If he is not there, come back and tell me immediately."

Erasmus remained silent but fidgety for the rest of the evening as Snape worked. The Baron did not return.

At a quarter to four in the morning just as the east began to glow in earnest, Snape rose and dressed. He found himself unable to resist heading down to check that Lupin did not need entrance to the castle. Why he was intending to do this, he wasn't entirely certain. Perhaps it was merely the notion that if Harry were here, it was certainly what he would be doing. But as he adjusted his robes, he heard a creak overhead as though someone were walking across the rooms above him – Lupin's office and chambers.

Snape dropped his arms and stood in the wan light from the windows. Clearly Lupin had been shown the new spells to enter the castle at night and Snape need not have worried. But still he stood there, not removing his robe and returning to bed. A full minute of pondering in the soupy greyness of his office was required before Snape decided that he could not return to his own bed without actually checking on Lupin. This realization disgusted him, but was not sufficient to eliminate the original compelling motivation.

Dismayed at his actions, Snape nonetheless rapped on the door of the office suite a floor above his own. Having come so far in overanalyzing this, he felt a undeniable need to finish it. The door opened after a long pause and Snape squinted in the dimness at the blanket clad, haggard vision of Lupin, who was using the door handle for support.

"Need anything?" Snape asked and wondered with a sleep-deprived kind of detachment, whether he was indeed under some surreal kind of Imperio.

Lupin, fortunately, wasn't cognizant enough to take in the significance of Snape's unexpected behavior. "No," he said, clutching the blanket around his neck as though hypothermic.

Snape began to doubt the man's better sense and sharply asked, "Are you certain? Have you eaten?"

Lupin glanced behind him as though seeking help from the inanimate objects in the room. Snape snarled faintly and slipped inside the door. "Dobby," Snape called in a hoarse whisper.

After a pause the house-elf appeared and with a half bow asked, "Harry Potter's father called Dobby?"

Snape paused at that Harry-centric title, but let it go. "Yes. Bring up a tray of food. Joint, pies, whatever you have that is extremely heavy, along with chamomile tea, a big pot of it."

Dobby nodded and disappeared. Lupin essentially fell into the chintz armchair behind him, breathing fast and staring across the room with glazed eyes. Snape paced as he waited.

"Remus, if you run out of Wolfsbane, whether you are in Hogwarts' employ or not, come ask for it. Your pride cannot be worth this," he added insultingly.

"I'm surprised Minerva's not here reading me the riot act," Lupin said groggily.

"She does not know," Snape admitted.

Lupin's eyes raised slowly to peer at Snape. He laughed lightly. "You have really changed, Severus." After further consideration he asked, "Or are you planning on holding it over my head?"

In a poor attempt at a sneer Snape said, "Only if I need to."

Dobby appeared with tray in hand and placed it on the table beside Lupin. "Masters require anything else?" he queried. Lupin was clumsily lifting lids. Mounds of mashed potatoes, slices of roast, and a square of pudding were revealed.

"No, thank you," Lupin said and Dobby disappeared. Lupin managed to hold the fork but gave up on attempting to spear anything from the tray with his quivering hands. Instead, he said, "I really don't need anything else, Severus, unless your plan is to reduce me further by some additional twisted act of unprecedented charity."

Snape straightened. "That was not my plan, believe me. I just wanted to . . . make certain you realized Minerva did not know," Snape lied and felt better for it. "If you believe any specific potions will help, let me know rather than Greer; she does not realize who the werewolf in the school is and I would suggest you keep her unaware unless you wish to be on her bad side."

Lupin half smiled. "As you clearly are, I've noticed."

"Yes." With that, Snape departed.

The Ministry buzzed the next week with preparations for the upcoming celebration and tournament. As a result, training was less focused, except on Wednesday, when Rodgers made each of them pair up with him for drills that seemed more to Harry like dueling practice. Harry wisely did not voice this observation to his trainer.

As he departed the atrium that afternoon, Harry noted the unusual queue of people waiting to be checked in at the desk. The desk staff had burgeoned to five from the usual one and extra spells were being cast at those wishing to enter the Ministry, even staff coming into work. Gold bunting was being hung from the ceiling, draped to just above the doorways and hearths. Harry had slowed to observe all of this and turned when his name was called by a very familiar voice.

"Harry!" Hermione called out again before he had a chance to wave. She dropped her paperwork-stuffed attaché and gave him a broad hug when they came together, attracting smiles from complete strangers. "What time on Sunday can you arrive?" she asked.

"I don't know for certain yet," Harry explained, thinking of the formal dinner he was scheduled to attend.

"Well, get away as soon as you can, all right? " she asked as though extracting a major promise. "Nearly everyone from Hogwarts has said they're coming, it's going to be like a reunion."

"You have room in your little flat for that many people?" Harry asked doubtfully.

She became vague. "I, uh, took care of that. Just temporarily," she added quickly, making Harry laugh.

"There is a special filing specifically for that; you know," Harry falsely lectured her. "Form 7802, Special Event Magical Preparation Permission." He thought further. "Or maybe actually, Form D-63, Temporary Dwelling Tardification."

"Harry," she said, sounding concerned. "I hope you are more fun at the party."

They both giggled. "We have been reviewing Ministry paperwork policy instead of spell training." More quietly, he added, "Ever since I messed up and changed the schedule, but I'm not allowed to talk about that."

Both of them quieted as Percy, Belinda on his arm, strode by, nose in the air. "See you on Sunday, Potter," he said. At least Belinda looked embarrassed.

When they were distant, waiting in queue at a hearth, Hermione said, "Poor Harry. You can hint more about your troubles on Sunday and grouse about you-know-who after you survive Bones' party." She aimed a thumb over her shoulder as she said this. More brightly, she said, "You and George can come together."

"George is going to the VIP dinner?" Harry asked.

"Haven't you read the Prophet coverage of the event? The Fashionably Gossipy section has covered nothing else all week," she said in disbelief.

"I don't read that section," Harry admitted. "Skeeter writes it."

"All the more reason to read it, Harry, to keep track of her. But at any rate, all four of the finalists were invited."

"Severus was invited? He didn't tell me he was." When Hermione simply shrugged, Harry said, "Probably assumed I knew."

Once home, Harry immediately owled his guardian to ask if he had accepted the invitation to the dinner. Upon visualizing tables full of Ministers of Magic, he then felt compelled to check his wardrobe and what he was planning to wear. Since he had ceased dating Belinda, his wardrobe had not been subjected to this kind of scrutiny. In the far right corner, he found his dark blue dress robes. He had only worn them a handful of times and they glowed like new, calling out to be worn.

Harry slipped them on, glad he had never had them taken in, because now they fit perfectly, which meant that Winky's cooking had filled him in and then some

since his return from Finland, something he wouldn't have noticed wearing his usual workout clothes, t-shirts, or his bulky casual robes. Over the top of his dress robes, his replacement red lined black cloak was not going to be fancy enough, he didn't think. Downstairs he tried it on and discovered that not only was it too plain, it clashed with the blue. Sighing as he turned side to side before the old mirror in the hall, Harry considered that he needed to get another, but purchasing a cloak just for one evening would be silly. Aaron, the nicest dressed friend he knew, floated up before his mind's eye. Without even removing his mismatched cloak, Harry went to the drawing room to write out a request to Aaron to borrow a dress cloak to match.

As he stared at the completed letter, he pictured Percy from the atrium and then wondered with a chill of embarrassment if he needed a date. He thought over possible dates and then thought about Skeeter and how much attention bringing someone would attract. Hermione could hold her own in the face of insinuation, but she was already busy that evening with her own party. As much as he disliked being dateless in the face of his ex-girlfriend and Percy, he didn't see an alternative.

Harry folded the letter, but he had already sent off his owl, so he changed into a dressing gown to await Hedwig's return.

As he sat in his room, giving Kali a break from her cage, Harry was gripped by another panicky thought: he may need to give a speech. Kali picked up this concern and flew out of his hands, scrambled even with her claws to get free.

"Sorry," Harry said to her, fetching her from the paltry remains of the drapes. "I'll just make something up, if necessary," he said to her in reassurance.

Hedwig returned and Harry let her in from the still night air. Snape's letter was just a note scrawled on the back of his own letter. It stated that he was not attending the party because he did not really care to and as well because McGonagall was and they did not wish to both be absent from Hogwarts. Harry's hopes for the evening sank a bit.

Before closing the sash after sending off his second letter, Harry breathed in the dewy night air and thought that he should really find a regular date again. If Skeeter decided to write about his datelessness specifically, he worried what she might conjure up, although that probably was not the best reason to find an acceptable girlfriend. Elizabeth's even-headed self came to mind, but she was in the middle of a term and unlikely to be home soon.

Idly thinking about various woman he knew, Harry dressed for bed and crawled under the duvet, which chilled him and made him wish he had used a spell to warm it up first.

The next morning before training, Aaron swooped in and handed Harry a large shopping bag. "Best I have in blue," he announced.

Harry, as he took the bag, said, "As long as it isn't powder blue."

Aaron winced and said in dismay, "Powder blue makes me look like a Healer's apprentice."

Harry couldn't hold back a noise of appreciation as he pulled the piles of deep blue velvet from the heavy paper bag. Silver needlework ran along the front edges in a fancy interlocking snake pattern with the occasional bead for an eye and clusters of tiny sequins for the border. "Wow, thanks," Harry said. "It's perfect. Are you going to be there?"

Aaron became comically evasive. "I don't exactly have an invitation . . . but I certainly know where the servants' entrance is," he said, nudging Harry in the ribs.

Rodgers came in, so Harry quickly dumped the cloak back into the bag and took a seat. Aaron moved a little slower as though to attract attention to himself. Vineet entered then followed by Kerry Ann at a run. Rodgers, apparently distracted by internal concerns, didn't even look up from his notes.

When it became clear that Rodgers wasn't ready to start, Aaron leaned over and whispered, "Who's your date?" Harry frowned and shook his head. Aaron leaned closer and asked, "Want me to find one for you?" Harry favored him with an expression of distaste. "Take Kerry Ann, then," Aaron suggested.

"We're not allowed to date," Harry pointed out. Kerry Ann turned around upon hearing her name, and Harry said, "He thinks I should take you to the DV-Day dinner." When Kerry Ann appeared very interested in this, Harry asked, "You really would like to go?"

Aaron raised his hand and Rodgers, after setting his notes aside, called upon him. Aaron asked, "Is is all right if Harry takes Kerry Ann to the VIP dinner as just friends?"

"Aaron," Harry began. "You can't just ask for permission . . ." he turned to their trainer, "Can he?"

"It would look bad if you took a fellow apprentice to the dinner," Rodgers said, making Kerry Ann's shoulders sink and her lower lip pop out.

"But it's not against the rules?" Aaron prodded. "He wouldn't be dating her, really."

"The rules are not so specific to include precise events that are off limits to joint attendance. No one in the department is allowed to date anyone else. The only exception is married couples who were married before they entered the department and

that has only come up once." Rodgers turned to Harry and snidely asked, "Trouble finding a date, Potter?"

Anger prickled at Harry's back and he couldn't find a safe reply before Aaron chimed in with, "He – and I – would have dates just fine if we didn't have five hours of reading every evening."

"Keeps you out of trouble, though, doesn't it?" Rodgers asked facetiously.

After washing and repeatedly combing his hair down, Harry dressed in his dark blue robes and checked himself all around for lint or anything amiss. He looked good, he thought, as he gazed at himself in the hall mirror. The robes could have been custom made for the occasion and the addition of Aaron's formal dress cloak rendered him ready for the fashion page of Witch Weekly, he felt certain, except for the clasp on the robe which was set with a gaudy blue gem, too big and bright to be real. Harry rushed up to his room to find the clasp from his old ruined cloak. The snake-shaped silver clasp, once polished, nicely set off the embroidery bordering the cloak edge.

Confident that he looked the part and realizing he was on the verge of being late, Harry pictured the entry foyer of the Wickem house and scrunched himself down to Apparate there. His feet remained planted on the floor of his room, however, as his chest smacked into a solid wall or something that felt very much like one. Harry gasped and stepped back to catch himself. He hadn't even considered that the house may have a barrier around it, but clearly it did. Coughing, he made his way downstairs and took down the Floo powder. This was undoubtedly going to make him fashionably late, but he didn't know another nearby Apparition target.

As he stepped into the flames, Harry announced both the Wickem house and the party itself, just in case. He landed in a cloud of ash in a small stone building containing an old carriage and some horse tack hanging from the rafters.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," a young man in formal robes said, waving his wand at him.

Harry, getting his bearings, held up his hand but was hit by a grooming charm anyway to remove the ash he had picked up. "Thanks," Harry muttered, shaking out his robes. He recognized the man from Bones' office now that he took a second look at him.

"This way," the man said invitingly, gesturing to the broad doors that were cracked open. Fully open they would easily allow the big carriage out.

Harry stepped out into the evening air. Torches lined the stone path up to the house, which blazed with light from all of its windows. Fortunately for Harry, everyone seemed to be late and a small queue waited at the door to be checked in. The couple in front of Harry were forced to hand over their invitation, which was checked with some kind of spell to reveal a hidden message as though to verify its authenticity. The couple themselves were each checked with spells as well to detect if they were enchanted or disguised. Harry wondered if the spells could detect a Polyjuice potion.

The queue finally advanced and the middle-aged wizard held his hand out and rotely asked for Harry's invitation.

"Do I really need one?" Harry asked in surprise. He hadn't even thought to bring it.

The man stared at him and uttered an "Uh . . ."

"I'll handle this one, Thornwater," Shacklebolt said graciously, stepping over in his Auror dress robes to lead Harry away.

"The minister said everyone was to be screened," Thornwater insisted. "Without exception."

"I'll let Madam Bones screen him herself, then," Shacklebolt said with a wink. When they were five steps away, the Auror turned and explained, "Thornwater works in Games . . . can't stand to break the rules."

They stepped out of the foyer and into the broader main hall which had been attacked by the same purveyor of gold bunting as the Ministry atrium. Fairy lights floated in orbiting clusters, casting long warm flickering shadows across large round tables draped in yet more gold cloth. A string quartet played unnoticed in the rear left corner. Witches and wizards in rich robes of midnight black with a few in dark colors of maroon, blue, or green milled about carrying drinks and chatting. No one looked ready to start.

Following behind Shacklebolt in his distinct robes made Harry wonder if the parts of the invitation he couldn't decipher mentioned what he was supposed to have worn. He had come as himself without considering that they may have expected to come as a Ministry employee. Shacklebolt stopped at a large cluster where Madam Bones stood speaking with foreign dignitaries and Ministry people.

"Ah, the guest of honor has arrived," Bones said, handing her drink to the person on her right, probably expecting it to be one of her staff, but instead it was Cornelius

Fudge, who appeared bemused to be treated thusly. Bones used her free hands to take Harry's arm and lead him to the head table.

She gestured at the seats. "You are here, Mr. Potter, beside me, and the regional finalists are here and here, and-"

"Only two finalists?" Harry asked.

"Two of them declined our invitation, stating prior engagements . . . on a Sunday, no less." She sounded mildly insulted.

Harry squinted at the little crystal balls sitting above each plate, each with a name floating inside it. Only George Weasley and Harry's trainer were going to attend this evening, it seemed. "I was hoping to meet this wizard, Vogle," Harry commented to the minister.

"You will tomorrow, I expect." She continued down the line. "Select elder members of the Wizengamot: Tiberius Ogden, Griselda Marchbanks, Headmistress McGonagall . . . ah, Minerva," Bones said in greeting, holding out her hand as McGonagall stepped up just then.

"Hello Harry," McGonagall said in a twinkling welcome.

"Professor," Harry returned. Around the room the mingling crowd began to look for their seats, which required lots of bending low and squinting at the tiny crystal balls. Belinda and the other Ministry staff were hurrying about trying to assist with this. Bones headed off to collect her other head table guests.

McGonagall came aside Harry and put her hand on his arm. "I almost sent Severus in my stead, but I selfishly decided I needed a break from the school more than he did."

Harry smiled, "That's all right, Professor. You're letting him off for tomorrow, right?" he teased.

"We will switch roles for tomorrow, yes," she said with another twinkle in her eye.

Voice pitched low, even though the murmur of the room provided cover, Harry said, "You're that concerned about security?"

"I'm not taking any chances, Harry." She removed her white gloves and smoothed them before bundling them into her pocket. With an air of admission, she said, "Sometimes the responsibility I've been entrusted with staggers me and I wonder all those years how Albus managed to take it so lightly, or appeared to."

"I hope Severus hasn't been shirking his part being home so much lately," Harry said.

She patted his arm. "Not at all. It isn't the day-to-day activities I am speaking of; it is the larger obligation of determining when extra precautions and reduced privileges are required to protect my charges."

The guests were settling into their seats en masse now, and George gamboled over and aggressively shook Harry's hand. "Mr. Judge, good to see you this evening."

Harry took his hand away and felt something in it. He rolled his eyes and held his hand back out to George without opening it. "Here," Harry said, "take that back."

"No, my dear man, you keep it."

"No, really," Harry insisted.

"What is it?" McGonagall inquired.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. A bribe I assume."

McGonagall reached out unexpectedly, took Harry's hand, and pulled it down to his side, near his robe pocket. Out of surprise, Harry didn't resist and was glad he hadn't when McGonagall brightly said, "Ms. Skeeter, having a good evening?"

Harry slipped whatever it was into his pocket. A pan of flash powder went off when he turned with a carefully neutral expression. He shook Skeeter's hand, just to ensure she knew his hand was empty. George, grinning very widely, took his seat with overly-done dignity, nose high in the air. Rodgers appeared at that moment and shook everyone's hand as well, resulting in a few more blinding flashes for the camera. Bones returned and Skeeter insisted she and Harry and the two finalists line up for a picture.

Despite Skeeter wanting to take yet another photograph, the Minister waved her off and gestured for Harry to sit while looking him up and down as though noticing his appearance for the first time. She leaned down and asked, "You weren't in Slytherin, were you Mr. Potter?"

"Not officially, Madam Minister," Harry said with a smile.

"Hm," she uttered in consternation before turning to the room and announcing, "Welcome everyone to the minister's dinner to open our Demise of Voldemort Day festivities. Some of you have traveled quite a distance and we are honored that you took the time and effort to do so..."

As the speech went on, Harry scanned the dim room. He spotted Obolensky, the Bulgarian Minister, seated with others who were vaguely familiar from past parties

and were dressed in foreign robes edged with colorful embroidery. The next table contained Ministry staff, but the only one sitting, because he was not helping the stragglers be seated, was Percy. He sat with his chin on his palm, looking far away and not particularly happy. When Harry glanced at George to see if he had noticed his brother, the Weasley twin winked at him. Behind the Ministry staff table, the Order of the Phoenix table held the usual suspects, including Mundungus, nearly unrecognizable freshly shaved. Mrs. Wickem floated, despite her size, along the back wall, shepherding the chefs steering carts of food out of the kitchen. Aaron stood against the wall nearby, enjoying the room and apparently eyeing the tables for an empty seat. When he noticed Harry's gaze, he waved.

The speech ended with Bones tapping Harry, who had not been listening, really, on the shoulder. The room was clapping. Chagrined by his own lack of attentiveness as well as lack of preparation, he put on a smile and stood beside the Minister of Magic.

"Thanks," he said and the clapping died down. "Two years is a long time . . ." He then hoped Bones had not just said that. "I'm sure everyone has forgotten already how it was before." Noises of denial echoed faintly. "Living with no sense of real security. The regular disappearances and mysterious minor catastrophes." He tried to cast his mind back to that time; back to when the Ministry of Magic could barely remain below average Muggle awareness. But he could not fixate on the past for long; Merton and the unknown threat he represented kept intruding. "This . . . holiday should serve as a reminder to remain vigilant, always, against new threats." Harry stopped, afraid of implying that there already was another threat. In a mere thirty seconds he had boxed himself in as though in a poorly opened chess match. Any moment now the knight was going to come through, mace swinging.

Harry backtracked quickly. "We also can, when we remember how bad things can get, better appreciate the peace and freedom we have, which we are apt to take for granted otherwise . . . without this annual reminder." Harry shook himself; that had been an okay recovery. He noticed that George had filled the glasses of mead at their table. Gratefully taking this opening, Harry picked up his mug. "So with that in mind, we should all properly enjoy this evening." A few chuckles emanated from the room as he raised a toast and the other tables scrambled to fill their own mugs.

"To quiet times," Harry toasted, hiding the forbidding sense that the current times were not going to last much longer.

A Full, Cold Moon

Ginny strode down the cold and dim fourth floor corridor on her way back from serving a long and mind-numbing, door-hinge-polishing detention with Filch that involved copious use of caustic liquids and an old toothbrush. A strange noise behind her, where she had just passed, made her pull her wand and turn. The sound repeated and a small figure emerged from behind a crooked suit of armor. It was Mrs. Norris. Half laughing at herself, Ginny re-stashed her wand and continued on.

"Ginny?" a small voice queried at the next turn.

"Colin?" Ginny asked, sounding annoyed to her own ears. "What are you doing skulking around here?

Colin pulled himself up a bit and said, "Professor Trelawney asked me to help her move some things. Big things. I wondered why she didn't just hover them, but I think . . ." Here his voice dropped to a whisper so that Ginny had to lean over to hear. "I think she's drunk. Why else would she ask someone my size to help move furniture."

"Oh," Ginny muttered. She wasn't a Prefect anymore and things like this weren't supposed to be her problem. "I guess I can see what she's doing," she said nevertheless.

Colin gave her a grateful smile and headed off. Ginny sighed loudly and mounted the steps to the nearby tower, wishing for an Un-Prefect badge to wear so as to relieve her of the responsibility of habit. Trelawney's off-key, mumbled singing echoed in the curved stairwell, rising and falling. A bat took flight when Ginny opened the door at the top.

"Professor?" Ginny asked loudly, pulling out a straightforward attitude to bolster herself. Trelawney was sitting on one of her mushroom chairs, painting little stars on a tall bureau that had been pulled to the center of the circular room. The visual effect on the ugly hunk of furniture wasn't half bad. "Everything all right, Professor?" Ginny asked.

"Huh?" Trelawney gave a start and squinted at Ginny through her thick glasses. "Everything's fine!" she proclaimed, waving her hand grandly so that she slopped yellow paint onto the dusty floor.

Ginny looked around for the bottle of alcohol Trelawney must have near to hand, but didn't see it. She was hoping to gauge how long this state would continue, since she didn't relish informing the headmistress about this and would prefer to think it was temporary.

Chapter 16

"You know my dear," Trelawney began conversationally, just as Ginny turned to leave. "That talking horse might have something there. The stars, you know. They go around and around." She put the paint down and gestured with the long handled, fine pointed brush she held. "But you know, every time they go around . . . they change just a little . . . tiny . . . bit." She held her forefinger and thumb close together up to her own eye to accent this point.

"Yes, ma'am," Ginny responded patronizingly, quietly adding to the score of things that she thought Hogwarts owed her for this last unnecessary year. "I really have to go, Professor. Have fun with your decorating." She started to back up. A waft of incense hit her nose, making her rub at it. Shoulders falling, she held off on retreating again when Trelawney continued speaking. "Really-" Ginny started to say, but stopped; the Divination professor was not speaking in her normal voice, more of a croak. Ginny strained to pick out the words.

". . . darkness bound, sought and released . . . they do not understand what they have wrought . . . they conjure allies that they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land. . . only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source . . ."

Ginny stood with breath gone. "What?" she uttered.

"My stars, I seem to have spilled rather a lot of paint!" Trelawney had leapt up and was checking her many layered translucent gowns that floated over her robe.

Ginny swallowed hard against simply being sick right there on the spot. Breathe, she ordered herself and ran from the room as soon as her lungs filled.

The corridors were too long reaching the stairs. The stairs too numerous. The returning corridors too long again before she reached the gargoyles. Out of breath it took two tries to say the password to get them out of the way.

At the top of the stairs the door was closed. Ginny didn't even think to knock. Inside, Professor Snape reclined in McGonagall's chair. At her unceremonial entrance his head snapped up with a very displeased expression. Ginny looked from him to Lupin and back.

"Where's Headmistress?" Ginny asked desperately.

"Late returning from the party," Snape uttered grimly as though just by asking Ginny had crossed the line.

Ginny looked between them again. Lupin's eyes held concern, but it was clearly held in check by his own general fatigue. Ginny simply had to say what had happened. She couldn't keep it in or even judge who should or should not know.

"Professor Trelawney . . ." Ginny started and then ran out of words.

Snape pulled his foot down off of the desk. "What? Drunk again?"

"Uh," Ginny put her hand to her forehead, which felt clammy. "Well, probably, but, she . . ."

"Ms. Weasley," Snape began firmly. "If she isn't cavorting with animals or performing black magic, it isn't important enough to bother with."

Oddly, his chastisement calmed her completely. Ginny un-balled her fists and said, "She prophecized."

The effect of this statement was even greater than Ginny had expected. Snape almost collapsed before catching himself on the desktop. Lupin bowed his head and shook it, swearing quietly.

Snape rubbed his forehead rather hard with his long fingers for nearly half a minute. "Recite it, Ms. Weasley. Exactly as you heard it."

"I might have missed the very beginning of it." At Snape's furious look, she insisted defensively, "I didn't realize what was happening."

"It's all right, Ginny," Lupin said gently. "Just tell us what you heard."

Again, Ginny had a moment's panic that she could not judge who should hear the prophecy. Wanting desperately to shed this burden, she recited it quickly. Lupin swore again, loud enough to hear it this time.

"Can I go check on Harry, sir?" Ginny pleaded.

"What for?" Snape demanded.

"Well, it is certainly about him isn't it? 'The one born into prophecy?'" Harry doesn't deserve this, she thought angrily.

"The prophecy is almost certainly not going to come to fruition this evening," Snape stated derisively. He gazed hard at her, unfortunately just as she was considering alternative plans. "And if you so much as step foot outside or fetch a broom – as I see you are considering – I will personally curse you to spend an extra year here repeating seventh year with all of the classes, such as Advanced Astronomy and Astral Linear Algebra, that you so conveniently choose not to take."

"We don't have a class on Astral Algebra," Ginny uttered in confusion.

Snape stood up and leaned over the desk like a predator. "I will see to it that we do. Go back to your tower."

Ginny shirked back at the very notion of even the next week here. At the door she said angrily. "You'll tell Harry?"

"Of course," Snape said, voice now tired and level. "As soon as it is convenient."

"Tell him we're all with him, you know," Ginny insisted.

Snape sat back, making McGonagall's chair squeak. "I am certain he is aware of that. GO ON WITH YOU." His attempt at returning to fierce was pale compared to just seconds before, but Ginny went anyway, if only to hide her damp eyes.

When the door closed, Snape put his hands to his head and uttered, "Bloody hell."

Lupin said, "We can probably call one of the old Order members from Hogsmeade if you want to go now."

Snape shook his head. "Ignoring that I promised Minerva I would be here, I need time to prepare."

"Harry probably won't even blink when you tell him," Lupin offered lightly.

"The reaction I would fear the most," Snape growled. "Ms. Weasley is correct, Harry does not deserve this."

"She didn't say that," Lupin said.

"Didn't she?" Snape asked rhetorically.

Lupin dropped into the visitor's chair. "You have to watch that Legilimency, Severus."

"Why? It has kept me alive so far and it seems extreme measures are likely to be needed again."

Author's Note:
Should be posting back on the usual Wednesday/Thursday schedule starting next week.

Chapter 17.

Demise of Voldemort Day

Harry leaned back on the open spot on the couch just vacated by Lavender. Hermione's flat was quieter now that half the partiers had left to go to yet another party. Lots of people were taking advantage of the Monday holiday to celebrate tonight, it seemed. Aaron himself was having his own late-night party which his fellow apprentices were attending. Harry was starting to think he should Apparate over before he had another mug of ale, or give up on the idea in the interest of personal safety.

"Going to leave the room this big?" Ron teased Hermione following a burp. He too was slouched low on the couch, his lanky legs bent out over the floor.

Hermione gave Harry a questioning look. "I'm thinking not . . ." she replied airily.

Harry laughed. "You think I'm going to report you for unlicensed domicile enlargement?"

"Harry wouldn't do that," Neville chimed in from his spot on the floor leaning back against the couch.

"They really don't let me do anything, so I'm not exactly out looking for evildoers," Harry said. "Your father," he added, nudging Ron, "said, 'You aren't an Auror yet, Harry. You can't go out . . . taking care of things . . .'" He waved his hand in the air as he forgot Mr. Weasley's exact words, then dropped his arm with a sigh.

Ron pointed out, "It's not as if you . . . haven't not spent years taking care of things."

"Huh?" Hermione prodded with a giggle. "Cut Ron off."

"He talks like that sober," Harry said. "Maybe give him another beer."

They all laughed more.

McGonagall returned to find her deputy headmaster still sitting at her desk where had she left him. "You've been here all evening, Severus?" she asked, startled to see him there. "You needn't have waited here for me. I just wanted you to fill in post dinner in case a student came with a concern, as they tend to do at that time."

She hung up her cloak and considered Snape as he grimly rose from her chair. She rambled on a little tipsily: "Your son conducted himself with his usual aplomb, but you were correct that the party was mostly intended to give Amelia's longtime associates a chance to mix with the foreign ministers. At least, that was just about the only interesting thing to do."

"There was a student with a problem," Snape stated vaguely.

"Oh, who?" McGonagall asked, hesitating in heading up the stairs to the other half of her office. Her red rimmed eyes focused on Snape with a little difficulty.

"Ms. Weasley. I had to threaten her with an eighth year of school to keep her from leaving the grounds."

"What happened?" McGonagall asked, clearly alarmed.

"Sybill saw fit to proclaim a prophecy to her, and since it regards Harry, she wished to rush off and inform him of it." Snape sounded tired now. "Something I should perhaps go and do, now."

"Is he mentioned literally?" McGonagall asked. Snape shook his head, causing her to moved to sit at her desk and arranged a parchment before her.

"What are you doing?" Snape asked.

"In that case it should be registered with the Ministry." She rapidly recut a quill with a pen knife from her drawer and stared at it cross-eyed to check it.

"It is unnecessary," Snape insisted. "It most certainly pertains to him and I will tell it to him myself. Only prophecies whose subject or subjects are indeterminate need be registered."

She poised the quill. "Tell it to me."

"I don't particularly wish it to be officially recorded," Snape pointed out harshly.

A small standoff ensued until McGonagall pleasantly said, "Severus, I can simply ask Ms. Weasley to recite it."

Snape put his hands on his hips and said, "If I tell her not to, I am fairly confident she will not."

McGonagall snorted. "Surely you don't imagine that possible, Severus." When he failed to reply or ease his stance, she said, "Severus, you are being unreasonable. Is Voldemort mentioned in this prophecy?"

"No."

She put the quill down and addressed the freshest painting in the room, the one that snored the quietest and therefore was allowed to hang at eye level. "Albus," she prompted.

The painted version of Albus Dumbledore shook himself and blinked his bright blue eyes. "Minerva, you've returned. How was the party?"

"Did you overhear the prophecy Ms. Weasley recited earlier in the very office?"

"Prophecy?" Dumbledore echoed dully. "Hm, prophecy . . . prophecy. I'm sorry, my dear Minerva, I must have been sleeping."

"Albus!" McGonagall snapped in disgust. A glance around the walls showed all the other paintings slumbering as well. She tapped her fingers on the desk. "Severus, I expect better from you," she criticized in real anger. "And you as well, Albus." But all the painting did was shrug as though amused with itself.

"Hear it before you determine that you must register it," Snape insisted.

She pushed the parchment to the side and rubbed her eyes. "All right, then."

"Ms. Weasley believes she missed the very beginning of it-"

"Wonderful."

"But, it goes as follows: 'Darkness bound, sought, and released. They do not understand what they have wrought. They conjure allies they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land. Only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source.'"

McGonagall tapped her fingers on the broad top of her desk in thought for a minute before she called for one of the house-elves from the kitchen, whom she instructed to

fetch the Gryffindor house ghost. Nearly-Headless Nick she then instructed to send Ginny Weasley up to them. "While I consider what course to take, I wish to satisfy my curiosity about your challenge," she primly informed him. She squinted at her watch as though suddenly thinking of the time, "No class tomorrow, tower should still be awake."

The clocks around the room marked the time until the door knocker tocked loudly. Ginny Weasley, wearing a dressing gown with her uniform, stepped inside when called to. She moved her blurry gaze between the two of them, appearing deeply saddened. McGonagall said, "You heard the prophecy from Professor Trelawney, Ms. Weasley?"

Ginny nodded and opened her mouth to speak but Snape cut in with, "Headmistress McGonagall is insisting that the prophecy be registered, which I do not wish to happen. Do not tell it to her."

Ginny blinked at him, rising in alertness. She looked between the two of them as though carefully gauging them.

McGonagall said kindly with a sigh, "Ms. Weasley, kindly recite the prophecy you heard from Professor Trelawney this evening."

Ginny looked back at Snape and then back at McGonagall and swallowed. "Why do you want to register it, ma'am?" she asked.

"No one is named outright in it, Ms. Weasley, correct? So technically the subject of the prophecy is indeterminate. All indeterminate prophecies must be registered."

Ginny stood thoughtful for a few seconds before she said, "No. I won't tell you in that case."

"You what?" McGonagall snapped.

"If Professor Snape thinks it should be kept from the Ministry then I won't tell you. He can tell Harry, or I can tell Harry. No one else need know." She sounded more tired than defiant as well as a little shaky as though the emotional load had gotten a little too high.

"You win, Severus," McGonagall said. With extra gentleness, she said, "Go back to your tower, Ms. Weasley." When Ginny hesitated, she added, "It's all right. It will be dealt with."

"You'll withhold it from the Ministry, then?" Ginny asked, sounding very concerned.

"Yes," McGonagall reassured her.

"Good," Ginny breathed and then took her leave.

When the door clicked closed, McGonagall said, "Liberated dark hordes sounds a little familiar, Severus. Which part of the prophecy exactly applies to Harry?"

Snape stared down at his interlocked fingers and didn't reply except to say, "May I borrow your Floo node?"

Empty silence greeted Snape in his own main hall. "Winky!" Snape shouted and the elf instantly appeared. "Where is Harry?"

"Master at friend Hermione's house, Master," Winky replied with a little curtsy.

"Thank you," Snape muttered and on the sideboard found a letter from her open but still in its envelope with the address written clearly in Hermione's neat hand.

After taking the Floo to Diagon Alley and Apparating as close as he could manage, Snape knocked at the door to Hermione Granger's flat. London was bathed in rain and quiet and Snape was soaked from walking much farther than he needed to in an unusual fit of stalling.

"Professor!" Hermione said in surprise when she opened the door. She wore a dressing gown as well at the late hour. Behind her the remains of a party littered the room and apparently all the other guests had departed.

"Severus?" Harry said, standing up and approaching. "What's wrong?" he asked upon seeing Snape's dark countenance.

"Sit down," Snape ordered after he stepped in.

Harry obeyed, mostly out of surprise. He took one of the flimsy kitchen chairs and watched his guardian circle. Snape eventually stopped before him, arms crossed. He looked extremely annoyed. Harry didn't dare ask again what was wrong, even when Snape rubbed his forehead and delayed starting.

"Sybill . . . prophecized again," Snape finally explained.

Harry's shoulders curled downward. "Oh," he uttered breathily.

"That's it? 'Oh'?" Snape demanded.

"I haven't heard it yet," Harry argued. "I'm assuming it's about me or you wouldn't be here." When Snape stalled additionally, he prompted, "I want to hear it."

Snape glanced at Hermione, who appeared grave. He recited the prophecy. Harry repeated it aloud to make sure he had it. "Huh," he uttered uneasily from far away. "At least it doesn't mention my dying."

"I do not want you to take this lightly," Snape said.

"What?" Harry responded with arms gesturing. "You want me to freak? Curl up in a ball and insist I can't handle it?"

Quietly, Snape said, "I'd feel better if you expressed something more. Some measure of the unfairness of it."

"'Course it's unfair," Harry said with a laugh. "That doesn't change it." He dropped off into thought again, repeating the phrases to himself and considering different possible interpretations of them. Hermione emitting a noise like a stifled sob interrupted whatever Snape was going to say. She hurried to her room, hand over her mouth, and closed the door. Harry thoughtfully said, "So you heard the prophecy from Trelawney?" He could picture the scene, her odd voice, her confusion afterward.

"No, Ms. Weasley did. She is most concerned about you; perhaps you should owl her. She insisted that I point out that she and everyone else are with you."

Harry looked around at the remains of their pizza dinner. "I know that, but it helps to hear it anyway." Harry stared at the stove with its little row of spice jars along the back. Snape's cloak smelled of fresh rain and it competed with the stale food scent that lingered in the utterly mundane room. Facing a prophecy-laden future was something he had grown unaccustomed to and he resisted it with a painful twist of his midsection. "Do you think it's Merton?" he asked in a whisper so Hermione couldn't overhear.

Snape paced, looking fierce still. "I don't know, but he is the likeliest possibility at this point." Sounding as though he wished to reassure Harry, he said, "The last prophecy required nearly eighteen years to run its course."

"No, there was another that took only one night," Harry corrected him.

Snape's eyebrows rose and then he sighed. "You aren't in this alone, Harry. You were not last time either, although you never seemed to fully grasp that."

Sounding annoyed, Harry said, "That's because no ever told me what was going on."

Flicking his damp cloak wide, Snape said, "Well, I certainly will not keep anything from you this time. Please do not keep anything from me." He frowned as he stared beyond the wall for a while. "This is a rather large flat, how does Ms. Granger afford it?"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered.

"Smart girl," Snape said in a low voice. "Keep your skilled friends near at hand, Harry."

"I will," Harry assured him.

"You are leaving for home, soon?" Snape asked, sounding protective.

"In a little while." Here he glanced at the closed bedroom door. "I want to talk to Hermione a while."

Snape nodded and gathered his cloak close around himself. "Keep me informed. And I will see you tomorrow."

"Good luck tomorrow," Harry said quickly, before Snape could Disapparate.

Snape nodded with a raised, knowing brow and disappeared.

The Ministry atrium glowed gold with bunting and a scattering of gold pointed hats that some in the crowd had chosen to wear. Harry ducked back behind the black curtain backdropping the dais as Minister Bones gave instructions to her assistants, including Belinda, who looked too harried to notice him. Bones finally turned to Harry with a bright look of pleasure as her staff scattered.

"Well, this has turned out to be a roaring success, Mr. Potter. Pure genius. We've sold every last ticket available." She took his arm. "And you've read the rule book, correct? People can be astoundingly picky about these things." Here she leaned sideways to see a little around the curtain. "Especially when Galleons are being wagered on the outcome." She smiled, widening her round cheeks even more when one of her assistants waved from near the first hearth that everything was set. "Whenever you are ready, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced down to verify that his dress robes were straight and neat enough. He took out his wand and then stashed it again, wondering why he thought he might have needed it. At the edge of the curtain, he took a deep breath and stepped around and up onto the dais. The boisterous crowd, which stretched all the way to the far end of the atrium, noticed him immediately and began cheering. Behind him, Bones was stepping up as well. Harry remembered why he needed the wand and quickly did a Sonorous charm on himself to be heard over the noise.

"Thank you everyone for coming," Harry said, and almost stepped back as his voice echoed around the vast, filled space. The crowd quieted. "And we also must thank the Minister for sponsoring this competition, this, the First Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Championship." The crowd noise surged appreciatively.

Bones beamed and stated, equally Sonorous, "We were going to call it Harry Potter Day, but Mr. Potter wouldn't allow us to." Harry was glad that the crowd didn't

sound entirely on her side. She went on, "We are honored that Mr. Potter, while not loaning us his name for this day, has nonetheless agreed to loan us himself to be the judge this afternoon. The prize for the First Annual Duel is this wonderful trophy." She gestured behind her where two assistants where carrying out a monstrous trophy in the shape of a hand holding a wand done in silver with a helix of crystal sweeping up and around it as well as forming the base. Harry found himself severely torn between being horrifically appalled at its ungainly stature and incredibly jealous that he was disqualified from possibly taking it home personally. The crowd unabashedly loved it, perhaps because of the distance most of them stood away from it.

Bones waited for a lull. "To go with the trophy there is also three hundred Galleons of prize money." This was greeted by even more cheering. "Mr. Potter, if you will introduce the regional winners . . ."

Harry took the note cards she held out and looked at the top name, which he was very familiar with. Harry announced, "Representing Ipswich, Dover, and London as the easy winner of that region, we have Reginald W. Rodgers, head Auror apprentice trainer – and my boss here at the Ministry, but I've already promised not to be biased . . . one way or the other."

Rodgers was giving Harry an overly doubtful look which made the crowd laugh more. Harry glanced at the card and found a note below, which he read, "Mr. Rodgers claims to have been dueling since the age of ten. Must have a few older brothers," Harry commented.

"I do," Rodgers mouthed as he took the position Bones indicated and glared at a spot in the crowd.

Harry went to the next card. "Here from the Midlands and Wales Regional, one of the more memorable competitions, we have George S. Weasley." George bounded upon the dais with an overdone leap. He was wearing a silvery cloak that alternated between floating and sinking as though it were underwater. Harry said, "We think this is George, but it may be Fred, but it probably doesn't matter either way." George took up a stance beside Rodgers and Harry said, "And that cloak will have to go."

George gave Harry an insulted look complete with hand upon breast. "Yes," Harry confirmed. "No magical clothing allowed."

George sighed loudly as a few people jeered as though terribly insulted by his apparent attempt at cheating. "And I thought we were friends," George lamented, generating more rumbles of complaint from the crowd.

"We are," Harry said quietly, but with the Sonorous charm it came across to everyone. "But I still promised to enforce the rules evenly. Especially with the next competitor

. . . from the Newcastle Upon Tyne competition, we have Hogwarts own Professor Severus P. Snape." A chorus of supportive hooting emanated from the back left corner of the crowd as Snape flipped the back curtain aside and came up, prompting Harry to comment, "I see he has brought some Slytherins with him."

Snape gave him a look that said, Of course before giving Rodgers a dark glance and standing beside George, who appeared honestly uneasy about his position. George asked with a tilt of the head at Snape, "Shouldn't –e be disqualified with you judging?"

Harry lowered the card he was about to read from and said, "We'd have to disqualify you as well, Fred or George, you're like a brother to me. Brother, father, boss . . ." Harry said, summarizing the line so far. "Good thing I had absolutely nothing to do with selecting any of you for this." Harry returned to the card since the crowd had fallen the quietest yet. "From the Cornwall and Devon regional we have Wesley A. Vogle. Wes I don't know at all. We've never so much as met, let alone share any kind of past."

Onto the back of the dais stepped a fine-boned man in his twenties with a black goatee and severe widow's peak with contrastingly light brown eyes. With graceful steps he took up a position beside Snape and surveyed the crowd as though gleefully memorizing it. Compared to the others, he looked as though the first serious breeze would blow him off the dais.

Harry put the cards away to keep from waving them around as he talked. They bumped something in his pocket as he did so, and he remembered that George had given him something disk-shaped and it was still in there. Figuring that now was not the time to examine what constituted a bribe, he put it out of his mind and announced, "Now, the format of the tournament will be a round robin, which, if it works out properly will reduce us to a single winner, or a final duel, if necessary. Two points are given for a win and a half a point for a draw. No dismembering, disemboweling, or personality changing spells are allowed. Neither are forbidden curses, but I hope I don't need to point that out." The goblet of fire was being carried onto the front of the dais and placed on a rickety tray-table. The crowd ooohed at its appearance.

"The four competitors' names have been put into the goblet which will select the order of the pairings." Harry waved his wand over the low blue flames of the goblet and two slips of parchment burst forth with a small explosion that made the people packed in front lean into the strangers behind them. "First up we have Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Weasley," Harry announced, dropping the slips back in immediately.

The goblet was swept efficiently away and the others stepped back behind the curtain. George and Rodgers arranged themselves back to back, each concentrating hard on what was to come. Harry figured that he needed to worry about George more than his trainer with regard to the rules but he couldn't catch his friend's eye to give him a warning look. "Ten steps turn and spell. This is alternating format, you must wait for your opponent to return a spell before making an additional one yourself if the spells are not simultaneous."

Harry backed up to the curtain and began counting aloud. George looked intense as they marched away from each other, but Rodgers almost relaxed and happy. Harry felt a little sorry for George. As they turned, spells rolled out right on the mark allowed, making the crowd gasp hungrily. George had fired something curly and bright with no incantation but Rodgers blocked it without effort and his blasting curse sent George back two steps to catch himself. Two more spells came forth coincidently and met in an explosion that brought cheers from the crowd; that is, the ones not in the front who were patting at their smoldering clothing.

George had been knocked back again and had to put a hand down to get up. Harry considered calling for a pause to verify he was unharmed but held back. He could see in George's eyes that he had begun doubting himself; Harry began cheering for him silently. The dragon spell rolled out of George's wand during the lull that Rodgers gallantly gave him to recover. Unfortunately, Rodgers had seen this one from Harry's own wand and he used three quick zapfen spells to shatter the incoming line of flying amphibians.

George was biting his lower lip but at some cheers of encouragement, he sent a rainbow beam from his wand. Rodgers ducked his head, hand over his eyes, blinded. This time he had spelled at the same time, but his chain binding curse was blocked. George quickly sent another spell at his impeded opponent. But, Harry thought as it unfolded before him, he should have chosen one with no incantation because Rodgers brought the correct block up easily just hearing the spell. Blind still, he cast a mummy curse back, and George, realizing too late that he should shift to one side to make himself harder to hit, got caught by the sticky streamers and despite repeated cancellation attempts, fell in a bundle to the wooden floor.

Harry went over to Rodgers first, who gave him a half-focussed look but waved off any assistance and headed for George, whom he released with a quick flick of his wand. George stepped back up onto the dais and gave Rodgers a sad shake of the hand as Harry announced the first match was going to his trainer.

The competitors stepped off behind the curtain. "Wasn't that fun?" Harry asked the crowd, who wholeheartedly and loudly agreed. An anticipatory calm fell and the

goblet was brought forth again. "Weasley and Vogle," Harry announced, feeling sorry for George not getting a chance to recover.

Vogle, expressing determination in every line of his body, did well against the rattled George and after four exchanges, the unfortunate George was again sent off, this time with his fingers turned into ivy which he insisted didn't keep him from holding a wand, but Harry had made his decision, and George didn't argue long. Vogle was elated, the first expression he had shown. He fairly bounced off of the dais after shaking hands . . . when George returned to having hands.

The goblet next selected the pairing Harry was dreading. He tried hard to read it off as if he weren't. "Snape and Rodgers."

The two of them stalked onto the dais and to the center, accompanied by isolated cheering. "You both know the rules," Harry felt compelled to say before he stepped back and began the countdown.

What resulted was a textbook battle of power. Neither tried anything strange or self-invented, they just alternated attacks and counters that rattled the chandeliers and knocked the bunting behind the dais down. Both men had such deep looks of concentration that no other expression reached their faces as spells and blocks exploded between and around them. Both returned precisely to their starting spot to restart after getting knocked back. Both aimed their wands with exactly the same finger grip.

"Time!" Harry shouted. Both of them stopped and gave him the same look of shock. "One hundred seconds," Harry pointed out. "It's a draw." Some in the crowd booed, wanting to see a real outcome. "Maybe you'll tie for first and get another chance," he pointed out. "Shake hands," he then had to sternly command them because they were both heading off to the back as quickly as possible. Harry couldn't help grinning at getting to order them both around as they grudgingly obeyed and then stalked off same as they'd come.

"That's the halfway point, everyone and we have a fifteen minute break to put things back together here. There are refreshments being sold along the back wall to benefit St. Mungos." The goblet was stood up in the center of the dais and allowed to flicker quietly to itself.

Harry tapped his throat with his wand and went back behind the curtain. Snape was standing, arms crossed, pointedly ignoring his recent opponent. When he saw Harry, he snapped, "You could have let it go longer."

Replying easily, Harry countered, "You could have tried a more imaginative spell." He glanced at his trainer and added, "Either of you."

"Looked like a draw to me," Vogle piped in gruffly.

"Me too," George said. "It was like watching someone duel a mirror." Unaware that they had mirrored expressions, Snape and Rodgers gave George horrified glares. "See, you still look like twins . . . and I should know." Snape stalked farther away, beside Vogle, who considered his dark demeanor with bright amusement.

"Everybody ready?" Harry asked when it was time to resume. He stepped back before the curtain and over to the goblet. He started to speak and then remembered that he needed to renew the Sonorous. "Welcome back everyone." The crowd had quieted a lot during the break and many conversations were still going on. Harry waved for another pairing. "Vogle and Rodgers," he announced.

Vogle took his position slowly as though trying for a little more time to prepare. Rodgers looked ready to take out his annoyance on this next opponent, and indeed his first ice curse was full force but Vogle was agile and jumped aside most of what he didn't block. That was one advantage to being small, Harry thought. In return Rodgers got a faceful of what might be seaweed; it certainly smelled like seaweed and since the spelling was even, Vogle could send something as a followup, and it turned out to be a web charm that tangled the seaweed up all the more.

Rodgers managed to stab his wand out of the mess and issue a blasting curse that made a portrait on the far wall fall down with a cracking of its frame. Vogle blocked it but almost lost his balance and fell off the edge of the dais, which would have ended the match. His eyes narrowed and with a grimace he sent a broad shrinking curse at his still tangled opponent. The mass of slithering wet greenery and white webbing pulled taut, binding Rodgers from raising his wand, although he continued to struggle for the ten seconds he was allotted to respond.

Harry called the match, secretly pleased his trainer had been gotten the best of. "Match to Vogle," Harry announced and then had to wait while the man worked out the right cancellations to free Rodgers, which resulted in a lot of audience jeering. By the end Vogle was beet red and didn't meet Harry's eyes as he dashed off the platform after shaking hands with a thoroughly peeved Rodgers.

"Next we have one I am personally looking forward to: Weasley and Snape," Harry announced as the goblet was again carried away. Harry was hoping George would look ready to get even, but he mostly appeared resigned.

"Care to forfeit, Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked smugly when they arrived at the center but hadn't turned their backs yet.

"NO," George responded, showing more spunk in the face of Snape's sneer. He spun his back to him to prepare for the countdown and raised his wand, much more

determined. Snape gave Harry a wink as he copied this move. When they turned after the pacing, George, perhaps inspired by the previous match, sent a rain of toffee at his former teacher and received a fat chain binding in return. While each cancelled the others capturing spell, the audience hooted. Snape, yellow toffee still stuck in his hair, spelled a weight hex at George who could only block part of it and fell to his knees, but his swarm of hornets curse had Snape occupied with repeated titan blocks and then finally a water canon, which he turned on George after clearing away the stinging beasts. The water pushed George off his end of the platform and Harry called the match.

Ministry people raced onto the dais to dry it. Snape came to the center, obvious stings on his face and even his nose. Harry thought it a good thing George was well out of school. There was a longer delay as things were cleaned up and Snape managed to procure salve from somewhere because the bites were much reduced by the time Harry called him and Vogle up for the last match.

"As it stands now," Harry said to quiet the chanting and unruly crowd, "Mr. Vogle is in the lead with four points and Professor Snape and Mr. Rodgers are tied with two and a half each. This match is indeed for the whole win. It's almost as if the goblet knew," Harry insinuated.

Snape appeared utterly confident as he turned his back to his small opponent, who looked rattled initially but then recovered by the time the count reached ten. Vogle reused the toffee curse, only with more power and dealt neatly with the fireball from Snape that Harry was tempted to call out of line but let slide. The audience roared in appreciation of the danger level going up. Snape didn't manage to free himself from all the toffee before the next exchange, which exploded between them more or less harmlessly, as did the next. Snape's expression grew as determined as Harry had ever seen it. And Harry had an inkling that he was trying to Legilimize his opponent but he must have been failing since the match went on evenly with Vogle's unusual and borderline childish spells tangling Snape and his just managed survival-level blocking and countering of Snape's textbook attacks.

"Mutushorum," Snape shouted fiercely, sounding victorious. Vogle ducked, but got caught in the backlash of the spell and fell on his wand as his body went stiff. Harry was stepping forward to call the match, when Vogle moved his wand hand and held it up, albeit shakily. It was his turn, Snape had to wait. Harry began quietly counting down from ten. Vogle had to have at least one foot flat on the floor to spell back. Slowly, he pulled one foot forward beside his arm, displaying great flexibility, and pushed it flat, shouting "Rictusempra!" in desperation.

Snape jerked, his face going surprised. And then he started laughing. Laughing with such force that his attempted chain binding curse flew to wrap up the bunting. Harry stood in surprise an instant until the crowd began chuckling as well. Harry called the match on time and cancelled the laughing spell himself, trying hard not to grin at the strange vision of his guardian doubled over in magical glee. Snape released his breath and awkwardly got up off his knees. "We ran over?" he gasped.

"Yep," Harry confirmed. "But a half point each gives Vogle the win."

"Yes!" Vogle shouted with a high-pitched hiss, putting a boney fist in the air.

Snape staggered to the side, making Harry step along with him backwards to verify he was all right. Snape shook him off and uttered, "Whatever made me think this might be fun . . ."

The competitors were all brought up before the crowd. Vogle stood as though shell shocked while everyone moved around him, bringing up the trophy, getting the Minister into position for a photograph. "So," Bones was saying while holding her wand over the brass plaque for the trophy. "We'll just engrave this, let's see . . ." She looked for her note cards in her many pockets until Harry remembered that he had them and handed the correct one over. "Yes, Wesley Armanily Vogle, correct?"

"What?" Vogle uttered.

"Your name," Bones patiently asked. "Would you like it engraved that way?"

"No, that's not right," Vogle uttered as though in a trance.

"No?" Bones responded, holding up the card. "I have the spelling wrong?"

"Yes," Vogle confirmed. He lifted his wand and waved off his beard with a metamorph cancelation. "It's actually . . ." he began while tapping himself on the head. His dark hair faded and red bushy hair came in its place. "Ginevra Molly Weasley."

Harry bit his lips tightly to keep in what was either an oath or a barking laugh. The crowd was rumbling with sharply whispered conversation.

"Ginny!" George uttered in complete dismay. "My own teeny tiny sister?" Beside him, Snape dropped his head and shook it tragically. Rodgers merely appeared thoughtful, perhaps because recognized the name from the apprentice applications.

"Uh huh," Bones uttered, failing to notice that Percy was straining under the weight of the trophy in addition to the shock. He finally set it on the floor with a grunt and moved as though to yell at his sister. Bones leaned over to Harry, "Anything in the rules about impersonations?"

"No," Harry said, grinning so wide it hurt.

"We'll amend them for next year," she said easily. "Well, Ms. Weasley, the trophy is yours." She pulled Ginny close as the flash powder went off and whispered, "But enter as yourself next time." She patted Ginny and gave herself a Sonorous Charm. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, we have a bit of twist here . . ."

A commotion in the crowd nearby caused her to pause. Molly and Arthur Weasley were shoving their through the tight crowd to get to the dais, followed by a wake of redheads.

"Young lady," Mrs. Weasley said as she she stepped up to them. "What are you doing out of school!?"

Only a tiny bit cowed, Ginny replied, "Winning the tournament?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head with a frown, but he patted her on the arm and said, "Good blocking, champ."

Ginny positively glowed. "Thanks dad."

He patted her arm further and added, "But you are grounded for two months."

"Yeah. All right." She pointed at the trophy. "But can you help me carry this home?"

Bones caught the attention of the crowd again. "Seems our winner was incognito and AWOL to boot from Hogwarts, but of age, so that is no issue for the Ministry. Here are your Galleons, Ms. Ginny Weasley." She held out a heavy black silk sack to Ginny, who accepted it with an intense expression of hunger. The crowd gave a little cheer. Bones added, "Be sure to join us for the afternoon picnic at the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds." The crowd began to disperse and the buzz of conversation surged as a happy sound. The noise of the row of Floos flaring in rapid succession rose to compete.

In contrast Ron glumly said to his sister, "You owe me the ten Galleons I bet on George. I even let Harry's friend spell-seal the bet . . ."

Harry straightened in memory and said, "You won that bet. It was for anyone in your family."

"Hey! That's right! Wow, twenty Galleons," he said dreamily.

Ginny rolled her eyes and stepped up to Snape. "Sorry about that last spell, Professor. I had insider information."

At this, Snape sent a disbelieving glare at Harry.

"What?" Harry blurted, protesting his innocence. "I didn't . . . Oh, maybe I did. It was an accident," he insisted. Snape shook his head and Harry pointed out smartly, "If Ginny hadn't won, you and Rodgers would have kept drawing until the picnic began and it'd have ended a tie. We'd have had to cut the trophy in half."

Ginny said, "You did a good job judging, Harry, really."

"You'd say that," George complained. "You won."

"Shall we move onto the picnic?" Harry suggested as a distraction.

"Where's the basket?" Molly Weasley said in sudden alarm, looking around herself.

"I have it, Mum," Bill said, holding up an overflowing, monstrous basket with a red and white checked blanket dangling out of it.

"Oh, thank goodness," Molly said.

"I want to take my trophy home, first," Ginny insisted, moving to pick it up with her money sack bundled awkwardly under her arm. It nearly came up to her waist it was so tall.

"I'll get it for you," Harry said, stepping in and hefting the thing with no little effort.

Fred said, "Let her carry it; she shouldn't win trophies she can't carry."

"You're just jealous," Harry accused him. "Coming, Ginny?" He Disapparated and reappeared in the Weasley living room. Ginny appeared beside him a half second later.

"Thanks, Harry."

"No troubles," he said, straining to avoid sounding strained as he mounted the rickety, creaking stairs. "You were really good, you know. Your blocks and counters, anyway. Your attacks were a little . . . nonstandard."

They walked down the narrow crooked corridor to Ginny's room. "How do you think I saved your arse the other night?" she asked pointedly.

"There is that," Harry said with a light blush.

"My blocks are always at your disposal, Harry," she added in a more serious tone.

"I may need them again," he admitted as he placed the heavy trophy on a rough shelf under the window where it caught the sunlight and sent prisms around the room. "Looks good there."

Ginny was staring at the trophy. “I really won. I don’t care if they expel me. I really won.” She turned to Harry. “Professor Snape didn’t say anything about that, did he?” she asked in alarm, negating her previous statement.

“Not that I heard,” Harry reassured her.

Ginny opened a small trunk and put her Galleons into it before re-locking it. “Can’t wait to do some shopping . . .” she sang with relish. “Oh no,” she then breathed in horror, hands at the sides of her head. “I hope I get expelled! I remember now that he threatened to make me take an eighth year!”

Author’s Note:
Congratulations to the three (and apparently only three) people who caught on that Vogle was Ginny right away: Lady A, Potterfan44, & siriuslymental Highly symbolic (read: tiny) gift certificates to amazon will be winging their way to you, suitable toward whatever you please.
Honorable mention to Chandlia Jade, who almost figured it out on a clue I didn’t mean to leave (Vogle apparently is German for ”bird”–who knew?)
I left a lot of clues beyond the anagram, that despite lengthy effort contained the name ”Wesley” a whopping single letter different from ”Weasley”. Ginny is also blatantly late for Quidditch the day of that Regional tourny.

Chapter 18.

The Foibles of Youth

The sun emerged momentarily as Harry, walking with the Weasley family and his guardian, stepped through the rusted, wrought iron gates leading onto the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds. Families were braving the wet grass and spreading out woolen blankets with picnics upon them. Children on half-size broomsticks squealed and shouted as they chased each other around the high, high goal posts.

Ginny glanced yet again at Professor Snape, who had yet to comment on her status or punishment for being absent from Hogwarts without permission. Fred and George with some help from Bill had convinced the Weasley parents that the winner of the dueling tournament could not skip the picnic; that all Hogwarts students should have been allowed to attend; and anyway, she couldn't get into additional trouble that day with all of them watching her.

Molly stopped in an open spot and decided that they had found a good place to spread out. The Weasley brothers turned drying the ground into a competition and soon they were all lounging comfortably on the huge checked blanket. Some pre-Hogwarts youngsters, wearing brand new gold hats that must be for sale just for the event, asked Harry to autograph theirs. Harry borrowed a quill from Bill to accommodate them. They stood with hands quaintly behind their backs as they waited their turn. As soon as their hats were returned they dashed off excitedly with them clutched in their hands.

As the picnic basket was unloaded, Ginny came around to the edge where Snape sat, eying a nearby group of wizards who were prepping fireworks while glancing around

as though to see if they had attracted attention from anyone in authority. "Professor . . ." Ginny began. "Deputy Headmaster Professor . . ." she said with a light grimace of reluctance. Snape's brow furrowed oddly at the convoluted title, but he didn't comment. Ginny crouched down, glanced at her closest brothers, who were playing a mini dueling game with their wands, and asked sheepishly, "What is my punishment going to be?"

"I have not decided yet. Professor McGonagall should certainly be involved in the decision. I'm assuming she knows of your location from listening to the tournament on Wizard Wireless with the rest of the school."

Ginny balked at that. "Wizard Wireless was broadcasting the tournament?"

"You didn't notice them off to the left in a wooden booth?" he asked. "I guess you were otherwise occupied," he went on snidely.

"I was," she retorted smartly. "You were using non-reg spells on me that required a bit of extra attention to counter."

Snape glanced sideways at Harry, who was just biting into a chicken leg Molly Weasley had given him. "I almost called you on that," Harry told him and then pointed out to Ginny, "But, you handled it all right, so I didn't." Sliding his eyes back to Snape, Harry added with false gravity, "Wonder what Minerva will say about you tossing a fireball at a student."

"I did not realize my opponent was a student, so it does not count," Snape returned smartly.

The fireworks erupted and everyone turned and watched the colorful display as the perpetrators scattered in the face of approaching Ministry personnel. Some people even clapped in appreciation and called for more. The Games and Sports Department staff who were running the picnic slunk away after sending threatening glances around the nearby blankets.

Harry scanned the now crowded pitch, which resembled a giant quilt with all of the colorful blankets laid out upon it. Children scampered about, mothers tended to the youngest, fathers tossed Quaffles back and forth with the older kids. Despite being surrounded by friends and family, Harry felt wholly isolated from the events around him; the prophecy hung like an impenetrable membrane between him and everyone else in their apparently carefree lives.

"Harry Potter," a small voice prompted from Harry's right. Harry started and found a small boy removing his commemorative t-shirt which he then held out and asked to have signed.

Chapter 18

"Bill, can I borrow that never-out quill again?" Harry asked.

The boy stood shivering with his exposed pink skin while Harry used the marker pen charm and signed his shirt, which Harry admonished the boy to put back on immediately. A harried looking witch in plaid robes came up from behind the boy and said, "Paisley, there you are! Whatever are you doing with no shirt?" When she spotted Harry, she said, "Oh," and her mouth held in that shape.

The boy, Paisley, held up the t-shirt in her view before moving to put it on but it was snatched away. "Save that, dear," the witch said, carefully folding it before draping her bright orange shawl over the boy instead.

Fred and George were pounding the blanket, laughing, as the pair walked away. "Oh, Harry Potter, sign my hand," George teased, holding out his hand as though to have it kissed. "No," Fred interrupted while holding out his foot. "Sign my shoe! My shoe first!" He grabbed Harry around the neck to better hold his foot up in front of him and they tumbled backward onto the blanket. George pretended to reach for his trousers as though to pull them down. "Sign this!" he said, waggling his bum back and forth. Fred's hands slipped away because he was laughing too hard to hold on and they all fell into a hysterical heap, and for one glorious minute the membrane between Harry and the rest of wizardry was pierced.

"Boys," Ginny grumbled as their antics continued and their jokes grew incomprehensible over their laughter. She accepted a carrot stick from the bowl of them that was held out by Ron, who eyed the pile as though looking for an opening. Ginny munched on the carrot thoughtfully. "You can't really make me stay an eighth year, can you?" she asked Snape. "I'm of age. I didn't actually have to come for my seventh year."

"Anything is possible," Snape uttered softly.

"No, it isn't," Ginny countered, now sounding more confident.

"With a special decree from the Wizengamot," Snape enunciated carefully, which made it come out more threatening, "anything is possible."

Ginny bit through the carrot stick loudly and paled a little as she held off on chewing. A shadow fell across her and she looked up at Reginald Rodgers, standing above her, hands on his hips which spread his cloak wide.

"Weasley," he said in greeting, and then "Snape," with less enthusiasm. He glanced at the wrestling match with mild dismay, but Harry didn't notice him. "A word with you, Ms. Weasley, if I could."

Ginny eagerly stood up and followed him a few steps away, out of hearing. The scent of seaweed still clung to him and Ginny considered apologizing but waited to see what he would say first.

Rodgers said, "You made a good showing, considering. And I couldn't help but recognize your name from the apprentice applications. We would certainly be remiss if we didn't offer you a chance to apply." At her excited reaction, he added sternly, "But realize that we are not necessarily opening a spot this year."

"No?" Ginny asked in disappointment.

"No. You will have to convince us that we cannot do without you."

"Ah," Ginny uttered, thinking that didn't seem quite as hopeful as she would have liked. "I'll certainly try my best," she said. "Do I have to have N.E.W.T.s to be accepted?"

Rodgers appeared concerned. "Usually. Why?"

Ginny hedged and gestured at Snape behind her. "Well, I may get expelled before I get a chance to take them." At his further confused expression, she went on with: "I was already in trouble for trying to rescue Harry at the warehouse and now I'm not supposed to be here either. Professor Snape won't tell me what my punishment is going to be."

Rodgers leaned around her to peer at Snape, who gave him an unyielding look in return. "Your Auror test scores will have to be impeccable and an exception would have to be made. That is not unheard of, though, so you certainly should come to the initial testing." After another glance at the full blanket behind her, he said, "I assume since I have not heard anything from Arthur, that he does not know you have applied?"

Ginny bit her lips and shook her head.

"Hm," he grunted and giving a little bow with his head, said, "I will see you at the Ministry this summer then, if not sooner, Ms. Weasley." With a last dismayed glance at the roughhousing young men, he stepped away.

Ginny bounced back to the blanket and sat down, thinking hopefully that things could still work out. Now if only she were certain that was what she wanted.

Molly Weasley leaned over and asked through the melee, "Was he congratulating you, dear?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, he was."

Snape gave her a very dubious look, but didn't speak. Harry somersaulted through between them and gracefully stopped in a crouch, dress robes fluttering. "'Scuse me," he said, his face red from exertion and laughing. Snape's expression made him add,

"Sorry." And rather than restart the wrestling, he sat down between them and took up a carrot.

"–E's given up, then," George complained disparagingly.

"About time you decided to act your age," Molly said, handing sandwiches to each of the twins.

Harry sighed and brushed his hair back. "You did really well today, Ginny."

"That's what your boss just said," she pointed out.

"Who? Rodgers?" Harry asked, looking around with much less of a confident attitude.

Smirking, Ginny said, "Yeah, he was just here."

Snape said, "Looked willing to trade her for you, in fact, given your position at the bottom of the pile."

"It was two against one," Harry pointed out, feeling a little embarrassed to have been behaving so juvenilely in retrospect.

Ginny nudged Harry, "Get Professor to tell you what my punishment is."

Harry stared at her before that sank in. "Oh, for being out of school, you mean?"

"Again," she clarified.

"Oh yeah. You had good reasons both times," Harry pointed out.

"Tell him that," Ginny said, even though Snape clearly must have overheard.

Harry turned to his guardian. "So, what's Ginny's punishment?"

Snape replied, "Minerva will have to decide." Far off near the banner poles more fireworks were erupting.

"What are you going to recommend?" Harry needled.

"What do you recommend," Snape immediately asked Harry. "Oh ye, who was so fond of breaking the rules himself."

"Oh," Harry uttered, munching his carrot to stall answering. "I don't know," he sheepishly admitted. "There's only a month and some left . . ."

"So it will have to be something exceptionally harsh to add up during that time," Snape stated with a twisted pleasantness.

Harry leaned closer to Ginny and murmured, "I think you're in trouble."

As it turned out, Ginny was. When she and Professor Snape arrived in the headmistress' hearth an hour later, McGonagall strode quickly down from the upper half of the office to face her. The paintings behind her held supporting expressions of dismayed disappointment, although one of them appeared to be leering as though punishment were the ultimate form of entertainment.

When Snape hesitated behind Ginny, McGonagall said, "Go on, Severus, I'm certain you have grading since all I heard today were complaints about your extra assignment to make up for the holiday." While she spoke, she didn't take her eyes off Ginny, or her hands off of her hips.

Snape didn't move immediately. "I am curious what punishment you are going to assign . . . I had some ideas."

"I think you are too biased, in Ms. Weasley's case, to consult on any corrective action."

Snape's expression grew disturbed. "Biased in what way?" he asked carefully, sounding on the verge of anger.

The two of them stared each other down. Ginny lifted her shoulders and glanced around uneasily. More of the former headmasters appeared to think entertainment was being provided and were smirking. Ginny didn't speak because she would rather be expelled than end up with an eighth year.

"I will handle this, Severus," McGonagall insisted firmly but conversationally. Snape stalked out, closing the door just a little louder than usual. Ginny shifted from one foot to the other nervously. McGonagall paced the room and finally spoke.

"I'd have liked to think that once you made the finals you could have come to me and asked for permission to leave," the headmistress said slowly, green robes swishing as she walked. "Given that you clearly deserved to be in the tournament. But I suppose I would have simply been forced to punish you then for being absent without permission earlier." She looked Ginny up and down as she passed her. "You don't seem as trouble-seeking as your brothers on the surface, Ms. Weasley, so I find myself shocked to be dealing with such blatant and repeated transgressions. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Ginny wanted to simply shrug, but she would have derided that in someone else. "I guess I just would rather not be here at all. It's too constricting here at school."

"Is it?" McGonagall asked doubtfully.

"Planning for the tournament and working out how to sneak away unnoticed has been the only thing keeping me going the last few months. Otherwise I'd have lost my mind," she admitted.

"It at least explains your long hours in the library," McGonagall commented.

"School doesn't matter," Ginny pointed out. "These horrid prophecies are what matter, and helping Harry with them."

"And to this end you wish to be an Auror, do you?" McGonagall asked in a tone that implied she knew the answer.

Ginny wondered who had told her. "I was considering it," she allowed.

McGonagall wandered to her desk and straightened the stack of files there. "Do you have any idea how much discipline the Auror's program requires, Ms. Weasley? How much studying, rote memorizing, repeated practice and drills? I suspect that you do not have the self-discipline necessary if you cannot keep yourself satisfied for a mere year here in varied and presumably occasionally interesting topics, among your friends, no less, with Quidditch as a diversion when all else fails."

Ginny had not considered it quite that way. It was true that Harry seemed to do nothing but read his Auror books. "I just said I was considering it. And I've been invited to apply, so they think I have enough skill."

"I don't doubt that you have sufficient skill, Ms. Weasley . . . many have sufficient skill. It is not as unique as you think." She stepped around her desk, sat down, and began taking out official looking parchments and a quill. Ginny wrung her hands a moment before forcing them to her sides.

"Do you wish to be expelled, Ms. Weasley?" McGonagall asked.

"Depends on what the alternatives are."

McGonagall's brow furrowed. "What could be worse than that?" she asked in confusion, but then immediately answered her own question. "Ah, yes, Severus said he threatened you with an eighth year, didn't he?" She was smiling now in real amusement. "The only difficulty with that, is that we'd be punishing ourselves as well; otherwise it is a splendid idea given that you are already in detention for the foreseeable future." McGonagall began scratching out something on a parchment. "Do you at least regret what you did?"

Ginny thought of the three hundred Galleons stashed away in her room at home – more money than she had ever imagined having at one time. She remembered her intense happiness when Harry called the last match a draw, giving her the win. "No."

McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Very short term thinking, Ms. Weasley, I would have expected better foresight from you."

"Why?" Ginny prodded, sounding difficult.

McGonagall paused. "I just would have. I'm surprised you sacrificed your last Quidditch match, as well. You're letting your team down severely."

"I didn't expect to win the dueling final. If I'd come in second or third, it wouldn't have mattered, no one would have known. I just . . . couldn't let them make out the trophy wrong. For once I was out from under my many brothers' shadows." It hurt to say that even though, or perhaps because, it felt incredibly true.

McGonagall's writing paused again. "A Quidditch ban and detention for the remainder of the year is barely more punishment than you are already under. But I don't wish to expel you, if only because I fear that you will become entangled in worse troubles. I feel we should keep you isolated and safe here with the rest of the wizarding youth."

"If things are so bad, why did the Ministry hold such an event? Why didn't th-"

"Didn't you notice how small the crowd was kept to?" McGonagall interrupted. "There were far larger places to hold the tournament. Many of the Regionals were held in larger venues. The atrium was the size the Ministry felt certain they could secure. The picnic was only held on the condition that nothing go wrong at the tournament. Many in the Wizengamot wanted the very public picnic canceled outright but doing so would have revealed how worried the Ministry really is, so it was not." She gazed at Ginny for many seconds. "I am only not expelling you because I owe old loyalty to your parents and feel obliged to protect you as long as possible." She sighed. "To that end, the only punishment I can see is one where you are compelled to volunteer to help clean up and organize the school for a month after classes end. You need not live here during that time, unless you wish to. All of this is dependent upon obtaining your parents' agreement, but I expect they will."

"What?" Ginny uttered, trying to take that in. She had felt nothing but pity when Harry was stuck here over the summer while the rest of them were home. "No, I wouldn't want to live here." Her gaze dashed over the objects in the room, disliking them all suddenly. "Can't I just be expelled?"

"No. Go back to your tower; I believe your evening detention begins shortly."

Ginny huffed and turned to stalk out, but stopped to hear McGonagall add. "Look at it this way, Ms. Weasley: you can still take your N.E.W.T.s."

Ginny closed her eyes and in the interests of demonstrating some discipline, didn't swear, even under her breath.

Chapter 18

Harry opened the letter from Ginny that arrived that evening. It was a long letter for her, both sides of two full pages, but apparently she had needed to rant. Harry had to stop and reread twice the part where she offhandedly mentioned that McGonagall had kept Snape from consulting on her punishment on the argument that he was biased. Once Harry was sure of what he read, he chuckled.

Harry wrote out a long reply saying that he sympathized deeply with the notion of being stuck at school after everyone else had left, but insisted that it would go faster than she thought. He wrote:

Ten years from now I don't think you'll regret sneaking off to the tournament even if it means an extra month of Hogwarts. The trophy will always remind you of why it was worth it and heck, there's no reason Hogwarts shouldn't be as happy to see you go as it was for your brothers. It allows you to sit for your N.E.W.T.s as I'm sure Minerva intended and it's only 30 days. The teachers are much more relaxed once the students are gone so it won't be as bad as you think. Just make certain now that you can get the days off you need for the Auror testing and STUDY HARD – the tests are a bear, worse than the N.E.W.T.s.

P.S. Minerva probably thought Severus would be biased simply because you probably handed Slytherin the cup and he owes you for it.

After sending the Hogwart's owl back with Ginny's letter Harry leisurely got ready for bed, prodded the fire one last time, and crawled under the duvet. Sleep didn't come though and gradually the fresh orange flickers on the ceiling from the hearth faded to a slate grey so flat it seemed the ceiling had disappeared into the far distance.

Hours later, the prophecy circling in his mind like a vicious animal, Harry lit his bedside lamp and read instead of attempting to sleep.

Fortunately, training the next day was all review during drills and, though tired, Harry had no difficulty keeping up, even when Rodgers called him to the front to demonstrate on him. Maybe it was Harry's foggy brain, but Rodgers didn't seem utterly disgusted with him today. Harry would have puzzled on this, but he couldn't concentrate on two things at once, so he just put it aside and hoped it continued.

"Did you pay Ron?" Harry asked Aaron when they were packing up at the end of the day.

"Sure did," Aaron replied. "Found him at the picnic, thank god, I almost had an epileptic fit from the jitters caused by the spell by the time I located him." He hefted

his shoulder bag. "Usually I win those bets I put a seal on, so serves me right I suppose," he added with a laugh. "Glad it's over, though?" he asked Harry.

Rodgers, who was straightening his notes in front, stopped and looked up to hear the answer to this as well.

"Yeah," Harry admitted, although his worries about everyone being angry about his judging had long since been overshadowed by other larger concerns. He wondered now why he had been so concerned before when all he had to do was be fair and no one could remain upset for long.

Rodgers dug through his things and pulled out a copy of the Prophet, folded it to the back page and stepped over to hand it to Harry. "Skeeter thinks you must have known who Vogle really was."

Harry stared at the back page gossip column. "She's a nutter. I had no idea."

Rodgers simply shrugged and stepped out, leaving Harry in the dark about why his trainer had pointed out the column.

That night didn't go much better for Harry. Again the persistent greyness of his unlit room felt as though it might suffocate him. He petted Kali until she fell asleep and placed her gently back in her cage in the hopes that it would help him sleep; instead it made him feel so utterly exhausted that it drove him into a state of jittery alertness. He pulled out a one-inch thick volume entitled Obscure Ministry of Magic Regulations involving Charmed Objects and Homemade Spell Invention, his last resort to sleep. It eventually worked; he woke an hour later with the page stuck to his face and the lamp low due to the wick curling to black and needing adjustment. He put the book aside and lay back, hoping to fall back to sleep. He didn't. Instead, memories he hadn't perused in years swirled through his mind.

Harry remembered the battle at the Department of Mysteries and more starkly than previously, remembered his friends' injuries and their outright dumb luck. He remembered all of it, disjointed and out of order with Dumbledore's sad and affectionate countenance overlaying it all.

The last prophecy required over eighteen years to run its course looped through Harry's tired mind. The last one took only one night followed closely on its heels. Only the one born into prophecy is equal . . . is equal . . .

Harry didn't sleep at all again the rest of the night and the next day required well-timed Pepper-Ups to remain equal another day of training. Fortunately it was a relatively easy day of drills and quizzing and discussion of common regulations that

all shared ninety percent of their wording with the other seven hundreds they had already reviewed. Harry was rubbing his eyes and slowly getting his things together after everyone else had departed when Rodgers said, in his far snidest tone for the week, "You aren't holding a week-long party to celebrate DV-Day, are you, Potter?"

Harry straightened and pretended to be alert. "No sir. Regulations just make me sleepy." As Harry stood there under his trainer's scrutiny, facing another long night, he wished Rodgers knew about the prophecy. But Snape had strongly suggested Harry not tell anyone at the Ministry. Harry was starting to think that wasn't the best plan.

Hermione stopped by the house while Harry poked at his dinner; it was almost as though she knew he needed company. Rather than discuss the prophecy, they discussed Ginny, with Harry getting to share the news about her punishment, which a letter just that day from Ginny had depressingly stated that her parents had indeed agreed to the arrangement because her mother was desperate that she finish school and sit for her N.E.W.T.s.

"'Just look at Ron,' Mrs. Weasley apparently told Ginny when Minerva had them visit for a conference about it," Harry said to Hermione and they both had a chuckle.

"I think Ginny would rather end up anything but like Ron: training Trolls and keeping the Goblins happy. But Ron is better at that than I would have expected," Hermione opined as they ate more of the cake that Winky had provided soon after Hermione arrived.

After a long silence Hermione asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

"Not as good as I would have thought. I thought I'd still be used to this . . . pressure. The Ministry hasn't been told and now I think they should. I think I'd feel less suffocated if they did." He thought further, imagined awkward meetings with Bones to discuss what was expected of him. "Though, maybe not," he then added.

"Maybe it will get resolved quickly this time," Hermione optimistically offered.

"Then there'll just be another one after it," Harry grumbled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry, don't think like that."

It was getting late and Harry's eyes tried to close on their own. "I need to get to sleep," he said. It was the most optimistic thing he had said all evening.

Again though, he catnapped for an hour and then found himself awake, with the remains of a very bizarre dream haunting his dim bedroom. In the dream he was

at the Demise of Voldemort Day party, sitting around a table occupied by Bellatrix Lestrange, the Malfoy family, Avery, MacNair and a few hidden, hooded others. All of them sat still and silent as the party went on around them, eyeing Harry as though waiting for him to slip up and make a mistake.

Harry rubbed his eyes and forehead and turned up his lamp. The room was cold. He padded across the floor and added three logs to the hearth without bothering to stir the coals first, so all they did was smolder thick black smoke, some of which billowed into the room. He pulled out the most boring of regulations manuals again and, curled up on his side under the duvet, forced himself to read it starting from the random page where the book fell open.

He dosed lightly again, but woke shortly after, thinking he should exhaust himself, perhaps with a long flight. But the destination he thought of was the warehouse in the Docklands because he was curious to look around again. Going anywhere else didn't hold any purpose.

As he lay there with the lamp sputtering, the door to his room swung silently open, rather than with its usual faint squeak. Harry had his wand in his hand before the shadow in the doorway said, "You are up."

Harry put his wand down and released the breath he had taken. "Yeah."

Snape stepped in and looked down at him from beside the bed. Harry couldn't read his expression in the oblique sputtering light.

"I wish . . ." Harry started to say before cutting himself off and biting his lip.

"I do not think there is any point in wishing," Snape pointed out.

"No," Harry agreed. Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial, prompting Harry to say, "I don't want it."

"You need to sleep."

"How did you know I wasn't?" Harry challenged.

"I asked Winky."

"Oh," Harry murmured. Snape had set the vial down on the night stand. Harry eyed it. "I don't want to not wake up if I need to."

Snape didn't move to pick up the vial again. Instead he sat down on the edge of the bed and hesitated before asking, "Do you need to speak of things?"

"What's to say?" Harry retorted. "I'm on the hook again. Me. Why me?" He was angry all of a sudden, which he would have sworn he hadn't been a moment before.

"Perhaps because you bear the burden better than others." Then more solemnly: "I do not know why you are chosen."

"So I should be rubbish at taking care of it so it doesn't happen again," Harry grumbled.

"I don't think you have that option."

"'Dark hordes.' How do you know it isn't me releasing the dark hordes?" he taunted, finding it easy to use Snape as an outlet for his anger.

"I don't," Snape replied easily, unflappable.

Snape's calm for once didn't incense Harry further; instead, he fell into a brooding silence. In the morning he wouldn't feel so cheated; he was certain that this was just exhaustion making him weak. "I have to sleep," he said, curling up and pulling the duvet up snugly to his ear.

A hand stroked his hair back, making Harry squeeze his eyes more tightly closed. He asked, voice muffled by the covers, "Should I just hunt Merton down and get it over with?"

The hand returned for another pass, surprising Harry, although his fingers tugged hard on his hair as he spoke. "Albus always appeared content to let events play out. Infuriating really. His instinct would have been to wait until circumstances are aligned properly, believing that you would know when the time was right. I hope you do recognize the moment, should you chose that route."

Thinking about it everything at once was only making things worse. Harry rubbed his forehead and asked Snape to turn the lamp down. He then said, "I'll get used to the idea. Right now I just want to do something about it. Inaction is killing me. I hate waiting for the right moment. I'm not a Hogwarts student anymore . . . not a child; I should be able to do things my way this time."

Snape's hand rested on his shoulder, muted by the thick covers. "The prophecy is a conjunction of events, just like the stars and planets form in the sky. You may not be equal to the task until that time."

After a pause, Harry accused from under the duvet, "You've been reading up, haven't you? From books Trelawney probably takes to bed."

"Yes," Snape admitted.

"You don't believe any of that," Harry accused.

"I don't know," Snape honestly admitted. "But I have seen you overcome very poor odds and I am not unhopeful."

Harry snickered. "You're such an optimist."

Snape sat back and said, "No reason to get insulting", although his lips were faintly curled.

Harry awoke when the morning sun filled his room. He had slept soundly after Snape had departed and although he was a bit groggy, he felt significantly better. He even arrived early for training, and curious what might be going on, wandered down to the Auror's office.

"What's all this?" Harry asked of the very tall stack of files on Rogan's desk.

"Research," Rogan said, paging through a file before setting it on another knee-high pile on the floor.

"Looking for Merton?" he asked because they were alone.

Rogan smiled. "Give you an inch, Harry," was his only reply.

Tonks came in then carrying more files and greeted him warmly. "Ready to work, Harry?" she asked.

"–Course."

"That's good," She replied while paging through her own stack of files. "Especially since you are on real duty tomorrow."

"I am?" Harry asked in quick excitement.

"Your sense of cursed objects is being put to use, so real field work for you."

"Brilliant," Harry said happily, needing more than ever to be doing something useful.

"Don't be eager," she admonished him. "Be careful."

Training seemed to take forever that day: the discussions were even longer and more boring than previously, the regulation numbers and conditions blurring from previous days. Finally Harry was released. He immediately went to find Ron, too chipper to go home and study.

Harry came home from a much-needed carefree evening at the pub and fell into bed. The notion of meaningful action calmed him enough to put him to sleep almost immediately and he woke feeling ready to conquer any dark wizard stupid enough

to cross his path that day. Dressed and at the Ministry early in an unprecedented second day in a row, Harry found a small conference going on in the break room.

Mad-Eye Moody's magical eye swung over to Harry as he entered and the room fell silent. "Potter, come on in," he invited in a tone that sounded the opposite of the words.

Harry, who had been hesitating in the doorway, joined the group around the small table. Tonks was there as well as the oldest Auror, Whitley, Rodgers, and Mr. Weasley, plus some staff from the Magical Reversal Squad.

Rodgers said, "We've arranged enough protection to give Merton's place a thorough going over. Several Aurors have visited it at night, alone, being careful not to be seen by the neighbors, or to set off any traps. We're going in as a group this time . . . going to comb the whole place from top to bottom.

Harry stiffened, thinking that this was an opportunity to look for the objects Draco wanted back. Not necessarily to give them to Draco right away. First he would take a very long look at them. Maybe have Hermione take a very long look at them as well – and Bill too, if he were willing.

Rodgers was still talking. "Remember, we aren't just looking for the unusual, we're looking for what might be missing as well. He hasn't been back, as far as we can tell, to fetch anything. We left a few traps of our own that haven't been triggered. And on that note, no Apparating in or out from inside the perimeter – only by foot, understood?"

Everyone nodded, so he said, "We need clues to where Merton might be now. We have a pretty good idea what he is doing, but we think he must have help and we'd like to know who that is as well, so we want to look for the usual things: old post, datebooks, etc. We've looked before but we've come up empty so far, so they may be hidden if they're there."

Harry's trainer turned to him. "Potter here is good at spotting cursed objects and seems to have a special antipathy for Merton's toys. I want you to look for anything, anything at all, that sets you off the same way, got it?" Harry nodded. "Alastor will also be looking for things along that line. We want to be in and out as fast as possible and the place is big. Magical Reversal will be helping us blanket the neighborhood to make the surrounding Muggles unaware of our activity, but there is always a chance for exposure so let's minimize it. Alastor is in charge of the operation, so all decisions to withdraw fall on him. Any questions?"

Harry shook his head and worked to keep his excitement at bay.

The Aurors who had previously patrolled the area didn't need assistance, but Harry had to have Tonks Apparate him. As little as he minded having her hold his hand, he wished it wasn't for something so childish feeling.

"Everyone be careful," Mad-Eye said as they approached the very ordinary front door with a little curved window in the top middle. "No telling what might try to lop a limb off in a house like this."

They moved as a group into the narrow entryway, until Mad-Eye gestured for a few people to go right and some to go straight, ending the traffic jam.

Harry wandered off down a side hallway lined with windows that looked into the neighbor's garden. As he walked, he looked up and down and carefully at the wall, just in case. He even checked the floor for loose boards with his toes.

At the end through a door, he found a sitting room that resembled a shop on Diagon Alley it was so crammed with objects. There were no fewer than ten lamps just in this one room, a very tall one in the shape of a stork that followed him with its head as he moved about, making him worry that there could be a monitor somewhere where Merton could watch him. Harry eyed it closely, but it didn't feel exceptionally magical and its eyes were of the same brass as the rest of it. He decided to ignore it for now and instead went over to the largest cabinet along a wall of them, peering at each shelf while checking for a gold inkwell or a seal. Merton seemed to own one frilly specimen of just about everything but nothing that matched Draco's description. Many of the objects felt cursed but none significantly so he moved on to the next cabinet.

At the end of the line, he pondered the room again. On the far wall, a portrait hung, its subject absent. Suspicious, Harry began to cross the crowded room toward it.

Before the stove and its very full wood bin, sat a small overstuffed chair, and against its seat, blocking the path, rested a silver cane, or strangely, half a cane, lengthwise. Harry tripped over this on his way by, or perhaps, as he wondered darkly when it clattered to the floor, it had tripped him up. Since there had been talk of setting additional traps for Merton here, Harry didn't want to leave the room other than exactly as he had found it. So, without forethought, he picked it up to set it back precisely as he had first seen it.

Harry stared in confusion at the thing he was holding in his hand. It was all silver and shaped like a cane, but it was flattened along on one side. It was also very heavy, as though it were solid metal. It occupied a most unusual room full of all kinds of old, twisted and curious things. In the distance footsteps could be heard and low

conversation. Someone stuck their head in the room, pulled it back and then leaned in, mouth agape.

"Harry?!" a woman with bright pink hair done up in a Mohawk uttered in shock.

Harry stared at her, looked around the room, and asked, "How do you know my name?"

The woman saw the cane. In a low voice of dismay, she said, "I told you not to touch anything. Why are you holding that?" she demanded, almost frantic.

Harry, used to being yelled at just like this, set the cane down quickly against the chair beside him. The woman stepped closer and stared down at him, hands on hips. "The effect didn't go away," she lamented and then leaned over to glare at the cane in consternation, careful not to touch it.

Harry hazarded another question even though his previous one had gone unanswered. "Where am I?" He had just minutes before been hiding in his cousin Dudley's cupboard to avoid him and his friends who had bored of their other games and had begun to plot various things they could do to Harry.

Another figure came to the door, a black man with very short hair wearing a long cloak. "This room clear?" This new person glanced at Harry and his expression went horrified. "Tonks, what's this then?"

The woman turned her head. "He picked that up. Had it in his hand."

"Harry!" the man chastised forcefully. Harry backed up a step, and would have tripped over about a dozen things sitting on the floor had the woman not pulled him back forward by his oversized t-shirt.

The woman called Tonks, said, "We'll have to take it with us. Get a sample bag, will ya?"

"Reggie said, 'exactly as we found it'," the man argued.

"We don't have any choice. Harry didn't revert when he put it down. We'll have to figure out how it works." Using Harry's shirt, which Tonks still held, she dragged him from the room, down a long corridor, around a corner, and out the door. Harry, for lack of a good reason to resist, followed along. They walked out into the cool air to the end of the drive and started down the road. Harry glanced back at the ordinary house and the street and didn't recognize where they were. Cloaked figures stood in the yards of each of the houses, sticks held up before them like short swords, reminding Harry of something . . . something very dim and frightening.

The woman stopped and her sharp voice broke his chain of horrific, dreamlike memory. "I'd yell you silly if I thought you had any notion of what you've done," she said angrily.

"Sorry," Harry offered automatically.

She took his arm and the strange neighborhood and its strange figures disappeared. Air hit Harry's ears with a bang! and they appeared in a wood-paneled corridor with lamps flickering along it high along the wall. The woman immediately dragged him by the arm to the first room, tugged out a chair before a desk in a room full of desks, and said with a forceful wave of a finger, "STAY!"

Harry shrunk down a bit at this. Somehow she didn't look like she would normally be mean. Harry sighed and watched a paper airplane turn in the door and land smoothly on the next desk over. He started to stand up to investigate, but then remembered the last insistent command and sat back again. This grew increasingly difficult as various interesting things happened, such as files ruffling themselves, and a glass lump upon another desk glowing brightly as though it were spinning inside. Someone ran by and his footsteps could be heard running away.

Tonks returned. She sat down and started writing furiously with a quill on a piece of parchment. Harry couldn't see what she was writing since her hand mostly blocked the view. She was shaking her head and muttering a lot though.

"Where am I?" Harry asked again.

The woman closed her eyes, looking to be on the verge of a real blow up, or perhaps a collapse. Harry thought he should not have asked. Quietly, she said, "This is the Ministry of Magic."

"The what?" Harry couldn't help blurting. He had never heard of that. Of all the Ministries his Uncle Vernon frequently complained about, Harry was pretty certain he would have remembered that one.

"You've never heard of it because we don't want anyone to know about it."

"Is your name really Tonks?" Harry asked. It was an odd sort of name.

"Yes." She blotted the paper with haste and ran off, her footsteps echoing as well.

Harry sighed. This was better than running from his cousin, he had to admit, especially since his ribs still hurt badly from the day before when Dudley and his friend had caught him. On the other hand, all the strange goings on in this place were a little alarming. A man stopped in the corridor and stared at Harry. He was a lean

Indian with thick hair down to his collar. He looked one way down the corridor and then the other and then back at Harry. Harry figured that this man also knew who he was.

"May I inquire what has happened?" the man asked in an accent. When Harry shrugged, he said, "Ah, that is not far-fetched that you are not knowing."

"I'm in big trouble," Harry offered. "I think."

"Oh yes," the man said, eyes glittering a bit. "I imagine you are. My name is Vishnu, by the way."

"Hi, I'm Harry."

"I am knowing this," the man said, now definitely smiling. "How old are you, Harry?"

"Nine. Nine and a half," Harry quickly amended. The paperclips beside him on the desk were dancing. Harry leaned a bit away from them, quite certain that wasn't normal paperclip behavior.

"They are just magical," Vineet explained. "Don't you have your wand? Ah, it is there on the desk."

He came over and handed a long wooden pointed stick to Harry. It was highly polished and worn around the handle as though used a lot. Harry felt a rush of something as he held it, as though a breeze were filling him with possibility.

"Ah yes. That is yours for certain. Shall I show you a spell?" At Harry's vigorous nod, the man came and crouched beside him. "Wingardium Leviosa," the man said while waving the wand. A quill on the next desk rose into the air. He demonstrated the hand movement several times until Harry had it down and then corrected his pronunciation. Harry put it all together but nothing happened.

"You are losing the proper swish when you speak," Vineet explained. "Try the motions a few more times without speaking."

Well over ten minutes of patient help passed; so patient Harry really wondered about this man and who he was. No one had ever spent this much time with him on anything, not even a teacher at school. But Harry finally got the feather to jump in the air.

"Did you do that?" Harry demanded.

"No, no. I am doing nothing. It is your doing only," the man insisted kindly. He looked Harry up and down. "You are too small for your clothes; they must not have changed with you."

Harry looked down at his grey t-shirt and the rolled up cuffs on his trousers. "These are my clothes. Well, they were my cousin's before. He's a bit bigger than me."

"He must be. And this spell must be very strong to bring you with your clothes." Vineet straightened up then and gave Harry a soft look.

"How do I know you?" Harry asked.

"You are forgetting much, but I am assuming it is safe to tell you-"

"Vishnu," Tonks said, rushing back in. "I see you've met Harry."

Vineet smiled more. "Yes. I am having an advantage for the first time . . ."

"I have to send an owl through the Floo to Hogwarts. I wish I had any kind of advantage." She propped her fists on her hips and considered Harry at length. "I wish he'd just revert and save an awful lot of trouble."

"What has happened?" Vineet asked.

"He picked up a cursed or charmed – we're not even sure which – object at Merton's place. I found him like this. He seemed well enough so we didn't bother with Mungo's, which we'd prefer to avoid anyway, but Severus is going to kill me when he sees him."

Harry's brow furrowed as he tried to follow what Tonks was saying. It was similar to the code Vernon and Petunia used, but Tonks didn't seem to be trying to lock Harry out of the conversation.

Tonks teased her companion, "Feel like babysitting? Then we could just hide him until this is straightened out. I was down in Mysteries trying to move them along. I had to leave before I did something permanent to Percy."

"Nandi would not be unwilling . . ." Vineet said, "And it is the weekend."

"Tempting," Tonks said, tapping her fingers on her elbow. "But if Severus ever found out . . . and he is very good at finding things out."

Vineet straightened as though less willing to pursue his offer. "Ah, there is that."

Tonks sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it." She stomped to the desk and wrote out another message, more carefully this time, that Harry could almost read, if he could have understood the unusual words. Then she disappeared again.

"I'm in trouble, aren't I?" Harry asked the Indian.

Vineet smiled lightly, which eased Harry's worries. "It will be straightened out," he assured Harry.

Chapter 18

Tonks returned and, to Harry's disappointment, sent Vineet off on an errand. She sat down at her desk and opened the fluttering paper airplanes with nervous motions, even dropping one on the floor. "As soon as I get a reply, I'll take you home," she said.

"Oh," Harry said sadly. "Can you come in and explain? My aunt and uncle are going to be furious that I've gone missing. Maybe they'll listen to you." Harry looked her now green-spiked hair over and thought again that maybe they wouldn't, but it was the best chance he had.

Tonks shoved the pile of parchments aside and said, "You don't live with your aunt and uncle anymore."

Harry, who had just been at his relatives' house, wondered about this sudden reassignment. "Where am I going?"

"Harry," Tonks said, sounding less patient. "You are eighteen. Well, you are supposed to be eighteen. Almost nineteen. Nine years have passed since the last things you remember right now." She looked through her desk drawer. "Drat, I don't have any photographs here. Just trust me. You've been adopted and you live with your new father, although he is teaching and lives at the school during the school year."

Harry studied her small eyes and pert nose, looking for a clue to the truth. "I've been adopted?" Harry couldn't imagine that. From what his relatives always said, he wasn't the most desirable material for offspring.

"Yes," Tonks confirmed. "By a man named Severus Snape." Tonks wasn't working anymore, had pushed her work aside in fact, and was now giving Harry her full attention.

This was another very odd name. Harry went on with, "Is he nice?"

"Er . . ." she hesitated awkwardly. "That isn't exactly the right word . . ."

Harry's heart fell out of his chest after feeling queerly swelled up. "He's cruel?"

Tonks grew more nervous. "He's a little hard to summarize."

Sadly, Harry asked, "Can I go home with Vishnu instead?"

"Harry," Tonks sharply chastised him. "No, you can't. Severus is your father now and that's where you live. Luckily it's Friday so he only needs to find a substitute for the rest of the day, I expect." Harry's disappointment apparently made her soften her tone, because she took his arm and said, "He takes very good care of you, really. He's not at all like your aunt and uncle . . ." Here she paused as though needing

to recover from that statement. "And I can't count how many times you've told me how happy you are to have him as your dad."

Harry sat, resigned, until an owl came fluttering in carrying a letter. When it landed, it scattered ashes onto the desk. Tonks opened the letter with nervous motions. "Forty-five minutes he'll be home. He has Remus to substitute, apparently. I told him it wasn't a total emergency . . . I hope he views it that way when he sees you."

Author's Notes:
Ginny's surprise win – Wow, finally a controversial chapter. Made it a long way into the sequel without one, I realized upon reading the reviews. Clearly playing it much too safe with this story. I'll keep that in mind as it continues. Bwa hah hah hah.
In an unstructured fight, I think Ginny would have lost easily. The format of alternative spelling gives creativity a chance to trump professional knowledge. For example, I'd expect Rodgers or Snape to cast three spells to her one easily if there were no limit. In an overly fair fight such as this, superior complex blocking maxs out as an asset – the nasty spells the ultrablocks work against aren't going to be cast anyway. So, dark alley fighting with no scruples, I'd probably give it to Snape, but Rodgers would be a close second, and only because I think he's been trained to fight fair, to his detriment.
Would Rodgers beat Harry? Yes, I think so, if only because he's been studying Harry's every weakness for the last year and Harry doesn't have the advantage of surviving six older, highly creative brothers like Ginny does.
Harry vs. Ginny? Hm... I might have to work that in somewhere... I'd give the psychological advantage to Harry.
Harry + Ginny? In case Harry's comment that Ginny feels like a sister doesn't make it clear enough that he has no girlfriend interest in her, let me lay it down again: the story is not going Harry/Ginny. I've just felt lately in need of developing another strong female character that wasn't an OC, because boy are they lacking in this universe. Also discovered another lacking in my outlining: by total scenes, Ginny isn't in there much but putting her scenes so close together boosts their importance (and them being "starring" scenes doesn't help) especially for people who find that she grates on their nerves. I feel sad for you – book 7 is going to hurt. I do appreciate the sentiment that the story is perhaps still worth reading further. As you can see, things have taken a very interesting turn for our main characters...

Chapter 19.

Home Is Not a Place

Harry sat as quietly as possible while Tonks worked at her desk. A balding man with bright red hair came in and gave Harry a very amused expression.

"Arthur," Tonks said, and gazed up at him in concern. "Oh good, you aren't going to yell at me."

Arthur stood with his arms crossed, leaning on the door frame. "Not unless it's permanent. How are you, Harry?"

Faced with this most recent unknown person who apparently knew him, Harry replied easily, "All right, sir."

"Need anything?"

Harry shook his head. A paper airplane veered around Arthur and looped fast around Harry, who grabbed it out of the air without thinking and handed it to Tonks.

"Good catch," Tonks said and the two adults shared a look.

"Is he going home?" Arthur asked Tonks.

"In about thirty minutes."

Since the new man looked the kindliest yet, Harry asked him, "Am I really eighteen?"

"Oh yes," he replied. "I have a photograph down in my office . . . if you want to come have a look?"

Harry jumped up and followed the man's faded blue robes – or perhaps they had once been black – down to the end and around the corner. At a small room with just a desk and one file cabinet, the man stopped and took out an album. He flipped through it to nearly the end and held it out for Harry. Harry stared at a moving photograph of four teenagers, two with the same bright red hair as Arthur, one a girl with flowing brown hair, and one that must be him, since he had glasses and the same scar.

Arthur was saying, "That's my son and daughter, friends of yours, and another girl named Hermione." The girl, Hermione, was holding the two boys hard around the neck, nearly pulling them forward, but they were all laughing happily. It was some kind of unreal fantasy brought to photographic life.

Arthur waited until Harry took his thumb and forefinger off the album before flipping to another photograph, an older one where Harry could recognize himself much more starkly. In this one a very, very large bearded man in rough clothing was bending close to get into the photograph. Arthur again found a new page. In this one, someone who looked like Harry was standing with a auburn-haired woman and they were arm and arm.

"Is that me?" Harry asked.

"That's your mum and dad," Arthur explained. "But you are the image of James, all right."

Harry stopped breathing; he had never seen a photograph of his parents, much less a moving one. They looked happy but it was muted by something, worry perhaps. Feeling dizzy, Harry took a deep breath. This man, Arthur, seemed unbelievably sensitive to Harry's distress. He gently put the album away in a drawer, which necessitated putting back some additional things that jumped out of it when it was opened, such as a kerchief and gloves.

"I have to get to a meeting, so I'll take you back to Tonks."

Back at the cubicle office, where Arthur urged Harry inside, Tonks said, "Sure you don't want to take him home?"

Arthur laughed and gave this a moment's consideration. "Trouble is Molly'd never let him out of her grasp again."

In the ensuing pause Harry said to Tonks, "He had a photograph of my mum and dad."

"Tonks didn't tell you what really happened to them?" Arthur asked and then despite offering this easily, seemed reluctant to explain further.

Harry who had always sensed something deeply mysterious about this issue and had met with only vitriol when he brought it up at home, sharply asked, "What happened to them?"

Arthur said, "My, I see that quick temper of yours is not a recent acquisition. Your parents were killed by a dark wizard named Voldemort, who tried to kill you too, but only gave you that scar." He touched Harry's forehead with a forefinger, and Harry instinctively covered it.

Well, Harry thought, if that were true, his aunt and uncle certainly wouldn't have told anyone. He wasn't sure he believed it, but he didn't say anything, just met the red-haired man's gentle eyes. Arthur said, "I wish it weren't true, Harry." He clapped his hands then and rubbed them together. "I expect we'll be seeing you next week, back to your old self."

"Such an optimist," Tonks teased.

With confidence Arthur explained, "You said the cane was in the middle of the room. If the spell were too strong, it wouldn't have been left lying out."

"Unless it were a trap," Tonks offered.

"Strangest one I've heard of," Arthur countered and gave a little wave before disappearing around the door frame.

"He's nice," Harry said.

"He is," Tonks agreed. "Almost too nice. I'm going back down to the Department of Mysteries, see if they've learned anything about that thing. Sit down," she ordered, and Harry obeyed.

Moments later, yet another person arrived and immediately took Tonk's chair. "Hello," this man said. He seemed less trustworthy to Harry for some reason. "You don't remember me, I see, I'm Aaron. We're in training together here."

He held out his hand, which Harry shook. "Training?"

"Yeah," Aaron said, propping his feet up on the desk. "Auror training."

"What's an Auror?" Harry asked.

Aaron leaned back to relax, hands behind his head. "A dark wizard hunter, of course."

"You're having me on," Harry criticized.

Aaron lost his laid-back posture when he started to laugh. And when he stopped, he continued to snort occasionally. "Harry, you are the foremost dark wizard hunter."

Yet another figure darkened the doorway to the offices with his cloaked self. "So, it's true. Potter . . ." he muttered disdainfully and shook his head.

Aaron leaned toward Harry and whispered, "This is your boss."

Harry, who had no notion of having a boss beyond his relatives, greeted this one with: "Sir."

This man shook his head again in an air of dismissive tragedy. "Tonks sending him home?" he asked Aaron.

"Yup. Snape is meeting her there shortly. I'm just playing nanny until then," Aaron explained casually.

"Ah," the mustached man said airily, "Snape doesn't eat children anymore, does he?"

Harry looked quickly to Aaron to see the reply to this. Aaron was chuckling. "Not in a few years . . . unless he's gotten better at hiding it."

Feeling that he didn't like this Aaron bloke much, Harry asked, "You know my new dad?"

"Oh, yeah, pretty well in fact. I went to the school where he teaches; had him for seven years as a head-of-house."

"Is he mean?" Harry asked, really needing to know. The man in the doorway snorted.

Aaron thoughtfully echoed, "Is . . . he . . . mean? When I was in school that wouldn't have covered it. Heartless, might have covered it. Cruel. Vicious. Heartless, no I used that already. But of course," Aaron said, waving his hand with aplomb, "He liked us. We were in his house. Students like you, who were in Gryffindor . . . Snape hated the students from Gryffindor."

Harry didn't know whom to believe. The man in the doorway looked far too amused and Aaron gave no sign that he was lying.

Seeing Harry's expression, Aaron said, "I think Snape likes you now though."

"I would say," the man in the doorway uttered snidely, "You are the only thing keeping him out of prison."

Harry disliked that man more all of a sudden. To Aaron Harry asked, "Is that true?"

Aaron looked befuddled in an almost comic manner. He straightened his spine and replied, "I don't know." He glanced at the man in the doorway. "Maybe. It's not impossible. I like Professor Snape though. If you're on his good side, he's a very good ally. Just don't get on his bad side . . . he knows an awful lot of dark magic."

"Dark magic?" Harry asked in alarm, but Tonks had returned so he didn't get a response.

"See ya later, Harry," Aaron said chummily as if he had not just withered Harry's future to something, if possible, glummer than the prospect of the Dursley's.

Tonks said to the man in the doorway, "I'll be back, hopefully in fifteen. If not, I'm being flayed."

"Get Mr. Weasley to drop him off," Aaron suggested.

"He's in a meeting and I'd have to fear Severus hunting me down if I don't just face him now." She sounded honestly worried about that, which only reinforced everything Aaron had said. Tonks took a cloak down off a coat rack and hooked it around Harry's neck and then pulled the hood over his head and as far forward as it would go. "Keep that there," she ordered, making Harry drop the hand he had brought up to adjust it so he could see something other than a small tunnel and the floor. His hand was taken up and with a heavy heart Harry let himself be led away.

The lift ride was a clanging and banging affair and then they were in a large open area, where Harry lifted his head and looked around as much as possible between Tonks' repeated yankings of his hood forward. They passed a fountain and then faced a fiery hearth, one of a long row of them. Tonks crouched before him and said, "I'm going to take you with me, just in case." She steered him close to the heat of the flames and tossed something onto the logs that burned pure green. With her arms she swept Harry forward and shouted something about a shrew and then they were spinning in near darkness.

Harry took a tight hold of the woman's robes and closed his eyes as rushing air assaulted his ears. He opened them after half a minute and watched as brick, and stone, and cement rushed by interspersed with flaming and glowing hearths. They were spinning dizzily, and Harry worried he might lose his glasses, but he didn't want to let go of his escort even with one hand.

They landed with a slap on a cement slab. Tonks led the way out, ducking under the mantel. Harry looked around the darkly paneled room. There was a window on the right and on the far wall a high shelf held strange bottles. A figure all in black swept into the room from the door to the left and glared at the two of them.

"Severus," Tonks breathed.

Dismay crossed the angular features of the man and his unkempt hair tossed about as he shook his head. "Your note didn't exaggerate at all," he said to Tonks.

"–Fraid not," she admitted.

The man circled the table like a predator to better see Harry. With his long black cloak and prominent hooked nose Harry thought he looked more than a bit like a giant raven. The man's eyes narrowed and Harry had the oddest notion that the man somehow knew he had come up with that unflattering imagery. Tonks gave a reluctant Harry a push toward the large table that dominated the room.

"I know I promised to keep an eye on him, but I can't stop him doing really stupid things."

The man pinched the bridge of his nose as though he had a headache. "And the object responsible?"

"Department of Mysteries has it," Tonks explained. Harry inched his way over to the other side of the table where he felt safer. On the sideboard behind him, post was scattered, some of it was even addressed to him, which was a first in his life. He fingered it with a swelling heart. A photograph of himself with two of the people from the other photograph was there as well. It helped a lot to see it there.

Conversation stopped and Harry turned. A small creature with ears that ended in long drooped points had come in bearing a tray with biscuits and a glass of milk. It set this down, curtsied in its tea towel and departed. Harry forgot the elf quickly but the plate of chocolate biscuits, in a room that also didn't contain Dudley, held his full attention.

The conversation about spell reversal and curse negation continued as Harry inched forward and took the first chair at the table. Slowly, stomach complaining, he took the milk and sipped that. No one said anything or looked his way. Harry took a biscuit and intended to nibble it, but instead gorged it down. He reached for another, thinking that he might get to like this place. His hand was halted by a sharp voice.

"If you are that hungry, we should have an early dinner, rather than excessive biscuits."

Harry removed his hand from the vicinity of the platter and returned to his milk. Rather than satiate his hunger, the biscuit had defined the hollow of his stomach all the more clearly. He had only gotten toast for breakfast and because he had been hiding from Dudley and his friends, he had missed lunch. The scent of the biscuits, about twelve of them, Harry guessed, was torment.

Tonks approached and gave him a one-armed hug, "I'll stop by tomorrow when there's news. Behave yourself." With another flash of green fire, she was sucked, spinning,

up the chimney. Harry blinked at that, certain he had never heard of that working outside of the realm of Christmas.

The man stood considering Harry. Harry considered him back. The only sound was the tick of a clock in the next room. Snape said, "I'll go see that Winky is preparing dinner."

Harry almost took a biscuit in his absence but expected that he wouldn't get away with it, that perhaps some magical trick would give him away and he feared what kind of magical punishment would be forthcoming. He finished his milk and sat trying to fathom what the objects on the mantel were for. None of them resembled torture devices, he was relieved to note. Other than the windmill, which turned in the brown painting on the far wall, nothing in the room was terribly, horribly out of the ordinary.

The man returned and took up a seat across from Harry. "Not much sense in yelling at you, is there?" he asked smartly.

Harry cleared his throat, "Everyone else said that today too."

Snape shook his head, which caused his stringy hair to obscure more of his face.

Harry needed to find some footing here. He had been left with this man by a mix of people who marginally seemed to care what happened to him and some who found dark, mocking amusement in the prospect. "Tonks said that you adopted me?" Even as he voiced it, it sounded absurd and he wished he hadn't spoken.

"Yes," came the wry reply.

Harry swallowed hard, not sure what answer he had been hoping for.

"Do you wish to examine the paperwork?" came the snide follow up.

"I guess," Harry said.

The man stood without warning after examining Harry's gaze extensively with that disturbingly close attention. With a swish of his robes he was gone but he returned presently and held out a rolled up parchment.

Harry awkwardly unrolled it. It was long with miles of small print and lines that had been filled in with his name and Snape's name. At the very bottom were some signatures. The first few lines were reassuring, going on in the manner of: henceforth shall be responsible for all welfare, health, and long-term educational/vocational requirements of adoptee. Harry let the parchment roll itself up again like an uncoiled spring and handed it back. Snape set it aside with his long, fine-boned hand.

Harry had only ever daydreamed of his parents suddenly coming for him to take him from the Dursley's, not adoption, but if he had imagined adoption, this would not have entered his imagining. He shifted in his chair under that black scrutiny and felt something in his pocket bump the chair. Remembering his wand with a spark of happiness, Harry pulled it out. "I learned a spell," he said.

"Really?" Snape crossed his arms doubtfully. "Let's see."

Harry, after three tries because he was nervous, got the silver pepper grinder to hover over the table. It drifted there on its own axis before suddenly falling with a loud bang! and a scattering of loose peppercorns. "Sorry," Harry immediately said, hurrying to set the thing upright.

"No matter; it is a rather heavy object for a beginner." Snape said. "One of your worst enemies sent that for Christmas."

Harry picked it up and looked it over. "It didn't break," he pointed out before rethinking the assertion about enemies sending Christmas gifts.

"I don't think it can be broken." The man now had a wand in his hand as well. "Shall I show you another?" With a quick flick and another strange utterance that sounded like Elphaskrasi, the peppermill suddenly had pink polka dots.

"You're a wizard too?" Harry asked, stunned by how many there seemed to be all of a sudden.

"Of course," Snape sneered lightly. "You would prefer to be adopted by a Muggle?"

"What's a Muggle?"

This question made the man rethink a moment. More calmly, he said, "It is a non-magical person."

At that moment plates and platters of food materialized on the table, clad in a sheen of sparkles. Harry sat back in surprise, not believing it could be real until the odor of roast chicken hit his stomach, making it twist painfully. He clasped his hands between his knees to wait his turn.

"Go ahead," Snape said.

Harry never got to serve himself first. Ever. He hesitantly reached for the serving spoon in the potatoes and once he started, rushed to give himself a chicken wing as well so he wasn't holding up the meal.

Harry had never eaten better food. The potatoes tasted like cream and the chicken fell off the bone. Harry quickly nibbled his piece clean to the tiny wingbones where

the feathers attached. He then began eying the platter, which was still heaped with the rest of a chicken and there was no Dudley or Uncle Vernon to be satiated. One wing was all Harry ever was given though when his aunt cooked chicken. He slowly ate his potatoes and wondered if he could have more chicken.

"Do you want another piece?" came the sharp question, and for a moment, Harry dealt with the notion that he had annoyed his new dad by NOT helping himself to seconds.

"Er . . ." Harry glanced down at the wing bone sitting forlornly on his plate. There really wasn't so much as a molecule of meat left on it so he couldn't claim he wasn't finished with it. "Can I?" he asked.

"Of course. I cannot possibly eat all that," the man said, still sharp as a whip.

Harry had somehow angered his new parent without trying. More to the point, by doing exactly as he knew he was supposed to. Confused, Harry said, "No, I'm all right." Which was true; he was more full than he usually was after dinner.

This did not work to negate the anger, however. Snape turned his head, angled and sideways, like a raptor might and said, "You are as thin as that tiny bone you have gnawed raw that now sits before you."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. The tone was clearly a challenge demanding a response, but Harry was only growing more confused by these mixed signals.

Snape huffed ominously, the way Vernon did before everything got the worst it could. But instead of turning red and becoming verbally violent, the man's entire attitude transformed and he mutely shook his head. With awkward patience Snape softly said, "Harry, take as much as you like to eat." He threw his napkin down on the table and sat back. "I am quite finished, in fact." He watched Harry gingerly take a thigh off the plate. As Harry gratefully ate it down, amazed at how much meat such small bones could hold, the man stood and took a bottle of dark liquid off the shelf and poured himself a serving. He failed to put the bottle back away, and instead made a point of keeping it close in reach.

After a second piece of chicken Harry was very full, as full as he had ever been in his life. His stomach hurt, which he didn't know was possible and made him think Dudley's must hurt after every meal and sometimes after his snacks.

Snape said, "We'll have to find something to occupy you. I have grading to do for tomorrow that I did not wish to foist off on my replacement, who is sometimes too forgiving of half-correct responses."

Home Is Not a Place

"Do you have a television?"

"No," came the dry reply.

"No television?" Harry asked in disbelief; he thought everyone did.

Snape waved at the oil lamps on the walls and table. "There isn't electricity. Nor do I wish to have a television. There is a library, perhaps we can find something there for you to read."

He took his drink and led the way across a two-story hall and into the far room, which was lined floor to ceiling, all around, with books. Snape said, "These are yours over here, although most of them you will probably not find interesting at this stage in your magical career."

"Magical career?" Harry echoed.

Snape waved him off and said, "Should you need anything. I'll be in the drawing room."

Harry sat on the rug before the shelf and pulled down each of the books and flipped through them. He finally found a book with lots of dragon pictures and very amusing stories of bad encounters with dragons. This book he sat back with and quickly forgot where he was, although he skipped over a lot of words he didn't know.

Harry's head nodded for the third time. He put the book away and went out to the main hall. On the left were stairs leading down a half a flight. Harry went that way and found the kitchen. The creature that had brought the biscuits earlier gave him a curtsey. "Master."

"Do you know where the toilet is?" Harry asked.

The elf nodded, making its ears flap. "Next door down this corridor, Master."

"Thanks."

As he washed up, Harry stared at himself in a mirror that had lost half of its silvering. The tile in the bath was sparkling clean but around the edges of things most of them were cracked and the grout chipped away. His Aunt Petunia would have run screaming from this place. Harry relished the realization that that gave him some protection from her. He yawned, exhausted and wondering where he could sleep. He checked the rest of this lower corridor. The large cupboard across from the toilet had only kitchen supplies in it, not anything that resembled a bed.

Growing more weary by the second, Harry roamed around the main hall following the light from the far room. Inside the drawing room, Snape worked at a tall stack of parchments. He didn't notice Harry in the doorway.

"Please, sir," Harry began, really not wishing to risk interrupting, but seeing no choice. The dark, very dark, eyes came up and fell on him with that intensity Harry was not used to. "Where do I sleep?"

The intensity vanished as Snape stood. "In your room." An eye blink later, he passed Harry with a gliding stride. "Come."

Harry followed up the steps to the first floor balcony. At the last door Snape stopped and gestured for Harry to enter. Harry went into the dark room a few tentative steps before the lamps came up bright on their own. Snape, wand out, passed Harry and went to the wardrobe.

"You'll have to wear an oversized pair of pyjamas I believe." He took out a pyjama top and handed that to Harry, who couldn't believe how soft it was.

Harry looked around at the four poster bed with its detailed carving on the posts, the trunks stacked in the corner, the animal cages. "This is my room?"

"Yes."

Harry wandered the perimeter and stopped at the cages. One was empty but the other contained something furry and violet curled up in a pile of rags. Harry touched the wire bars, trying to get a better look. The creature lifted its head and blinked at him sleepily. Harry reached for the cage door but was restrained by a hand.

"To bed instead. Her sleepiness gives away yours."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, but he had to finish exploring the room first. The man waited by the door, watching, so Harry didn't try to open either of the huge trunks. Instead, he went over to the bed and looked in the drawer of the night stand and then on the shelf. He spied a photo album very much like the one the nice red-haired man had shown him. Pulling this out brought Snape back over and Harry started to put it back away.

"Go ahead," Snape said. "I thought perhaps you would like to know who was in the photographs."

The first page was obvious. "That's my parents," Harry announced. "Mr. Weasley had a photo of them too, but I thought my dad was me."

"You do look just like him."

Harry stopped and looked up sharply. "You knew my mum and dad?" When Snape replied affirmative, an undefined tension relaxed inside Harry. "You were friends with

them?" he asked, trying to figure out why, if his parents had friends still alive, he was still left at the Dursley's who clearly were not friends of his parents.

"Not exactly," Snape admitted wryly. "Your father and I did not get along well."

"Oh," Harry responded, thinking that may explain it, which also made him feel oddly better. "Were they magical?" Harry suddenly thought to ask. "Or . . . what'd you call it . . . Muggles?"

"They were very magical," Snape confirmed.

"No one ever told me," Harry lamented in a mutter, flipping now to pages showing his older self with the same friends as the other photographs. "I have these two friends," Harry announced happily.

Snape made a snorting sound that made Harry look up sharply on the verge of hurt. "You have more friends than you can possibly count," Snape explained.

Harry glanced back down at the album and a photograph showing himself sitting around a thick wooden table in a library, he looked displeased at having the picture taken and kept shading his face from the flash bulb. The table was full of other students, all dressed in the same uniform. "I don't have any friends; Dudley beats up anyone who talks to me."

"Your cousin would not survive three seconds with you anymore," Snape assured him. "And that is assuming you were feeling generous toward him." He moved to the door. "Do not have the lamp lit too much longer."

Left alone, Harry finished slowly flipping through the pages before he changed into the pyjama top, of which he needed to fold up the sleeves three times over, unable to imagine fitting in it, but apparently it was his. He settled into the huge soft bed and his eyes wanted to close, but he held them open to look around the big room filled with all kinds of things . . . all his. With care, Harry turned down the lamp and willingly let his eyes close this time.

Around midnight, Snape slipped in to check on his young charge. Mussed hair peaked out from under the duvet above where Harry's small self barely formed a tall wrinkle at the top of the bed, barely reaching the middle. For one breathless moment, Snape imagined Dumbledore attempting to guide this small life through prophesized events that even in hindsight loomed overwhelmingly. He wondered how the old wizard had managed it and thought that perhaps, he had underestimated Dumbledore's power, or at least his wisdom; he had certainly underestimated his resistance to stress. The very notion filled Snape with cold dread.

Chapter 19

The cold knot tightened Snape's insides painfully. If Harry were not transformed back, he himself would be in precisely the same position, for which he was sorely lacking in both power and wisdom. He could not accept that daunting future; it refused to take hold in his mind. His Harry, powerful both magically and physically, would return to fulfill the prophecy. He must.

Ginny awoke with a jerk and grappled for her watch and her wand. Shrouded by the thick drapes, she used a Lumos Charm to read the time: ten after four. She tossed the watch back down beside her pillow so as to not have to set it down loudly on the wooden night stand and potentially wake her roommates.

As she buried her face in her pillow again, Professor Trelawney floated up before her mind's eyes, speaking in that awful voice. Ginny groaned and willed her away until she realized that she was remembering the very beginning of the Prophecy, the part she thought she hadn't heard but apparently had just forgotten.

With a huff she rolled over and assumed it could wait two hours until what a reasonable person would consider morning.

She didn't fall back to sleep, however, despite steeping herself in reliving the recent dueling win, usually a sure-fire way of lifting her mood. At six in the morning, she dressed in silence and went out of the dormitory. She considered informing Professor Snape, but then remembered that he had been absent from dinner and maybe had gone home for the weekend. Ginny wished she could go home for the weekend, especially to Harry's house.

As she expected, Headmistress McGonagall was awake. She sat with her glasses on her nose, reading from a yellowed tome propped up on her desk. "Ms. Weasley, this must be a record," she said.

"I remembered the beginning of the prophecy," Ginny explained.

McGonagall clasped her hands over the vellum pages before her and appeared extra attentive as she lowered her head to look over her spectacles. "It is good that you did, sometimes these little details matter."

Ginny shrugged. "I think we're better off without the beginning part this time," she stated tiredly.

After a long pause McGonagall prompted, "What is it, Ms. Weasley."

Ginny took a deep breath, "'Few will escape the blood and chaos of the darkness, bound, sought and released.'"

McGonagall's eyes closed momentarily. "Well, that is a jolly thought for this morning."

Ginny put her hands in her pockets to quell the nerves making them fidget. "Maybe the Ministry should be told," she suggested quietly.

McGonagall nodded. "Very selectively though. I'll discuss it with Severus . . . and Harry," she added in an awkward manner. She then appeared mysteriously befuddled for just an instant.

"Do you want me to go inform him, ma'am? I notice that you don't both like to be absent." She asked this in what she thought was an admirably professional tone.

McGonagall shook her head. "No, I will take care of it." She almost appeared to reconsider, then waved Ginny off.

Morning came for Harry. He awoke thinking that he had had a very nice dream about having his own room and a good dinner, but when he opened his eyes to the sunlight, he realized it had not been a dream. He quickly dressed in his own baggy trousers and a clean t-shirt from the wardrobe that reached below his knees, and went downstairs.

The man from the night before, the strange dark-eyed one who had adoption papers saying he was now Harry's father, was at the dining room table drinking coffee and reading a strange newspaper. A white owl sat on the back of the chair opposite. It bobbed its head at Harry's approach.

"Would you like breakfast?" Snape asked.

Harry stopped just inside the doorway. "Shall I go make it?" he asked.

The sharp edge came back then, "Heavens no. Take a seat . . . the elf will bring it."

Harry wished he could avoid annoying this man, but it was impossible. He moved warily over to his chair. The owl tilted its head endearingly and clacked its beak.

"That is your owl," Snape informed him. "Her name is Hedwig."

Chapter 19

"Where was she last night?" Harry asked, carefully pulling out the chair so as to not upset the bird's perch.

"Hunting, picking up your post from your friends at Hogwarts."

Breakfast arrived before Harry could get fully acquainted with this pet. The plate that appeared before him had two rashers of bacon and two pieces of toast and two eggs. Harry looked over at the identical plate before Snape. He sensed now that making a point about the food was a mistake, so he dove into eating without asking if this was all for him.

Another owl arrived at the end of breakfast, carrying a letter. Snape read it and bunched it up. "Still no progress on reversing the charm upon you. And they do believe it is a charm, rather than a curse."

"What will happen then? Will I go back to the Dursley's?" Harry asked.

"You will go back to being your eighteen-year-old self," Snape replied.

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that didn't sound so bad. In the photographs he had looked big enough to fend off anyone.

"What to do with you today, though," Snape muttered. "What do nine-year-old wizards like to do?"

Harry had no appropriate suggestions and hoped the question was merely thinking aloud.

"The weather is a bit warmer today. I think I know what we can do." He stood and Harry followed quickly, curious to see.

The man went to the front entryway and took two brooms out of a cupboard there. "Not your usual one, but perhaps that is just as well." He handed a broom to Harry, who studied it in confusion. It wasn't an ordinary broom though, it had a logo on the end of the handle and it was highly polished. Snape also gave him a cloak and a pair of gloves, although they were both far too large.

"Come," Snape said and led the way through the house and out the back to an overgrown garden. "You were reputed to be a natural at this at eleven, so I expect you already are at nine and a half. Do like this. Set the broom on the ground, hold your hand out over it, and say 'up!'"

Harry did as he was told and nearly let go after catching the broom as it jumped up into his grasp and hovered there, alive and willing.

"Up for a little flight?" Snape asked with what could have been snide, but Harry thought instead that it meant they shared an inside joke.

"Sure," Harry replied eagerly.

Snape dropped his broom and said "Up!" before it could hit the ground, a slick looking move. "Oh, and one more thing." He took out his wand and tapped Harry on top of his head. Cold liquid ran over Harry's head and neck, making him rub at it to no avail. "Get on like this, lift the handle slightly to increase your height. Very good," he praised Harry, who had lifted to a steady hover seven feet from the ground, a bright smile ruling his face, making it ache. Snape mounted as well and sped off toward the low clouds, and Harry instinctively leaned forward to make his broom follow.

Everything about flying on a broomstick felt inherently obvious and instinctive. He zipped side to side, testing the steering before catching up to the man.

"Having fun?" Snape asked.

"This is wonderful," Harry shouted, feeling his stomach flip at the view of the spring green ground far below. But he was free, at home, freshly liberated; everything before this had been imprisonment in an alien country.

Snape slowed and stopped. The cold breeze blew fiercely in their faces, so he turned his back into it and Harry did the same, knocked off balance by the maneuver, but recovering with a quick hand of help. "Where shall we go?" Snape asked.

"Can we get ice cream?" Harry asked.

"You wish to have ice cream?" Snape asked, sounding snide again.

Harry swallowed nervously, afraid that he had crossed the line, certain that he would never know where the lines were with this man.

"If you wish." Snape conceded and turned slowly on his broom. "What town looks likely to you to hold an ice cream shop?" he asked.

Harry looked keenly around them. A larger town sat at the horizon in a small valley along a canal. He pointed his oversized glove that way. Snape gestured that he should lead, and Harry eagerly did so.

Before they were halfway there – farther than it seemed at the outset – Harry's hands were growing cold inside his fur gloves. A wisp of very low cloud passed by, moistening his cloak even more than it already was. Below them a road snaked through greening fields dotted with sheep. It wasn't real, Harry's sensible mind suddenly asserted. He

was dreaming. By sitting back Harry slowed without trying. He was on a shiny black broomstick, flying over the countryside. It wasn't real.

The man flew close beside him. "All right, Harry?"

Harry couldn't believe the man was real either. Any second now he was going to wake from this dream or he was going to fall. Harry gripped the highly polished wood before him as tightly as his half-numb hands could manage through the ungainly oversized gloves. He was dangerously high in the air and brooms couldn't really fly. But despite his screaming instincts, he wasn't falling; the broom didn't need his faith to continue hovering, even five hundred feet above the earth.

"Harry?" Snape prompted more sharply. Harry reached out for the man, and got gathered up as soon as the world careened wildly. "One hand always on the broomstick – difficult to steer without that," Snape corrected, forcefully planted Harry's right hand on his broom. The world leveled out, but Snape's arm was still fast around him. "I think this is perhaps too much too soon."

Harry was breathing normally now and he anchored himself by watching the cars snaking along the road below them. Flying on a broomstick was feeling real again, as real as the warmth of an adoptive father wrapped around him. The broom hadn't failed him, even though he had failed it. Experimentally, he leaned a little left and they both turned.

"Let's get you home, Harry."

"No," Harry countered. "I want ice cream."

"You do? You are dead certain that you are about to fall and you want ice cream?" Snape asked facetiously, but he gradually released Harry to fly on his own. Harry took it as a test and did the best he could, even though his arms felt quaky as well as cold.

"It will be warmer on the ground. Come." Snape led the way this time, cloak billowing, checking back frequently to see that Harry followed. Harry for one was angry at himself for faltering at his first taste of real freedom. He wouldn't do that again, no matter how certain he was of falling.

They landed behind a shed on a small football pitch. Snape tapped each of them on the head, set their brooms up against the wall and tapped them as well, and then led Harry away. It was considerably warmer on the ground; halfway to the nearby road, Harry had to toss his heavy cloak off of his shoulders. Down a small slope and across the road stood a chinese restaurant and beside it an ice cream shop. Three boys of about fourteen were already enjoying treats on the pavement before it.

Harry followed past them, pausing to roll his worn right cuff up, which he was walking on, as usual. Snape waited by the window for him. The boys were whispering, but Harry was used to comments about oversized clothes and ignored them. When he reached him, Snape said, "Perhaps we should get you some clothes that fit."

Harry, to whom it had been made abundantly clear that new clothes were not appropriate somehow, said, "These are all right. Can I have double chocolate?"

While Harry's treat was being prepared, Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out large shiny gold coins. He put these quickly away and tried a different pocket, which contained ordinary, dull, pound coins. "What's the other?" Harry asked.

"I'll explain later," Snape dismissed the question, paid, and handed Harry his treat along with a stack of serviettes.

They sat at the small plastic table beside the window. The other boys had moved on and the two of them were alone. Snape considered the small version of his adopted son with a practiced eye as the boy vigorously ate his treat. So involved in eating, he was, that he remained unaware of Snape's attention. The brief sunlight swept through accompanied by a cool wind and Harry pulled his bulky cloak tighter with his free hand. A wave of protective instinct washed through Snape, sitting there at a Muggle table in an entirely Muggle village.

This Harry he could protect, unlike his own independent Harry with his own duties and his own grown-up predilection for trouble. Voldemort was gone; could this new trouble possibly be worse, Snape wondered. And if he tried to protect his older Harry with the kind of forthright confidence he felt certain he could bring to bear upon this Harry, would that work? Or would his Harry thrash immediately against the necessary limits placed upon him?

If Snape kept Harry this size, he could protect him much easier – a tempting, if not irrational, notion. But the prophecy would either be void or had better have a lengthy timeline to fulfillment for Harry to get prepared. Snape found himself unable to assume Harry's decrease in age could be part of the expectations of the prophecy. He would get his own Harry back and this would just be an opportunity to better understand the son he had taken in.

Harry paused in his voracious eating and sighed as though it were hard work, this eating.

"Thanks for the ice cream," Harry said. It was delicious . . . and all his. The only other time Harry got any was when Dudley overturned his bowl, upset that it only

had four scoops instead of five. Harry had turned it back over and eaten it anyway because no one told him not to. "You're not having anything?" he asked, seeing Snape empty handed. "Do you want some of this?"

"I am quite all right. Thank you."

Harry finished his treat as slowly as he could while watching the boys kick a football around on the pitch. He wished he were as big as they were. "Am I as tall as them now?" he asked.

Snape, required a second to take the question in, apparently his thoughts were elsewhere. He glanced over his shoulder at the impromptu match going on and said, "You are very near as tall as I am."

"I can't be," Harry argued, but then had to lick a large drip that threatened his already sticky hand. "You're really tall."

"You truly are. You have grown enormously from where you are now."

"Then I could beat anyone up," he asserted.

"You don't require height for that; your wand is quite sufficient. Finish your ice cream, it is melting."

Harry guessed this was a signal that the topic should be dropped and thought perhaps with a little practice that he could find the lines around this man.

They returned to the broomsticks, Snape, instead of handing Harry his, used a charm to lock them together and hovered them as one. "Fly with me this time; the tryptophan is making you sleepy already."

"The what?" Harry asked, but he had to admit that he was feeling a little groggy on top of full to bursting.

Snape lifted him onto the broom before him and tapped him on the head. "A compound prevalent in milk and chocolate that makes you tired and a bit happy." He stashed his wand away and steered them directly upward into the wind. The boys on the pitch grew smaller and smaller until they were no more than insects.

"I am pretty happy," Harry said, leaning into the cloak-shrouded strength behind him. Despite being a little sad that he wasn't flying himself, Harry didn't complain; this riding along in warmth was fine too. Snape's arm held him fast and he had no concern this time about falling, even when they skirted the grey clouds. A gust of wind struck them and they turned with it and the arm around Harry tightened and didn't let up until they were hovering down into the back garden of the house.

Snape didn't release Harry immediately when they landed; in fact, he held him tight enough to restrict his breathing before he finally set him on his feet, and Harry, for the first time that he could remember, felt what it was like to be cherished. The man gave no outward sign of this as he broke the brooms apart and led the way inside, but Harry was certain of it. He was also certain, despite their short time together, that this man did not give up such emotion easily, and that only made it strike Harry harder.

Harry took his gloves and cloak off and handed them up to be put away in the front hall cupboard. Snape then instructed him to follow to the drawing room where a measuring tape was dug out and used upon him with cold efficiency. Snape then picked up a quill and jotted down the numbers. "I'll owl a shop for some basic clothes for you so you do not have to look as though you shrunk and your clothes did not." He said this in a mocking tone, but Harry felt its sharp edge slide off him without harm.

The pink-haired lady from the Ministry came during the afternoon with apologies. Harry listened from the doorway to the drawing room as she and his new father spoke about technical magical things. Tonks was reassuring Snape. "We've figured out that Merton must have been using the cane to chop wood and do other chores. He's up there in years and the cane was sitting right before the full wood bin, all cut with an ax that was right out back, which would have been a lot of work for someone his age. He must have owned the cane long enough to know what it did and how to reverse the charm. For all we know it's been in the family for generations. He could have written himself a note with a To-Do list, read it, did the chores, and changed back. Probably used it for all kinds of tasks that would be easier for someone younger. So if he went back and forth easily . . ."

Snape sat back in his desk chair and steepled his fingers. "That implies that his magic is not very good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," she admitted. "Pathetic to be having so much trouble with him, in that case."

Snape said, "He is presumably getting help from someone more powerful."

"We've figured that out, but we don't even know who inside the Ministry is helping him, let alone outside." She considered Harry as he hung in the doorway. "We'll get this straightened out, Harry," she assured him.

"I don't think he is in any hurry," Snape commented.

Harry, wishing for a television for the hundredth time, carried a stack of books with lots of pictures up to his room to read until it was time to sleep. It was quiet here

without Dudley and his uncle yelling and stomping up and down the stairs over his head. The elf snuck in, startling Harry, but it mostly ignored him and went to the hearth to lay on a fire. Harry liked having a fire in his room. Even Dudley with his two bedrooms didn't have a hearth in either one. He would probably just try to burn his toys in it if he did.

Harry cracked open a book entitled Encyclopedia Albion Wizard Annual 1980. It had a lot of pictures and Harry could turn the pages slowly and pretend they were little televisions. Ten pages with around eight photographs each were devoted just to something called the Quidditch World Cup and Harry, since he had spent the morning on a broomstick, found this intensely intriguing, considering that he knew nothing about the sport. He enjoyed being alone for real rather than alone with lots of loud people around, pointedly ignoring him.

When a rushing sound like the hearth flaring sounded, Harry jumped up and bounded to the stairs, almost tripping on his much too big dressing gown as he tried to put it on. At the bottom of the stairs Snape was pointing at him with a fierce look instructing him to stay put and presumably out of sight.

A man's voice could be heard. "Minerva sent me . . . wants to talk to you." The two of them stepped into the hall and Snape glanced up but didn't give Harry, who had inched back forward, any further instructions.

The other man, who had a generous head of greying brown hair, a pointed chin and slightly pointed nose, looked up and said, "Well, look at that. Harry, how are you?" he asked with kindness.

Harry tentatively stepped down until he was at eye level with the two of them. Snape said, "I must go for a few minutes. Remus here will look after you."

"Who are you?" Harry asked the man.

"Remus J. Lupin," he said, holding out his hand. "An old friend of your father's."

Snape stopped in the doorway to the dining room long enough to say. "He's a much better candidate to tell you stories about your parents."

They settled into the drawing room after the Floo flare sounded, and Winky brought tea in almost immediately. "Ah, thank you," Lupin said to her. Harry accepted a cup as well and blew over it.

"Did you know my mum too?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, I did. The finest person I've ever met," he said with feeling.

"My aunt gets mad when I ask about her," Harry lamented. Lupin gave him a wry smile. Harry went on, "But I have a new dad now, and he's pretty nice."

Lupin nearly spilled his tea. He shook his head and didn't respond, even when Harry prompted, "What's wrong?"

Lupin grinned crookedly and finally said, "Nothing is wrong, Harry. Most people don't use the word 'nice' with regard to Severus, is all."

"Well, he isn't sickly nice like my aunts are with Dudley, all kissy facing and hugging . . . ick."

Lupin sipped his tea. "Well, you are in the right place, Harry."

Snape returned a short while later, and immediately escorted Harry up to bed. Harry wasn't ready for bed so he circled the room as he did the night before. The violet, bat-like creature stirred from grooming itself as Harry reached up to release the latch on the cage door. Before he could untwist the wire holding the latch secure, the creature hissed at him, revealing rows of needle-like teeth.

Snape was there beside him in an instant. "Do not open it. That is strange . . . she doesn't seem to know you." That deep scrutiny turned on Harry for a long moment before Snape moved to cover the cage with a towel. "To sleep with you then," he said abruptly, and Harry thought he was talking to the animal, but his gaze came back around to Harry.

Snape stalked to the door, turning back with a sharp look to be certain Harry obeyed. His brow was furrowed and he seemed mildly disturbed by something, but Harry assumed it must have been something from his meeting the way Vernon got angry at work, rather than anything Harry himself had done. Harry, still delaying, said, "Remus was nice. He told me about my dad playing Quidditch and my mum being really good at schoolworks."

Snape's his eyes seemed to be focused a bit farther away than where Harry was standing. He stated coldly, "Remus is a werewolf. Fortunately you met him on an evening when the moon isn't full." While Harry stood with eyes wide, Snape shook himself and said sternly, "I am quite certain I told you to get into bed."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, and hurried up to the wardrobe to find his oversized pyjama top.

Despite what Harry would have ranked as one of the best days he could remember, that night didn't pass as blissfully as the previous one. He snapped awake with a

nightmare, one he had sometimes, with lots of green flashing light, but this time instead of the reassuring close walls of his cupboard, he found himself in a large room that in the disturbed moments after waking, felt far too vast, as though he might float away and be lost.

Harry told himself that it was just a dream, stilled his breath, and listened for any sound of footsteps. The last thing in the world he wanted was to hear the dreadful approach of an adult woken by his nightmare, followed by pounding on the door rebuking him even though it wasn't Harry's fault he sometimes had bad dreams.

Harry fluffed his pillow, hugged it, and closed his eyes. His dreams returned almost immediately. He heard a horrible vicious, almost triumphant, laughter and a man shouting in a panic before getting cut off suddenly with a queer gurgle. Harry swallowed hard and tried to understand what he had been in his nightmare. Usually when he heard voices with the green light it was a woman.

Across the room his brightly colored pet moved frantically in its cage and Harry flinched as footfalls clearly approached outside his door. The door creaked open and Harry closed his eyes, pretending to sleep.

"Harry?" Snape prompted. He didn't sound angry. "Are you having a nightmare?" Harry couldn't bear to reply and admit it. "I asked you a question," came then, far less yielding.

"Yep," Harry admitted quietly. When his new father approached the bed, Harry said, "Sorry I woke you."

"You should not be. I wish to know when your sleep is disturbed." He sat on the bed; Harry felt it tilt in a dip at the edge. "Did you have nightmares last night as well that I did not know about?"

"No."

"What is in your nightmare?" Snape asked. When Harry didn't reply, Snape asked, "Are there shadows?"

Harry rubbed his eyes and then his forehead. "Shadows? No."

"If there ever are shadows in your dreams, come to me immediately. Do you understand?" Snape's tone had taken on an ultra hard edge.

"All right."

Snape rested a hand on Harry's shoulder, startling him. It was removed quickly. "If you need me, you may come down to my room, although I expect you will not do so.

I unfortunately left the monitor I could have used for you at Hogwarts. Perhaps I will fetch it tomorrow."

"Am I going to still be here tomorrow night?" Harry asked.

"The Department of Mysteries, who is charged with determining how to reverse this charm upon you, is not the most competently led part of the Ministry of Magic, and that is saying rather a lot. You wish to return to normal already?"

The question was asked with such neutrality that Harry felt there must be something more to it. No one asked a question without caring so little about the answer, or seeming to. Harry replied, "I don't know what I'm doing here."

"You are biding your time," Snape pointed out gently. "You need not have any cares."

Harry scratched his head and gazed into the fire burning warm across the room. "This is better than the Dursley's though. Loads better."

Snape stood. "I should hope that even I could improve upon that. If you have nightmares again I can bring you a potion to make them go away."

Harry shrugged. "They just happen sometimes."

Snape examined him closely, but not for as long as usual, before saying goodnight again and departing, leaving the door widely ajar, presumably to better hear if Harry's sleep was disturbed. Harry rested his head back on his pillow and wondered why he had spent so much time at the Dursley's if there were places like this to be living instead.

Author's Notes:
Wow, I continue to be unable to predict reader reaction. I'm officially giving up trying. (That sounds familiar...) This is all too much fun; it ought to be illegal or something.
I have to respond here to a careful reader who posted anonymously: Harry is not the Avatar. Vineet was speaking in generalities, although he may, and probably does, have someone in mind. That stated, understand that in my stories what absolute story truth is and what the characters believe don't have to match up. It's more interesting if they don't, I think, with each character having their own worldview and assumptions, none of which are in sync with any other character's, nor in sync with any absolute truth artificial or real. btw, if one of the characters ends up with my worldview, that is my definition of Mary Sue.

Chapter 29.

Postage Due

Nymphadora Tonks waved her wand at the plain black door before her. It refused to open. She waved again and pushed harder still with no luck. Turning around, she took in the large circular room with its shiny floor. "I know it was two to the left after the spin last time. Percy probably changed it just to annoy me," she muttered under her breath. The blue flames in the branched holder between the doors flickered as she shifted past to try the next door, still with no effect.

"Looking for someone?" a snide voice came from behind her. Percy, arms crossed, stood outside the door directly behind. "You aren't supposed to be poking around without an escort, Nymphadora"

"Why did you change the spin then?" Tonks complained. "And don't call me that." Stalked over to stand before him, she said, "What is taking so long with that cane?"

Percy tilted his nose up. "It's a very rare device despite its ordinary appearance. We have been forced to experiment and that takes rather a long while."

Tonks put her hands on her hips. "The reversing initiator can't be that hard to work out, Percy." She cut by him and went into the laboratory. "Where's Fudge?"

"Out, unexpectedly."

Tonks turned slowly, one brow raised. "Did himself in with it, did he?" she grinned broadly. "That's rich." She stalked past glowing tanks and steel strapped cabinets with locks the size of dinner plates. Percy hurried along behind her. "Where's Oggie?"

"Here," a voice said from around a corner.

Tonks followed the voice around the corner despite Percy's objections. The cane sat on a long bench before a pegboard wall with all manner of tools. Near at hand hung a row of gloves in a wide variety of materials; a rack of wands in every conceivable wood and even a few metals; farther up were reams of wire, clamps, and for the frustrated worker, hammers and chisels. The cane glistened with a fresh polishing as it sat within the folds of a black velvet cloth. A young man stood nearby, looking shy and sheepish.

"Who's this?" Tonks asked.

Ogden explained, "That's Pontypool – did himself in yesterday and now he handles the experiments because the cane only works once on any given person." Ogden held up a thick notebook with all manner of gestures, spells, wand tap sequences and passwords written upon it. Most were crossed out.

"You all right there Blyth?" Tonks asked the stunned looking man of around sixteen waiting patiently beside the table. Now that she looked him over he did seem to be wearing rather outdated robes for someone his age.

"Yes, ma'am," Pontypool replied, eyes still wide.

Ogden said, "We keep him in Muggle cokes and crisps and he cooperates all right."

"So, still no news?" Tonks asked with dread.

"Lucky for you up there your little wonderkid isn't the only one who's hexed himself now," Ogden said.

"That's reassuring," Tonks muttered.

Percy, who stood in silhouette before a large glowing tank, broke in with, "Tell her she cannot come in without an escort. That's the rule."

Ogden and Tonks turned to him. The brains floating behind Percy were clearly congregating on the far side, bumping into one another. Tonks said, "What's with that, Percy . . . the Tank of the Ancients doesn't like you?"

Ogden snorted. "No, they don't."

Percy's mouth twisted and he glanced behind himself with disdain before turning his nose up and stalking away. Tonks grinned at getting rid of him so easily.

"Wish they didn't like me," Ogden muttered quietly. "Wife hates it when I come home reeking of formaldehyde and complaining about the invention of flying broomsticks."

The two of them stared at the cane and Tonks said, "Please, let us know when you learn anything. And don't let your break from Fudge go to your head," she added before departing. At the door out she backed up and around to the work area and sheepishly asked, "It's spin and then second on the right from straight behind?"

Chapter 29

The next morning Harry was a little sleepy at breakfast and when something loudly struck the window glass behind him, he spilled his juice. "Sorry," he quickly said as the pool flowed off the table and onto him when he turned around to see what had hit the window.

The expected blowup did not occur; Snape merely went to the window to let in a ruffled old owl that in turn dropped a letter into the spilled juice before flapping clumsily off again.

"That was Errol, your best friend's family owl," Snape explained, waving his wand to remove the juice from the table, although the letter and Harry remained damp with it.

Harry carefully opened the soaked letter and read the sloppy handwriting with great effort. Some of the words he could not make out, nor could he comprehend the message beyond Ron complaining that his sister, Ginny, had not spent any of her prize money because she could not decide what to spend it on. That she had their mum come into the bank and open a vault for her and insisted that Ron come with her to put Ginny's money away, which he thought was just an excuse to rub it in.

"I don't understand this," Harry said, holding the letter out and plucking at his cold, sticky clothing.

"Finish your breakfast and then you can clean up."

Harry dropped the letter to the table by the corner, still thrilled to have letters, but it stressed him that he couldn't reply.

After breakfast, in the steamy bathroom with its old chipped tile, Harry stripped off his orange juice soiled clothes and would have hung them on the hooks, but couldn't reach the hooks. It occurred to him that if he had his wand with him, he could have hovered them up to the hooks. He dropped them on the floor instead, hoping the elf would do what she seemed to always do: pick them up without comment.

Harry washed slowly, careful not to rub the face cloth too hard over the bruises on his ribs, which had turned an alarming dark blue, and in spots, almost black. He could ignore the discomfort easily in the context of not having to worry about running away from his brutish cousin here, or perhaps ever again. Harry slowly squeezed out the bundled-up flannel as he tried to accept that notion. The worn bath tiles with their

outdated pattern screamed the absence of his Aunt Petunia and the absolute quiet of the house screamed the absence of everyone else. It was almost eerie.

Figuring that no one was going to yell at him to get moving out of the bath, Harry twisted the gaudy silver handle of the tub and let in more hot water so he could more easily wash his hair.

When the tub had cooled a third time, Harry finally got out. He towel dried his unruly hair, which left it sticking up in all directions like well-trodden grass, then stood on tiptoe to peer into the half fogged mirror and try to push it down, but it had no interest in obeying. The state of his hair hadn't been mentioned and the man's hair wasn't exactly well-kempt, so with pleasure, Harry toweled it some more and left it like that.

A knock sounded on the door and it opened immediately. Harry quickly bundled up in the thick white softness of the towel from drying his hair. He wanted to hide his bruises more than the rest of him, but modesty made for good cover.

Snape gave him one of those penetrating looks before holding up a brown paper wrapped bundle. "Your clothes arrived rather fortuitously."

Harry stepped forward to take them, tripped on the long towel and had to right himself using the battered white cabinet that shielded the hot water pipes. Snape helped right him as well, suspicion edging his expression and movements.

"Thanks," Harry said, and accepted the package with difficulty given that one hand was already dedicated to gathering and holding the towel around himself. He backed up to sit upon the footstool where he could open the bundle on the floor. The string around the bundle was knotted and re-knotted. "Do you have a knife?" Harry asked.

"Better than that; I have a wand," Snape said and aimed a flick at the bundle, which popped it neatly open.

Harry looked down at the rust colored pullover and small stack of starched shirts and two pairs of jeans still dark blue and stiff – the first new clothes he had ever possessed. They went along with a lot of other firsts in the last two days. Harry looked up at the man who, with his predatory features and flinty eyes, appeared unlikely to be responsible for such a positive change in Harry's life.

"Thanks," Harry said again.

Snape, with one last narrow-eyed look, departed.

Dressed, Harry emerged and found Snape in the dining room reading the newspaper. "They fit," Harry said, indicating his clothes.

"Good," Snape stated and returned to his reading, but as Harry moved to step around the table, Snape reached out and grabbed Harry by the shoulder and marched him backward. He locked his eyes on Harry's and said, "I assume those bruises are not from flying yesterday – they look too old."

Harry felt frighteningly transparent; he didn't think there was any way the man could have seen. "No," he said, wondering how his new father seemed to know everything. "My cousin . . ."

Harry's shoulder was released. "Ah," Snape uttered and then added with a point of his long finger, "If anyone ever harms you, you will tell me . . . immediately." His tone spoke of retribution beyond Harry's imaginings, of protectiveness beyond his previous experience.

"Dudley did," Harry pointed out, thinking that he would rather enjoy seeing a wizard terrify his bully cousin and reduce him to the kind of blubbering he normally only faked to get his own way.

"About ten years too late for this transgression," Snape commented as he returned to reading again.

Harry pictured Dudley halfway to looking like his uncle. "He must be really big now," he said, alarmed.

"He cannot harm you," Snape assured him casually. "When I went to get your papers signed, he hid behind your aunt, which was quite a trick from someone his size."

Harry grinned at the image conjured up by that and, as he pulled out the heavy chair opposite Snape, he noticed the remaining pile of unopened post addressed to him. Stacking it neatly before him at the table, Harry began systematically opening each one and reading them even though he could understand very little of them. "Who's this?" Harry asked regarding one letter that looked normal, with the kind of postage the letters arriving at the Dursley's always had.

Snape glanced at the letter just an instant and, with his nose back in the paper, replied, "That is your cousin."

"My cousin?" Harry returned in disbelief bordering on elation.

"Muggle young woman, nice enough . . . if you like that sort of thing," Snape muttered.

Harry read the letter. "She wants to come over for a visit? Can I invite her?"

"As long as it is next weekend, you may invite whomever you wish. You may wish to make a list on the side, however."

"Do you have something to write a letter on?" Harry asked plaintively, thinking he should invite everyone who has sent him post. Snape snapped his wand out of his pocket and writing supplies zipped in from the hall, stopped just before Harry and finally drifted to a gentle rest on the table. "That's awfully lazy, isn't it?" Harry asked but he unscrewed the inkwell eagerly.

After writing out one line, he stopped and said, "My handwriting's not so terrific."

"It isn't terribly so at eighteen either," Snape stated wryly, but he leaned forward and said, "But that is slightly worse than your cousin may be expecting." When Harry's face fell, Snape reached out with his wand to tap Harry's quill with, "Munditiscriptum." As he stashed his wand back away, he said, "That should take care of it."

Harry smiled as he started a new version of the letter and found the words flowing out quite nicely. "Thanks. I want to invite my friends from the photograph too."

"I'll help you with their addresses. You will have to use your owl for letters to them."

"And that nice man who was friends with my dad," Harry continued and waited for a verdict on that.

"Your party."

A scratching at the window indicated an owl had arrived. Snape fetched the letter it carried, opened it and read it thoughtfully. "Hopefully that will keep you occupied for a while. I have to take care of something," he said distractedly, and headed for the drawing room.

Harry was hoping for another ride on a broomstick, but he didn't ask since it seemed too much to ask for. When his letters were finished and labeled but not addressed, he wandered around the house to pass the time, poking in the cellar until the elf came and asked if he were looking for something in particular. Then he went up to the first floor, noticing that there were rooms on the other side too. Harry walked around the balcony to the opposite side and carefully opened the first door.

Unlike the rest of the house, this room was dusty and it tickled Harry nose. Inside, spare household things were stored, such as a few ugly paintings, a door, battered trunks, and more books. The room felt icy, making Harry rub his arms vigorously to get rid of the chill. On shelves to the left sat some interesting things: a skull with a candle stub on top of it, string, chalk sticks, more half burned candles. In the right hand battered bookcase, books were stashed more randomly than in the library downstairs. Harry pulled one out and just barely read the title before Dark Mastery: A Gyde squirmed out of his grip, fell to the floor and lay still.

Books didn't usually do that in Harry's experience. He let that one be and pulled out the next: C3 – Crucio Comparable Curses. This one didn't resist, so he peeled it open and flipped through diagrams showing wand movements and drawings of a contorted man in extreme pain; the same baldheaded example victim over and over every time. Harry closed that one and put it on top of the previous one on the floor, which didn't resist its companion. Tilting his head, Harry read a few more spines and found Horryfic Hexxes, Vocational Vexing, and War & Pieces: Torture Techniques of the Goblins.

Harry's fingers had gone numb in the cold of the room, so he retreated, closing the door quietly because he was starting to get a sense that he shouldn't have been in there to begin with. Voices sounded from the dining room and Harry could see the bottom half of another set of robes. He crept around the balcony and silently down the stairs. Snape was saying, "You must not tell anyone."

A woman's voice said, "Severus, of course I won't, if I knew what–"

Harry had leaned into view, curious about the female voice. A plain-featured, brown-haired woman stood in mauve robes before the hearth. "Harry!?" she exclaimed in a tone of amused concern and immediately approached. "What happened to you?" She was laughing now.

"Picked up a powerfully charmed object for which the reversal is still being worked out," Snape supplied.

"You are a darling," the woman cooed, petting Harry's hair back to his stunned annoyance. When she stopped, he pushed his hair back forward. She turned to Snape and asked doubtfully, "How have you been faring with him?"

Snape crossed his arms and raised himself up. "Well enough," he replied crossly.

"You should have owled sooner," she insisted and then to Harry's complete surprise, picked him up and hitched him on her hip. "Wow, you are a wisp of a thing. How old are you?"

"A tad small for his age," Snape confirmed.

Harry liked seeing the room from this height and he was quickly liking the woman despite her automatic domination. "Just two hours?" the woman asked Snape. "We'll find something to do."

"That is all I need I expect. I will owl if it is more. It is a rather difficult meeting Minerva arranged that cannot be put off."

"Can we go to a film?" Harry asked, thinking of what he most often saw Dudley get to do but never did himself.

Snape answered before the woman. "No one can recognize him."

The woman let Harry slide to the floor as she laughed. "Yep, that would cause quite an uproar, wouldn't it? Sure you don't want to play games here?"

"There are no games here," Harry complained. "And no tellie."

She laughed again. "We can go to the cinema if you like." She was petting his hair again, but it didn't annoy him so much this time. "Edinburgh? London? York? Where would you like to go?"

Harry blinked at her, that wasn't an expected set of options.

Snape stepped closer. "Candide," he said firmly, "Be very careful with him."

"Severus, unlike you, I have two nephews, though not quite this old. He's just a kid. And I'll keep him among the Muggles, just in case."

"And out of the Floo Network, if at all possible, in case of misdirection."

"Well, that leaves out London, and there are too many wizarding folk in York. How about Manchester? That's completely Muggle."

"Can we really go to a film?"

She winked. "–Course, that's an excellent way to spend a Sunday afternoon, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," Harry pointed out. "I've never been to one."

"No?" Candide asked, sounding confused.

Snape stated dryly, "If you want to earn his undying affection, simply take him out for ice cream."

Harry's attention shifted quickly. "Can I really have ice cream again?" he asked, deeply absorbed in the notion.

"I will see you back here later," Snape said, and headed for the dining room and the usual rush of air indicated he had departed.

Harry tugged his jumper down straight, thrilled at the notion of looking normal out in public for once. "I have my own room now," he said to Candide, needing to share that with someone.

She led him to the front entrance and opened the wardrobe. "That's great. Let's get a cloak and some gloves. Did you have to share a room before?" She asked idly as she handed down the fur-lined gloves Harry had worn the day before. He slipped the gloves on and started to use his teeth to tighten the ties at the wrist. "Here, let me do that," Candide said and Harry held out his hands. Without the ties the gloves would immediately flop off.

"I didn't have a room at all before," Harry explained.

Candide hooked his cloak on him as well, since the gloves made his hands almost useless. "Where did you sleep?" she asked curiously. "In the attic or something?"

"In the cupboard under the stairs," Harry explained. "Having a room is much better."

Candide gazed at him oddly. "What miserable people your aunt and uncle must be," she asserted.

Harry, startled by how fiercely she said this, countered, "But they took me in when no one else would. There wasn't anyone to care for me. Where would I have lived, I–?"

"That's a lie," Candide snapped, fiercer still. "All kinds of people would have taken you in. You're famous after all."

Harry stared at her in the oblique, shafted light from the window panes in the door. "What?"

Candide looked taken aback and swallowed hard. "Not sure why no one told you that," she muttered. "But you are. Famous for sending off the dark wizard who tried to kill you as baby." Harry rubbed his scar, prompting her to say, "Yes, that dark wizard. He and his followers were destroying anyone who stood in their way. It was a terrible time, and you put an end to it. Well, for a while anyway. Then you put a final end to it just two years ago. The anniversary was just last week, in fact."

Harry gazed at her, trying to comprehend all that.

She smiled over her adamance. "Come on, let's get to the Odeon and see what's showing; I know a little closed up shop we can Apparate into, just off Curry Mile."

When they returned, with Harry in an odd daze from both too much ice cream and the dramatic darkness of the cinema, Snape was already there.

"Meeting go all right?" Candide asked Snape. Harry took a seat opposite his new dad at the table. "You looked a bit grim before," she said, apparently feeling further explanation was in order.

Speaking softly, Snape said, "I may need to tell you what is happening . . ." Here he glanced at Harry, slouched across from him. "But later."

Harry was thinking about the film, remembering all of the motion and music as though it had become a part of him and still carried him along.

"We had fun. What'd you think of the film, Harry?" Candide asked.

Harry's brow furrowed and he said after a pained pause, "He didn't belong anywhere. He didn't belong in the world he grew up in nor in the other world."

"What did you take him to see?" Snape asked, sitting forward suddenly in concern.

"A Tarzan cartoon," Candide replied with a shrug.

"Oh." And then in a tone that implied Snape realized he was forgetting his manners said, "Thank you for looking after him." He sat back again and pondered Harry. "Why don't you stay for dinner?" he asked her without actually looking up.

Candide smiled the way Harry expected he had when ice cream was offered and moved around to the chair beside Harry. "Thanks. I'd love to."

Small talk passed between the adults as they waited for dinner to appear. Harry looked between the two of them as they discussed some tournament and him, but not things he remembered doing. It was comfortable there at the table with the two of them, the fire, and with nothing expected of him, nor anyone rushing to criticize him at every opportunity.

Candide eventually asked as though teasing, "So, how long is he staying this way again? You'll have to enroll him at Hogwarts soon."

"The Ministry is searching literally everywhere for references to similar objects. Two staff in the Department of Mysteries have also accidentally halved their age, although they refuse to say who. So more staff have been called in and more care is being taken, which slows things significantly." They both looked at Harry. Snape said, "They have the utmost confidence in reversing the Charm, so I expect soon."

After dinner the adults returned to boring conversation, so Harry took himself to his room and, curious about Candide's comments, looked through the Wizard Annual he had been reading for an entry on himself. There wasn't one. But of course, he realized, this was the year that he was born. He picked up the next one by date and turned to "H" but there was only Habatious, Rudulph followed by Hartwick, Humphrey. His heart sank, mostly at the thought that she had been putting him on. She had sounded so serious, in a wholly adult way. Of course, Harry then thought,

they are organized by last name. Harry flipped hurriedly to Potter and stared at the otherwise ordinary letters of his name in bold print at the very left hand edge of the column.

Potter, Harry – Born July 31, 1980; Son of Potter, James and Potter né Evans, Lily; Celebrated for the destruction of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named by some unknown luck or force. The Dark Lord appeared at the Potter residence the night of October the 31st of this year intent upon destroying a wizard and witch who had been working hard to cause the evil wizard's own downfall. After dispatching Mr. and Mrs. Potter the Dark Lord turned his wand upon boy Potter with a Killing Curse only to apparently have it rebound upon himself. The infant was left with only a distinctive lightning bolt scar upon his forehead and was otherwise completely unharmed.

Harry read and reread the entry. No one knew him, he had always believed. But he had been wrong. Did his aunt and uncle know about this, Harry wondered. They never said or implied a thing, although they grew awfully upset at Harry's questions so perhaps they did know.

Harry looked up "Killing Curse" in each of the Annuals but it wasn't to be found. He then looked up "Dark Lord" which took two tries because he started under "L".

Dark Lord AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who – See entry Volde___

Harry remembered that Mr. Weasley had said the evil wizard's name was Voldemort. He wondered why he had so many nicknames. But he looked up the other entry.

Volde___ AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who; AKA Dark Lord – At seemingly the height of his power and influence Volde___ was defeated this year by a small child, whom he failed to kill. How exactly this was accomplished is uncertain, but the wizarding world will be celebrating this event for many years.

Harry quickly pulled the 1980 Annual back out again and looked up the same entry.

Volde___ AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who; AKA Dark Lord – This dark wizard and the shadowy organization of dark followers continues to plague the wizarding world. The pessimists who have warned that his power would only grow in the face of Ministry apathy were correct and this year we reaped the misfortune of not acting sooner to quell his power and corrupting influence. The number of missing, mysteriously dead, and Obliviated reached epidemic proportions and now it is unclear how the power of Volde___ and his devoted Death Eaters can be negated.

Harry quickly looked up Death Eater in the same edition. This time correctly looking under "D" the first go.

Death Eater – Loyal followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (See Volde___); Their numbers are considered to be growing, but could be as few as fifty or as many as a hundred and fifty. These true servants are Marked by the Dark Lord himself with the Dark Mark – a skull with a snake emerging from its mouth – upon their inner left arm. He can then summon these close followers at will and those that disobey are punished with great agony through this Mark.

The 1981 edition entry also reflected the change in Voldemort's status:

Death Eater – Loyal followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (See Volde___); The Ministry of Magic continues its pursuit of the Death Eaters in the wake of their leader's unexpected apparent demise. Many suspected Death Eaters claim to have been under an Imperio when they committed atrocities. Some have been given lenient sentences in return for cooperation in identifying and locating more powerful colleagues. Despite the Aurors best efforts, some are expected to disappear undetected.

Harry paged slowly forward in that volume, stopping at Diggle, Daedalus to read about his arrest for attracting Muggle attention to a wizarding celebration of Voldemort's destruction, then Fernworth, Yolanda, arrested for illegal dragon breeding, then at Flume, Abrosius, for opening a chocolate shop and giving away two thousand pounds of chocolate to the first two-hundred customers. The thought made Harry's mouth water.

The pictures that weren't of Quidditch didn't change enough to make them interesting for long. Harry stopped at Goyle, Benedict and read how he convinced the Wizengamot that he was falsely accused of being a Death Eater and released on the theory that he was too thick to be a threat and certainly Voldemort would have killed him in annoyance had he really been that close to the dark wizard. Harry gave the very unintelligent picture of Goyle a close look to see if he could judge whether the man was really evil. The image of Goyle scratched his head and looked about himself in confusion as he held a numbered placard before himself upside-down. Harry turned the page.

Snape awoke to an unusual noise. He peered at the glass dome of the monitor, but it was still, too still in fact as though it had nothing to grab hold of. The noise grew slightly louder and now definitely sounded like crying. Alarm cut through the remaining sleep clinging to his thoughts, and he rose, pausing only long enough to tug his dressing gown from the bed post.

On the balcony he spied Harry at the far dead end huddled against the spirals of wrought iron that held up the railing. At the sight of Snape his crying hesitated and he turned his head into the unyielding bars as though to hide.

Chapter 29

"Harry what is the matter? Are you having a nightmare?" Snape stepped through the yellow light pouring from Harry's room and back into the dimness beyond it and crouched before the boy. Harry definitely shrunk away from him this time, so Snape held off approaching any closer. He looked around, back at the room; the monitor should have gone off if Harry had been experiencing a nightmare. One of the Wizard Annuals lay in the doorway, open, face down.

Harry's small voice brought his apparently unwelcome attention back that way. "You were one of them," he accused in a voice that held barely enough strength to be audible.

Snape considered him before standing to pick up the book, the nearly complete set of which had been a Christmas present to Harry from the neighbor. He opened it to the page that formed the source of the folds caused by the book resting on its face after being dropped. Kabbage, Harriet, Kaputnik Kats, Karkarov, Igor . . . Snape glanced at the entry; it mentioned a rumor – a fairly accurate rumor – as to why Karkarov had been released into freedom after Moody's long hunt for him. Methodically, Snape unfolded the creased pages and closed the thin, stiff-covered book. He considered the curled up Harry, who to his credit held his gaze.

"You killed my mum and dad," Harry said, finding his voice.

"Hardly," Snape returned. "Voldemort did that."

"But you were helping him."

Snape let the book swing at his side. "This is far too complicated to explain."

Harry turned his head away as his face scrunched up in grief. Snape said, "You believe yourself betrayed, do you?" he asked coldly. He hadn't meant to use that tone, but the man he had been the last few days, the last few years even, had fled him, leaving behind only the hard core of him. "I had forgotten how much your meddling got you into trouble at this age," he added, feeling exasperated, but sounding annoyed.

Harry sniffled and didn't look at him. Snape closed his eyes a long breath. That other version of him was here somewhere; he refused to believe it existed only as a reflection of Harry's grace and expectation.

Calmly, finding his way through a double minefield, Snape said, "I did not kill your parents."

Harry, sounding difficult, said, "You said you didn't like my father."

"True, and I would admit to appreciating a chance to get even with him, but I would not have killed him."

A silence ensued, and through it Harry's green eyes flickered in the dim light as he thought things over. Snape crouched again to get down to Harry's level, at a distance he judged would not be threatening.

Harry rubbed his runny nose on his sleeve and said, "But you were one of Voldemort's loyal followers. You were helping him."

"I made a mistake," Snape explained. "One I regretted and suffered with for twenty years. But this is all too complicated."

"Adults always say that," Harry snapped, sounding the most hurt yet.

Snape sighed silently and cracked open the book, found that it was too dark and rather than use a Lumos, which might alarm Harry if he had not seen it before, Accioed the oil lamp from inside the room and set it beside him. It had the downside, though, of also illuminating Harry's tragic and tearstained face.

"Did you read Dumbledore's entry?" Snape asked easily. Harry looked as though he didn't want to respond, just to be difficult, but he eventually shook his head.

"'Dumbledore comma Albus Percival Wulfric Brian,'" Snape began. "'Organized a shadow organization known as the Order of the Phoenix to counter He-Who-Shall–Voldemort's rise to power. Dumbledore politically fought the Ministry itself at times to get official action taken to counter the Dark Rise and is credited with rooting out Death Eaters from within the Ministry's ranks. Upon the Dark Lord's demise, he refused to accept a nomination to Minister of Magic and instead remains Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'"

Snape held the book out to point at the picture of a smiling wizard stroking a long flowing white beard, and even though Harry looked beyond willing to listen, said, "This man – a very powerful wizard, one of the most powerful, in fact – was my mentor. I went to him when I realized my error and began assisting him from the inside of Voldemort's organization."

Harry didn't respond and his hard expression with deeply furrowed brow didn't relax. His eyes screamed hurt and anger.

Impatience and a deeper uncertainty took hold of Snape again and he said more sternly, "You believe yourself betrayed when you are not. You think your older self didn't know I had been a Death Eater when he agreed to the adoption?"

Harry blinked rapidly. "He knew?" he asked, aghast.

"Of course he knew," Snape closed the book with a snap. "Of course he knew," he repeated, more relieved at getting through. "I don't mean to sound like your aunt

and uncle again, but it is very difficult to explain this in terms you will understand." At least Harry's fear had ebbed, but he still hung onto the iron bars, his chin resting on his extended arm. "Please return to your bed, Harry; it is cold here on the floor."

Harry's lips pursed and he considered moving; Snape could see it in his eyes when he glanced his way before turning his head awkwardly against his own arm again.

Snape's feet were complaining about his crouching. He shifted to kneel on one knee, using the railing for balance. He looked down at the book before tossing it aside and sighing loudly. He said, "I didn't mean for you to be hurt." And at Harry's suspicious expression, he firmly added, "Not that I was trying to hide anything from you. But there are things you have to have lived through to understand. Not that I would wish those events on you simply to bring you to understanding. Many were painfully devastating for you." With a lighter tone and a wave of his hand, Snape said, "Makes this seem like nothing, really."

Harry still didn't move. Snape had decided that getting him back into his bed was his sole goal and that tomorrow, or at worst the day after, he would have his Harry back and this would all be canceled out.

"Do you wish me to owl Candide to come?" Snape had been grateful that Harry's distress at his background was not on display to someone who so recently had accepted it herself, but now he found Harry's care more critical. "She would return, I'm certain, even at this hour."

Harry shook his head.

"You are certain?"

Another head shake was followed immediately by a confused nod. "I'm certain," he muttered to clarify.

Snape sat back against the bars of the railing and to let his aching feet get a break. If Harry refused to move then he could not either. A long silence ensued broken only by Harry's sniffling.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Snape said. "I cannot possibly explain in a way that will remove the betrayal you are feeling, and I regret that it has broken into this little holiday you were having – a chance to experience a bit of the childhood you deserved to have had all along."

Harry tugged at the edge of his oversized pyjama top and didn't respond.

"All I can say is that as much as I disliked your father I did not wish him and your mother dead."

Harry didn't looked up, just continued to tug at the slightly worn blue and white striped flannel.

"But the past is the past and cannot be changed as much as one might wish otherwise. And in the present, which is the only thing we can control, I love you as much as I could if you were a son of my own."

Harry's hand froze before it dropped to the floor. He looked around at the dark hall, the lamp, seeming to avoid looking directly at Snape. Seeing his opportunity, Snape rose and said, "Back to bed, Harry," in as normal a voice as possible.

Harry hesitated just a second before standing and, head low, slipped past Snape, went to his bed, and crawled completely under the duvet. Snape released a tight breath and returned to his own room, leaving the lamp behind on the balcony where it illuminated the pathway between them. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared out at the dark maroon planking and the traces of light edging the black iron bars supporting the railing.

Snape waited a long time, but there was no sound. The only reassurance in the room was the gentle wave of light in the glass dome of the monitor, indicating someone was within range of the other half of it. Still in his dressing gown, Snape lay down on his side and waited for the inevitable.

The glass dome vibrating resonantly against the night stand made Snape's eyes snap open. When he made the balcony, he heard Harry's half shout of distress, which seemed to peel his ribs open in the area around his heart.

Harry was in the throes of the worst nightmare Snape had ever witnessed. He made distressed, half spoken noises and his thin arms tossed fitfully, occasionally catching on the duvet and his head canted at an alarming angle when he did lie still. Kali fussed in her cage creating off-key music on the wire bars as she climbed in circles.

"Harry," Snape said loudly, resorting to shaking him only when his name didn't work.

Harry jarred awake with a quick inhale and after taking in his surroundings, rolled away from Snape and curled up.

"Any shadows?" Snape asked.

The delay was lengthy, but Harry finally shook his head.

"Will you tell me about your nightmare?" When Harry didn't respond to this, Snape prodded, "Does it involve green light?"

Harry's head jerked halfway back to looking at Snape.

Snape said, "Of course I know what your nightmares may be."

Harry curled up and faced away from him again. Voice muffled by the duvet, he said, "Someone's dying."

"In your dream?"

Harry's head nodded as indicated by the hair sticking out from under the cover.

Snape reassuringly said, "I would not let anyone harm you, Harry. You have nothing to fear."

"You know a lot of bad magic," Harry said a little peevishly.

"Yes," Snape confirmed. "And I wouldn't hesitate to use it to protect you."

Harry didn't respond except to adjust the edge of the duvet to make himself more comfortable.

"It is almost morning," Snape said. "If you have another nightmare, perhaps you should just rise for the day. I have a potion I could give you, but it will make sleep too long at this point."

To that, Harry didn't respond at all. Snape finally took himself back to his own room and this time, tried to catch a few minutes of sleep.

Morning light was pouring into the room when Harry next awoke. His face was tacky with the residue of crying and he felt thirsty and shaky as though he were far too hungry. After dressing quickly in his own, oversized clothes, he tiptoed down to the last bedroom and peeked in. Snape lay sleeping in his dressing gown, half wrapped in the duvet. He looked to be out quite solidly; enough that Harry considered trying to flee the house. But he had no where to go. His cousin Dudley must be the size of his uncle now and Harry wouldn't survive living with him for long, he was certain. And as emotionally confused as things were here, they were much better than anything he knew before. His aunt and uncle certainly never used the word love in reference to him although it flowed out easily enough where Dudley was concerned.

Downstairs in the dining room, the elf was laying on a fire in the hearth. She curtsied and said, "Good morning, Master Harry."

Harry blinked at her and the stark reminder she provided, that he was no longer at the bottom of the household chain of obedience and chores. "Good morning," Harry said.

"Master wish for breakfast now?"

Harry was famished. “Yup, thanks.”

The elf disappeared in a sparkle. Harry took a seat and stared at the wood of the table. He considered getting a book, but decided he had had enough of books for the time being. Looking around he spotted the burgeoning pile of letters addressed to him on the sideboard. He perused them a bit before getting an idea. He had seen his adopted father with bundles of letters in the drawing room and Harry wondered what was in them. They were stored in the bottom left drawers of his desk.

On silent bare feet, ears straining for any noise, Harry crept down to the drawing room. The room felt foreign to him, from the faint smoke residue of the lamps to the unfamiliar scent of its usual occupant. At the desk, he bit his lower lip as he tugged open the bottom drawer. Inside were several bundles, but one of them had his signature on the face at the bottom of a letter, visible around the black ribbon used as a tie. Harry snatched this up and very carefully closed the drawer again.

Back in the dining room his breakfast had arrived, complete with metal cover to keep it warm. Harry had to admit that this place did have certain concrete amenities, but the cut of betrayal from what he had learned last night still bled and he pushed the plate away despite the wondrous odor it filled the room with.

The first letter Harry unfolded talked about spells he had been learning and contained many words he didn’t know. He turned it over and scanned it. It was signed Yours, Harry. The words mocked Harry’s current pain. Biting both lips now he flipped each letter to the closing, stopping only when he found one that read Your loyal adopted son, Harry. For an instant Harry wanted nothing more than to throw them into the fire. But as a person who owned almost nothing and certainly wasn’t used to having stashes of letters from people who clearly cared about him, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he read the letter.

Halfway through it, without realizing, Harry pulled his plate closer, opened the lid and began nibbling on the toast. The realization that his new father wrestled with guilt over his past neutralized Harry’s pain marginally. His aunt and uncle certainly never felt guilty or apologized for anything and clearly their treatment of him deserved a bit of guilt.

Even though it was reluctant to lie flat, Harry placed the letter before him on the table and propped his chin in the backs of his pressed-flat hands. He could recognize his own voice in the letter even though it was pleading for Snape to give up his guilt or to make amends if he couldn’t do so.

Guilt doesn’t pay anyone back or restore anyone to life, his older self had written. It made rational sense but Harry’s pain wasn’t amenable to the rational. He didn’t see

any way he could forgive that much. Obviously his older self had lost track of his priorities. Moving quickly, Harry bundled the letters back up and snuck them quickly back to their previous spot.

When Snape came in later, Harry had to eat more of his breakfast as cover for keeping his head down, which he instinctively felt he needed to do to hide what he had been doing. He flipped through his own letters and with a jolt realized a few of them were missing and must have been bundled up with the others. One of his old ones to Snape was also mixed in this other pile. He casually shifted it to the bottom. All of the parchment was yellowed, even the new sheets, so it didn't stand out. Fortunately, it was one of the Yours, Harry letters rather than those with more poignant closures.

Snape didn't speak, even after his breakfast was finished. He opened the odd newspaper wide and read, giving Harry almost no attention. It wasn't until he had finished the paper and had it refolded neatly that he pinned his eyes on Harry who fixed him with a difficult expression in return.

"I don't suppose you would like to learn chess?" Snape asked.

Harry lifted one shoulder, giving no ground.

Snape sat back, arms crossed, and matched Harry's expression. "I don't anticipate this situation continuing much longer, but I will point out, just in case, that should you need anything, you must ask. Winky will anticipate your hunger and thirst but I am not skilled at anticipating what else you might require."

"True that it doesn't look like you get to the clothing shops often," Harry commented. "Or the barber's."

Snape tilted his head and his eyes widened. "Haven't heard much of that tongue, have we? To your credit, I guess, that you are able to overcome sappy gratitude so fast; keeps it from clouding your mind."

Harry crossed his arms as well and pushed back on the table leg to rock his chair back, a shouting offense in the Dursley household. "At least I'm not an evil dark wizard," he retorted.

"Not yet anyway," Snape mildly replied.

Harry swallowed. "What does that mean?"

Airily, Snape replied, "Only that you recently learned how to cross into the underworld and can command the grotesque creatures–demons shall we say–that dwell there."

Harry's brow twisted up. "I don't believe you."

"You haven't seen them invade a room when you have lost control. I have."

Harry tried to take that in. He had no sense of the man lying. "So what's your point?"

"My point," Snape smoothly replied, "is that a lily-livered white wizard would have dumped you on the street long ago what with your channeling Voldemort's emotions and plans–hence your nightmares of him killing–let alone your mage-like skills with the plane where demonic creatures reside." Snape relaxed a bit smugly, Harry thought, and added, "Look at it this way: I cannot possibly hold any of that against you. And as to the former, I am intimately familiar, unfortunately, with Voldemort and truly understand what he has put you through. There is no one else who could." He appeared to rethink that, "Well, there is that little friend of yours, Ginny, who may understand, given that Voldemort took her over and forced her to do all manner of vile things such as kill all the roosters and write messages in their blood and set a deadly Basilisk on her school chums, but you don't give her much of a chance beyond friendship."

Harry shook himself as he tried to take in that diatribe. Finally, he said, "You're just like my aunt and uncle, trying to make me feel grateful you took me in. They were lying too."

Harry scored with that one; he could plainly see the man's shift in attitude away from smugness. "I do not mean to be like your aunt and uncle. What an appalling thought," Snape added after sipping his coffee.

Harry couldn't help his lips curling slightly upward.

"Well," Snape said, sitting forward. "We need to get through the day. I can certainly owl Candide, who I am positive would be willing to take a day off to spend it with you."

"She your girlfriend?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Snape said, lips pursed.

"I don't need her; she's too clingy. She needs to have kids of her own, you know," Harry pointed out, sounding authoritative.

"That's none of your concern."

"Right," Harry taunted. "I'm just your first son. My opinion wouldn't matter."

Snape rolled his eyes and countered, "Your opinion has already been registered in the matter along the lines of I am chicken not to marry her, which may logically lead to

your first point, of which your older self may have an interest, but certainly wouldn't have any say."

Harry put his chair down with a clunk. "Touchy," he mocked.

Snape rubbed his forehead before glancing around the room as though looking for a distraction. "How about we go to the zoo?"

Harry froze and in a more amenable voice asked, "The zoo?"

"This way of travel is cheating, you know," Harry said when he was released. They had arrived between a brown stained wooden building and a fence. Myriad scents of animal fur and living quarters floated on the gentle breeze.

A boy of about six stared at Harry as he walked past, watching his heels catching on his cuffs. Harry propped his trainer on the next bench and bent to roll his trouser leg up better.

"You should have changed into something that fit, as I suggested," Snape said, waiting beside him. "You would pass for normal, then."

Harry straightened. "You should get a hair cut, then you would . . . oh, never mind," Harry said, exaggerating his turning away.

"Hum," Snape uttered far back in his throat.

They stopped before the elephants, who were rhythmically sweeping the ground with their trunks, gathering straw. Harry became lost in the scene, and the loud rasping noise. The largest elephant shook itself, starting with its great ears and working backward with great relish.

"You aren't simply going to stare at the same animals all day, are you?" Snape's voice broke into Harry's revery.

"You must admit they are huge and interesting."

"There are far more large and interesting creatures Muggles are not allowed to see. Dragons, for example."

"Really?" Harry said, losing all enmity. Gripping the railing, Harry rocked back on his heels to more secretly ask, "Is there a magical zoo?"

Snape's lips twitched. "There is a private one . . . but you have not been well enough behaved today to be taken to it."

Harry snorted, stepped down off the railing and walked along the pathway, stopping at something that looked like half zebra, half deer. They were just standing around flicking their ears, so he moved on.

When the crowd around them thinned, Harry said, "So, you don't keep any magical pets around except your owl. I'd think someone as evil as you would have a house full of red-eyed black cats to keep you company, to bring you the luck they steal from other people . . ."

They passed the camels. Snape was forced to wait to respond, "The only evil pet in the house is yours. She used to be blue, until you fed her your blood and she turned violet-colored."

"I don't believe you," Harry said, leaning far over the railing to better look up into the tops of an eyre.

"Suit yourself. Drinking your blood is what lets her feel your moods."

Silence reigned until the trail split off, one path leading to a building. "Let's go in here," Harry said, marching off to avoid being told otherwise.

"Ah . . . reptiles," Snape said as the dim, square walls closed around them. "The dark wizard's favorite."

They studied the poison-dart toads. "Doesn't look deadly," Harry criticized, nose close to the glass. "Looks too colorful to be anything."

"Truly powerful things hide their fatal tendencies."

Harry dropped back to his heels. "Yeah, right, Socrates."

They came upon the Rattlesnakes, mostly sleeping, but one of them slithered slowly around its matching gravel. Harry stopped to watch, mesmerized.

"Snakes are the evil wizard's absolute favorite," he said, sounding odd, like he talked around forcing down a smile.

"You would know," Harry said. They were alone in the corridor. "How many did Voldemort have?"

"Just one, but rather a large one," Snape replied. "Nagini he named her, and he spoke with her often. A skill that marks only the darkest of dark wizards."

Harry wanted to snort, but this sounded serious. "Really?"

"I saw him do it countless times. He could command her to spy for him, kill for him, even."

Harry stared at his face, his features sallow and even stranger in the low light from the windows opening into the reptile tanks. His black robes left his head to float,

disembodied. This man intimately knew the evil wizard who had destroyed Harry's entire world and here Harry was, put in his care, which unlike his relatives, he seemed to be at least trying at. Harry looked away, feeling all kinds of things that pulled him in too many directions.

Harry slid his hand along the wall to the next tank. Snape read the tag. "Diamondback. Native to North America. Go ahead and ask it if it remembers the desert."

"Who, me?" Harry blurted.

Snape's dark eyes stared directly back at Harry. "Of course you."

Harry opened his mouth to reply with something snide, but closed it and turned back to the tank. The snake, whose scales resembled a weaving of sorts, lifted its head.

"Heeeelllo . . . Cowboy . . . " whispered through the glass as the snake's tongue flicked out.

Harry, strung tighter with nerves than he realized, sprang back from the glass. "You did that," Harry accused Snape.

"I did nothing. What happened?"

"Sssssorry to ssssstartle you . . ."

Harry held a hand up as if to fend off the snake. "Can't you hear that?" he demanded of Snape.

"I don't speak Parseltongue. At least, not at the moment. What did it say?"

"It said sorry for scaring me." Collecting himself, Harry stepped back the glass, so close his breath fogged it. To the snake he said, "Can you understand me?"

"Yesssss."

Harry bit his lip and stepped back again. "What did you call this?"

"Parseltongue."

Harry frowned, he had lost this round, clearly. "Let's go look at something else."

"Sssssee you later . . . partner . . ." The snake rose up to say.

Harry threw out a hand to wave goodbye and headed for the light shining from the doorway around the bend. Outside he stopped to blink in the bright light and headed randomly down another path, feeling sulky. He no longer found any appeal in the game of insults they had been playing and things grew quiet between them.

Ahead, Harry spied an ice cream vendor. Children stood around the broad umbrella, dripping treats onto their hands and clothing. Harry pointedly scuffed his feet and slowed as they approached, absolutely certain Snape would offer to buy him something. But Snape simply glanced at the pictures of the various chocolate covered delights and strode on, forcing Harry to follow.

After that, Harry paid little heed to the animals and when Snape suggested that it was time to go, Harry did not argue.

Upon their return, Harry shook his arm loose from Snape's Apparation grip and strode back to the dining room. He had given too much ground on the trip, letting their insult game become almost fun, despite what had felt like an inexhaustible reserve of stubbornness. He did not like that he could talk to snakes like dark wizards could, and he was also a bit peeved that he hadn't got ice cream. This had confused him badly and now he sat with his chin on his hand, looking glum.

Snape checked the post that had arrived in their absence and asked, "Something the matter?"

Harry wriggled a bit before responding. "I don't want to be a dark wizard."

"Then don't."

"What? It's that simple?" Harry mocked.

Snape returned his gaze with a level one. "In the end, yes."

"I guess you would know," he said, trying for more mockery. "That why you're here?" This last fell flat.

"Essentially." Snape put the letters he held down and gave Harry his full attention, something Harry was not used to except when punishment was being meted out. "I reached a limit and borrowed a moral compass from someone I respected, since my own was clearly not working."

"Dodgy doing that," Harry said, trying to imagine knowing someone he would trust that much.

Snape straightened. "Yes. Wise of you to recognize that."

This did not come out mocking at all, rather conciliatory. Harry saw an opening for his other complaint. "I didn't get ice cream."

"You didn't say you wanted any," Snape said, returning to his post.

"I always want it; you know that," he retorted. He was certain he had made his mood clear after the reptile house. "Dudley always gets ice cream when he's upset. And toys," he added sulkily.

Snape glared at him over the envelope held up before him. "And had I offered it, it would have seemed to you merely a sorry attempt to buy your emotions." Snape leaned closer, almost menacingly. "I am not your aunt and uncle, nor will I ever be. You and I are a family for reasons of loyalty, caring, and mutual understanding, not bribery. Believe me that it is sadly ironic that I understand that and you do not."

Harry frowned more and put his head down on his arm. He wanted the man as his father back again, but not really. These opposing feelings were splitting him down the middle, he could feel the pull of it tugging on his deep insides.

"Harry," Snape said, sounding caring, then apparently gave up with, "Never mind."

"What?" Harry demanded.

Snape stacked the new post with the old and said, "You are making me fear that you, my old you, has merely decided that I am the best he could get for a family and forgives me everything solely based on that notion."

Harry traced the deep wood grain of the table with his finger. "You're better than the Dursleys," he admitted.

Snape gazed down at him and said, "I think at one time I would have been pleased enough with that. Or perhaps not." He picked up his post as a bundle and struck the envelopes against his palm. "I did not adopt you to hurt you or cause you such an emotional quandary. Quite the opposite," he added quietly before departing the room.

Author's Notes:
Yes, Yes, I got Lily's hair color wrong. General space-out that I have a clear image in my head and I don't think to check the lexicon as a result and DARK RED? Heck, I don't remember even knowing that in order to forget and double heck! that puts her smack dab in the Black Family Tree doesn't it? I'll be obsessing on that notion for a few weeks...
And I'm glad Junior Harry comes across well. Just to clarify: Harry is not time travelling, the spell just makes an exact duplicate of a person at halfway to where they are now and plunks that down in place of them, warts and all. Strictly halving his age didn't seem any more powerful than the youth potion Lucius used in Resonance, so I consciously made it different from that more simple effect.

Chatper was updated July 8, 2009 from http://darkirony.livejournal.com/55413.html

Chapter 21.

Hearth and Home

Harry perused his photo album at the dining room table, expending many comments on the photographs of his parents. Snape was disappointingly unflappable, however, as he worked at meticulously writing out a small stack of highly decorated forms.

"I bet they were really happy together," Harry opined, watching James reach under his and Lily's linked arms to tickle her. She pulled away with a giggle.

Harry fell silent as this latest gibe failed to spur a negative reaction. His comments were making him sad so, instead, he asked, "Why didn't you like my dad?"

Snape's quill stopped arcing over the paper and he looked up. "He was my Dudley, you might say."

Harry swallowed. Suspicious, he said, "But he wasn't any bigger than you."

Quill still frozen, Snape responded, "His magic was much stronger than mine, even though I worked very hard to improve mine to have a chance against him and his many friends." He seemed to be trying to remain unflappable, but his jaw tightened revealingly, making his statement seem all the more true.

Harry frowned and turned back to the album, silent now.

A blast of green flame preceded Tonks' arrival in the hearth. She brushed herself off while holding a large black velvet sack out of the way. She said, "Blasted thing refuses to Disapparate . . . hello Severus, Harry"

Snape stood slowly. "You have it?"

Her eyes flitted to Harry and back to Snape. "Yep." She pulled a slip of parchment out of her pocket, after checking most all of her pockets twice. "The instructions are here." When Snape took the slip to examine it, Tonks invited brightly, "Come here, Harry."

Snape held up a hand. "Leave the object here. I'll send Harry along."

Befuddled, Tonks stared at him, but shrugged and handed over the long inky black velvet bundle. "See you in a bit, Harry." With that and a wink at him, she Disapparated.

Snape laid the cane, still in its sack, on the table and studied the note awhile longer. It was a small note, so Harry assumed he was stalling, which was fine with Harry, who had found his gut was all knotted up.

Snape rubbed his chin and said, "Interesting impact this object has." He lowered the note and looked Harry in the eye. "Simple principle: halving one's age. One wouldn't think much of that beyond the obvious power of youth by choice." He lowered his head back to the parchment and re-met Harry's gaze through the strands of his hair. "But it has left us with a dilemma." Frowning, he set down Tonks' note and carefully slid the velvet off the cane, finally laying the silver length of it down on the wood with his hand carefully protected. He tossed the velvet aside and after considering the cleaved cane, said softly, "I cannot by rights make you do this."

Harry took that in. "You'd let me stay this way?" he asked. "Even though I hate you?"

Snape didn't flinch as expected at those words, but his lips pursed harder. Harry stood up to take a better look at the cane. The picture of his older self seemed to watch from the photograph along with his two friends. "I don't belong here," Harry said. "Don't you want the other me back?"

"Of course I do. He is my son and you are not, or perhaps more accurately, you refuse to be." Snape exhaled audibly. "But reversing the charm means that you cease to exist as you are."

Harry gave him a disturbed look and picked up the cane to examine it closely. "All those complicated books in the room there . . . he understands those?"

"Yes. Most all of them."

Harry thought aloud: "It wouldn't be fair to him not to come back. He has all those friends and I don't; they wouldn't want me." He reached for the note, despite the raw

instinctive fear coursing through him. Tiny diagrams were drawn on the yellowed paper, showing cartoon hands doing things with the cane. Harry carefully put the note down on the edge of the table where he could see it and rested the cane upside-down on the stone floor as the first diagram indicated. He hesitated though. A glance at Snape showed him wearing a grim expression. "What's wrong?" Harry demanded, beginning to feel numb as though the fear had taken him over, sucking his own will dry. "Don't you want me-as-your-son back?"

Snape's troubled expression didn't flicker. "Of course. I need not make amends with him"

"I don't know why not," Harry commented. He turned from the black gaze and adjusted the note to see it better. His breath wouldn't come freely, as though he faced stepping off a cliff.

Snape's low, soft tone interrupted Harry's thoughts. "It is a kind of death. That is why, although it is only equitable for you to do this, I cannot insist you do."

Harry, determined by that to prove something, if only that he was bigger than this man, tapped the cane twice on the curved handle, spun it twice one way and then back the other. He bit his lip and hesitated just an instant, during which he pictured the tall young man from the photographs in the album – the one who truly deserved to be in his place. The cane handle rapped sharply twice on the hard floor.

Harry, tall and wearing his usual clothes and cloak, appeared with a faint whoosh. He stared at the cane in his hand and then glanced in surprise around the unexpected scene of the dining room. "What am I doing here?" he asked.

Sharply, Snape said, while pointing with his lean finger, "Put the cane in the sack."

Harry scooped the evidence sack off the chair beside him and slid the cane into it. As he tugged on the drawstrings, he said, "I was out in the field . . ."

"That was three days ago," Snape pointed out snidely.

Harry blinked and stared. "Three days? How could that be?" He gestured with the evidence sack. "Did this thing bring me home? But . . . three days?"

Snape angled his head and appeared more dismayed. "You are due back at the Ministry. I said I would send you."

"But . . . what happened?" Harry demanded, gesturing with the wrapped cane.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "What did you think half a cane would do? Not exactly hiding its inherent purpose."

Befuddled, Harry considered the long black sack in his hand and tried to come up with an answer. After a long pause in which his mouth twisted, he decided not to guess. "Er, I don't know."

Snape rolled his eyes. "It cut your age in half," he stated.

"It what?!"

"Ms. Tonks was most disappointed in you, I believe," Snape added and appeared to be tracking the impact that statement had on Harry.

Harry frowned but avoided flinching. "I've been . . . NINE for the last three days?"

"Yes," Snape snidely replied. "And you are expected back at the Ministry, since it is not quite the end of the day on Monday."

"Bloody . . . all right." He rubbed his forehead where a headache teased and moved toward the hearth.

Snape held his hand up. "There is something I should warn you about though, before you go."

Harry, mind already cast ahead to the Auror's office and what he might face there, turned and dropped his hand from his head.

Snape said, "The Ministry has been informed of the prophecy."

"Good," Harry uttered in relief and at Snape's surprised look, explained, "I was starting to think it would be for the better. What prompted it . . . my being a child?"

"Not precisely. There was little doubt you would return to normal quick enough. No, the impetus was Ms. Weasley remembering the beginning of it, which she recited as: Few will escape the blood and chaos of darkness bound, sought . . . etc."

"Blood and chaos?" Harry echoed, distraught. "And few will escape. Wonderful. So who at the Ministry knows, or has it been published in the Prophet already?"

"The Prophet is so far unaware. Minerva and I informed Madam Bones, Arthur Weasley and Cornelius Fudge."

"Fudge! Why'd you tell that waste of space?"

"As you are perhaps aware," Snape began as though lecturing. "He is head of the department that records these things for safe keeping in case the person the prophecy pertains to is not known."

Harry remembered the room full of shelves of glass prophecies. "Oh, right. So what did the Ministry think?"

"They are rather alarmed by the implication that the current minor difficulties they are having promise to elevate to such a level. I am not certain they believe it possible."

"I'm not certain I believe it possible," Harry said.

Snape made a shushing gesture. "Well, off with you. They will start to wonder what the difficulty is." Harry took down the Floo powder but before he tossed it in, Snape said, "There is only an hour left in your day . . . do try not to get into trouble again already."

Harry shot him a glowering look. "I will. Thank you." Clutching the gritty powder, he turned and said forcefully, "I get through weeks of field shadowing without incident . . . getting complimented on my performance, even, and I mess up once, er . . . twice, and now you assume that is all I'm going to do." He felt a bit hurt.

"It was a rather significant mistake caused by an affinity for Muggle habits."

"That makes me better in the field normally, by the way," Harry argued. "I don't reach for my wand in the middle of a curry shop when I slop a bit on my shirt."

Harry, having made his point, he thought, moved to toss the Floo powder in, but Snape interrupted yet again with: "Just one more thing . . . How did you know the cane would refuse to Apparate?"

Harry froze, and then glanced at the handful of Floo powder he clutched on one side and the evidence sack on the other. "I don't know." He hadn't even considered Apparating. "Bloody . . . I have to go." This time he did toss the powder onto the flames.

At the Ministry, Harry walked unmolested across the Atrium but when he reached the lift, the grins and winks began along with the thinly veiled teasing. "You sure grow fast, Harry," Someone from Games commented when they stepped onto the lift behind him. Everyone, it seemed, felt the need to get a poke at him before he made it to the Auror's office.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Rodgers said when Harry stepped into the workout room after dropping the cane off with Shacklebolt. "You survived your little trip down memory lane, did you? Take a seat."

Harry tried not to blush, but it didn't work. His fellows were definitely enjoying his discomfort, although Kerry Ann tried to suppress her grin.

Rodgers went on: "We were just doing a quick review of incarceration procedure. Originally I was going to do one on field work procedure, but thought it best for us to wait for your glowing return."

Harry glanced up at Kerry Ann beside him only reluctantly. "Poor Harry," she whispered, teasing. Vineet turned around and gave him an oddly affectionate look. Aaron simply muttered, "At least it isn't me in trouble this time."

"Also, in case I need to remind those of you who don't own a calendar on top of not owning a watch. We are fast approaching your next review exams. They will be scheduled for next week Tuesday. Potter, can you remain eighteen that long?"

When the mercifully short hour ended, Rodgers said, "Potter, stay after," as the others were packing up their things. Harry had not brought his things so he stood, trying to figure out what to do with his hands, finally settling on picking lint off of his cloak.

The door closed on Kerry Ann, who gave Harry a sympathetic nod. Harry could hear them chatting happily as they headed down the corridor to the lifts. Rodgers appeared grim as he closed his notes and waved them into his leather satchel before sitting on the front edge of his small table.

"We have a problem, Potter," he said, making his wand vibrate by flicking it with this thumb.

"I'm sorry sir, I . . . "

"You're sorry to have been named in a prophecy?" Rodgers interjected. "Did you send away to be named in one through some service I'm not aware of?"

"Oh. No sir; didn't realize that was the topic."

Rodgers returned to flicking the end of his wand nervously. "This is the difficulty – even barring your recent spate of cock-ups – we don't exactly wish to put you in the kind of harm's way necessary to give you the opportunity to fulfill the prophecy. And we certainly would like you to do so as quickly as possible."

"But . . ." Harry began. "The blood and chaos hasn't occurred yet. The dark hordes haven't . . . well I don't think they've been released." At Rodgers blank expression, Harry explained, "Those have to happen first."

"Do they?" Rodgers blurted.

"I'm rather certain," Harry reluctantly admitted.

Rodgers' wand flicked rapidly. "As much as I hate to say this, I think I have to defer to you on this. Goodness knows I'd hate to stand in your way."

Harry thought this must be a taunt. But when Harry found Rodgers' eyes, they looked deadly serious.

"I don't like this, Potter," Rodgers said. "I'm not even going to pretend to like it. I can't believe you are just standing there so casually . . . that you've known about this without letting on."

Harry felt a little humbled. "I'm used to it, sir." More lightly, Harry added, "And this one doesn't mention my dying. It's not so bad from that perspective."

"Right." Rodgers flicked his wand a few seconds more and stood straight. "Arthur wants a talk with you as well." At the door he said, "There's traditionally a lot of blood and chaos at the first Puddlemere United match. Why don't we just invite Merton to it and you can dispatch him afterwards?"

Harry laughed and finding relief in his normally vitriolic trainer's humor, said soberly, "If you wish to set it up, sir, I'm willing to do my part."

Rodgers still didn't open the door to the training room, just rested his hand on the latch. "I take that back. Let's hope Merton doesn't come to that match. Any combination of one of those weapons and a large crowd makes me very nervous."

When Harry knocked on Mr. Weasley's door, it opened by itself to reveal Arthur Weasley, comb-over skewed, closing his files and putting them in neat stack.

"Harry. Come in. Have a seat." He sounded doleful, which affected Harry more than expected.

Harry sat in the guest chair and quickly shifted it out of the way as the door closed itself again.

"Most unfortunate, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, folding his hands in his lap. "I thought we were past all this . . . prophecies, Voldemort, that sort of thing."

"Apparently not," Harry conceded, feeling stronger now in the face of Mr. Weasley's overtly sad demeanor.

"I don't want to hold you back from your destiny, Harry, when the time comes. But . . ." He held up a finger. "It isn't here yet. And until it is, you are just another apprentice, one that is on probation, no less."

"You're playing Dumbledore this time –round?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley stared at him. "Far be it for me to even attempt it. How is Severus holding up? He was his usual clammed up self at the meeting Minerva arranged. Looked like he wanted nothing more than to toss Fudge from the room."

Harry's lips curled. "He was right angry with me just now over the cane incident. I must have been a regular delinquent to cope with at nine and a half."

"What!?" Mr. Weasley blurted. "He tell you that?"

"No," Harry replied, pushing back onto the desk the unopened paper airplanes that had taken flight into his lap. "But I heard it often enough from my relatives."

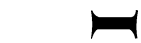
Mr. Weasley stared at him some more. "Tonks told me Severus was practically doting on you." Harry dropped his head and stared doubtfully back at Mr. Weasley, prompting him to add, "Honest. Took you out for ice creams, broom flights, etc."

"The zoo?" Harry asked, almost mockingly dubious.

"I didn't hear all the details. Only I'm quite certain you were not the monstrous burden you've implied. Tonks, when she returned after leaving the cane behind, joked that Severus may try to hide it and leave you as you were."

"Not a chance," Harry said disparagingly.

"Hm, well you would know better, I would assume. But back to our original topic: I want you to know that if you feel the time has come, Harry . . ." Here he wagged a finger at Harry. "And you think we are unaware . . . you can come to me and tell me that. In those words, exactly, 'the time has come.' Got that? I need to know when to give you leeway." His finger waved more sharply with the next words. "But you aren't getting it before then. And in the meantime very few people have been told. The general public isn't to know until it is absolutely necessary."



At home, Harry found a note from Snape on the table, which was a good thing because when he began opening his post and found people writing him about coming to his upcoming dinner party, he would otherwise have been rather confused. Hermione's rambling letter made him shake his head at Snape simply allowing him, at nine years old, to send out invitations. Although, Harry had to admit, at that age he would have been quite thrilled to have friends to invite, let alone send post to.

Unlike the letter from Hermione, who did not know that his last letter had come from a rather different version of himself, the letter from Lupin was highly teasing in its

tone. But he was more than willing to come to the party, was quite in need of a break from the castle, in fact.

Harry chuckled at himself as he put the day's post aside and started in on the older pile that his younger self had opened. Oddly, at the bottom of the pile, he found a letter he had sent to Snape almost half a year before. Harry looked it over and shrugged while dropping it on Snape's desk in the drawing room. Before he stepped away, a colorful paper tucked into the blotter corner caught his eye. It had an icon of an ark on it and when he tugged it out, found that it was a ticket to the Chester Zoo, stamped just the day before.

A bit embarrassed, Harry carefully tucked the ticket back exactly as it had been and stepped out of the drawing room – out of surroundings that carried too heavy a sense of his guardian.

Harry was deeply absorbed in reviewing when the fire crackled loudly. He glanced over and found Snape's head floating there. "Wotcher," Harry uttered in surprise.

"Thought I would just check to see that you were still remaining out of trouble."

Harry set his quill down hard. "Thank you very much; I'm still not in trouble yet. Our one year reviews are early so they can assess the incoming applicants based on how well we do. So I'm too busy to get into trouble. Go away before I toss an extra log on you. Why are you there instead of coming through anyway?"

"I am at my own hearth which is warded to disallow transit. I am leery of leaving my house in Remus' care for any longer and Minerva hinted at that as well, although he seems to have done surprisingly well."

"Tell Minerva I'm very sorry I messed up." Harry rested his cheek on his palm and gave Snape a long and tilted looking over. "Knees getting tired yet?" he asked innocently.

"Yes, in fact, they are. Do stay out of trouble." Snape's head disappeared and yellow flame closed in where his visage had floated.

Merton's eyes were gleeful as he gingerly inspected a large elongated bulbous vessel. "Wonderful . . . absolutely wonderful . . . and only two days," he whispered reverently.

Lockhart sat nearby with a glazed expression. He hadn't spoken since the last spell had been executed on him. Merton leaned close into Lockhart's face, causing the

man and his wild blonde hair to lean away, which at least indicated he knew what was happening around him. Debjit would not have got so close; he hovered near the doorway. It was warm in their borrowed building now during most all the day, almost hot during the afternoons, so there was no reason to congregate in the small workroom.

Merton grinned in pleasure. "All my wonderful plans no longer need be on hold." He set the vessel down on a heavy shelf and said, "We'll see how long that one lasts and make several more to have a regular stock. Fill this shelf and we can announce to the Ministry that we have arrived."

Svaha spoke something low to Debjit to urge him to move out of the doorway to allow her to carry in the tea. She placed a fresh cup before Lockhart and left the tray behind from which Merton poured his own after giving up admiring the first addition to his new collection.

Lockhart picked up the teacup and sat tracing its shape slowly and meticulously with his fingertips. Svaha ignored him and began sorting through the crate of freshly-fired ceramics to find the most symmetric one.

Harry knocked on Pamela's door. The wind in Godric's Hollow was brisk as it always seemed to be, forcing Harry to pull his cloak together with one hand while he waited.

Pamela opened the door, saying, "Harry! You can Apparate in directly, you know."

"I've never been in your house," Harry said as he stepped in. "I can't unless I've seen it."

She led him into the small sitting room and said, "I'll be just a moment more," before she stepped away, adjusting an earring.

Harry glanced around the room while he waited. A photograph of Patricia and her children was on a table beside the couch. Harry kept expecting it to move, but it refused, making Harry wonder if there were a charm to make a Muggle picture seem magical, if only temporarily.

"All right, how do I look?" Pamela asked, stepping out of the bedroom and presenting herself.

"You look like you," Harry said.

"You're a charmer, Harry," Pamela teased.

"Did I say the wrong thing?" Harry asked, glad this didn't come up so much anymore, although the reason it didn't come up in itself wasn't so wonderful.

She laughed gaily. "No, not at all." She collected her handbag and stepped over to Harry. "I'm a little nervous . . . my first magical party."

"It will be fine, just some friends of mine." Harry took her arm. "Thanks for agreeing to come early." A second later they were in the main hall.

Pamela stepped around the room, looking up and down. "Old place you have here."

"It's Severus' really," Harry explained. "Would you like something to drink?"

"He's not coming, is he? You didn't make it sound like he was in your invitation."

"No," Harry answered, not wanting to think too hard about how that invitation may have read. But Pamela didn't say anything more about it and soon other guests began arriving, all eager to meet Harry's distant cousin.

Hermione was explaining what the inside of the Ministry of Magic looked like when Winky stepped up and curtsied. Pamela started at her strange sight, fixating on her spotted and nearly bald head framed by her grotesque ears.

Hermione giggled before patting her arm. "House-elves are harmless," she said.

"Yeah, it's . . . yeah," Pamela sheepishly said. "Everyone looks so . . . normal; I forgot where I was, I think." She squinted at Winky and asked, "Is that a tea-towel?"

"Would mistress like something?" Winky asked with a bow of her head that made her ears flap.

"I'll have a butterbeer," Hermione said, and with a glance at Pamela said, "Bring two."

Winky disappeared. Pamela, now wearing a determined expression, tapped Harry on the shoulder. "Harry, you make your elf wear a tea-towel?"

Harry spun and said, "She wants to wear a tea-towel." To Pamela's doubtful and chiding look, he said, "You are talking to the house-elf rights expert there, Hermione. She'll back me up on that. Winky could wear whatever she wants; we don't tell her what to wear, but the magic surrounding them doesn't work if they wear actual clothing. And if they're given any they are compelled to leave the household. It breaks the magical bond to their master."

Hermione said reassuringly, "I know it seems a little disturbing. But Winky has it good here, compared to most elves. Go and talk to her, if you want. The kitchen is just down there."

Hermione pointed and Pamela said, "No, I'll trust you on that."

Laughing, Hermione said, "She doesn't bite, really. Many magical things do, but not Winky."

Winky returned with their butterbeers and executed another curtsy but added a wink at Pamela before moving to ask the next people over what they might like.

Hermione nudged Pamela. "She likes you."

An hour later, Harry finally successfully urged his guests to move to the dining room. Hermione had filled the main hall with couches and after that, no one wanted to move. Harry was going to have Pamela sit beside him, but she had already taken up a chair at the other end beside Neville and across from Lupin. Ron was the only one to bring a date, Lavender of all people.

"She came into the bank and when she saw me, insisted I escort her to her vault. I get a lot of that now," Ron stated proudly. "It didn't used to be my duty, but I do more and more of it and the Goblins don't sneer anymore, just ring me to the floor if someone asks."

Tonks arrived late with a bang! which echoed around the main hall before stepping into the dining room. "Hello, Harry, everyone, sorry I was tied up. Oh, and you saved me a seat, Harry, thanks." She took the empty seat to Harry's right, which he had originally saved for Pamela.

"–Course," Harry assured her, happy to pretend he had, he would have if he'd known she wouldn't think it too forward.

After everyone settled in, Lupin said, "I received such a touching letter from Harry, did anyone else?"

Harry, who had just raised his mug to take a gulp, gave Lupin a sharp look over the rim of it.

"I thought . . ." Hermione began and then laughed lightly, "That maybe you were drunk when you wrote your letter to me. But the handwriting was so nice, so I wasn't sure."

Tonks was snorting into her own mug. "Poor Harry."

"I was stinking drunk. Used a charm, or something, to hide it," Harry quickly said.

Tonks asked, "You'd rather people thought that?"

"Yes," Harry firmly stated. "And dinner should be arriving shortly." Harry leaned to stare into the hall in the direction of the kitchen. "Any moment now."

"You weren't drunk?" Hermione queried in confusion.

"I heard what happened," Neville said with a smirk. "Well, I heard something, but didn't know it was true until now."

No dinner arrived to distract Harry's guests and now they were interrogating Neville who was greatly enjoying it.

"All right," Harry announced, tossing down his napkin. "I was nine when I wrote you out the invitations. If the handwriting looked great, I have no idea why that was."

Silence fell until Hermione queried, "Nine . . . years old?"

"Yes," Harry breathed, exasperated. "I was nine years old when I invited you all here. I don't remember, so it's a bloody good thing a few of you wrote back or . . . well, Winky probably would have made dinner anyway."

"He was an absolute doll," Tonks said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Please don't."

"But you were," she insisted, teasing affectionately, and suddenly Harry thought maybe that didn't pain him SO bad.

Dinner arrived then but it only delayed Harry's having to tell the whole story.

"Are there photographs?" Hermione asked. "I would have liked to have seen Harry at that-" She stopped upon seeing Harry's annoyed expression.

"What did Snape do?" Ron asked, glancing between Harry and Tonks.

"He did fine," Tonks supplied. "Don't you think, Remus? Remus came and baby-sat briefly I hear."

The entire table, excepting Harry, who was staring into his pea soup, turned to Lupin with great interest. "Harry just wanted to know about his parents. Severus told him I'd be better suited to tell him about them."

"Well, that's the truth," Hermione uttered. "But I want to be owled next time you cut your age in half, Harry." She sounded thoroughly hurt.

"Why?" Harry asked in dismay. "And not if I have any say in it."

"You don't remember a thing?" Ron asked.

When Harry shook his head, Lupin asked with an innocent tone, "Not the broom flights, the ice creams, the zoo?"

Harry studied him an instant before asking, "Are you getting even with Severus over something?"

This made the whole table laugh and finally the topic changed over to the impending Quidditch season.

Down at the far end of the table from Harry, Pamela was taking a third long look at the guest across from her. He didn't look terribly old, but he had prominent crinkles around his eyes when he laughed and a soft way of talking that made her think he was someone who tried to tread lightly on the people around him. He was by far the oldest male at the party and therefore the most interesting and Pamela had maneuvered to sit across from him particularly after eying him during drinks in the hall.

"So, Remus, you work at Hogwarts?" Pamela asked when a lull presented an opportunity.

The man's grey-blue eyes came her way as he responded, "Yes, at the moment."

"Oh, where do you usually work?" she asked to keep the conversation going.

He clearly grew uncomfortable, but replied, "Whatever comes along."

Pamela wanted to say I know lots of people who get by like that but sensed that it would only add to the discomfort and it explained his patched clothing as more than some grunge fashion statement. "Is that where you met Harry?"

Lupin smiled broadly as though reminiscing. "No, I knew Harry when he was quite small. Met you once, in fact, in Godric's Hollow, many, many years ago."

"You're an old friend of James and Lily's then?" she asked.

Odd, he seemed to frown although he smiled more. "Very old friend," he answered, voice even softer.

That undercurrent was interesting. "Very sad, what happened to them. We didn't know what really happened until Harry happened to drop in one day. Well, my mum did, but she never told anyone."

He took a sip of the amber liquid that he was drinking instead of mead. "That was good of her. She might have been Obliviated if she had."

Pamela froze. "She might have been what?" she asked, uncertain if she wanted to hear the answer.

"Not as bad as it sounds. It's a kind of memory charm to make people forget something that they shouldn't know. It doesn't actually make them forget, just blocks the memory from them so they cannot access it unless a more powerful wizard manages to cancel it. The Ministry needs to do it quite often to Muggles when there is trouble."

"Good thing there isn't trouble right now," Pamela said.

Lupin tilted his head to the side. "There is always a little bit of trouble," he said mildly and added a teasing smile as though to not worry her. "And what do you do?"

She tossed her head. "I'm a receptionist at a dentist's in Chesley. It's a bit of a drive but the people there are nice and they take a lot of holidays which means I get a lot of time off too, when I can go on holiday with my sister and her family."

She wasn't entirely sure he was listening, as his gaze frequently focused at a distance before coming back, but he said with a quirky smile, "Any sign of her children being magical?"

"No," Pamela said a little forcefully. "And my sister can't decide if she's hopeful or terrified one of them might be." She laughed. "Severus making one of them invisible the last visit didn't help any."

Lupin laughed as well and asked in clear disbelief, "He did what?"

Harry dutifully arrived for his field work the following evening. The shift was to run until four in the morning, so he had slept in as long as Kali would allow him to. Her frantic cage circling started eventually and he couldn't get her to calm down even when he brought her back to sleep with him. That had worried Harry a bit, but he had checked several times throughout the day that the Dark Plane was closed off or at least quiet and all seemed well. He took care of everything around the house; Pamela had lost one of her gloves on the floor and he had sent Hedwig off with it; the post that looked important he bundled to send off to Hogwarts. Getting all this done left Harry looking forward to an open Sunday.

Harry stood inside the door to the Auror's office, not wanting to interrupt Shacklebolt. Tonks stepped in wearing thigh-high white leather boots and a pink skirt that matched her floppy hair. "Ready to go?" she asked.

Harry kept himself very level and cool as he replied. "Sure." He looked her up and down and gestured at himself. "Should I change?"

Tonks waved her wand at him and he suddenly wore black denims, chunky heeled black shoes and a black leather jacket. His hair felt odd too, off of his face and indeed it now swept back and felt slick. "What do I look like?" Harry asked.

"Rather amusing," Shacklebolt contributed from across the room.

"You look great," Tonks assured him, took his arm, and the Auror's office disappeared. A cat screeched as they arrived in an alley between stone buildings and when they stepped out onto the pavement, Harry recognized where they were.

"York?" he asked.

"Yep, I want to talk to some people." She took off down the pavement, and Harry, feeling exceptionally tall and slightly awkward in his shoes, followed. At a pub called the Friar's Mistress, Tonks stopped and said, "Try to act like Harry Potter, all right?"

Harry watched her tug open the heavy battered door. "What does that mean?" he asked, but she was already inside and he didn't get a reply. He stopped just long enough to read the small brass sign on the door that read No football colors inside. Tonks was halfway across the crowded room, but Harry easily tracked her pink hair. He squared his shoulders under the assumption that at the very least, she meant for him to appear confident. Nearly half the patrons were magical. Harry could feel this but it was confirmed by the wide-eyed expressions of most anyone who looked his way as he passed.

Tonks had hitched her hip on a bar stool when Harry caught up to her, so he stood beside her since there were no more open ones. She was speaking to the barman about the last time he had seen certain people and by the end of the conversation, Harry was thinking that he should start disguising himself when he went to the pub, given how much attention the barman apparently paid to everyone's comings and goings.

Tonks pushed a mead over to Harry. "Have one so we don't look like we just came in for questions. Put a drop of this in it." She slipped him a tiny vial with skilled sleight of hand. Harry waited two sips before adding it, so it would look even less suspicious, not just because he thought he could use a drink with the prospect of eight hours of pub hopping with Tonks looming before him – especially Tonks in that outfit. He held his mug up before his mouth and peered down at her, suddenly wondering if she were teasing him intentionally. But no, she seemed utterly unaware of the effect her clothing had on anyone around her.

Harry sighed and set his mead down, less interested in drinking it now that its alcohol was neutralized. A nicely dressed woman Harry thought looked familiar from years ago at Hogwarts, but whose name he could not recall, sauntered slowly by, eyeing him before glancing at Tonks and then taking on a vaguely defeated air.

Tonks was scanning the room with a practiced eye. "Harry, do you recognize the man standing under the elk head by the wall?"

Harry did as he had been taught. He didn't look over right away. He rubbed his eye, shifted his weight as though his legs were tired and used that as an excuse to turn his body enough to see. "No," he said and then after a second glance said, "I take that back. He plays Beater for Falmouth. Not a nice bloke." Harry recognized another Falcon with him. "The team captain is over there too."

"Thanks," Tonks said. "He looked familiar in a bad way and they have rather a compliment of brooding yet fawning companions."

"Must have been in Slytherin," Harry quipped, pleased that it made her laugh.

Tonks swirled her drink. "So, did Severus survive losing to Ginny at dueling?"

"You know, he seems to have, but it worries me in an odd way, as though he's plotting something and that's why he's behaving so pleasantly about it."

Tonks sipped her drink in silence. The crowd fell quiet as an exciting football play happened on the television. Finally she said, "I wouldn't want to find out the hard way that Severus was plotting about me. Have you warned Ginny?"

"Huh?" Harry asked, looking back at her from the television hanging beside the door linking the two halves of the establishment. "No. She can take care of herself."

"Against Severus?"

"Sure," Harry answered absently as he watched a man trying hard to catch up to a long high kick before the whole play came to a stop with a groan as offsides was called. Harry observed, "The offsides rule seems intended to make certain that this game never gets very exciting."

"You're on duty, Harry."

Harry drew his eyes away from the action and looked around. "Right. Sorry."

"Let's stand over there, see if we can overhear anything interesting." Tonks led the way across the room, a few feet down from the mounted, glassy-eyed elk head.

They hung there in the crowd by the wall, chatting occasionally, but mostly listening as they pretended to drink. Tonks often had to stand close when people crossed the

room and the crowd pressed in to make room. If someone had asked Harry whether he would have enjoyed pretending to be on a date with Tonks, he would have immediately answered yes. But standing there with their bodies brushing close when necessary, he was thinking that would have been mistaken. He moved to the side next time an opening appeared to do so, to give them more space.

"And who is this?" a voice nearby asked.

Harry turned and found himself facing Gregor, the Falmouth captain. The man's flinty eyes went up and down his body and he said, "Didn't know you were a poof, Potter."

Harry, who didn't feel quite himself in these clothes, still thought that a bit rich, but no responses seemed likely to keep him out of trouble. "What's it to you?" he asked but as he did, Tonks had shifted in close, giving Gregor a sharp look.

"–E's got a bird," One of the others said. "Or what certainly looks like a bird to me."

Gregor turned to Tonks. "Wouldn't you rather be with a real man, luv?" he asked her with thick insinuation.

Oh Merlin, Harry thought, let's not start that. He rolled his eyes at Gregor mockingly.

A woman dressed all in demin who was hanging at the other edge of the group's fringe said, "–e's goin' to wipe the floor with you, Gregor."

This immediately drew Gregor's attention that way, where the woman's unfortunate date looked to be pretending he wasn't. "What did you say?"

"I'm only sayin' it fer your own good."

Harry wasn't entirely displeased by the support, but it was only urging Gregor to higher levels of stupidity. He turned back to Tonks and him and said suavely, "Come on, luv. No one's been disappointed by me yet. Got –em lining up."

Harry was glad he hadn't eaten yet this evening. But when Gregor added, "This bloke can't even dress himself decently," Harry gave Tonks a reinforcing look of see?

Tonks said innocently, "Go out with a man who can't win a match without fixing the Bludgers?"

Gregor's countenance shifted. His smile inverted and his eyes darkened. He even felt nasty at a level that unnerved Harry, who slipped his wand into his hand, which was easy since Tonks was right up against him, blocking the view. He waited for a signal though, reminding himself that he wasn't in the lead here.

Gregor moved him into the lead by reaching for Tonks. Harry, without thought bodily moved into the way and the two of them ended up chest to chest with Harry's wand jammed into Gregor's solar plexus.

"Don't be stupid," Harry stated calmly. In truth, his heart was hammering away as though the episode was triggering some unexpected instinct in him.

"Gregor," the man Harry recognized as the teammate, said, "drop it or you'll be in front of the Wizengamot again a little too soon."

"He should drop it," Harry said "Or he's going to end up in St. Mungo's a little too soon." Gregor and the other man started at that. Harry added, "Yes, that's my wand." and then more snarkily, "What did you think it was?"

A flash pan went off then, startling everyone.

"Well, well," a familiar voice said. "What do we have here?" Skeeter wove her way through the crowd with expert ease.

Harry turned aside with an oath, which garnered a darkly amused glance from Gregor. The rest of the group faded and Harry realized that Tonks was gone. He didn't glance around for her, realizing just in time that he shouldn't.

Skeeter came right up to Harry. "Getting into a little tussle here, Harry?" she asked.

"No," Harry replied, "just having a friendly little discussion about proposed changes in the Quidditch rules for this season." Harry glanced at Gregor's intent expression and added, "Rules that this man's team necessitated, I believe."

Skeeter leaned in. "You're getting better at this, Harry . . . takes all the fun out of it. Perhaps I should have waited just thirty seconds more, but the two of you did look so darling, facing off like a pair of bucks in the springtime."

"Please don't talk like you write," Harry falsely pleaded in disgust.

Skeeter had turned to Gregor, but she turned back, long fingers pressed into her chest as though insulted. "My column is the most read section of the Prophet, I'll have you know. I can make or break many, many people, as Gregor here is well aware. Just because you are out of reach, now, Mr. Potter, doesn't mean you will be forever. Do keep that in mind."

She pointedly turned her back on Harry and began interviewing Gregor about what had been happening, the incident, as she began referring to it. Harry slipped out of the crowd and found Tonks, now dressed as a boarding school Muggle, complete with knee length pleated skirt and blue woolen crested jacket.

"Let's go," she whispered and they slipped easily out the back, while everyone was watching the interview.

"Sorry about that," Harry said, trying not to think of what tomorrow's paper was going to say.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Tonks said, "except block my aim for a capping, which I was looking forward to, but that I'd've had to answer for."

"What were you going to hit him with?" Harry asked, curious what might have worked in that close crowd.

"I was prepping a Boltage; it can be explained away as a Taser if there are Muggles about."

They exited the back alley and walked a while through the cool night air. "There's another pub I'd like to stop at," Tonks said after a while.

"All right," Harry said, trying not to sigh.

The second place had far fewer magical people in it and they were all clustered in the back where the hearth was burning to counteract the open door to the small courtyard. Laughter poured in from outside where the patrons had apparently been imbibing for a while.

They took a small table and Tonks surreptitiously touched her ear with her wand and sat in silence, looking at Harry, but listening in to the conversations beside them. Whenever loud laughter would start up, she would have to cover her ear with a wince. Harry, for his part, grew irked that his drinks all had the kick removed from them. He didn't serve much purpose on this shadowing, really, and he had far too much time for his mind to wander where it shouldn't.

As a distraction he watched the couples at the bar; the closest ones were literally hanging on one another. But a man in a far booth was sitting alone, brooding, and Harry realized that at this distance, he couldn't tell if the man were magical or not. Of all the people in the room, he certainly seemed the most suspicious, although he may simply have had a bad day rather than be sitting there plotting. Harry thought that if the man looked up at him that Harry might try a little Legilimency on him.

Before he could, his attention was pulled back to his companion when she asked, "Ready for your one-year review?" in an ordinary, friendly, concerned voice, as though she had dropped the official, on-duty one all of a sudden.

"I think so," Harry replied.

"While you were young, I kept thinking you'd get to skip it, despite everyone's joking about bringing you in to see how you'd do anyway." She peered at him and said, "You look much older now in comparison."

Harry swallowed – nervous about what a nine-year-old version of himself might have said to her – and changed the subject. "Do I get Moody again?"

"It's supposed to be random who you get," Tonks pointed out. "But in your case, Moody insists."

"I imagine he does," Harry commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tonks asked.

"Nothing," Harry quickly said.

"You know something I don't know?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, unable to lie.

She eyed Harry thoughtfully as she drank down half of her glass of ale in one go. "I thought he was up to something. Whose dirty work is he doing? Not Arthur's."

"I'm not supposed to know. You'll have to guess . . . which isn't particularly hard." This topic was a good one, Harry thought. It was focusing his mind nicely off of her close proximity.

"Yeah, I can guess." She frowned. "I hate it when they lose faith in you. They should know better by now." She stated this with touching vehemence, reminding Harry about the prophecy. She hadn't been mentioned by Mr. Weasley as one of the people who had been told. Harry felt inclined to simply tell her, but he wasn't supposed to. This conundrum set his loyalties against one another which he deeply disliked.

The pub's closing forced them back onto the street and Tonks said, "Let's go to a wizard pub, then. I'm still hoping to run into some people."

It had rained while they were inside and the roads were now black and quiet except that their footsteps slapped loudly now. Around the corner when they were alone, Tonks stopped and faced Harry, who was growing weary of the long night already.

"I get the sense this duty is getting to you," she said.

Harry shook himself more alert and said, "It's all right."

"You just seemed bothered by pretending to be on a date."

Chapter 21

Harry dropped his gaze to his big black shoes. "I am a little," he admitted because he desperately wanted to admit it.

"Sorry. Do you want to only shadow Kingsley or Tristan from now on?"

"No," Harry answered immediately, not allowing himself to think about it. "I . . ." but he didn't know what to say. He wasn't exactly hiding his discomfort, but he hadn't really wanted her to notice, or had he? "Let's just go to this other place."

She gave him a sad smile and with one glance back to see that he was certain of his answer, led the way.

Author's Notes:
I made up an eye color for Lupin. I was desperate.
Firing up the boiler on the angst train next chapter. Whoo whooooo! All aboard...

Chapter 22.

Dueling Loyalties

Harry took his seat with his fellows on Monday morning. Rodgers looked up at him, pulled a copy of the Prophet from his stack of parchments, folded it backwards to reveal the back page, and slid it over the top of the book Harry had just placed before him on his desk. Harry glanced down at the photograph of him and Gregor facing off – the one he had avoided looking at the previous morning when it was delivered. Harry's fellows gave him grins as he shifted the paper up to better see it. The picture was zoomed in close, so Tonks was not even in the periphery; he and Gregor were shoving each other a bit, and Harry's wand was clearly poking the other man in the ribs. Harry winced and held the paper out to his trainer to take back.

"You were on duty at the time, were you not?" Rodgers asked.

"Yes, sir," Harry admitted.

"Did he pull his wand on you?"

Harry thought that over. The events were not so clear today, nor was the point of it all. "No."

"Have a good reason for pulling your wand?"

"He's a nasty bloke and he tried to grab Tonks," Harry explained calmly, not at all like a protective boyfriend might say it, he thought.

Rodgers turned the paper around to study it. "Tonks can take care of herself, I'm quite certain," he mocked mildly.

"Yes, sir," Harry repeated, not wanting to use the excuse that he had kept Tonks out of trouble.

"Better you in the photograph than Tonks, I suppose," Rodgers muttered as though assuming that exact thing. After that, he dropped the subject and banished the newspaper. Back at the front of the room he began, "Tomorrow is your one-year review testing. Everyone should be here – as they were today – on time, if not early."

"We were all here early to see Harry after that photograph in the newspaper yesterday," Aaron supplied, making Harry close his eyes.

"Well, tomorrow you have an even better reason," Rodgers stated dryly.

At home, Harry had a letter from his guardian waiting, along with a small pile of what appeared to be fan mail; although one was a howler from a Falmouth fan complaining about how unfair everyone was to his team and now with Harry Potter being so mean, it was just the final straw. Harry carefully uncovered his ears after the red envelope dissolved into a curl of black ash. Most of the other letters, replete with exclamation marks, were along the lines of: Gregor deserved it, and why didn't Harry hit him with a Crucio anyway, hadn't he ever seen him on the pitch?

Harry stacked the letters away and opened the one from Severus, who seemed overly concerned that Harry was staying out of trouble, given that he had already tried to initiate a bar fight with a known thug. Sighing yet again that day, he wrote out a reply that opened with how he regretted the pub incident but mostly talked about how very ready he felt for his one-year review; although, now that he thought about it while chewing on his quill, there were some subjects he had only read in a hurry when he had to catch up after being in Finland.

Harry put the letter aside and went to get his books. They formed rather a large stack on the table and unlike his Hogwarts courses he didn't have a good, organized outline of what was supposed to have been covered. A kind of cold dread seeped into Harry. The stack, which was taller than him when he was sitting, sat in silent challenge, too late to conquer. Harry took the top book down and flipped through it, thinking that at least he could remind himself of the subjects for tomorrow, if not memorize a few new things.

The next morning, Harry rose feeling refreshed. He had unexpectedly found a new bottle of sleeping potion in his night stand drawer and put a sip of it to good use. At the Ministry his fellows were sleepily taking their seats, until Rodgers swept in and said, "Push them to the side." With groans they stood up and did as instructed while Rodgers explained, "The lot of you complained last time about not doing your best

at counters after three hours of written exams, so we're changing the order around. If you think you are better with a wand than a quill, that's fine by me."

They went to the locker room to change into their workout suits, since none of them wanted their robes messed up. Harry tugged his now familiar fuzzy one-piece straight. It had faded to a flat grey and the Auror's patch had threads hanging loose on it, especially the gold threads. Maybe they would be issued new ones for year two. Maybe something that didn't resemble a t-shirt that had got it in its head to become a set of plus fours at the bottom.

Harry swung his wand at his side and followed Aaron and Vineet back to the workout room to wait for the examiners. Kerry Ann came in just after Tonks did.

"Kalendula, you've drawn Tonks and you're first," Rodgers explained. Harry and his fellows backed up as far as possible, all the way to the wall, to watch. While Kerry Ann positioned herself, it felt to Harry as though someone should be officiating these duels. "The two pre-defined counters are a combined dome and crystalline chrysanthemum and a super-modulated titan. A moderate blasting curse will be provided for you to time it against. Then you will be required to wrap up your examiner with a tendon-chain binding, and it must hold for thirty seconds."

Aaron groaned at that, since all of them could jinx his away well within that time. "He picked that one just because I have trouble with it, I bet," he grumbled.

Vineet, appearing relaxed with his arms crossed, said, "But that would mean he is doing Harry a favor."

"Hm, true," Aaron said, agreeing with the unlikelihood of that. He turned to Harry while Rodgers explained the limits on the three free-form attacks the examiner was allowed to use. "Would you rather do the spell casting or the written first?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said. He was feeling confident again about the written test, if only because he had spent half of his waking life the last two months with a book in front of him.

They quieted to watch as Tonks cast a blasting curse at Kerry Ann, which was easily blocked. Rodgers made a note on a small tablet in his hand and nodded that Tonks could cast the second curse.

Kerry Ann did well against everything except a swirling blinding screamer that they had not covered yet. It required three tries for Kerry Ann to cancel it out and it was possible that it had faded on its own. Rodgers made a note without comment and gestured that she was finished.

Chapter 22

"Wish I drew Tonks," Aaron muttered. "I bet I have Moody this time."

"Nope," Harry said. "I do."

"How do you know?" Aaron asked.

"I just do," Harry said, stepping up as his name was called. Moody entered just then as though he had been waiting outside the door for that moment. Harry took up the same position Kerry Ann had – near the corner of the room, but leaving space for a block to expand.

The first two blasting curses were easily handled, and Harry began to feel that he may make it this time. After all, he had been hoping for this moment and his chance to prove that he was good at this, if not get even for the bruises he took home last December.

Harry, at Rodgers' nod, cast a tendon binding, but Moody canceled it on the second try and only his deliberation made the spell hold for ten seconds. Harry frowned, he had hoped it would hold longer and wished to ask for a second try as his ego prodded him that he wasn't using this opportunity very effectively.

Next, Harry had to demonstrate his ability to counter the unexpected. Both of Moody's eyes were drilling into Harry's own as the old Auror shouted, "Koukooken!" and three spinning arched blades swooped out of his wand. It looked and sounded like a Weasley twins kind of spell. Harry used a Titan, but the flashing arcs just bounced off and wheeled to attack again, but now they were spread out and would arrive at disparate moments. Harry knocked one away from himself with an air canon, but the other two were approaching from opposite sides. He should have used a rubber shield in the first place to catch all of them while they were together, but it was too late and he was still slow at casting that block and may not have had time. The two closer blades bounced off his modulated block and the third was approaching at the fastest yet. Harry began to sweat.

A blasting curse sent the singleton away again as the two opposing ones closed in again. Harry stepped back just as they were to strike, tossing a close-range titan before himself for safety. The two exploded in stabbing light as they struck, and Harry blinked hard to see where the third had gone. He didn't have time to locate it as it came in low and knocked his right leg out from under him. The feel of the cold metal passing hard over his flesh made him assume he had been cut deeply, but a quick glance down at his leg as he stood up showed only that his workout suit had been snagged.

Moody canceled the remainder of the spell with the growl, "It very well could have cut. You're lucky I dulled it."

Harry resisted examining his leg again and held his wand at the ready. Rodgers said, "You aren't supposed to use damaging spells, Alastor," before giving a nod for the next spell.

Moody grunted as though he wished to debate that, and Harry stilled himself to await the next spell. There was no incantation, but there was an awful lot of light. Beams of white scattered all around out of Moody's wand before coalescing into a flat wall that swung around like a giant cricket bat. Harry used a chrysanthemum block to no effect and the beam struck him. He was on his knees and the beam was coming around again. Disoriented and seeing spots of darkness in his vision, Harry tried a rubber block, but when the beam passed by again, it froze where the spells met and exploded, knocking into Harry, who was just rising off his right knee.

Harry opened his eyes only to have the normal room lighting stab painfully into his brain. He was flat on his face on the floor, with his cheek pressed hard against the cool, highly polished wood. Rodgers' voice asked if he was all right from a crouched position beside him. Harry thought, I'm alive, I must be. But somehow he couldn't get his mouth to work in order to speak it.

"I said, – no damaging spells'," Rodgers snapped, presumably at Moody. "What the devil was that?"

Harry managed to move a hand to push himself up while Moody explained that Harry handled it about as badly as he could have and the damage came from his counter backfiring. Harry thought that it seemed like a setup to chose a spell that would interact badly with the block they had most recently learned.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted as he got to his knees. He said this despite the excessive weight Rodgers was supporting under his arm, but he refused to stay down.

"Right," Rodgers mocked, but when he let go, Harry managed to balance.

Harry's vision was still off, his arm ached where he had fallen and most annoyingly, his toes were tingling. "I'll try the last spell," he said, because Moody was being sent off.

"What?" Rodgers said from beside the other Auror.

Harry was contemplating how awful his grade was going to be as well as certain he could counter this last spell, damn it. "I have a third spell for my test," he insisted. His fellows even started to argue otherwise, but Moody had a smile, crooked even considering that his smiles always came out crooked.

"Potter says he's fine . . . overconfident as always." Moody cast the third unannounced spell without waiting for Rodgers' signal. A black dot, which at first Harry

thought was a disturbance on his vision, expanded from Moody's wand until it encompassed Harry, shielding his view of the room and leaving him in a tunnel where there was nothing behind and only a sparkle of light ahead of him. There was utter silence within the spell. Harry hesitated, trying hard to approach this one more thoughtfully than the others where he had gone on instinct, to his detriment.

The tunnel began to oscillate, swinging in a circle and closing in. It was stronger than Harry and forced him to bend down as it pressed in. Harry, for lack of good ideas, went with instinct. He raised his wand over his head – because that was one of the few directions that kept the others in the room safe – and sliced with a cutting curse. The tunnel buckled and light poured into the gap before the oscillation became a thrashing that tossed Harry to the ceiling where only his Quidditch-born reaction saved his head, but sacrificed his shoulder. The sound of the desks cracking against the wall from the blast followed right after. Freed of the spell when it exploded, Harry plummeted to the floor, surprised to find his landing softened.

Harry glanced up at Moody in surprise but his wand was aimed at the floor. Rodgers, Kerry Ann and Vineet all had cast something to break Harry's fall or soften his landing and Aaron looked as though he wished he had been quick enough to cast something too. The spells were waved away and Harry sat up and immediately regretted it. Rodgers approached again and tugged Harry to his feet. Harry wanted a chair, really, not his feet, but he fought the overwhelming need to rest.

"Down to the dispensary. Kalendula, you take him," Rodgers ordered. Kerry Ann approached despite Harry's denial that he needed a healer.

Moody said, " – E's not overconfident anymore, is – e?"

Rodgers said to Moody, "If I have any say in it, that's the last interim apprentice exam you are helping with."

Harry stalled in the doorway to see Moody's reaction to that. Moody said, "You can't protect them from everything." Then to Harry, he said, "You've still got a lot to learn, Potter. Remember that."

"Come on, Harry," Kerry Ann urged when Harry hesitated while searching for a response.

Harry stalked to the lifts as best he could while needing help balancing. The lifts seemed very far away from the workout room all of a sudden. When they did reach it, the lurching of it made his stomach nearly rebel.

"Are you going to make it?" Kerry Ann asked. "I can just take you to Mungo's."

"No," Harry said, imagining the scene his appearance would cause in the waiting room at the wizard hospital.

In the dispensary, Harry sat heavily in an overstuffed chair that tried to swallow him, which meant he was not going to get out of it without assistance. Kerry Ann fetched the Healer, a pasty-faced young man who had played Chaser for Ravenclaw when Harry was a second year. At least he healed Harry's shoulder quick enough without him even needing to move from his cushioned spot. For his spell-disturbed nerves, the Healer poured a concoction of potions together, added a tumbler of Pimms to it and handed it over.

Harry sniffed it and, despite the burn it caused his eyes, downed it under the assumption that he couldn't feel much worse. And indeed five minutes later Harry did feel better: he felt numb, pretty much all over.

When Harry stirred from deep within the overstuffed chair, Kerry Ann said, "We should get back."

Harry tried to sit forward to heave himself up, but it was impossible. He held out a hand for assistance and the much lighter Kerry Ann hauled hard to pull him to his feet.

In the lift, Harry realized that he had three hours of written examination coming up and he could barely feel his fingers. "Shit," he muttered.

"You should have let me take you to Mungo's," Kerry Ann pointed out as they stepped out. "Good excuse to reschedule the rest of the examination."

Harry had been looking forward too keenly to getting this out of the way to imagine putting it off. Concentrating hard, he followed Kerry Ann into the training room where Vineet and Aaron were sitting at their desks, waiting. The other two desks were already arranged and Harry fell gratefully into the closest one.

"Surviving, Potter?" Rodgers asked.

Harry shrugged. He wasn't going to ask for anything from this man. The test parchment was slid over his desk, hanging halfway to the floor as the scroll unfurled. Harry looked around in a panic for a quill, and found Kerry Ann holding out a never-out quill for him.

"Thanks," Harry said, checking that she had another before starting.

Harry, with regulations freshest in his mind, scrolled through and answered all of those first. The curse-related ones he did next, but as he was writing out the last

of those answers, his thoughts began to drag. The clock showed that nearly an hour had passed. Harry rubbed his eyes and went back to figure out question one which was about filing procedure, which for some reason, he honestly couldn't remember the details of. The rules were posted on the wall of the filing room and memorizing them, as a result of their easy access, had not held much purpose. Harry skipped to the next blank question.

"Potter," Rodgers prodded sharply an hour later. Harry had only meant to rest his eyes and fortunately only five minutes had passed since he had put his head down on his arm.

Harry pushed his hair back, rubbed his forehead where he was getting a throbbing headache and went back again to question one. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the pegboard in the file room. It reluctantly came into focus. Labeling procedure was on the parchment on the right. Harry needed to know what the dual color codes meant as well as the archive and disposal timelines. He could almost see it in his mind and hoped that Rodgers didn't prod him again, given that he was upright. Harry felt hot and then cold and the file room in his mind suddenly didn't contain anything but piles of junk. He opened his eyes. Rodgers had left the room and Kerry Ann worked diligently beside him.

Cripes, Harry thought; he wasn't going to score any better this time around. This bothered him rather a lot, given how many times over the last half year he had told himself that he would do better. Giving up on question one, Harry began rereading his other answers, fixing some alarming errors he spotted in his answers to the potions questions. Getting those wrong would really be the end.

Harry turned in his examination parchment, ate his lunch without tasting it, and forced his eyes to remain open throughout a lecture on suspect background interviews. Rodgers didn't keep them after 3:00 p.m. much to Harry's relief.

Harry took the Floo home, turning down his fellow's invitation to go to a pub. They gave him sympathetic looks before he turned to join a queue at the first hearth, not trusting himself to Apparate home after the day he had had.

At home, Harry tossed his cloak down on the hall floor, climbed the stairs, and fell into bed. Evening turned into night and Harry slept through Hedwig coming to his window. She finally gave up and went hunting, leaving the letter on the doorstep.

Ginny Weasley led Winthrop, a first-year Gryffindor, back to the tower from the furthest darkest fifth floor corridor where he had been trapped in a wardrobe by mischievous students that the boy refused to name. His sniveling had at least ceased by the time they made it back to where the lamps flared brightly. Ginny would be the one to have heard his pounding, of course, not Heather, the new Prefect.

"Ms. Weasley," a deep, slippery voice said behind them just before they reached the staircases.

Ginny stopped and turned. "Professor." Snape strode up to them and stopped abruptly, making his robes swish. Beside her, Winthrop edged closer as though for protection.

"It is after-hours, Ms. Weasley, is it not?" Snape asked.

"I'm taking care of one of my house students who was locked in a wardrobe by some of your students. I'm not out for my health, if that's what you mean." Ginny wasn't certain which students actually were responsible, but Slytherin seemed a good bet. Snape's eyes bored into Winthrop's for a long breath before flicking back up to Ginny's.

"Nevertheless," Snape said. "You no longer have the cover of being a Prefect, which you were so fond of using previously. Mr. Winthrop, go up to your tower and next time do not take rumors of treasures of sweets so seriously."

Winthrop scampered off, his footfalls fading into the distance. Ginny began, "I can't exactly be punished anymore than I-"

Snape ignored her and swung around, commanding, "This way, Ms. Weasley."

She followed him down to the Defense classroom where the lamps were already burning. "Good evening, Ms. Weasley," Lupin said from behind them, beside the door as they entered, startling Ginny.

"Up there." Snape pointed to the far end of the platform. When she hesitated, he sneered, "Or would you prefer to do this in front of the class?"

"Do what?"

"Up!" Snape ordered, long finger still pointed. Ginny slunk over and Snape stepped up to the other end.

"What are we doing?" Ginny asked, getting an alarming inkling.

Snape replied silkily, "We are having a rematch."

Chapter 22

"We're what?!" Ginny exclaimed and then promptly broke into hysterics, bending over her arm she laughed so hard. Lupin had moved to stand beside the platform at the halfway point. "You're judging?" she asked him between guffaws.

"I have been unwillingly drafted as judge, yes," Lupin replied, smiling lightly, perhaps at her amusement.

Ginny wiped her eyes on her sleeve and sniffled, still laughing occasionally. "I suppose that – no out-of-class dueling' rule doesn't count if you're the deputy headmaster." She cleared her throat and tried to be serious. "Or are you going to give me additional detention when we're through? Or only if I win?" This made her laugh again which necessitated drying her eyes again.

"I waited until you broke the rules, Ms. Weasley," Snape stated.

"Right," Ginny returned. She cleared her throat and pushed her shoulders back. "I guess I can't very easily get out of this."

Snape raised his wand with the precision of an orchestra conductor and twice the concentration. "We can dispense with that silly pacing off and go with a count."

"No," Ginny argued, but then remembered to appeal to the judge. "That gives him too much time to Legilimize me. I want the paced count."

Lupin hitched his hands behind his back and rocked up on the balls of his feet. "I have to side with Ginny on this one."

Snape rolled his eyes and tossed his wand hand in annoyance. "All right," he growled and came to the center. "I should have known to expect such decisions when I asked you to judge."

Lupin pleasantly said, "I'm the only staff member who would have agreed to it, I'm quite certain."

Darkly, Snape muttered, "You are far too agreeable, Remus." He faced off with Ginny, who was having a hard time taking this seriously enough despite sheer panic looming just beyond her stifled hysterics.

They turned back to back, wands raised upon Lupin's gesture to do so. "Do I get anything if I win?" Ginny asked.

Snape hesitated. "I'll take a week off of your summer detention."

"Really? Well, that's worth trying for." Just as Lupin began counting and Snape took a long step, Ginny asked, "You can really do that?"

Snape aborted his pacing and returned to his former spot, back turned. "YES. Now duel. You certainly are reluctant for someone willing to practice illicitly not to mention sneak off school grounds in order to do so."

"All right, all right."

They paced off and turned inward, casting simultaneously, producing a grand shower of flaming spheres. Snape lowered his wand. "What did you counter that with?" he asked.

"Like I'd tell you," Ginny retorted, wand still up. George had shown her the flaming water-demon spell under the promise that she only use it in an emergency.

As Snape re-raised his wand, Lupin said, "I'll give you another count to three."

On three, Ginny raised a block and deflected the incoming blinding spell. She wanted a free shot and now she had one. Snape's eyes were drilling into hers, though. "Ugh," she said, staring down at the floor to think of a different spell and casting a blasting curse, only as she raised her eyes. This was blocked far too easily, she should have thought of something better. Another exchange of low level jinxes were easily blocked, letting Ginny relax. She tossed out the torpedo spell that Harry had shown the D.A. when he visited, but this was dispensed with even easier and with the sneer, "I invented that spell."

"Oops," Ginny uttered and then swallowed hard since now it was Snape's turn. He waited several breaths before spinning the tip of his wand around with the incantation, "Fluctexarmus!" A comet of orange energy circled around Ginny, undeterred by anything she tried against it. She leapt back but it turned fast and swept the wand out of her hand and dropped it on the floor behind Lupin.

Ginny's shoulders fell, but she held in the damn that threatened to sneak out of her lips. Lupin pleasantly quipped, "Well, that was quite well matched."

"Best two out of three?" Ginny asked her professor innocently.

Snape rolled his eyes and stalked off.

As the night grew its darkest, Harry finally woke up. He sniffled and scrubbed the grit from his eyes. An odd dream had woken him. In it, he was staring into a darkened house window and in the reflection he could see fire surrounding him, but when he

turned to look about himself, there was nothing but a quiet road winding through rows of boxy houses. The flames burned strong though in the reflection, as if well fed.

Hungry and in need of a bath, Harry shed his clothes for his dressing gown and went downstairs into the cold air of the quiet house. He drank tea and did that day's readings at a calm, leisurely pace that almost made him consider getting up early all of the time. With thoughts turned painfully to what his exam results were going to be from yesterday, Harry Apparated into the Ministry.

The first thing Rodgers said when he walked in gave him a reprieve. In responding to an apparent question from Kerry Ann, Rodgers was saying, "You'll get your results next week, I think. Things are too busy to score them right now." He gave Harry a sharp eying as he took the desk beside Kerry Ann's. "Better, Potter?" he asked pointedly.

"Mostly," Harry replied, hoping to leave enough doubt that he wouldn't be used for difficult demonstrations that day.

Vineet arrived presently and then they waited for Aaron, who was five minutes late. But even after they were all present, Rodgers continued to page through his own notes in silence, rather than begin. The door opened and Mr. Weasley leaned his head in and gestured for Rodgers to start. The apprentices grew curious at this, but as soon as Rodgers began speaking they fell to their official manuals.

"Let's start with the reading review today. Who can tell me the correct procedure for filing a follow-up complaint regarding a haunted property?" His eyes scanned their faces before stopping on Harry's with as flat an expression as he had ever used. "Potter . . . can you?"

Harry put his hand on his book but didn't need to open it since he had read this not an hour before. "We have to use a translucent grey form so that it gets routed properly to the Paranormal office. As with most repeated complaints where we think the original complaint wasn't handled properly, we add a note in our own open case log to arrange for someone to verify in a few weeks' time that the other department did indeed follow through."

Rodgers hesitated before saying, "Correct."

In the middle of discussing filing procedures and evidence exhibit logging the door opened again. Mr. Weasley said, "Harry," and stepped back to wait for Harry to join him. Harry did so after closing the Fastidious Filing Manual that he had open

before him. Something about Mr. Weasley's sober attitude made him not ask any questions, just follow as they turned left at the end of the corridor, rather than right toward Mr. Weasley's office. They passed the ventilation shaft and the owl cages and went all the way down to the end beyond two inexplicable jogs in the corridor. Harry had not been down here since his original tour when he started almost a year ago. This area held the interrogation rooms.

Tonks stood holding a metal-clad door open. It was Mr. Weasley who said, "In here, Harry, and give me your wand."

Harry's heart tried very hard to speed up, taking a disturbing stuttering start at it. He calmed it as he entered with the firm belief that nothing was amiss, nor could possibly ever be the very amiss implied by what was happening. Inside the bare room sat a single stool, bolted to the floor with plates larger than that on their practice dummy. Fudge and Moody stood beside the wide door, looking somber and reminding Harry of the open investigation the Department of Mysteries had on him since his return from Finland. But he had not had any difficulties, recently anyway, with the Dark Plane, so he should be safe on that account, he believed. Harry handed Mr. Weasley his wand, handle first. His heart again tried to race at the loss of it.

Mr. Weasley said, "Have a seat, Harry," in a more normal voice and Harry obeyed, calmed again although his muscles tingled as if they themselves were alarmed and readying for flight. The fairy lights floating at the ceiling congregated above Harry, placing him in a column of light which made the faces around him harder to discern. Harry wanted to ask something, but couldn't even come up with a decent question, given how unexpected his circumstances were.

Moody flicked his cloak off of his left shoulder and stalked past Harry's knees. "Couldn't resist a little revenge, could you, Potter?" he asked in a knowing tone.

"What?" Harry managed.

Moody stalked back to the right. Harry glanced at the other occupants of the room. Tonks had her eyes on the floor. Mr. Weasley watched Moody. Fudge looked avid and hungry. Moody went on, "Last week brought it all back, didn't it? All those years added up, didn't they? And after doing poorly on your year-end exams you had to take it out on someone . . ."

"What?" Harry asked again, but the way no one heeded his voice, it was as though he hadn't spoken. Harry's mind began racing now, but it couldn't latch onto even an unreasonable possible explanation for what was happening.

Moody plowed on, "Did you really think the Ministry would just let it go? That you are owed that much?"

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded.

Mr. Weasley said, "Alastor is asking the questions, Harry."

Harry closed his jaw, which had fallen open. Was he dreaming? Harry wondered. This disconnect with his notions of all of these people definitely felt dreamlike. He rubbed his forehead where the headache that had been teasing at him now blossomed into a pounding spike. "I don't know what he is asking me," Harry insisted, sounding more desperate than he wished. This couldn't be real.

Moody leaned close. "What do you think you are owed?" he asked slowly, his magical eye trained unwaveringly on Harry.

Harry stared at him, unable to come up with a response that wasn't a question itself, especially one that included – bloody hell.' "Nothing," Harry finally replied, exasperated.

Mr. Weasley stepped up beside Moody. "This isn't working, Alastor."

Moody, after a faint snarl at Mr. Weasley, stalked over to the wall to glower at Harry from beside Fudge. Harry found himself on the verge of quoting some of the choice things Moody had said about Fudge in the past. He bit his lip instead, certain that it would not help even as satisfied as it would make him feel.

Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, where were you last night?"

Finally. "At home."

Mr. Weasley put one hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned close. "Anyone there with you?"

"My house-elf," Harry replied.

"Anyone else?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry's heart was sticking to a higher rhythm now. "No."

Mr. Weasley straightened, put his hands behind his back and paced a bit. "But you weren't there to receive your post at around 10:30 p.m.," he commented gently. He gestured at Tonks, who held out a letter. Hermione's handwriting was clearly visible on it. Mr. Weasley held it up for Harry to see it. "It was undelivered on your front step. Ms. Granger states that she sent it around 7:10 p.m."

Harry's hands were trying to shake, so he gripped the stool seat all the harder. "I was asleep. I must-"

Mr. Weasley interrupted him. "Last night, Harry, someone, using a firestarting spell, burned down Number Four, Privet Drive."

Harry nearly fell off the narrow stool he was sitting on despite clutching it fiercely. "Was anyone hurt?" he asked when he processed that notion properly.

As he should have expected, no one answered this question. Mr. Weasley asked, "Who do you think lives at Number Four, Privet Drive, Harry?"

Harry thought he would prefer Moody's interrogation since Harry wondered why Mr. Weasley would ask him such a stupid question. "The Dursleys," Harry replied.

Mr. Weasley shook his head. Moody supplied, "Moved out six months ago."

Harry deflated. That stupid question was a test and he had failed it miserably. "You think – ?" Harry began to ask in higher alarm, but Mr. Weasley holding up his hand for silence, made him close his mouth.

"No one besides your house-elf was there with you last night?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Winky is always there. She knows I was home," Harry insisted.

"Inadmissible," Fudge grunted; the first thing he had said.

"What does he mean?" Harry asked, forgetting again that he wasn't supposed to ask anything and wincing inwardly when he remembered too late.

Mr. Weasley rubbed his face. "He means that your house-elf cannot be a witness for you since the binding spell makes them capable of deception in their master's interest."

"I'm not bound to Winky," Harry said.

The room seemed to freeze. "You aren't?" Mr. Weasley prompted with interest.

"No. I didn't want to do the spell. She's only bound to Severus."

Mr. Weasley gave Moody a sharp look. "Fetch Winky, Alastor."

While they waited, questions ballooned inside of Harry, frantic to get out. He sat silently though, suffering.

Moody returned into the tense silence. He had Winky by the back of her tea-towel and she was using her long fingers to pry his open. He shook her to get her to stop.

"Leave her alone," Harry demanded angrily.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley held out his hand and said in a tone that was half threat but of the fatherly kind. "This would not be a good time to lose your temper."

Chapter 22

Harry's anger, now loosed, was finding a lot of targets. He glared at each person in turn, even Tonks, who still stared at her feet, wand pointed at the floor.

"Tell him not to manhandle Winky, then. She hasn't done anything wrong."

"Crouch's old elf," Fudge said, insinuatingly. "Interesting . . . very interesting . . ." Harry couldn't discern his features in the shadowy corner by the door.

Moody lorded over Winky and asked, "Your Master order you to watch over Potter here . . . like you used to for Barty Jr.?" Winky rubbed her hands rapidly over each other and blinked up at Moody before glancing nervously at Harry. Moody impatiently demanded, "Did he?"

"Winky watch over Harry Potter, yes. Master wishes this. Winky good elf," the last came out sadly uncertain.

"And was Harry Potter at home last night?" Moody demanded.

"Yes," Winky replied.

"What time did he come home?"

Winky shook her head and twisted her hands together. "Winky no tell time."

Harry swallowed a noise of exasperation. Fortunately, Moody was familiar with this. He asked, "Was it still light out when Potter returned home?"

"Yes."

"Was he there until it was completely dark?" Another nod. "Did he leave . . . AT ALL . . . before it became light again?"

"No," Winky replied, sounding small.

Harry released the breath he had been holding. "You don't really think I'd try to hurt my aunt and uncle . . . ?"

"Harry," Mr. Weasley warned sharply. Harry had never seen him truly angry, now realized that he really didn't wish to, and that he may be about to.

Tonks had finally raised her eyes, looking between Winky and Harry and actually meeting Harry's eyes. "The evidence is rather damning, Harry," she said.

"What evidence?" Harry returned. "I want Severus here," he then said, feeling fear welling behind his anger now that words like – inadmissible' and – evidence' were being tossed about.

Mr. Weasley grabbed Harry's shoulder for an instant. "You are too old to insist he be here," he explained, oddly in a tone intended for someone much younger. "We may have made an exception when you were seventeen, but not now."

"I want a solicitor then," Harry said.

"That you may have," Mr. Weasley said and stepped back as though waiting.

"Have one lined up do you?" Moody offered.

"I don't know one, but Hermione could probably recommend one." Harry looked around at all of them. "I just want someone here on my side," he insisted, not managing to keep his voice from sounding bleak.

This statement caused a visible reaction in both Tonks and Mr. Weasley, who said, "Harry, if the truth is on your side, you have no concerns here."

Harry rubbed his stabbing head and let some of the tension out of his shoulders. He was wishing he had stayed in Finland.

"Do you want a solicitor, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I want to hear what the evidence is," Harry retorted.

Mr. Weasley withdrew Harry's wand from his robe pocket and held it up. "A phoenix-core wand has some unique properties; one of which is its firestarting spell. Did you know that, Harry?"

Harry winced inwardly at Mr. Weasley's frown when he replied honestly, "No."

Mr. Weasley said, "A phoenix-core wand leaves a distinctive feather pattern in the ash of the fire it starts. You might even see it in the carbon black in the wax of a candle you lit. Never noticed it, eh?"

Harry shook his head.

Mr. Weasley appeared disappointed.

"Check his wand," Fudge muttered from his shadowy corner.

"That can be fooled," Moody muttered. "I've made my wand forget spells."

"We'll assume for the moment that Harry has not progressed as far as you," Mr. Weasley stated and didn't see Moody's dubious expression because he was pulling out his own wand and aiming the tips together. "Prior Incantato," Mr. Weasley incanted and Harry's wand spilled forth a hazy version of the teapot he had reheated that morning, a curl of steam issuing from its ghostly spout. Mr. Weasley repeated

the spell and Harry's Pack spell to clean up the library at home followed, ghostly books flying around the bare interrogation room. Again and again the spell was repeated, backing lengthily through Harry's previous day's testing and the night before. Harry had had no idea that he used magic so often at home.

They all waited as another day was backed through after Moody insisted Harry could have somehow recreated all of those numerous blocks from drill practice Monday.

"Spell's not on here," Mr. Weasley said.

"Maybe he owns a second wand of the same core," Fudge suggested. "Did you check with Ollivanders?" This last was directed at Moody.

"I asked how many wands of that type there were. He said he rarely sold more than one a decade, so I doubt there are more than 12 or so roving about in use. You have another wand, Potter?" Moody asked while leaning close so his magic eye filled Harry's vision.

"No."

In the ensuing silence Harry tried another question of his own. "What happened? Was anyone hurt?"

Mr. Weasley replied, "Only slightly, fortunately. Young couple that lives there now jumped out a rear first story window onto some overgrown shrubbery." Staring fixedly at Harry, he asked, "Did you burn down the Dursley house, Harry?"

You have to effing ask that? Harry nearly snapped in disbelief. "No," he replied, anger barely in check.

"We're having a very difficult time, you see, coming up with anyone else who would have," Mr. Weasley stated.

Harry's mind, which had been spinning aimlessly, latched unexpectedly onto Mr. Weasley's previous statement. "Someone's trying to frame me," he insisted. "Someone who, unlike myself, wouldn't have known that the Dursleys would never let the shrubs get overgrown. Honestly, if I were going to attack the Dursleys I'd make certain it was them at home and I'd have known it wasn't in that case."

Mr. Weasley and Fudge shared a look and Tonks for the first time, brightened slightly. "A setup is certainly a possibility," Mr. Weasley said with strange care, but it still let Harry relax marginally that he had said it at all. Harry glanced around the stark interrogation room and felt anger returning, full force. He clamped his jaw tight to keep himself from speaking. Mr. Weasley held Harry's wand out to him. "I think we are done for now."

Moody made a noise of disgust, prompting Mr. Weasley to say. "There isn't enough evidence to hold him, Alastor." Harry accepted his wand, forcing his movements to be fluid rather than violent to express the hot anger searing his limbs.

Harry followed Mr. Weasley back to the workout room. The trip felt like a mile, during which Harry barely managed to avoid snapping out a variety of vicious comments about them not trusting him; all of which, he was certain, were a bad idea. At the door to the workout room Mr. Weasley said to Rodgers in an awkward attempt at nonchalance, "Here's Harry back."

Harry took his seat. His vision was going strange with his anger, as though a black veil were flashing in the wind in front of his face. It took him a few seconds to realize that Kerry Ann had spoken his name in concern. He didn't know if she had asked anything, just had a sense of her speaking. Drawing on a well of good attitude that somehow hadn't run dry, Harry managed, "It's nothing."

Rodgers gave Harry a long looking over before returning to their review of the filing manual.

Harry didn't eat anything at lunch; he couldn't face idle, pointless conversation. He sat alone in the workout room, nursing his headache. His much needed solitude was interrupted by Mr. Weasley, who pulled the desk before Harry's around to face him. With his hands clasped on the desktop, he said, "As Tonks said, Harry, the situation does appear quite damning on the face of it."

Harry swallowed hard as a small, disloyal part of his mind tried to agree. Mr. Weasley gave him a lot of time to reply but finally decided Harry was not going to. "The Prophet has not noticed the Muggle articles about the fire, I expect because the address is no longer on the wizard registry. I believe, Harry, that it is in your best interest that they not find out. I've managed to keep the investigation secret so far. Alastor and Cornelius are amendable to that for their own reasons: for one thing it allows them to keep control of the investigation."

"They really think I did it?" Harry demanded angrily and then bit his lip for the twentieth time that morning; to his own ears he sounded peevish, like Draco Malfoy. The translucent black curtain fluttered before his vision again. The gateway to the Dark Plane must be wide open. Harry felt around him, felt the queer hunger of the creatures waiting just beyond the barrier. He made himself release some of the poisonous anger filling him like an electric current, even though it threatened to take his forbearance with it.

Mr. Weasley said, "You need to keep this to yourself, Harry. The investigation is coded blue, and you have learned what that means, I assume."

Harry nodded. "Explicit permission must be obtained from the lead investigator to release any information."

"That includes Severus, Harry."

Harry's brow furrowed. He hadn't thought ahead to going home, but if he had, firing an owl off to his guardian would have been the very first thing he would have done. "I understand," Harry said, hating to say it.

Mr. Weasley stood. "Keep it in line, Harry. I expect Alastor will be keeping an eye on you."

"I didn't do anything," Harry insisted. "Don't you believe me?"

"My belief doesn't help anything, Harry," he replied vaguely before he opened the door and departed.

During drills, Harry was hopelessly distracted. He couldn't generate a dome-crystalline block at all and ended up flat on the floor many times as a result. The last time, he nearly blacked out completely, and as Rodgers used a water spritzing spell on his face to wake him up, Harry thought he was back in the Triwizard tournament, passing out because his gills had faded and he couldn't breathe.

"Take a break, Potter," Rodgers snapped.

Harry scrambled to his feet, nearly fell as his vision went bad again, but found his desk and clung to its solidity. His fellows were gazing at him in alarm but they eventually went on with their drills.

At the end of the day, Harry departed before anyone could ask him a question that he couldn't answer. The house was eerily silent when he arrived home. Rubbing his bruised arm, Harry went to his room and lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, ignoring for nearly an hour Kali's frantic clawing at her cage to get out.

Harry finally rose, wondering as he did why he had lain there so long, doing nothing. Kali climbed onto his shoulders and circled manically.

"Sorry," Harry said to her, knowing his own distress was possessing her. He held her in the crook of his arm and petted her, even though she struggled against it.

Harry paced the house, thinking he should find his friends and then nixing that idea when he considered the torment of not being able to share his troubles with them, especially in the face of what he knew would be painful assurances of help on Hermione's part. Thinking of his friends gave him the energy to open his post. A

Muggle letter from Pamela peaked his interest, so he opened that one first. In it she again lamented that he did not have a telephone as she badly needed to talk to him.

Harry put the letter down and Disapparated to her house. Pamela had just come in and was putting her keys and purse away. "Harry, what timing," she said brightly and then seemed to take in his emotional state in one quick glance, "Is everything all right?"

"Things have become a little complicated at the Ministry. But it's all right," he lied, and not very well, he thought.

"Well, I don't want to bother you if you have other things to worry about . . ."

"No, really. I need the distraction," Harry insisted.

"I'd ring you if you only had a phone so you wouldn't have to come all this way."

"It's not a problem, really," Harry insisted.

Pamela took her own post out of a holder by the door. "So I borrowed your owl to send a letter to Remus . . . I left my glove, hoping you would send her."

Harry blinked at that. "Clever of you."

"But, I got back a response that makes me very curious about some things." She unfolded a letter and looked it over before sighing. "I tried to be plain about hoping to see him again, but he doesn't seem to get it . . ."

"You what?" Harry said. "Oh," he then said he accepted that "You've only met him once," he felt compelled to point out.

"Haven't you ever liked someone the first time you laid eyes on them?" she asked.

"Er, maybe," Harry said.

She folded up the letter. "I wondered, for example, is Remus gay?"

"Not that I know of," Harry said.

"He has no girlfriend now?"

"Not that I know of," Harry repeated.

"Then, he has some serious skeleton rattling in his cupboard, right?"

"He has . . . sorta," Harry admitted, thinking that revelations of such things should come from the source.

She gazed at him without blinking before asking, "The kind Severus apparently has?"

"Not at all," Harry said in relief at her good question. "No, nothing like that."

"So, unlike Severus, you wouldn't mind if I dated Remus?"

Harry struggled for a second. "If he agreed to it . . . I think . . . that'd be fine." Harry hesitated again before asking, "You have a thing for wizards?"

She smiled a little crookedly and tilted her head side to side. "Yeah, I guess." Shyly, she asked, "Can I borrow Hedwig again?"

Back at home, after delivering his owl to his cousin despite Hedwig's dislike of Apparition, Harry felt even more alone and worries about the Ministry began to press in again. He forced himself to review the Ministry's official Magic Manual of Moneytracking. Expense reports were so far from his purview of care that he actually laughed upon opening the booklet, which was bound with a used shoe lace as though in a demonstration of cost-savings.

Before he went to bed, he sat petting Kali and considering how he might send a message to Snape. The Eye's Only spell would certainly work to keep Moody from reading it upon intercepting it, unless his magic eye could see through it. But even if Harry thought he could obscure his message, anything he might say would draw his guardian here, which would give it away. Even if Harry insisted Snape not come home, he had little faith his guardian would honor that if he thought he was needed. Harry curled up on his bed in his clothes while clutching his pet, and fell asleep.

The next day of training went only slightly better than the previous day's. Dark dreams full of confusion and blood had haunted Harry's night, and he had actually spiked his morning coffee with Pepper-up to wake himself. Harry again tried to skip lunch. Kerry Ann stayed behind in the workout room, ignoring Rodgers sharp glance as he departed.

"Harry, what's the matter?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," Harry explained.

"Is everything all right?" she asked in clear concern, sounding like Hermione would have had Harry given her the chance to see his state.

"No, but there isn't anything you can do, so don't worry about it."

"I have extra pasta in my lunch if you didn't bring one," she offered.

Harry didn't want her concern; it was tearing his walls down and he badly needed them. "I brought a lunch, thanks," he said dismissively.

She took the hint and started for the door. "If I can do anything, Harry, let me know."

That evening during dinner, which Harry knew he needed to more than pick at, but could barely manage to eat more than three bites, an owl arrived at the window – a Ministry owl. Harry accepted the letter and watched it glide away.

Inside was a summons to a hearing the following evening before the Wizengamot to review the facts of the incident at the Dursley's former house. Harry dropped the letter before him on the table and stared at its neatly handwritten lines of text. The phrase Muggle residence situated at Number Four, Privet Drive stared out at him. If the Dursley's had sent him a notice that they had moved, he wouldn't have answered that critical question wrong. But they probably didn't want him to know where they lived. Probably felt safer for his ignorance.

He was allowed a solicitor; he wondered if he needed one. The evidence was on his side; he didn't want to appear anything but confident of his innocence. Although, he was going to have to get by this ache of betrayal if he was going to continue to function. Not trusting him to take action when he thought it necessary was one thing. Not trusting that he wouldn't attack a Muggle house in the middle of the night, even if his aunt and uncle still lived there, was another thing entirely. It made his insides knot queasily to consider it.

Harry paced. He stared at the bottle of liquor before dismissing that way of eliminating his stress. He needed to talk to someone, desperately. But there was only one person he could talk to.

Harry took the Floo to the Burrow and stepped out to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sitting at their oversized table, having tea.

"Harry!" Molly Weasley said in warm greeting, even getting up to give him a hug.

"Good evening, Mrs. Weasley." To the figure still hunched over the Daily Prophet, Harry said, "I need to talk to you, sir."

"Harry," Molly said, pushing his hair back from his ear. "is everything all right?"

"Not really, but I can't explain." Harry watched Mr. Weasley, his thin hair mussed and standing up on top of his head, giving him a red aura in the lamplight. His posture was not reassuring, and Harry dearly needed reassurance at that moment. "Can I talk to you, sir?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated replying. When he did, he said, "I'm not sure what there is to say, Harry." He turned the page of the Prophet, leaving Harry dumbfounded.

"Arthur," Molly said, shocked. "You won't speak to Harry?"

Mr. Weasley looked up, and Harry did what he had been resisting the last two days because he thought it improper – he read Mr. Weasley's eyes. In them he found conflicting instinct, old memories of a much smaller version of Harry seemingly always in some difficulty or another, as well as fear of his strange new powers, a lingering doubt about the events at the Dursley's, and overriding any of his normal kindheartedness, a desire to remain aloof enough to do his job properly. Mr. Weasley was flinching from any threat that would break down that resolve.

Molly was speaking. "Shall I leave you alone then?"

"No, I'll go," Harry said.

"Harry," Molly said in confusion. "Arthur," she sharply said, turning to her husband. Harry started toward the Floo before realizing he didn't need it. He Disapparated on the spot with only an inkling of where he wished to go.

Harry arrived behind the block of flats where Hermione lived. He blinked at the stone wall in confusion since he hadn't fully decided to come here. He strode out onto the pavement with purpose; Hermione would understand that he needed to talk without actually being able to say anything, her job dealt with that all of the time.

When his friend opened the door, she had a broad smile on her face, and it took Harry a moment to realize she was expecting someone else. But she insisted he come in and have a seat at the table. She was in the midst of setting the table and continued doing that, adding a plate before Harry to make three placesettings.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Harry insisted.

"Harry, I've seen that look, what's going on?"

"I can't say. But I've had the worst week in a very long time, maybe ever." He glanced over the nice placesettings, the candles on the table. Hermione held a plate before her like a shield.

"You can't talk about any of it?" she prompted, her gold hair clip glittering in the candlelight. She put the plate down on the counter and looked at him in concern.

"If I said I might need a solicitor, could you give me a name?"

"For business at the Ministry? Civil or criminal?"

"Criminal," Harry admitted.

"Harry, are you in trouble?" she asked.

"Not as a result of anything I've done. Let's put it that way." He adjusted the shiny plate before him, white as snow, and wished he were still in Finland. He wondered idly if he could Apparate all the way there.

Hermione pulled out a sheet of paper and, with a decorative peacock quill, jotted a name on it along with an address. Without speaking, she handed it over.

"Thanks," Harry said, pocketing it. His head pounded, so he rubbed his temple.

"Do you need something for a headache? I have some Muggle medicine that works great." She didn't wait for a reply before fetching it and a glass of water.

Harry gratefully downed the little white pills. He wanted to tell her everything. He needed a sympathetic ear more than anything else in the world at that moment, even more than the headache medicine.

A knock sounded on the door. Hermione jerked to attention and went to answer it. Harry stood as well and found himself faced with Vineet when the door was opened, temporarily jarring Harry from his own concerns. Vineet nodded his head at Harry, who was deciding that he really should depart before his faith in the world skewed even more dangerously. Vineet stepped aside and Nandi followed him inside, making Harry nearly blush in embarrassment over his assumptions. Harry greeted them both and said he needed to go.

Hermione said, "Harry, please stay for dinner; there is plenty of food."

"Thanks really, but I have to think about some things."

She watched him depart with sad eyes. Vineet, still with his cloak on, followed him into the corridor and shut the door behind him. His dark brown eyes gazed at Harry with unnatural intensity. "You are in some difficulty with the Ministry, I think," he stated.

"Yeah, but I think it will be all right. I haven't felt this helpless, though, since offing Voldemort and I really hate it."

Vineet considered him before saying, "I am here because of you, not because of the Ministry of Magic. This means my loyalty is first to you."

Harry would previously have found this pronouncement a bit unsettling but in his current state of needing allies, he found it reassuring. "Thanks, Vineet. I appreciate that."

As Harry stepped away, saying that he would see his fellow apprentice the next day, Vineet said, "You may call on me anytime."

Chapter 22

"Have a nice dinner, Vineet," Harry said and waved casually, pretending everything was all right long enough to turn away.
Out on the pavement, the wind had picked up, tossing Harry's cloak about. A figure immediately stepped up beside him, walking with him.
"Not very attentive of you, Harry," Molly Weasley criticized him. "You need to be more careful; I could have been anyone."
"Lot on my mind, but you're right," Harry said. "What are you doing here?"
They resumed walking as she said, "I'm here to apologize for my husband, who since his promotion has been turning into someone I don't recognize all of the time."
"I think he's just trying to do his job," Harry said, finding a defensive argument easier than expected.

Author's Notes:
Amber? As an eyecolor? Well, there is a consensus at least on the golden brown (and delicious) but the lexicon says "unknown" and I didn't look beyond that. Originally, I imagined a purebred malamute with one brown eye and one blue one and I thought, well, if that were the case it HAD to have been mentioned in canon and I couldn't get away with that even as tempting of a doggie characteristic that it is and how symbolic... Amber (that sounds terribly fanon all by itself, I confess) doesn't fit for me. Too warm somehow. Lupin is so . . . separate I guess but always wishing otherwise that a warm color seems too . . . outward. I don't know, something. He wears his warmth in his personality when the situation allows for it, not automatically. All this mental debate and it will never come up again, I'm sure.
Snape as cardboard. The trouble for me is that if I show too much inside his head – which I'm guessing is the problem since he is five or six dimensional for me – he loses his mystery, which is a significant chunk of his appeal. It's like that haunted house on the corner that fascinates you utterly until you finally step into on some sunny day on a dare and discover that the worst it has to offer is rotting floorboards. Your comment is interesting because I would have predicted the opposite criticism to occur: that Harry is a foil to show glimpses of inner Snape and to force growth on his resisting personality. Ah, well, I don't believe I can do any better with Snape, except to run him through an even worse ringer to see what kind of playdoh creature comes out the other side, and it just so happens that I'm sizing him up for one right now...
Harry's already been measured...
Keep in mind that I like happy endings but I firmly believe that they only matter if they seem horribly unlikely halfway or even 9/10ths of the way there.

Chapter 23.

The Hearing

Harry arrived at the Ministry early on Friday and waited alone in the Auror's break room for his time to report to the hearing. Mr. Weasley came in, leaned over the table, and said, "I know this may sound like a brokered recording-"

"Broken record," Harry corrected without thinking.

"One of those, but you must, MUST keep your temper. Cornelius knows it's your weakness and he is going to try to use it."

Quietly, Harry asked, "What does he have against me?" Harry held off on asking Mr. Weasley the same thing. After all, his department head was only treating him the same as anyone, and that's what Harry had insisted he wanted.

Mr. Weasley straightened and took one of the stale biscuits from the foil pan someone had left behind in the center of the table; it snapped into a shower of crumbs when he bit through it. "You remind him of the past, of past failures. He thinks you weren't on his side when you should have been."

"He wasn't on my side when he should have been," Harry countered glumly.

Mr. Weasley took another bite, generating fewer crumbs this time. He wiped his mouth as he said, "I expected that his assignment to review the procedures of the Department of Magical Transportation would keep him occupied for his first six months, but he's given all of the workload to Percy."

"What?" Harry blurted, finding himself stunned at this revelation. At Mr. Weasley's curious, chewing-stalled expression, Harry explained, "Half the time I step into the Floo network, I get directed to the wrong hearth. Don't you?"

"Not more so than I used to," Mr. Weasley said, appearing concerned. "I'll ask Percy about it next family dinner."

"No, don't bother," Harry quickly said, standing up to head down to the hearing room a few minutes early in the hopes of getting it all over with a bit earlier.

"You'll do fine, Harry," Mr. Weasley reassured him as he brushed crumbs from his robe front. "The truth always wins in the end."

Harry hesitated at the door thinking he wished to argue with that, but he let it go instead because he was feeling better about his prospects. Although he was still too stung to reveal this confidence, even if Mr. Weasley were just trying to do his job. As he stepped into the lift, Harry considered that everyone was just trying to do their job . . . as they saw it, anyway. With a clunk the lift started moving. Harry's only job right now was staying out of trouble and he wasn't making a very good show of it. Relax, be confident, Harry told himself as he stepped out and made his way through witches and wizards busy with their own tasks.

Outside the heavy wooden door to the hearing room, Harry waited to be called inside. He was ten minutes early, which gave him enough time to half-wish he had owled the solicitor. Perhaps it wouldn't have looked too suspicious to have one. As he pondered this, a small, old wizard came to the door and gestured for him to enter. Harry sat in one of the petitioner chairs that faced the tiered seats, grateful that this wasn't Courtroom Ten, just the usual meeting room. Taking in the room, Harry noticed McGonagall's alarm as she took in his presence between quick glances at the paperwork before her.

Fudge stepped down the far stair to the floor, and when he passed, Moody materialized from the wall, where Harry had not noticed him standing before.

Fudge began, "On the night of May the 25th of this year a magical spell was used to incinerate a Muggle residence located at Number Four, Privet Drive. This residence is noteworthy as the former home of one Vernon Dursley and one Petunia Dursley, who have, as of six months previous, relocated to a home in the area of Finchley. Mr. Potter, did you know your relatives had moved?" He asked this as though savoring the question.

"No, sir," Harry replied.

"Amazing, your pseudo-parents of seventeen years did not see fit to notify you that they had changed homes?"

"No, sir," Harry replied, still levelly and with easy confidence. He wished McGonagall didn't still look quite so alarmed.

"Is it safe to say that you did not get along with your relatives, that in fact many outright brawls broke out between your relatives and yourself starting . . . " Here he consulted a sheet of paper, making Harry wonder if it were an official record or just his own notes. "Starting in 1989 but growing in violence significantly after you began your studies at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

Harry thought over his years of being manhandled by his uncle. "I wouldn't have defined them as brawls," Harry said.

"Well, then, give us a word for them."

"Well, I guess I'd call it overly strict punishment," Harry countered.

"But violent, wouldn't you say?"

"Physical," Harry corrected.

"Whatever you wish to call it," Fudge said dismissively. "Isn't it safe to say that they were frightened of you?"

Harry wished he had a solicitor to deal with Fudge for him. Minister Bones interjected, "Are you going somewhere with this questioning, Cornelius?"

"I'm establishing motive, madam," Fudge said with a little bow. "Mr. Potter, when was the last time you saw your relatives?"

"Um, my birthday, last year. They were at the same restaurant."

Seeming oddly pleased, Fudge rearranged his notes and said, "Yes, the waiter states that your uncle refused at first to sit near you, referred to you and your companions as 'freaks'. That didn't bother you, Mr. Potter."

"They've always hated wizards. It was nothing new."

"And here they were, ruining your birthday. It would not be incorrect to state that you do not like them . . . would it not?"

Harry replayed that sentence in his head as he glumly considered in silence that they had ruined every birthday so far. "As you probably have statements of mine to support," Harry said, indicating the large stack in Fudge's hand, "I'm not particularly fond of them, no."

Fudge leaned forward and like a trap closing, said, "Hate them enough to hurt them? The way you blew up your aunt when she insulted you?"

"No. And she hadn't insulted me, she insulted my mum and dad." Temper, Harry, he thought to himself and made his shoulders relax.

Chapter 23

The evidence was presented as a long reading of the interrogation transcript. The only interesting moment was when Moody demonstrated that he could indeed remove a spell from his wand. Harry tried to watch how he did it, but he turned his back to Harry as he worked the spell – using another wand of the same length and wood, essentially transferring the memory of the spell to the other wand.

"Of course, Mr. Potter, our star Auror apprentice and known quick study of spells would have no difficulty with such a spell, even as complicated as it is," Fudge stated airily as the demonstration concluded.

McGonagall interrupted. "May we review the section of the transcript where Harry asserts that had he wished to attack his relatives he would have checked that it was they who were home?"

Fudge read it again, he had mumbled over those sections the first time.

"So the shrubs were overgrown?" she confirmed. "Harry you would have noticed that, would you not?"

"I trimmed those shrubs every two weeks, every summer as long as I lived there. I would have noticed. The Order of the Phoenix once fooled my relatives to get them out of the house by telling them they had won the All England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. They would never let things go while they were living there."

Bones flipped through the parchments before her. "Well, I agree with Mr. Fudge only on one point, and that is that there is no other likely motivation for this crime. Harry do you know of any other witch or wizard who would do this?"

When his focus relaxed, the flickering torches lining the walls appeared as a floating, glowing plane bisecting the large room into a top and bottom half. The ridiculous answer Voldemort popped into his head. Frowning at the notion that they would surely have him locked up for his own protection if he said that, Harry instead said, "No madam. Not beyond framing me."

Minister Bones asked point blank, "Mr. Potter, did you burn down your relative's former house?"

"No, madam."

"That, and the evidence, is good enough for me. I move that this investigation against Mr. Potter be terminated . . . all in favor?"

At home, still reeling from his sudden release from suspicion, Harry encountered a pacing Snape in the dining room. Pacing and angry.

"Why didn't you inform me?" Snape demanded, hair askew more than usual.

"They told me not to. Specifically," Harry explained. At Snape's look of derisive disbelief, Harry said, "Made it a test even that I not tell you. I had to obey given how much trouble I'm already in. If they'd intercepted the owl . . . If you had come in response to an owl . . ."

Snape shook his head, and as though lecturing, said, "Harry, from now on if you send me an owl that begins with the phrase 'training went well' I will assume you are in trouble. If you follow with the phrase with 'but I need to work on my blocks,' I will not come home, but will send you a coded owl, one you will have to read between the lines of, metaphorically. In such situations, magically hidden writing only attracts more suspicion. You will simply have to decode the double meanings and reply in kind. Do you understand me?" he demanded.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I should have tried to send you an owl, I suppose, but I was a little out of kilter after the interrogation and I wasn't sure where to turn."

Snape grabbed a hold of the front of Harry's robes and tugged him so that their noses nearly bumped. "You. Can. Always. Turn. To. Me," he stated almost viciously, and Harry realized with no little shock that he had truly hurt his guardian by not telling him what was happening.

"I'm sorry. I knew you'd come if the situation got worse. I didn't doubt that. But Mr. Weasley said I could rely on the truth."

Snape had almost let go of Harry's robe, but he re-gripped it as he said, "Arthur Weasley is a dangerously over-optimistic man. How he survived the dark times, I have never fully determined, expect to believe that the Death Eaters never found him potentially dangerous enough to really eliminate." He released Harry then, and Harry shook his clothes out while rubbing his forehead.

"I'm finding out who trusts me and who doesn't," Harry said shakily. "Even Mr. Weasley had his doubts," he admitted and felt the world shift dangerously under his feet with that admission. "How can I count on these people when things get worse?" he asked, distraught now that he had Snape to talk to.

Snape stepped closer and unexpectedly put one arm around Harry, who stared over Snape's shoulder out into the hall in surprise before saying, "I can't exactly take care of the prophecy if I'm in Azkaban for something I didn't do."

Snape's voice, very close to Harry's ear said, "That will not happen," in a tone that implied a large number of laws would end up broken if need be.

Harry didn't want to thank him for that pledge as much as he was grateful for it. This will all pass, and things will go back to normal, Harry insisted to himself, thinking that in the end more people at the Ministry supported him than not, which was better than most of the past. He was grateful enough for that to feel he could not let them down.

Snape patted him on the shoulder blade and released him, averting his gaze. Harry asked, "What should I do about Moody . . . and Fudge?"

"I do not think there is anything you can do. Moody is not the most well-balanced individual and he is tenacious once he believes he is on the trail of something. The Department of Mysteries itself operates with very little oversight, is my understanding. Remaining out of their way entirely would be wisest. I will, however, suggest that Minerva bring the Order back together, although her alarm at finding you on the Wizengamot agenda may already have convinced her to do so." He looked Harry over as though grading his state of mind. "Do you have any idea who did attack the Dursley's old house?"

Harry froze again on that question. He swallowed and said, "Merton is the obvious answer, but you know it's really stupid, during the hearing I wanted to say 'Voldemort' when they asked me that." Harry laughed lightly then. "He always wanted to get at me." At Snape's dubious expression, Harry admitted, "I didn't answer that way; I said I didn't know."

"You may have caused a panic, had you done so," Snape stated wryly. "Voldemort would not have left anyone alive," he added darkly. "But someone does seem desirous of getting you out of the way, although they are never straightforward about it, are they?"

"You mean, why don't they just jump me in a dark alley?"

"Precisely. It implies that they are certain they cannot best you in a fair fight, which unfortunately leaves us with most of Wizardom as a possibility."

Harry chuckled lightly at that as he assumed Snape intended, given the odd glitter in his eye, belying his snide tone.

Snape said, "I must get back. I will re-ward my Floo to accept Hedwig . . . or even Kali . . . in transit. And I will return tomorrow evening to check on you." Then as nasty as Harry had ever heard him speak, Snape said, "DO NOT leave me in the dark

if anything happens. I don't care who tells you to keep it a secret. I trust you are clever enough to couch your words in an open letter to communicate most anything to me. There are a great number of things that only you and I know. Use them."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "Thanks." As Snape took the powder canister down, Harry said, "Not sure what I'd do without you."

Despite having given Harry a hug not a minute before, this statement seemed to make him uncomfortable. "Be very careful, Harry. I would quote Mr. Moody, but cannot bring myself to do so." And with a toss of powder, he was gone.

It was not a Hogsmeade weekend for the students, so Snape strode alone along the rutted path to the neighboring wizard village. The grass beyond the Hogwarts lawn had not been mown yet this spring and it caught at his robes as he walked. The tea shop was quiet when he entered and Candide stood to greet him when he opened the door. Snape sat across from her, glancing at the elderly couple leaning over a far table.

"Thank you for meeting me on such short notice," Snape said.

"It's no problem," she assured him. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and leaned forward to pour tea for him.

Snape didn't touch his. Instead he clasped his hands before him and said, "I need a favor from you."

"'Course," she said, sounding surprised but not displeased.

Snape glanced around the quiet shop again and stood. "Let's talk elsewhere. I do not wish to be overheard." He pulled a handful of Knuts from his coin purse and tossed them on the table. She stood, hitched her cloak back on and followed him out.

At High Street, Snape paused to look in both directions. "Come," he said, leading the way toward the lake. But rather than follow the path to the gate, he cut through the longer grass and into the forest. When Candide hesitated, he came back and took her by the hand to lead her through the brush at the edge, only releasing her when they reached the deeper trees where few plants grew among the gnarled roots of the broad, straight trees.

"Severus, is this really a good idea?" she asked.

Snape had taken out his wand when he dropped her hand and now turned in a circle as they walked. "This is the safest place to talk."

They walked farther, following a gradual rise. Hoofbeats approaching brought them to a halt and Candide moved to stand very close to Snape's side. A female centaur skidded to a halt and gazed down at them, tail flicking, eyes flashing.

"You are not welcome here," she said.

"Tough," Snape stated, holding his wand at the ready though not aimed. "We will be taking a little walk this fine afternoon whether you like it or not."

The centaur's front hoof pawed the soft ground. She sneered lightly and said, "Take your walk in the direction of the Booming One then." She pointed off to her left.

"Booming One," Snape echoed, trying to puzzle that out. "All right," he agreed, and took Candide's hand to lead her that way.

When they were out of earshot of the centaur, Candide asked, "What's the Booming One?"

"You will see," Snape assured her.

"Is this secrecy really necessary enough to be strolling in the Forbidden Forest?" she asked, prompting him to turn in another predatory circle to check around them.

"Yes."

They approached what appeared to be a small hill in a clearing, but when the hill shifted and stood up, Candide came to a sudden stop. Snape turned to urge her to follow. "Is that a giant?" she asked, stunned.

"Yes. Come." He spoke casually, and with a shake of her head, Candide did approach, although clearly only on Snape's assurance.

A boom! accompanied the giant stepping in their direction. He leaned down and sniffed. "Perfessor?" he asked.

"Yes, Grawp," Snape said casually, stepping around the giant's massive muddied foot and over to a fallen tree, one of many that formed a circle like a fence around the clearing. It clearly had been forcibly hauled up by the roots at one point. "You don't mind if we drop in for a visit, do you?" Snape asked pleasantly as he took a seat with a flick of his robes.

Candide skirted quickly around the obstacle of Grawp's foot and joined him. "Well, this is unexpected."

"But very safe," Snape said under his breath. "He smells anyone approaching, cloaked or not."

Grawp sat down with a thundering crash. Snape ignored this and said to Candide, "I have a difficult favor to ask of you."

"You've never asked for a favor before," she said. "I expect that all favors are difficult for you."

He gave her a pained half smile in response. "I need you to move in."

"Move in? To your house?" When he nodded, she facetiously asked, "Harry needs looking after even though he's eighteen again?"

"Harry requires an alibi. Looking after is secondary."

"What does he-"

Candide was interrupted by Grawp's booming voice, "Tea?" he asked, blowing their hair about.

The two of them looked up at this offer. "Sure," Candide said. "Thanks." Grawp pulled a small tree over, snapped it in two and those pieces in two, and then piled them neatly on his fire, where a cauldron the size of a minibus hung on a pole. It took her a minute to get back to her previous question. "What does Harry say about this?"

"He doesn't know."

"Ah." They watched Grawp uncover a crate of tea leaves, the scent wafted over from 30 yards away. "Harry needs an alibi, you say."

"Someone is trying to take Harry out. They have attempted an ambush and abduction previously and this week they attempted to frame him for a crime. If someone were living with him, it would have helped immensely to have had a human to give evidence that he indeed was home when the crime was committed. As it was he got off on the word of a house-elf, which is unusual." He brushed her arm awkwardly. "On the other hand things are getting dangerous in general."

"They are?" she asked, displaying clear doubt.

"The Ministry is hiding a great deal," Snape stated. "Something you should not repeat, by the way."

"No one would believe me."

Snape went on. "There are two views on dangerous situations. One is that the skilled people who usually attract danger make for poor companions; the other is that the skilled people know how to handle danger when it does come along. This is the difficult part for me since I do not know which will be safest for you. My divided loyalties between Hogwarts and Harry notwithstanding, I could leave school now and keep an eye on him full-time. But he would not accept that, I am certain." He paused to watch Grawp dipping a gunny sack full of tea into his cauldron. "On the other hand, I believe he would accept my telling him that you were in need of better accommodations – which you are, I have seen your flat – and that I had invited you to move in."

Candide's eyes went wide. "Move in," she echoed again.

More quietly Snape replied, "Yes."

The ground pounded as Grawp approached and plunked down a massive wooden vat that sloshed gallons of tea onto the ground before settling. Grawp, with enormous care, held out two soiled teacups on the tip of one finger. Snape accepted them and began cleaning them with his cloak. The giant looked around wistfully. "Grawp hope little friend come today."

Snape froze at that. "Little friend?" he asked.

"Grawp's little friend," the giant rumbled in what probably constituted a whisper.

Snape gave up puzzling that and handed a relatively clean cup to Candide, who after a moment's deliberation, dipped it into the vat of tea beside them. Snape did the same with his cup and took a sip. He made a not-bad face and took another sip.

"Are you amenable to the idea?" Snape asked her.

"Yes," she answered immediately.

"Thank you for that. There are a few things you need to know, in that case."

She widened her eyes and then laughed nervously. "All right, I'm listening."

"Harry was sent to Finland to control his opening a gateway to the underworld. When he loses control he can unleash some rather loathsome creatures into our plane of existence."

Candide gave him a bemused look. "You're trying to scare me off, are you?"

"No, I simply cannot let you enter into this without you fully understanding it. Harry is safe most all of the time, but do realize that there is the potential for considerable

chaos." He sipped his tea and dipped his cup again into the vat. "The other thing, which you must absolutely keep to yourself . . ." He looked up at Grawp who was staring wistfully off into the distance, letting his vat of tea billow steam clouds into the air before him. "Grawp, is anyone nearby . . . anyone at all?"

Grawp shook his head.

"Your tea is getting cold," Snape pointed out to him. Returning to Candide, as Grawp hefted his tea and sipped loudly, Snape said, "There has been another prophecy spoken. This one has rather a lot of grim prediction but in the end lays the responsibility for ending the evil firmly upon Harry's shoulders." He recited the prophecy for her.

"And poor Harry has that hanging over him?" she uttered.

"I was tempted to leave him nine to save him from it, in fact," Snape joked grimly. "Are you still willing?"

She set her teacup down in a wide groove in the bark between them. "Severus, I'd love to move in permanently."

Grawp stood up and moved to the next downed tree that formed the circle around his clearing. There, he bent down and began painstakingly plucking clover blossoms with his ungainly oversized hands.

Snape bristled and said, "I don't think you know enough about me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you otherwise would not have such notions," he stated, sounding cold and unyielding in stark contrast to a moment before.

She sighed and shook some fallen twigs off of her robes. "Well, if I'm going to move in with you, you have to come have dinner with my parents."

"Now you are trying to scare me off," Snape accused.

"Really, Severus, I have to mollify them."

Snape closed his eyes. "I was hoping you could move in tomorrow."

"What! That fast."

"Yes. I do not at all like leaving Harry alone. The term cannot end soon enough. If you wish to move out again when it does, you may do so . . . so perhaps you do not need to inform your parents," he suggested, sounding strategic.

"You're just trying to get out of it."

"Correct," Snape returned sharply.

"Well, I'll do it for Harry," she conceded.

"Thank you," Snape said quietly.

A loud hiss of Grawp shushing them, interrupted. He was picking up the pile of minute blossoms he had collected. Candide gasped and pointed slowly behind Snape. Also with slow movements, Snape turned just as Grawp took as careful a step as he could, which still shook the nearby leaves in a green cacophony. A Unicorn, silver and lithe, poised for flight, stood at the edge of the clearing, dappled in sunlight. Grawp bent to offer it the tiny blossoms clinging to his fingertips like dust. The unicorn had no concern for the giant, but eyed Snape and Candide with tense caution. Neither of them moved and a half a minute ticked by where only the wind shifted their robes. Finally the unicorn reached out to nuzzle a few of the blossoms. "Nice little friend," Grawp cooed, sounding like a train rumbling words in the distance.

The unicorn quickly took the rest of the blossoms and then loped a few yards away before turning and standing in silhouette, long horn blending in with the branches behind it.

Candide released her breath. "Wow, I've never seen a unicorn before."

Snape stood and tossed his robes straight. "I will be seeing Harry this evening and I'll tell him that you are moving in. When can you do so?"

She stood also, eyes not straying long from the mystical creature hovering in the trees. "If I'm not staying long, I only need to pack a trunk."

"Pack two so it looks convincing."

Candide propped her fists on her hips. "Someday Severus, why don't you just tell me everything you're afraid to and let me decide. You're just hiding behind that excuse."

Snape considered that before turning to depart without replying. She caught up to his longer stride and stepped in front of him. A breeze blew dead leaves around their robes as Candide stared him down. Her fierce look didn't hold, however, her face pinched and she reached around his waist to hug him.

Harry sat reading in the deathly still house. Even Kali didn't make a sound as she lay curled up on the chair beside his, not wanting to sit in his lap for some reason.

The Floo flared and a familiar, and very welcome, figure stood straight at the end of the table.

"Hey, Severus," Harry greeted him.

"Come back to Hogwarts with me for a few hours," Snape said.

"Hogwarts? You promise not to make me stay?" Harry asked.

"As tempting as that is, I do promise."

Harry closed his books and stacked them neatly. "All right, I want to speak to Remus anyway. Let me just put Kali away." Kali fussed and tried to bite Harry, but he was faster and had her bundled tight to take upstairs.

"Hold on," Snape said sharply. "She doesn't know you?" he asked in concern.

"She's been antsy lately. She slept with me last night but she has been in a snit today. Why?" Harry asked, struggling to hold her.

Snape's brow furrowed. "She didn't like you at all at nine years old, which I didn't expect. Blood is blood and she is bonded to you by it so it should not have mattered." He bent to study her as she clawed at Harry's grip. "Give her to me," he said.

"You sure?" Harry asked but handed her over. Surprisingly she climbed willingly into the crook of Snape's arm. "What's this?" Harry complained. "She likes you better now?"

"Apparently," Snape said, studying her as she sniffed him. "I'll put her away for you."

When Snape came back down, Harry said, "Well, it has been a week of sorting out who's on my side. Turns out my pet isn't."

"I didn't see you being cruel to her as a child, so I cannot explain it."

"I don't think I would have been. I hated when Dudley tormented things that couldn't fight back . . . like me for instance."

Snape patted him on the shoulder with a weak smile. "I have some things to show you but I don't want to do it here." He nodded at the hearth and took down the powder.

They reappeared in the headmistress' tower. The hearth was down to embers and the office's occupant was in an overstuffed chair reading a large tome that floated before her. Upon seeing them, she waved the book to float aside and stood, showing her age as she straightened. "Harry dear, good to see you."

"Professor," Harry returned.

Snape had moved to the door but before Harry could follow, she asked, "How are you doing?" not in a casual way, but as though she expected an answer.

Harry shrugged. "Surviving, Professor."

She grasped his arm, "First meeting of the revitalized Order of the Phoenix is tomorrow . . . think you can make it?"

Harry tried not to smile. "Where are you meeting?"

"Upstairs at the Hogs Head. Just ask for The Library at the bar. Eight o'clock sharp. You are certainly old enough to join and . . ." She glanced at Snape. "And you are the only one with all the information we need to catch up." Harry visibly hesitated at that, prompting her to add, "I understand there are some things you cannot say. Everyone else will understand that too."

She was still holding his arm. Harry said, "I'll be there. But if I come, Moody will follow. Do you want him to know about it?"

"He is a member, although I have not sent him a notice of the meeting. If he finds out we have brought the Order back together, so be it . . . let it serve as notice to him." Her voice was hard-edged at the end, but she released Harry's arm. "I've held you up long enough." She waved him off in the direction of the door.

Snape led the way not to the Defense classroom, but to the Transfiguration one. He unwarded the door and then after stepping in, warded it behind him. "It is too obvious to meet in my classroom, or even the Room of Requirement." Harry thought Snape too comfortable with making paranoid accommodations to his routine. Snape walked about the room, waving tables aside to make a larger space. "I want to show you some spells and I want to speak to you about something important."

Harry was just glad for Snape's company and would have been amenable to pickling rat's brains if that was what was wanted of him. "Sure."

Snape stepped to the center of the classroom and slipped cleanly into lecture mode. "There is a class of spells known as fogging charms. Have you heard of them?"

"Just mentioned in the legal code as strictly regulated," Harry said. "We haven't been shown any."

"No surprise," Snape stated. "If I were the Ministry, I'd hold off showing you until you were a full Auror. Nevertheless, I'm showing you now."

The trust this spoke of made Harry's chest ache. He stepped over to about ten feet in front of his guardian and stood attentively.

Snape began, "Most of these are quite tricky. I am not expecting that even you will get them all this evening. I will keep bringing you back until you do, Remus can take care of the grading those evenings . . . give everyone Es for all I care."

Harry grinned but it faded quickly.

Snape clasped his hands before him, empty hand around his wand hand. "When things get very bad, it helps to have decided ahead of time where you will draw the line in what magic you are willing to do. Some of these spells are not only regulated, they fall within the realm of the dark arts."

Harry chewed on his lips and watched as Snape demonstrated a basic Apparition fogging barrier. Snape said, "I want you to practice without casting the spell. The wand motion is most critical and any botched attempt at the spell will immediately attract attention from the magical misuse people, in the department adjoining yours, who monitor such things. Although here at Hogwarts they mostly ignore our rampant rogue spelling."

Harry worked on the motion, Snape guiding him through it repeatedly with such patience Harry never imagined from him. Harry finally could repeat the motion to Snape's satisfaction. "Try it just once," Snape commanded.

Harry held his wand over his head and pushing power through his wand in gradually increasing amounts – just as he'd been instructed – he executed the spell. Snape's expression was hard to read. "Did I get it?" Harry asked.

"Yes," he replied, and Harry now realized Snape was displaying relief, which looked remarkably like dismay on him.

They did three more spells although Harry successfully managed only one more, an owl Obsfucation spell that Harry immediately dubbed "Owlfucation". This learning by not doing reminded Harry of Umbridge in a twisted way. Maybe that's how she learned all her dark magic, he thought suspiciously.

"We'll work on the others again Monday, and I'll have to decide what else I am showing you."

"Were any of those dark magic?" Harry asked. None of them had seemed to be.

"No," Snape replied and the topic felt closed, so Harry didn't pry at it.

In the corridor, Harry said, "I want to talk to Remus for a minute."

Chapter 23

Snape led the way to Lupin's office and knocked for Harry. The door swung open to reveal Lupin, reading a small book by the light of the lamps burning brightly on his desk.

"Hey, Remus," Harry said. "Can I have a word?"

Lupin glanced between the two of them. "Certainly, Harry. Come in."

Snape said, "Come to my office when you are finished," and shut the door as he departed. Harry wandered over to the desk, not sure how to begin. There weren't any letters lying out to strike up a conversation on that topic. "Pamela told me she's sent you a few owls," Harry dove right in and said.

Maybe there was no good way to approach this. Lupin grew strangely wary immediately. He shut the book before him and wrapped his hand around it. Harry went on, "She just wanted to know why your reply was . . . not taking the hint." Harry shook himself; he was truly awful at this.

Lupin had gathered his wits, however and stood up, filing the book he had in his hand; probably because it gave him something to do. "Did she send you here?"

"No," Harry denied quickly, not thinking of that misinterpretation. "I'm here on my own. Look, I'm rubbish at this, but I get the sense she really likes you. And I think you should give her a chance, but heck it's none of my bloody business."

Lupin rubbed his neck and bent his head back. "I'll confess I never considered dating a Muggle."

"It's my mum's family," Harry heard himself arguing. "There's intermittent magic there."

Lupin smiled the wryest smile Harry had ever seen on him. "True."

Harry held back on the arguments he might have used with Snape and had to think of new ones. To stall, he said, "This came as a surprise to me too. She has something for wizards." He shook his head. "Otherwise I doubt she would have dated Severus."

Lupin dropped the book he had just pulled out. "What did you say?" he blurted. He stooped to pick up the book and said, "Did you just say she dated Severus?"

Harry couldn't quite read beyond Lupin's aghast tone. "Yeah."

Lupin appeared utterly appalled, which Harry thought a little much. Lupin said, "I guess someone could make that kind of error in judgment once."

"Mmm, twice," Harry corrected.

Lupin set the book down on the desk and placed his hand upon it with the other on his hip. "Pamela, this quaint little Muggle who reminds me far too much of your mother, dated Severus . . . twice?"

"Yes." And then: "You think she looks like my mum?"

"Not so much looks like her." He paced a bit as he explained, "Gestures like her, uses the same turns of phrase, has the same low respect for authority."

"You got all that from one party?" Harry asked. He propped his own hands on his hips. "You had your eye on her too," he accused.

Lupin rolled his eyes and tossed his right hand. "Not in any kind of realistic manner," he stated dismissively.

"Well, why not?" Harry asked.

Lupin rolled his lips into his teeth while he looked for an answer. "Why doesn't she date Severus any longer?" he asked instead of answering.

"I'm not sure I should say precisely. See, trouble is if Severus explains too much of his past . . . I'm not sure the Evan's will accept it all and . . ." Harry bogged down.

"Severus gave her up for you?" Lupin asked evenly, the way one might when asking for directions from the middle of a mine field.

"Maybe," Harry admitted, pained a bit by it. "But I pointed out to him that he has a perfectly good girlfriend already-"

"He what?" Lupin asked.

Harry scratched his head. "Maybe forget I said that. I haven't seen them together much at all lately."

Lupin shook his head, appearing befuddled. "So, Pamela didn't come to her senses and break it off with Severus herself?"

"No."

"Well, that speaks volumes about her tolerance, I suppose."

"Why don't you owl her, set up a date."

Lupin swallowed and idly flipped open the book before him. "Tomorrow is the full moon."

"Next weekend then. You'll be better by then."

Lupin shrugged, seemingly drawn deeply into himself. Harry clamped his jaw together, but couldn't hold back; his week had been too stressful to bother with other people's weaknesses. "Remus, honestly," he began, drawing his former teacher's eyes up sharply. "I don't think she would care that you're a werewolf. I certainly don't care." And Harry would have censored the last, but he had no energy to. "My mum never cared, did she?"

Lupin was now eyeing Harry as though wondering where he had come from. Harry swallowed. "I had a rough week. If you're coming to the Order meeting tomorrow, you can hear all about it. It's a few hours before sunset."

"Minerva was serious?" he asked in surprise. "I wasn't certain she was."

"She was. I should go see Severus and get home," Harry said. "Hope you do all right tomorrow night, if I don't see you."

"I've been properly potioned by Severus; it will be all right," he said quietly.

Harry departed and headed down one floor to Snape's office, which was open, oddly enough. "Close it and spell it," Snape stated from beside the bookshelf, when Harry entered. As Harry spell-sealed the door a blue line burned its way from its frame to all corners of the room before fading.

Harry stared at the door, wishing things hadn't grown this bad again. He turned and Snape gestured at the visitor's chair while saying, "You will want to be sitting for what I have to tell you."

Harry dropped into the chair and sighed loudly, prompting Snape to say, "You are not in Azkaban, there is still hope."

"Is that your slogan for times like this?" Harry asked.

"It's as good as any," Snape countered. "But there is something personal I need to discuss with you."

Harry pulled his head back at these rather unexpected words and listened closely.

Snape paced once before sitting at his desk. "Candide, as you probably don't know, lives in a rather ramshackle little bed-sit above the apothecary's on Diagon Alley. No amount of . . . silencing charms overcomes the foot traffic and the nearness of Leaky Cauldron. Her lease is up," Snape went on, and Harry thought his voice sounded false somehow, but why would he lie about that? Harry listened though without comment as Snape said, "So I have invited her to move in and, after some deliberation, she had agreed."

Harry blinked a few times in shock. "Move in . . . to the house?"

"Yes," Snape replied in that mild manner that implied through its lack of force that his mind was already fixed.

"This is a surprise," Harry said. "I didn't even know . . . course, you don't keep me filled in really." Harry scratched his head vigorously. He wasn't unamenable to a housemate; it was really much too quiet at home. He shrugged. "It's your house." He straightened his hair and rubbed his forehead. "When-?"

"Tomorrow."

Harry expressed more shock. "That's quick."

"It is the end of the month," Snape stated, slipping into his talking-to-a-first-year tone.

"I guess it is." Harry moved to stand up, thinking he should mull this over a beer and, after the whole thing started to make sense, organize some things around the house. "Did you warn her . . . ?"

"Yes," Snape replied, now clearly losing patience.

"All right," Harry said, giving up. "Your girlfriend, fiancée . . . whatever."

Snape had the tiniest of smiles on his lips when Harry turned at the door and pulled out his wand to cancel the spell on it. "What? Now you're keen on that notion? There's no understanding you," he complained.

Snape's smile didn't flicker. He simply said, "I will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah," Harry said, still getting his mind around the notion that Snape had apparently asked a woman to move in. As Harry walked down to the gargoyles, he thought maybe he should have asked if they'd set a date. All the world had lost its mind this week, clearly.

Sunday afternoon, Harry sat disquietly, trying to reread the manual of filing procedures before starting in on a much more interesting looking book entitled Curse Carriers. He wasn't certain exactly what time Candide would arrive and between waiting for her and waiting for evening, and the Order meeting, he could not relax. Also teasing repeatedly at the back of his mind was the sense that he had missed

something during the time he was nine, something with regard to Candide, at the very least, and other things he could only wonder at.

Rubbing his hair back, Harry gave up the first book in favor of the second, thinking that he would just read a chapter of the second and go back to the first one. Concentrating was difficult; the Ministry's distrust of him sat like a wall between himself and motivation.

It was 4:00 before the Floo announced a visitor with a rush of air. "Hello, Harry," Candide said, brushing ash from her hair and directing her trunk out onto the floor. She looked a little haggard but she smiled broadly.

Harry for his part felt awkward with her arrival. "Need any help?" he asked, to cover.

She almost said 'no' but then said, "If you could be a doll and take this one up, I'll fetch the other."

Harry agreed and she disappeared again. With a flick of his wand, Harry hovered the beaten old trunk up the stairs and into the first door where he settled it onto the floor in the middle of the room. The room didn't seem to care, even as much as Snape's personality clung to it. Harry thought it would be more appropriate if some latent charm spewed the trunk back out the door. But it sat quietly, untouched by magic in any way.

The sound of the Floo drew him back downstairs before he could contemplate the strangeness of the situation any longer.

Candide took the second trunk up herself and Harry settled back before his book. When she appeared a half hour later and sat at the table across from him, he asked if she wanted tea. As she nodded it appeared on the table.

"I'm going to like this house-elf thing," she said with relish. Her hair was pulled back with a flowered kerchief and she had a smudge of ash on her round chin. Harry thought that she looked about as unlikely a mate for his guardian as he would have imagined. After sipping her tea, she became a bit more serious and said, "I don't want to get in your way, Harry."

"Er," Harry began. "You can't . . . it's your house too."

She smiled wryly. "Thanks, I appreciate that."

Harry's book suddenly didn't seem so interesting anymore, even given that he was almost to the section on cursing liquids, which he had previously thought was impossible. The tea made him warm and relaxed. "So, did I miss something last weekend?"

"What do you mean?" she asked between sips. It was a stall; Harry could tell.

"Severus has been behaving a little bit strangely since then." He didn't want to say, inviting you to move in, for one thing, and he didn't want to point out that he had received an unexpected hug. "It's hard to pinpoint," he said instead.

"He was very protective of you," Candide stated.

Harry turned his teacup one way and then the other by the handle. He would have appreciated some protectiveness at nine; he could starkly remember having no one on his side. But Harry couldn't imagine what he would have thought of Snape with his brooding appearance and threatening posture.

"Did we get along all right, then?" Harry asked.

"You don't remember anything?" When he shook his head, she said, "When Severus had an important meeting with Minerva and some people from the Ministry . . ."

"To tell them about the prophecy," Harry stated.

"Possibly," she said. "I took you to a film."

"You did?" Harry said, laughing. "What'd we see?"

She shrugged. "The only kids film showing at right time was Tarzan." When Harry's brow furrowed as he imagined that, she said, "You enjoyed it."

Harry blushed lightly, finding himself embarrassed suddenly.

Candide went on, "You kept bubbling over with telling me about learning how to fly and getting ice cream. You must really love ice creams," she added, teasing. "Also about how nice it was not to have to hide from your cousin, who must have been quite a monster." At Harry's nod, she said, "Severus said your ribs were bruised by him so it was good I turned down your asking to stop at the playground."

"I was?" Harry asked, trying to remember that happening, which would pinpoint exactly which moment he would have appeared from. "I got better at running away from him, later."

"No repelling magic?" she asked, pouring herself more tea.

Harry shook his head thoughtfully. "Worked on my uncle, but not my cousin for some reason."

"Bugger that. You could get even now," she said easily as though commiserating.

Harry paused and with difficulty swallowed the sip of tea he held in his mouth. Suddenly, he imagined she was not who she appeared to be, that perhaps she was someone in disguise here to interrogate him further.

In honest apology upon seeing his face, she said, "I'm sorry, Harry; I don't mean to bring up difficult topics." Rambling as she explained, she said, "At nine, you didn't seem so disturbed by it, so I didn't think . . ."

"It's not that," Harry quickly said. "I was just thinking of something." When the opportunity arose, he found her eyes. There was nothing but sympathy in them, competing with the excitement of moving in and an ache that perhaps she was expecting too much of Snape. Relaxing, Harry said, "It's all right, really. I don't want you to feel like you can't talk about things. I had a very tough week and some things are still occurring to me."

She smiled lightly, not quite believing him, Harry could see. He asked, "Severus told you what happened?"

"Sketchy outline, yes."

"The ministry accused me of burning down my aunt and uncle's old house. Said I had plenty of motivation for doing it." Harry poured himself more tea even though he didn't want any more. "I didn't even know they'd moved. It was the perfect setup."

She sat stunned. "Someone framed you for attacking Muggles?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Things are not very quiet around here, even though it usually is quiet in this house," he corrected. "Sure you want to move in?" he jested.

"Yes, of course," she uttered, voice hardened.

"And he told you about the prophecy?" Harry asked, thinking perhaps Snape had skipped that, given that she actually was here.

"Yes," she assured him. "He pointed out that when trouble arrives it is often safest around those who know how to handle it." She dropped her gaze and peered into her cup. "I think he's worried about me, actually."

Harry drew one difficult breath and then another. Snape had asked her to move in for protection, for Harry to protect her, if not himself, when the school year ended. Of all the responsibilities Harry had been handed recently, this one startled him. No wonder Snape was teaching him restricted spells now.

"I need to get back to my studies," Harry said, gesturing at his book.

She smiled. "And I can finish unpacking." She stood and departed in a swish of mauve. Harry was going to have to get used to that color. Nothing else in the house was that color.

That evening, Candide came down for dinner, still marveling in rambling conversation that Winky did everything and would continue to do so indefinitely. Harry had grown very used to having a house-elf and thought Candide was overdoing her commentary regarding it.

"I have to go out at 8:00," Harry explained. "I don't know what time I'll be back." An awkward pause followed before Harry added. "I have training tomorrow, so not too late."

She cut into her pork chop with the comment, "No real issue of mine, Harry, if you are tired at training."

Minerva McGonagall, carrying a silver tray with an assortment of old and odd potion bottles, knocked upon the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. The door opened to admit her and within she found Lupin, hands deep in his cardigan pockets standing beside the desk in conversation with Snape.

"Oh, good," McGonagall said. "You are both here." She took the tray to the desk and placed it carefully beside the neat array of inkwells. "A cabinet in my office finally opened after years of fighting the charms upon it and inside I found these," she explained to Snape. "Thought you should take a look at them."

Snape lifted a stone jar which was sealed with a stone lid and a waxed rag. He placed it back on the tray without opening it. "Don't trust your Potions Master, Minerva?" he asked mildly.

McGonagall flicked her robes straight. "It isn't a matter of trust. It is a matter of your understanding Albus better than Gertie ever could. I had this odd notion that the cabinet had opened because I had rejuvenated the Order, but given the collection of positively ancient containers, within, I think that just a coincidence."

Lupin leaned down to peer into a warped frosted glass bottle that swirled orange. He then shot Snape a look that said, better you than me.

"On that topic," McGonagall said, "as much as I would like all of us to attend this evening, it just isn't workable. And you will be incapable, Remus, late this evening. Professor Sinistra tells me you have until half past eleven."

"Unless we hold the meeting here," Snape pointed out.

McGonagall shook her head. "I do not wish to entangle the school in this more than necessary. Hogsmeade is close enough that two of us can attend." She looked between the two of them. "I think, though, that Harry may wish to see you there, Severus. And I can fill you in, Remus, when you are feeling up to it."

Lupin nodded, chagrined. "I am at a point in my life when it feels like there is only a week between full moons."

"Severus and I should head down early, Remus. If you could mind the school from my office, that would be appreciated," McGonagall said.

At Lupin's nod, she shook her cloak over her shoulders. Severus picked up the tray and placed it inside his dangerous ingredient cabinet – which he immediately respelled closed again – before collecting his own cloak.

Harry stepped beneath the crooked Hogs Head sign swinging in the wind and closed the door firmly behind him after entering. A few patrons slouched with cloak hoods pulled forward to hide their faces. Harry was just stepping up to the bar when a rosy-cheeked witch came upon him and hooked her arm through his. Upon recognizing Hestia Jones, he allowed her to lead him to the back stairs. By the time they reached the end of the narrow crooked first floor corridor, she was even redder from blushing.

"So good to see you, Harry," she said chummily, patting his hand before releasing him.

"Good to see you here too," Harry said, glancing around the room. Mundungus leaned close to Sturgis Podmore and spoke to him as though trying to sell him something stashed inside his cloak. More people stood around the perimeter, chatting. A figure in a violet top hat capered in and slapped Harry on the back.

"Harry, my boy, well, not much of a boy anymore are you?" Dadelus Diggle said gamely while shaking Harry's hand. "Enjoyed the DV-Day festivities . . . I really did. Splendid, really."

Harry turned and found Headmistress McGonagall sweeping into the room in her usual emerald cloak. Snape stepped in behind her, removing his gloves. He caught Harry's eye and stepped his way.

"Ah, Severus," Diggle said, sounding vaguely uncertain.

Snape greeted him perfunctorily and with his head gestured for Harry to step away with him. "Candide's move-in went smoothly enough?"

Harry shrugged. "Yep. Fine." He wanted to add something along the lines of hoping he could live up to Snape's expectations regarding protecting her, but he didn't want to sound less than confident and McGonagall was bringing the meeting to order. Hagrid interrupted when he ducked in the low doorway with no little effort. Harry gave him a wave and took a seat on the arm of a moldy couch and let Snape have the remaining spot on it beside a silver haired man with nearly matching eyes. The door opened again as McGonagall was welcoming everyone, and a familiar, shaven-head black man slipped inside.

"Ah, Kingsley," McGonagall greeted him warmly.

It warmed Harry as well to see one of his colleagues at the meeting. He moved to stand beside Harry, saying, "I'm here for Tonks and Arthur. Bit too busy for us all to get away." He patted Harry on the shoulder; something he would not have done at the Ministry.

The meeting had already accomplished one thing for Harry, it firmly reinforced that he had rather a large number of allies. When it came time for Harry to fill in what was happening at the Ministry, Shacklebolt's presence became clearer: he covered Harry's part, which avoided Harry accidentally saying anything he shouldn't. Harry was a bit surprised when Shacklebolt told them all about Merton, including how dangerous he potentially could be with his spelling devices.

"So," Shacklebolt said, slipping his cream-colored cloak off in the rapidly heating room and draping it over the couch behind Harry. "We need help finding this man who is causing Harry such difficulty." He glanced at Mundungus, "Haven't done business lately with someone who fits that description?"

Mundungus shook his stubbled chin. "Sounds like a good customer though. Let me know when you find him." The room chuckled.

Podmore asked, "So, why haven't we heard of this bloke before now?"

"He's only attacked us Aurors so far. And we suspect it requires a lengthy time to manufacture one of these guns of his."

"With special attention to Harry, sounds like," Hagrid said, sounding vaguely incensed. "You just let us know what you need of us . . . right?" He insisted.

"Sounds like he needs more character witnesses," Mundungus stated sagely. Putting his thumbs in his antique waistcoat, he put on airs and said, "Oy, right, constable, I

was wit' –Arry yesterday evenin'. Oh, yeah, and evein' before . . . eh? What day d'ya say?"

Even Harry laughed that time, while beside him Shacklebolt positively cringed.

McGonagall cut through the tittering with, "To answer Hagrid we have no precise directive at this time beyond keeping your eyes and ears open for the man Kingsley described. Mostly we are here this evening because I thought it best to get you all together in case you were needed later. Everyone should dust off their old secure methods of communication and perhaps send a practice message or two through the network."

The meeting turned into an impromptu party after that. Harry stepped over to McGonagall when she swung her cloak back on. With a nod of her head, she pulled him away from the group standing around her. "You are perhaps wondering why we failed to recite the prophecy," she said. At Harry's nod, she frowned. "Severus and I promised to leave wide dissemination of it to the Ministry itself."

Harry gestured at the room. "But Shacklebolt told them about Merton."

Her voice dropped lower. "A rogue wizard playing at tormenting the Aurors is nothing compared to that prophecy."

"They are one in the same," Harry insisted quickly, because she was gesturing for Snape to join her.

"We actually don't know that, Harry," she pointed out firmly.

The notion that two completely different troubles were looming, made Harry blanch, which drew a sharp glance of concern from his guardian. "It's nothing," Harry insisted, feeling the good will from the meeting canceling out too rapidly.

Snape unexpectedly grabbed his arm and said, "Owl me with any news."

"All right," Harry agreed.

They departed then and Harry wandered over to Hagrid, who was discussing troll subspecies with Bill Weasley. Bill looked up at Harry and said, "I'm like Kingsley – instructed to report back to the family."

Harry nodded and gave half an ear to their conversation about the variance in troll weapon choice, which Bill argued was regional, while Hagrid argued it would depend on the size of the troll. Harry's mind quickly fled the warm room with its crooked grey walls and settled somewhere between wondering what Merton was doing and wondering what he had missed while he was nine.

The Hearing

The next morning, Harry headed into the Ministry very, very early. He left a note on the table for Candide so she wouldn't wonder where he was. He found he didn't mind at all coordinating his day's schedule with another person and he even felt a little unfortunate to miss her at breakfast.

The offices were quiet between the night shift and the day one. Harry hunted around and found Rodgers in the file room. His trainer gave him an ordinary look that was followed immediately by a sharper one.

"Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked. Upon waking that morning, he had realized that his primary stress came from uncertainty about who was on his side and who wasn't. Unexpectedly, Rodgers' reaction to hearing the prophecy made Harry think he could be on his side, despite his previous provocations.

"Sure, Potter." Rodgers turned the file he had pulled upside down and took a seat on the tightly packed files of an open file drawer, gesturing that Harry pull up the nearby footstool.

Harry did so, clasping his hands between his knees because they were cold. "I need to know who believes me, and perhaps you won't say if you do, but I thought I would ask anyway."

Rodgers' rubbed his full mustache one way and then the other before patting it into place. "For the most part, I can't imagine you'd do something so stupid. I saw the transcript from the Wizengamot and I think the evidence is on your side." When he paused, Harry looked up at him, trying very hard to keep raw hope out of his eyes. "On the other hand, I've seen your temper at full burn and I've seen that overcome any better sense in all kinds of people. I've seen you master spells rather expeditiously, so I can't put covering your tracks past you, either."

"I didn't do it," Harry said into the gap that appeared when Rodgers fell silent.

"I'll confess I'm leaning toward believing you, Potter. Certainly Madam Bones has faith in you and your old headmistress. You probably don't need my belief."

Harry sighed and rubbed his nose at the document mustiness of the room. "I remember last time how important it was to know who I could rely on. I'm afraid things are going to get very bad before they get better and everyone person is going to matter a lot."

Chapter 23

Rodgers leaned back against the file cabinet, causing it to groan more in the way a mountain troll might rather than the way an ordinary piece of wooden furniture would. He put his foot up on the drawer face, and asked, "Ever imagine yourself attacking your aunt and uncle? Maybe you were sleep walking."

Harry replied, "When I was younger, but the threat of getting kicked out of Hogwarts kept me in line, except for accidents like blowing up my aunt, who wasn't really my aunt." Harry rubbed the brass label holder on the drawer beside him, Ackerly to Aedipus. "I honestly don't even think about them anymore. I have a home where I'm wanted, why dwell on it. And you know," Harry said more sharply, "Mad-Eye said my turning myself nine must have brought it all back, but I don't remember anything from that. Fudge de-aged himself too, he should know firsthand that I don't have any memory of it."

Rodgers didn't appear to have a response to that. Harry stood and pushed the stool back under the sign that he couldn't remember the contents of during his examination. He stared at it, still not memorizing it. "Thanks for talking to me sir," he said and turned away.

"Potter," Rodgers said, stalling Harry at the door. "You didn't really do it, did you?"

"No sir," Harry replied.

"Hm," Rodgers muttered. "Watch your back then. Someone clearly is after you."

Harry turned with his hand on the latch. "Yeah," he agreed. If I could just get a shot at them in the daylight, he thought with determination.

Author's Notes:
Wednesday OR Thursday posting. Not JUST Wednesday. I'm in Palm Springs (goddess knows why, really, I'm still piecing together how this happened) and the network is really dodgy at this little hotel. And I was out hiking in the desert all day yesterday near Mecca (which looks strikingly like Mexico) so I wasn't around anyway. This is why I need two days option. SHEESH. Oh, and those of you in the angst-must-be-followed-quickly-by-resolution crowd: scenes got shifted around and now 24 is safe too. All of you who can't stand to wait for plot resolution should wait on 25 until mid-May when the story is all finished and posted.
Wow, the number of people who think Harry should quit amazes me. He is just not the quitting type and isn't in the Auror's program as a favor to the Ministry; he wants to be there. If he let a few people who dislike him force him out of doing what he wants to do (i.e., learn lots of dangerous cool magic and be in on the action when it happens) then I would think the forbearance he's demonstrated over the last 8 years must have utterly abandoned him. Harry is used to having enemies. He is never not going to have enemies and/or people overreacting to him, no matter how nice a guy he is (see: Dumbledore, for an example).
Vineet's age – I'd say he's in the 21-22 range.
Ginny again. You are all making me feel sorry for her . . . and she isn't even real. Some stuff, including her development, is partially prep for story 3 (should it come into existence), partially prep for later scenes in this story, but mostly I needed a more major character at Hogwarts to work on Snape and I thought I'd have some fun with that character at the same time. Cheer up, Lupin has now taken over her job as Snape's foil for a while so she will be backgrounded. Mary Sue? sheesh. That hurts. Keep complaining about her and you might just see more of her .... hah. So there.

Chapter 24.

The Watchers

At home, after sharing an early evening pint with his fellows, Harry encountered Candide sipping tea in the dining room. At first he felt mixed emotions about not having his usual absolute peace but by the time he put his things away and assembled his readings, he was grateful for the company.

Harry stacked the three books he needed to read from that evening beside his teacup and saucer, and cracked open the first one: the filing manual.

"That looks to be exciting reading," Candide commented, glancing at the spine.

Harry licked sugar off his knuckle from his saucer and said, "The admissions test was off the mark; what they should have tested us on was tolerance for filling out three-foot forms and precision scribing of letters for writing file labels."

"Sounds like my day," she joked.

"Do your file drawers get deadly if you don't put a dot in a nought on a new label?" Harry challenged teasingly.

"I've never tried that. I had a teacher who became virulent over that long before I met a cabinet that might."

Harry grew curious then and asked. "So where did you learn wizard accounting. They certainly don't teach it at Hogwarts."

She shook her head emphatically. "No, they certainly don't. I took Runes and Arithmancy and everything even close. Took courses ahead of my year, even, and

then left after my O.W.L.s to go to a public school in Canterbury where they teach wizard accounting, taxation, and what Muggles call paralegals but in wizardom are more astutely called Lawlackeys. “

“I think that’s what my friend Hermione is doing now,” Harry commented.

“Without going to school for it?”

“She’s quite smart, so she didn’t need to,” Harry pointed out.

“Then she is going to become very bored very quickly.”

Harry scratched his head. “I think she already is.”

“You learned a little bit extra about the law last week,” she said easily.

Harry put his head back in his book. “Yeah,” he acknowledged drearily and Candide dropped the conversation.

Knowing that Rodgers trusted him, or almost trusted him, made studying much more pleasant for Harry than it would have been otherwise, and despite the dry topic of his book, he felt a renewed determination not to let his trainer down. This held through thirty pages of cross-indexing formatting rules.

The evening edition of the Prophet arrived and Candide opened it just as Harry was opening Accursed Aid to a page about negating swelling curses using leach charms. He glanced up and forgot about leaches when he saw a picture of himself facing off with Gregor on the back page held up across from him.

“What’s this?” Harry blurted, thinking it odd that photograph was printed yet again.

“What?” Candide asked, but handed over the paper when Harry reached for it.

Harry laid the paper out and looked at the three narrow photographs spliced together in the Gossip Section. A photograph of himself at the Tri-Wizard Tournament was sandwiched between the Gregor one and another of him playing Seeker, looking very small indeed, as he raced a Slytherin Beater around the Hogwarts pitch. The caption below this triptych read: Attention-hungry Potter at it again.

“Damn her,” Harry said.

Candide turned the paper around when Harry released it. “I thought she’d taken a liking to you,” she commented. “What happened?”

“I insulted her,” Harry admitted, figuring that must be the reason.

“You what?” Candide blurted. “What were you thinking?”

Chapter 24

"I was thinking she was annoying me," Harry said, sounding vaguely uncertain now. He had let his mouth go at that moment in the pub and perhaps he shouldn't have. Among his friends it would have been a harmless gibe.

"Harry," Candide lectured, "you don't want this woman as an enemy."

Harry rolled his eyes and pushed the paper farther away.

"Really, Harry. I think you need to put a stop to this now. Write a letter of apology to her."

"What?" Harry exclaimed. "Why?"

"Do you want me to compose something for you? What did you say to her?"

Harry gave her a glare but she was impervious to glares, apparently, which wasn't too much of a surprise. He more pointedly propped his book up in front of himself. "She said something sappy and I suggested she not talk the way she wrote." Candide gave him a stern look, prompting Harry to ask, "You learn that look from Severus?" a little sharply.

This elicited a bout of chuckling from her. "I really think you should nip this now," she said when she sobered.

"Why bother?" Harry asked.

"You're really asking me that?" Candide said. "You don't see this is just the beginning."

Harry tried to study a diagram of a leach charm wand motion. "I'm more popular than her. She'll stop."

Candide rubbed her head. Harry could tell she was exasperated, but she didn't speak for many minutes. Finally, she said, "If you swallow a little bit of pride now, you can avoid a huge battle later." When Harry didn't respond, she added, "Do you really want to fight this out with her when she owns the entire back page of the biggest wizard newspaper in Britain?"

"You're making too much of this," Harry criticized. "Skeeter'll get a bunch of angry mail, and it'll stop on its own."

Candide reopened the paper to page two and said, "I do hope you're right."

Tuesday, they were given their examination results. Harry looked over the half-sized parchment with its scoring summaries. He had been given overly generous partial credit for three of the spells he hadn't really succeeded on and somehow that made

him even more angry at himself. Seven out of twelve possible points was actually worse than his previous six out of ten. Despite the sting the numbers caused, he resisted crinkling the parchment up. Beside him, he could see that Vineet didn't have a perfect score either, but a ten out of twelve. That made Harry feel a little better. On the written part, Harry had a score of ninety-two. He would have done better, he was certain, if he hadn't been beaten up in the first round and given a strange potion complete with Pimms chaser. Even his field work evaluation was down to eighteen out of twenty.

Harry carefully folded up the results and stashed them in his bag. No one ever said this was going to be easy, he reminded himself. But he did not look forward to sharing the results with his guardian. Harry thought that he might just wait until Snape asked; hopefully he would be too busy to.

That night, Harry had another odd dream where he was lying on the floor unable to move. He woke chilled and clammy, forced to stumble to the hearth where only a small fire burned in the warmer weather. He added wood and ignited it with a spell to a blissful blaze. As he watched the flames snapping, he hesitated putting his wand away, remembering the odd dream he had had the night of the Privet Drive fire. Crouched on the edge of the hearthstone, Harry slowly pieced together the evidence timeline and estimated that his dream had occurred around the same time as the fire must have started. He rubbed his arms, which were prickling with cold despite the blasting heat, and wondered what the dream had meant. In it, the house hadn't been burning, the world around him had been. It wasn't as though he had dreamed the actual events, which made him feel a little better about it.

Using the poker, Harry pulled a cold, blackened wood stub out of the corner of the hearth onto the stone and ignited it with his wand. The spell made the black glow red from its core and a blue crown began dancing around its edges. Quickly it was consumed and, careful not to exhale and disturb the ash, he leaned close and inspected its remains in the red light. Sure enough, the ash displayed a delicate, curved feather imprint on it with the hint of part of another beside it. Opting for comfort despite the chill in his limbs, Harry stood on stiff legs and returned to his bed.

The next evening during dinner, Snape's owl arrived with letters for each of them. In Harry's, Snape instructed him to visit Hogwarts that evening to further discuss what they had discussed previously; code, Harry assumed, for more training in fogging

spells. Harry refolded the letter and watched Candide reading hers, which was much longer. She flipped the parchment over to read the end of it, which was closed with a somewhat more embellished signature than his own letter. Harry grinned to himself at the notion of someone softening Snape up at all.

Candide folded the letter and stashed it in her robe pocket. Her brow didn't un-furrow immediately, however, so Harry asked, "Everything all right?"

"Yes, fine," she replied easily.

"Do you wish to visit Hogwarts with me this evening?"

"Perhaps." But then her face fell. "Hm, but what will McGonagall say?"

"We can Floo into Hogsmeade and walk over rather than use her office," Harry offered. "I know the spells for the castle doors."

Candide raised her brow. "You do? Who showed you those?"

"Your original Head of House," Harry said, "Rowena Ravenclaw."

Candide gave him a doubtful expression that had a definite underlayment of real belief that he could be serious. "You speak with her often?"

Harry grinned mischievously, toying with the idolization he suspected still lingered. "I can't help it she decided to talk to me and no one else for nine-hundred years." She stared at him. Harry said, grinning, "But, what it means is I can open the doors if they're locked so we don't have to use the headmistress' Floo if we don't want to."

"All right," she said warily. "I'd like to join you."

Candide fell quiet the rest of the evening until it was time to leave. Harry considered that she was perhaps too sensitive, but he brought her cloak from the entrance hall cupboard as a kind of offering.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, hooking it on.

She remained quietly introspective as they walked through Hogsmeade and when they reached the lake path, Harry said, "I can try to show you Ravenclaw's book if you like."

"What book?" she asked.

"Ravenclaw pulled together all the notes from the school's construction," Harry explained, gesturing at the hulk before them, rising up out of the trees with its windows just beginning to glow. "She sealed them in a stone binding so that Salazar Slytherin couldn't get to them again, because he had used them to build the Chamber of Secrets so he could pass on his notions about the school only being for purebloods."

"And this book is still there?" Candide asked curiously.

"Yes. No one could touch it. It battered anyone who tried." Harry leapt over a particularly muddy spot and waited for Candide, who had walked the long way around. "It opened for me for some reason though. Which is silly, really; I wasn't even in her house."

"It knows you're different, Harry," she commented.

They reached the castle doors, which were unlocked. Harry gestured for her to lead the way in. The students lingering in the Entrance Hall paused in their doings and said hello. At the top of the stairs, pounding footsteps drew their attention backwards where Ginny and her friends were charging out of the Great Hall and up to them.

"Hey, Harry," they said in warm greeting and Ginny asked, "Going up to visit Professor Snape?"

"Yep." Harry replied.

The others finished their hellos and went back to their studies, but Ginny followed along. When they were clear of the others, she pulled Harry's arm and said, "Guess what Professor Snape did?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied, taking a quick glance at Candide, who was looking most interested in this gossip.

"Set me up for a rematch the other night. No warning," she complained.

"He did?" Harry asked, "Who won?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and they resumed walking. "Oh, he did. Surprise is my only chance and it was on his side this time." She appeared to notice Candide suddenly. "Hi, Ginny Weasley," she said while holding out her hand.

Candide introduced herself and said in pleased recognition, "You won the dueling tournament, right? In disguise."

"Yup," Ginny said, sounding bored with the recognition.

"That was brilliant. Surprised the blazes out of everyone," Candide said.

As they reached the top of the second floor staircase, Ginny glanced at Harry and then Candide. Harry leaned close and said, "We're visiting Severus. Candide has moved in, so we came together."

Ginny gazed at Harry, not comprehending. "Moved in?" Harry nodded with a knowing look and Ginny cottoned on. "Really?" she verified. "I . . . wouldn't have

thought that possible." She gave Candide a smile. "I haven't anything on you in the surprise department." She stared at Candide a moment longer, still taking things in before turning to Harry and saying, "That torpedo spell . . . you could have warned me Professor Snape invented it."

Harry laughed. "What? You tried to use it on him?"

"Yes," Ginny stated emphatically. "Stupidly thought maybe he hadn't seen it before." She glanced between them as they had reached the Defense office door. "Well, I better go. See you, Harry. Nice to meet you, Ms. Breakstone."

When Ginny's head had bobbed out of view around the corner, Candide said, "I think she fancies you."

"I know she fancies me," Harry stated and knocked on the door.

Snape was surprised to see both of them there in the corridor. "We thought we'd both visit," Harry explained. "If you want, I'll go chat with Lupin."

"Remus is not here," Snape stated, forestalling Harry's departure.

"No?" Harry asked.

Snape gestured for them to enter his office. When the door closed, he said, "He is still recovering from the last full moon and decided to remove himself from the castle to do so."

Harry, who had leapt to the assumption that he had a date with his cousin, said, "Oh."

Snape glanced between the two of them and asked a bit awkwardly, "How are things at the house?"

"Fine," Harry said. Candide nodded that she agreed with this assessment.

"Did you receive your one-year review results?" Snape asked.

"Yeah," Harry admitted, downcast, which generated a sharp look of disapproval. Candide appeared to be considering excusing herself, so Harry said. "I'll go wander the castle while you two talk. I'll be back." He escaped out the door before anyone could suggest otherwise.

Harry wandered the corridors, greeting students – some startled to see him – as he went. At the staircases, he started upward and at the fourth floor found himself drawn to the library. As he closed the door behind him, Madam Pince said, "Nearly closing time."

"Sorry," Harry said. "I just wanted to have another look at Ravenclaw's book."

Pince looked over from the books she was directing back to their shelves with a conductor's sort of motion and recognized him. "Oh, Mr. Potter. Of course, go right ahead. Please lock the door when you leave."

The gate squeaked plaintively as Harry let himself into the restricted section. The room hung in stillness same as last time, and inside the wall grate where the book was kept there wasn't nearly as much dust. He tugged out the book, which he had not finished reading previously, having stopped when he reached the foundation spells. He pulled over a stool and paged slowly forward, remembering the contents easily despite not having to worry about being tested on them. Long minutes of perusing ticked by before he reached his previous stopping point. The book gave no rattle or shudder to hint that it disliked his pace.

Beyond the foundation spells were artesian spring charms, wood knot removal spells, carpet repair and flying charms, which the diagrams demonstrated as useful for hoisting bricks or roof tiles to upper floors. Harry paused to study those a long while, rehearsing the complicated motions. The incantations were too long to memorize, however, going on in minute writing for three quarters of a page. Harry read each word, though, to ensure the book would let him pass farther.

The next pages, were written on heavy, rough parchment and they smelt of smoke. Harry squinted at the diagrams, which were done in unfamiliar notations in shining ink that had not faded, unlike the rest of the notes, which in places were a pale brown. Jet black angry strokes drawn with a wide nib outlined diagrams on a remarkably detailed illustration of a stone floor drawn with an ultra-fine nib. It appeared to be some kind of fire and electricity spell but the long notation across the bottom read: Bayn to any who do not be-long with'n the castle. They shal bee sunk into the helfire of their mynds. The domesday spel wil on'ly releese when the v'ry last enemy is re-moved.

Harry pondered this and then glanced at the clock and discovered that three quarters of an hour had passed. He quickly shut the book with a boom! and, with a grunt at its weight, stashed it away in its personal cupboard. He jogged back to Snape's office and knocked.

"Nice of you to join us, Potter," Snape said, clearly rebuking Harry for disappearing for so long. "Catching up with your little friends, I assume?"

"I was in the library," Harry insisted. "Sorry."

Candide let herself out, giving Harry a little wink as she departed. She wasn't disappointed that he had taken so long returning.

Snape swished by with the words, "Come along then. I have much to do this evening when we have got through this."

In the Defense classroom, Harry mastered the other two spells: a magical tent that could hide the spells within it for a minute or so as long as they were not too powerful, and a doorway hiding spell, that Harry argued didn't need to be regulated, really.

"It is illegal because it was previously popular for Muggle-baiting," Snape explained. "And since it fogs itself, the Ministry cannot detect it, even in a Muggle building that should not otherwise have any permanent magic within it." Snape clasped his hands together before him and considered Harry before saying, "Given your ease picking up such things, I do not understand why your review scores are not higher."

Harry frowned and hesitated explaining since it would just sound the whinging excuse. "I just didn't do any better . . . that's all," he said instead. When Snape glared at this, Harry went on with, "I won't do better until Moody isn't doing my spell examination."

"Or until you can beat him," Snape pointed out smartly. "What were your scores?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and told him, wincing as he did so.

"At least you have not actually flunked out of the program, correct?" Snape asked.

"No," Harry agreed, pained by the ongoing disapproving tone. "I'd have to do much worse for that to happen." More darkly, he added, "Attacking Muggles for example."

"As someone else apparently realizes," Snape stated insinuatingly. A silence descended until Snape broke it by saying, "There are two other spells I'd like to show you. They are dark magic spells, so use them at your discretion, obviously. One is a magic-twisting spell. It can be used to mask a curse to make it appear to be a charm."

"Why would one do that?" Harry asked.

"Generally hiding cursed things or perhaps creating a trap. Imagine a bracelet that is actually a cursed shackle. Twist its magic to make it appear charmed even to a skilled wizard and you have rather an effective trap." Snape strode purposefully to a wardrobe in the corner and dug out one of the marble blocks used for class demonstrations. He returned and placed it on a desk. Speaking to himself, while tapping the block with his wand, he said, "Something minor. Perhaps Excususbludger! And then the twisting spell." Snape proceeded, using arced lines, to draw overlapping triangles around the block where it sat.

Something caught the corner of Harry's eye and he glanced around the floor, but there was nothing there. Snape was speaking again. "Attempt a curse detection spell on it."

Snape stepped back to give Harry room, and again, something caught Harry's eye, as though there were candles floating on the ceiling casting odd shadows rather than the lamps lining the walls, spreading diffuse light. Harry approached the desk. He didn't need a detection charm, the block sitting there felt fetid and unhealthy. "It isn't masked for me," he said. But he lifted his wand and against better instinct, tapped it with a curse detection spell, which sparkled negative. "Interesting," Harry said. He was thinking that the curse felt worse than the dark magic twisting spell layered over it.

Snape approached again. "But you can still tell?" When Harry nodded, Snape used a different curse detection spell which also came out clear. "That is useful that you can still discern the curse."

Harry asked, "Is that really all it takes to create a Bludger?" as he reached out and touched the block to annoy it. Touching it required overcoming strong instinct to avoid it, which Harry wanted to prove to himself he could do. The block snapped into the air directly at him and he caught it and forced it down onto the table where it thrashed under the weight of his hand.

"Not a Bludger interesting enough for the pitch . . . that requires a dozen spells." Snape canceled the curse and the block became still. "Let me show you the twisting spell again," Snape said, recursing the block with a boiling blister curse this time. But as he repeated the triangles, explaining the pattern as he went, Harry again had the sense that something was moving on the floor. This time he could make out faint tendrils of shadow, hungrily reaching for or seeking something that was on their side of the plane of the floor. Harry traced the shadowy rivulets as the began to converge around Snape.

Harry grabbed Snape's wrist, mid-spell. Immediately, the tendrils appeared to lose their focus and drifted more randomly. Snape gazed sharply at him before also glancing at the floor in alarm. "Harry?" he finally prompted.

"Don't do that spell," Harry said. He swallowed and muttered, thinking aloud: "It's like there's a barrier." The tendrils couldn't seem to break through for some reason. They were almost undetectable now, sinking away downward the way the giant squid's limbs did when the stale buns tossed by the students ran out. "Don't do that," he repeated, feeling it critical to accent that point even though he was realizing how very oddly he was behaving.

He released Snape's wrist and tried to explain himself in the face of rather intent scrutiny. "Something hungry is attracted by that spell."

Snape glanced at the floor again and said, "All dark magic feeds something hungry, I believe. One loses a bit of oneself each time one performs such magic. That is why it is so very dangerous."

Harry swallowed hard and rubbed his arms for warmth.

Snape went on. "I have to admit that I haven't heard of anyone actually seeing that happening."

Harry gestured at the floor, justifying interfering. "It was coming for you. Although something was in the way . . ."

"The castle's own magic, I expect," Snape suggested. He canceled the curse on the marble block and carried it back to the wardrobe, where he put it away. Stroking his wand, he said, "I'll admit I have previously observed that most dark arts work far better outside of this castle."

Harry asked, "You used to do a lot of it, didn't you?" When Snape nodded, Harry glanced at the floor where the tendrils had been and suppressed a shudder at what kind of unfettered feeding those things would be getting in that case.

Snape broke into his musings, saying softly, "One does lose oneself. And to make it worse, it first takes the part of you that would most care for the loss."

"Don't do those spells anymore," Harry insisted. "When's the last time you did one?" Remembering, he quickly said, "You had to do one to find me when I flew off and crashed." Harry felt bitter at himself over that now.

"I used one also to follow Ms. Weasley when she flew off after you." At Harry sharp look, Snape explained, "I used an Apparition tunneling spell . . . the other spell I was going to show you this evening. It is often useful to follow someone who has Apparated away. But perhaps I will not demonstrate it." He stepped to the nearest desk and said, "I can write it out for you in case of emergency. If you wish."

The way Snape stated the offer, it sounded like a test. Harry imagined a matter of life or death. One spell wouldn't matter so much in that case, he considered; although other instincts in him insisted otherwise. "All right. I probably won't use it, but it does sound useful."

"Come to my office and I'll diagram it for you. It is fairly complicated."

Harry followed back to the office, glad to feel that the floor felt normal behind his guardian. As he sat and watched Snape writing with a tall, black quill, he wondered

how much of himself Snape had lost permanently. It seemed possible that excessive dark magic and not some natural personality quirk was the reason Snape didn't seem to be quite . . . complete.

Harry Occluded his musings as Snape finished up and handed the long parchment over. Harry stared at the first diagram of five towers of energy that looked eerily familiar from earlier just that evening.

"What are these?" Harry asked.

Lecturing, Snape said, "They are spell columns. Foci for large amounts of spell energy. One cannot generate enough spell energy all at once for the casting to succeed, so one forms those columns to temporarily store enough energy to execute the spell."

"Are they dark magic themselves?" Harry asked, studying the diagrams that demonstrated how to create them.

Snape interlocked his fingers on his desk and replied, "I only know of a few spells that use them and they are all dark magic spells, but I do not know about the columns themselves. At one time I tried to utilize them to boost the power of other spells, but without any effect beyond copious dangerous spell backlash."

Harry grinned at Snape's dry tone. He folded up the parchment, saying, "You would have been your own worst student . . . you do know that."

Snape's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Albus frequently pointed that out, yes. Thank you for dredging it up in his absence." He pulled his grade books over from the corner of his desk. His hair fell forward as he flipped the first one open. "Everything is indeed all right at home?"

"Yes, it's fine," Harry said. "Kind of nice to not come home to an empty house." Glancing at Snape's obscured face, he said, "I should leave you to it then, but I wondered: did McGonagall tell you about Moody's demonstration during my hearing?"

Snape hesitated. "You are going to ask me if I know how to remove a spell from a wand?"

"Yep."

Another pause. "Do you wish me to show you?"

"No. I don't expect to need know how," Harry pointed out, then said, "Thanks for the lessons." He wanted to plead yet again for Snape to restrain from any dark magic, but he resisted, afraid he may sound childish repeating himself. "Quidditch this weekend, big match. Guess I'll see you then."

Snape nodded. When Harry reached the door, Snape said in an overly pleasant voice, "Slytherin is far overdue for the house cup."

"We'll see," Harry said, unwilling to give up on his former house team, even if it were lacking its captain.

Chapter 24

Thursday after training, Harry again had a letter from Pamela, and this time it included an invitation to dinner due to her 'frequently bothering him'. Harry left a note for Candide and Apparated to Pamela's sitting room.

"Right on time, Harry," she said in welcome, and collected up her jacket and purse. "Let's go down to the Godric Arms . . . I'll buy."

Harry walked along beside her in the breeze, which at least was no longer bitterly cold. She made small talk until they sat down with their pints of ale in an empty corner of the pub. As he sipped, Harry noticed that mixed in with a row of cricket bats hung along the beam above them, was something that looked suspiciously like a Quidditch bat. He was puzzling that when Pamela began to speak, drawing his attention that way.

"So, I'm sure you know why I need to talk to you again . . . I have another question."

"Why didn't you just ask Remus the question?" Harry cut in.

"I'm not a good letter writer, Harry. I can't judge handwriting they way I can judge a person sitting right in front of me, or even over the telephone when I can hear things that are different from what someone is saying." She swigged a gulp of her drink and asked, "So how well do you know Remus?"

Harry shrugged. "Fairly well, but not in excessively personal detail."

"I even asked my mum what she knew about him." She shook her head. "I can't get him out of my head."

"What'd your mum say?" Harry asked.

"She remembered him as shy, not much else. A bit of a hanger-on with James, I think she said."

"Hm," Harry uttered, swigging his own ale, despite the pile of reading looming at home.

She flipped her Old Peculiar coaster over repeatedly with her fingers and said, "He actually said he'd like to go out sometime but he has health issues at the moment. So now I wonder, does he have AIDS?"

Harry propped his chin on his hand and swallowed a sigh. "No."

"Hep C?"

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"I'll take that as a 'no'," she said. "Why is this such an issue then?"

Harry did sigh. "It's an issue because magical people make a big deal out of it. He almost didn't get to go to school even." Harry stopped there upon seeing her deeply furrowed brow. "Ah, hell, I honestly don't think you are going to care, but it isn't my place to tell you and you don't have a chance of guessing. So give it up and ask him."

Pamela fell silent a long while before asking, "So it is catching?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Why don't I just go fetch Lupin here so he can tell you himself."

Face bright, she said, "You'd do that?"

"He isn't at school; he's apparently at home. I think teaching's been a bit much for him," Harry said aloud thinking how increasingly worn Lupin had appeared over the term.

"You know where he lives?"

"You have his post, right?" Harry held out his hand and she dug a letter, one of several, out of her purse and deliberated which to hand over. "I just need the envelope," he said, trying to not sound annoyed.

Harry stepped out of the pub and walked around the back and across the carpark to the trees. He wished he could Apparate silently yet again and took himself to one of several alleys in Brixton that he had learned from his Auror field work. He didn't have a map, so he walked along a narrow pavement where the traffic rushed by very close, to ask at the first tobacconists where he might find the address.

With the directions firmly memorized, Harry headed out again into the noisy street, wishing Muggles had better silencing charms for their cars. Over the ten minutes it took him to walk to the proper road and number, Harry plotted out what he was going to say without much faith in what he was coming up with. By the time he stood before the correct door in an overly aromatic, narrow corridor that had the bulb missing from its light so it was in near darkness, he hoped that this matchmaking worked.

Lupin answered after a few seconds' delay. He had his wand out, although he held it behind him. "Harry?" he queried in surprise and then backed up to invite him in. The two small rooms of the flat were crowded with trunks and cabinets, halving the actual living space.

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Harry found a rare open spot to stand on the worn Indian rug and said, "I'm here to take you out for drinks."

"Are you?" Lupin asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Harry insisted, now finding the proper tactic had entered his mind on its own. "See, I'm being driven positively mad by this woman who will not leave me alone until she has every last blasted thing explained to her." Lupin appeared strangely amused by that, prompting Harry to say, "Get your cloak . . . let's go."

Lupin brushed his hair back with his hand and inspected the cardigan he had on. "You look fine. Godric's Hollow is hardly the height of fashion."

This gave Lupin pause and he said, "Haven't been there in a very long time."

Harry handed Lupin his cloak from the stand by the door, and took his arm after he had swung the cloak around his shoulders. "Long overdue, then," Harry said, and a moment later they were in the trees behind the Godric Arms.

They stepped inside and made their way in to the corner where Pamela sat talking with the next table over. Harry hoped that was the same pint as when he had departed and not the end of a second one. Pamela's eyes brightened considerably upon seeing them.

"Remus," she said warmly and they shook hands. Lupin slid into the booth, but when Harry hesitated, Pamela tugged on his arm. "Oh, no you don't. Wizards are positively Victorian – you can chaperone."

Harry slid into the seat beside Lupin and tugged his very warm drink over to himself. "I'll get us both fresh ones," he said to Lupin and stood back up to go to the bar. When he returned, the two of them were chatting amiably and Harry considered that they looked pretty good together.

During a lull in the conversation, Harry nudged Lupin and pointed up at the ceiling beam. "What does that look like to you?" he asked.

Lupin's face broke into a smile. "Same thing I'm sure it does to you. Haven't you seen the Snitch commemorative plaque in the square?"

"The what?" Harry asked, his memory teasing him unsuccessfully about something like that.

"I'll show you later." He elbowed Harry. "Come on, I've seen you myself with your nose buried in a copy of Quidditch Through the Ages."

He and Pamela returned to talking when Harry's memory kicked in. He tugged on Lupin's sleeve, saying, "That's right! The Snitch was invented here, wasn't it?" After a glance between them, he sobered and said, "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt." But they both laughed.

"What is this he's on about?" Pamela asked.

"Wizard sport," Lupin explained, shaking his head.

Pamela said into her drink. "Young men and sports are impossible." She set her drink down firmly. The hum of conversation around them formed a kind of safe barrier to their conversation. "Harry, would you order us some chips or something?"

"Sure," Harry said, and slid out of the booth.

Lupin keenly watched him cross the now-bustling pub to wait at the bar.

"What's that look for?" Pamela asked.

Lupin shook his head. "He's been getting into a great deal of trouble lately."

"Harry has?" she asked in disbelief. "He's such a sweet kid."

"Not so much that kind. The kind that finds him. He doesn't know it but he is under guard most all the time now, although I suspect this evening he accidentally shook off his assigned watch."

"You're guarding Harry?" she asked as Lupin continued to observe Harry waiting his turn to order at the bar.

"I am at the moment," Lupin said easily. "I was out of commission this week, so I don't know the schedule of whom it should be."

"I got the sense that Harry was better at magic than most of you," Pamela said quietly.

"Oh, he is. Could take most of us on all at once. Mostly we are eyes to sound the alarm or in case a witness is needed. It is a routine we did years ago for him as well." He swirled the last of his ale around in his mug. "Sometimes it feels like things rarely ever change."

Harry returned, ending their thread of conversation and in the interest of picking a new topic, apparently, Pamela said, "So, you seem nice enough, Remus. Why don't we go out some time?"

"Aren't we out now?" Lupin asked, sounding teasingly put-upon. Gesturing at Harry, he said, "You sent the single most famous wizard in the world to fetch me. I've got the sense that you're serious."

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One heavy meal and a pint each later, they strolled to the deserted square at the heart of tiny Godric's Hollow. Pamela had her arm linked through Lupin's, making Harry think it was time to make his exit.

"Over here, Harry," Lupin said, gesturing at the back of a cement pillar that held a sign designating the large tree before them as having been planted two hundred years before in honor of a visit by William Pitt the Younger. Harry studied the pillar but did not see anything special. Lupin glanced around them carefully, peering into the shadows even, before pulling out his wand and tapping the pillar with Reveluso.

A sparkle started on the face of the concrete which then burned brighter and split into two dots that drew a rectangular outline that then filled in with an ordinary brass plaque. The sparkle faded and Harry, by the streetlight, could see that the plaque held the image of a Snitch. Excitedly, Harry said, "There's a photograph of my father in front of this!"

"Oh, I'm sure," Lupin said, almost sounding tired of the topic. Harry leaned in to read the words: Here the Snitch was invented August the twenty-first thirteen hundred and sixty-nine by the foremost metal charmer Bowman Wright. Lupin said, "He claimed Wright was an ancestor, but I think he just liked to think so because he wanted to play Seeker."

After a minute more the plaque faded back to invisible with one last little sparkle. "Thanks for showing me that," Harry said. "I'd wondered where that photograph was taken."

"So much magic everywhere," Pamela marveled. "You just never know what you might find if you look in the right place." She re-hooked her arm through Lupin's and said, "I want to see some more spells."

Harry and Lupin both laughed. Lupin said, "Not laughing at you. Just imagine if someone said, 'I would like to see you switch the electric lights on and off again'."

"Oh, come on . . . it isn't like that at all," Pamela complained.

"Yes, it is," Lupin insisted.

Pamela rolled her eyes and tugged him toward the bench. "So tell me about something other than magic."

Harry followed, thinking his time to exit had perhaps passed and that he was now overdue. Pamela said, "Come on, Harry, it's a beautiful night. Sit down."

"I have readings to do, and I think I'm in the way," he commented as he sat on the end of the cold cement bench.

"No, you aren't," she said, sounding as though the ale was doing half the talking. "You're our moral support."

"How's that?" Harry asked. But he sat quietly for many minutes while they talked. They sounded already like they knew each other well. Harry finally stood again. "I'm sorry. I really have a long list of readings assigned today and I hate to admit that my review tests didn't go as well as they should have, so I must get to it." The two of them looked up at him and he realized that Pamela may have been right, given the slightly haunted look in Lupin's eyes and the uncertain one in Pamela's.

Harry sighed. The air was still. The surrounding shops and houses shuttered. This place felt heavy with history both wide and personal. "Look," Harry said. "It isn't a big deal. Remus, just tell her. My continued apprenticeship as an Auror is starting to depend on it," he teased. "You two could talk all night and not get to it."

Lupin frowned lightly and patted his hands on his legs. Harry thought that perhaps he underestimated how many friends Lupin had lost exactly this way. Lupin smiled lightly the next instant, as he recovered himself, and said to Pamela, "I'm a werewolf."

Pamela stared at him. Glanced at Harry. Stared at Lupin again. "Truly?" When Lupin nodded sadly, she said, "That's really interesting." After a pause she tried, "You look normal." She looked to Harry for help. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"You haven't seen any films with werewolves in them?" Harry asked. Even he had a few times when Dudley insisted on staying up late when his friends were staying over.

"Yeah, tons, at the cinema kid's club. But that's not . . . real, is it?"

Harry glanced at Lupin, who was studying his hands. "Not really far off. It's only a full moon thing," Harry qualified quickly, realizing more starkly now why Lupin would not go through this explanation without good reason. If it were making him this uncomfortable . . .

Pamela, eyebrows high on her head looked Lupin over. "Fur, claws, the whole thing?"

"Murderous madness," Lupin added sadly.

Harry nodded. Pamela considered Lupin again. Her brow had lowered and she was beginning to look almost . . . intrigued. Harry shook his head ever so slightly. "I really need to go. Lovely evening. See you both later, I'm sure," he said, stepping away to look for a closer space to Disapparate from.

Lupin stood and followed him. "Harry," he said. Harry stopped and when Lupin caught up, he asked, "Did you leave a note at home?"

"Yes," Harry said, thinking that an odd question.

"Good. That's all." Lupin started back to the bench.

"Why do you ask?" Harry demanded. But Lupin simply waved. Harry wound his way between two houses and to the copse of trees bordering the village. He arrived in his main hall a moment later, followed by what could have been an echo, but it was just a little too far removed from his own arrival and it sounded as though it came from outside.

Harry growled and stalked into the dining room. Candide, in pyjamas and a dressing gown, sat drinking cocoa. "You're much later than your note said."

"Did someone come in here?" Harry asked, seeing his note still out on the table, but shifted to the middle.

She shook her head. "No."

They were guarding him again, Harry thought. That's what Lupin was referring to: his shaking his guard. But that was silly. He was an Auror apprentice; they couldn't very well follow him on duty. But . . . he thought again, he was usually with Tonks or Shacklebolt then. They were Order members too. Harry stepped slowly into the hall and then back to the dining room where he quietly said, "Don't be alarmed by anything I'm about to do."

"What are you about to do?" Candide asked warily over her the rim of her cocoa.

"I'm not sure yet," Harry said in a low voice. "I'm still thinking. If my barrier spells were better I'd trap them in. I wonder who it is."

"Who who is?" Candide asked, glancing slowly around to look out the window at the darkness beyond.

"Watching the house. Watching me. Like I'm a child or something," he said in growing anger. He was alarming Candide now, so he stashed he wand in his back pocket to think. A moment later another pop! sounded from farther away, almost inaudibly, and Harry decided the person must have departed. He ran a barrier check spell on the property but didn't see anything red flaring out in the darkness of the garden. He sat down opposite Candide and drummed his fingers. "I can take care of myself," he griped. "Boy, that makes me angry."

Still wary, Candide said, "Have you done your readings?"

"Ah, shit," Harry said, and stood to fetch his books.

"Would you like a cuppa before you Apparate away?" Pamela asked Lupin as they sat in the ever-growing gloom of the square.

Lupin smiled faintly. "I would, actually."

She stood and closed her jacket tighter against the cooling air. "Come along then. You can see my little house." As they walked out of the square down a road lit only faintly by distant lamps and house windows, she said, "Harry said that you weren't at Hogwarts tonight . . ."

Lupin explained, "The full moon was just last weekend and I require nearly a week to recover."

She squinted at him sideways. "You look hairless."

"Not recover in that way. It is just draining, the transformation is, that is," he stated clumsily.

At her house, she plugged in the electric teakettle and sat down across from him in the sitting room. "It's good that they give you that much time off," she stated conversationally.

"Yes, it is. Headmistress McGonagall is remarkably understanding. Fights the board on my behalf regularly, I suspect, although she believes now that it distracts them from other things, to her advantage. Even Severus displays a modicum of understanding, which he hasn't in the past."

"Hasn't he?" she asked over her shoulder as she stood to tend the boiling water.

"No, last time he worked very hard to have me removed."

Pamela stuck her head back in the doorway. "Did he?" she asked sharply.

"He's all right now," he assured her, and she disappeared again into the tiny kitchen. "He had his reasons . . . not the least of which is a rather tangled past we share."

She carried a tray in with tea and small cakes. "Are all wizards as damaged as you three?" she asked.

He chuckled lightly as he accepted a cup and saucer. "Most are not quite as damaged as us. I don't think, anyway."

"But Severus is not trying to have you removed now?" she asked, sounding as though she strongly desired to have this straight.

"No, no, he's fine now. Astounding, but Harry seems to have taught him a modest glimmer of compassion." He dropped a sugar cube into his cup with a clink. "I would not have thought it possible previously." He thought further and smiled. "Although, Severus is rather awkward about it."

She carefully sipped her hot tea. "That would make it endearing, even."

Lupin shook his head. "I really wouldn't know about that."

Groggy the next morning from his late night reading and a strange dream where he was searching a dank cellar full of glittering jeweled things for something he dearly needed, Harry was not prepared to face the back of the Daily Prophet at breakfast. "What!" Harry snapped.

From behind the paper, Candide said, "I wondered what you would make of that." Calmly, she folded the paper backwards and handed it to him.

With a pained expression Harry read the gossip headline Star Auror Not So Much So. The article went to say that Harry had cumulatively scored the lowest of his fellows on his one-year auror review. Skeeter went on to suggest – with lots of high-minded sounding words – that perhaps Harry was not deserving of having his rather expensive apprenticeship paid for by the Ministry.

"Don't say, 'I told you so'," Harry grumbled, rubbing his forehead and suddenly wishing to go back to sleep.

"I wasn't going to. I didn't imagine she could dredge up something that damaging that quickly. Or did she make it up?"

Harry pushed the paper back. "No, it's true. I'd have done better on the written, but I got beaten up by this semi-retired Auror, Mad-Eye Moody, during my spell testing and ended up being given some potion concoction by the Ministry Healer. I couldn't quite get through the test after that without a short nap in the middle of it."

She covered her mouth. "Sorry," she said, trying not to giggle. "It's not really funny," she argued, apparently with herself.

But Harry was laughing lightly too at the humor of it. "Frickin' hero of wizardry . . . right."

"You are," she said sharply, and as with most people this caught her by surprise, or her sitting there with him caught her by surprise, or something even more complicated than that. "They're forgetting already," she said knowingly.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I wanted them to . . . or so I always thought." He pulled the paper back and studied the old photograph accompanying the article – one taken right when they had all started training almost a year ago. They already looked much younger then. "I wanted to have a normal life for once."

"Why did you decide to be an Auror then?" Candide asked in disbelief.

Her chastising tone made him generate confidence to go with his reply, "Well, I thought I'd be bored doing anything else. The fact that some people don't want me there makes me even more determined to stay." She fastened a raised brow look of consternation upon him, prompting him to say, "You look like Severus again." Which made them both chuckle.

"He didn't seem real pleased to hear your scores," she commented.

"No, he wasn't. He hasn't grown any less exacting. At all."

"Why should he?" she asked.

"Spoken like a true Ravenclaw," Harry muttered.

Author's Notes:
Well, the main reason Harry can't quit, of course, is it ruins my story...
Candide has brown hair. Pretty sure about that.
Order members. Realize that this is the Order as snapshoted at the end of book 5 and that it never really officially incorporated people like Hermione or Ron as a result. I'm sure if they are needed they'll be called in. I'm in fact positive of that.
Reminder: Last chance to bail. was nothing compared to what is coming up. Oh, and 25 might be late because I'm still working on 26 and trust me, you don't want the delay to occur between 25 and 26.

Chapter 25.

Crimson Regret

June was by far the best weather for Quidditch at Hogwarts. The cloudless sky backdropped the colorful stadium, tipped with stands full of eager fans who were wearing and waving maroon or green.

Harry sat between Ron and Hermione on a bench that had more space than the previous match due to the thinner clothes needed in the warmer weather. Beside Lavender, who was with Ron again, sat Vineet with Nandi, whose hand he held tightly. Nandi asked for another clarification of the rules, which Ron was happy to fill in. Harry had the oddest sense that Hermione was intentionally keeping her gaze forward and he thought that perhaps he should talk to her the very next time the opportunity arose.

The teams took flight and circled. The Slytherin Beaters looked even larger than the previous match and they eyed the smaller Gryffindors with malice as they flew by them, jackets flapping. The Gryffindors were shouting last minute instructions to each other and pointing, clearly lacking leadership but not lacking competitive spirit. The Slytherin Beaters closed ranks around their Seeker, who was wearing her silvered, wrap-around sunglasses today, which were sparking curious conversation around the stands.

The teams continued circling as Madam Hooch directed the Ravenclaw Beaters to place the trunk of balls in the center of the pitch. The grass expanse cleared of extra personnel and Madam Hooch blew her whistle to attract the teams' attention. The

teams dodged dangerously and tauntingly around each other to swing into position, and then hovered in the breeze, waiting.

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"Severus?" Lupin queried upon entering Snape's office. He had entered because he could hear his colleague inside and Snape had strangely not responded to his repeated knock. The door had only been sealed with two layers of closure spell, which Lupin waved off. Snape stood by the last tall window, staring out. The closest window stood open, allowing the sound of the crowd to drift into the office. As he crossed the room, Lupin hesitated upon noticing that the one student desk in the room had been badly bent by something– most likely the heavy stone Pensieve that lay on its rim resting up against a bookshelf. Rounded beads of pearlish silver, like glowing mercury, lay scattered around it.

Lupin bent to upright the bowl; it scraped loudly on the stone floor as he set it right. Snape didn't move, so Lupin also used a cleanup spell to return the memories to the cradle of the Pensieve. He left it on the floor and stood, not wishing to intrude more than that, but compelled to at least organize that much to help sort things out, if possible.

"Severus?" Lupin prodded again at the stone-like figure. The crowd roared out on the lawn, indicating that the teams had come out. Lupin approached the desk and noticed a screw-top jar lying on its side beside the tray of old potion bottles McGonagall had brought down the previous weekend. "These are the potions from Albus, aren't they?" he asked.

Snape's lip twitched into a sneer. "Bloody Dr. Frankenstein," Snape muttered.

Lupin puzzled that. "Albus you mean?"

Snape did not clearly respond. He said, "Pieced what he wanted together and pretended it was human." His eyes dropped then; the first real movement he had made.

Lupin glanced back at the Pensieve. "Was one of Albus' old memories in there?"

Snape again stated the nonsensical. "The truth. That is all the old fool cared about . . . thought it had some kind of power."

Lupin considered looking into the Pensieve but instead asked, "What was in the memories, Severus?"

Snape snorted. "I stupidly thought perhaps it related to the ingredients. Do you know what they are? Look at the label on the stone jar."

Lupin moved quickly to find the jar in question. "Flamel," he read off. "These are Nicolas Flamel's ingredients. That means . . ."

"Presumably," Snape muttered. He turned then, displaying his dark countenance full on.

"Severus, what's wrong?" Lupin demanded more sternly.

"Everything." Snape picked up a cylindrical jar made of heavy masonry. As though far away, he said hopelessly, "A few of these are nearly inert with age, but they are perhaps salvageable for a very small stone."

"You're going to Alchemize a Philosopher's Stone?" Lupin asked in surprise.

Snape held up a bottle of something clear and tilted it through a circle as though checking the viscosity. "Do you know the original story of the Philosopher's Stone?" he asked. When Lupin shook his head, Snape said, "A kindly old wizard, long of beard and tall of hat, comes to see the king and he tells him that he can create a magic stone that not only grants nearly eternal life, it can transfigure lead into gold." Snape placed the bottle back on the tray and turned the tray around a few times as though looking for something in particular. "The king gives the wizard riches and then more riches with which to fund the production of the Stone, but it is all a lie . . . in the end the old wizard is nothing but a common thief in disguise."

"You are making no sense, Severus," Lupin criticized.

Snape's eyes narrowed to slits as he graced him with a look unlike any Lupin had seen on him in several years. A knock sounded on the door and Lupin turned sharply. Ginny Weasley stood there.

"Professor, I was wondering . . ." she began.

Lupin swooped to her and herded her out of the room. She glanced back but stepped willingly into the corridor. Lupin closed the door to Snape's office and ignored her questions about what she might do for her detention because she needed a distraction from thinking about the match she was required to miss. The open window at the end of the corridor inspired her to flinch with its continued sporting venue noises.

"Go fetch Harry," Lupin said.

"What?"

"Something is bothering Professor Snape and I can't get anything straight out of him."

"I'm not supposed-" Ginny began.

Lupin sharply interrupted. "It doesn't bloody well matter if you're banned from the match. Go fetch Harry . . . I expect he is in the visitors' section."

Ginny closed her mouth at his unusually forceful words. She stepped to the window and, leaning on the sill, transformed into a hawk and leapt into the updraft.

In the cheering visitor's section, a large bird of prey swept down and grabbed hold of Harry's cloaked shoulder. He turned with a jerk and immediately relaxed upon seeing that it was a red-tailed hawk. "Shove aside, Ron; make some space," Harry insisted.

Ginny appeared between them, holding both of their shoulders to stabilize herself from reappearing sideways. "Whoa," she breathed, gazing across the pitch. "Gryffindor's up thirty to zero already?!"

"They're playing inspired Quidditch, I think," Harry observed.

"Or the twins really did . . . never mind." She leaned close to Harry and said, "Professor Lupin said to fetch you. Something is irking Professor Snape."

"Maybe it's being down by thirty," Ron commented, apparently overhearing.

Harry tried to read Ginny's expression. "What's going on?" he asked her.

"I honestly don't know, Harry. I'm just the messenger."

To his friends Harry said, "I have to go." He followed Ginny as she climbed up the row of seats above them and leapt over the rear railing, transforming as she fell. Harry did the same, heart pumping in the second of free-fall before his wings came into being, caught the air, and directed him forward in a surge.

Ginny drifted in bird form nearly all the way to the castle doors, so Harry did the same, overtaking her in the last twenty feet and pulling up hard before putting his heavy claws into the lawn. Transformed back to himself, he mounted the stone steps and entered the dim entrance hall.

"He's in his office," Ginny supplied when Harry turned to her with a questioning expression.

At the top of the second floor staircase stood Lupin, apparently waiting. "Why don't you ask Professor Trelawney what you can do for detention, Ms. Weasley; she rarely goes to the matches." He said this without looking directly at Ginny.

"Oh, thanks," Ginny snipped a bit sarcastically and shuffled off.

Given Lupin's expression, Harry held off on expressing his opinion on Ginny's assignment. "What's going on?" he asked instead.

"I don't know. Severus is in a dark and mysterious funk about something," he said quietly as though afraid of being overheard. "He's nonsensical, going on about Dumbledore's obsession with truth and his playing Dr. Frankenstein and-"

"What?" Harry blurted, but he didn't wait for an answer. Now thoroughly concerned, he headed for Snape's office.

Harry opened the door without knocking and found Snape staring down at a tray full of strange potions on his desk. "What are those?" Harry asked, seeing hazards in anything out of place. He glanced around carefully before closing the door behind him and heading to the desk across from Snape.

Snape replied, "They are the ingredients of immortality, should one wish to torment oneself with more of a life than one would normally suffer through."

"Severus, what's going on?" Harry asked. "Lupin said you were ranting about Dumbledore."

Snape's gaze remained distant as he said, "I lied to you."

Harry pursed his lips before quipping, "Lupin also mentioned that you were being nonsensical." The sound of the match called Harry's attention back down the room where he spotted the Pensieve on the floor beside a half-destroyed desk. Thinking it a better clue than the old potions, he went over to it and peered down into the small pool of ethereal liquid drifting lazily in the bottom of it.

"Go ahead," Snape snarled, giving Harry a start.

"What is it?" Harry demanded.

Snape had lifted an orange bottle from the tray. "Rare liquid amber," he stated as though wishing potions was the only topic. He set the bottle down hard and said, "A memory," like one betrayed. "A memory Albus took from me." With that pronouncement he began to pace behind his desk. "Thought he could make me something I wasn't by taking me apart like one of his bloody magical contraptions."

Harry, unbalanced by seeing this now-unfamiliar disturbed side of Snape, asked carefully, "When was this?"

Stopping to glare at Harry, he replied, "When I refused to adopt you."

Harry tried to swallow when his mouth went dry. "Oh," he muttered, feeling dark dread settling upon him, hard enough to make breathing difficult.

Tossing his arm which made his wide sleeve wave wildly, Snape went on. "Idiot should have just thrown it away. Blasted slave to the truth. Why keep it?" he asked no one in particular.

"Dumbledore did like the truth," Harry said in a commiserate tone.

Snape came to a scuffing stop on the stone floor and gesturing at the Pensieve, said, "Go ahead! What are you waiting for? You certainly never shied away from one of those in the past."

Harry considered refusing. "Severus," he said, placatingly. Snape spun away with a huff of disgust and paced again, stopping before a cabinet of odds and ends, and Harry for a moment believed that Snape was considering tossing its contents across the room. Snape's shoulders fell and he instead sat between the tallest bookcases, on top of the step stool used to reach the upper shelves. He looked defeated; himself shelved in the narrow space.

"Why are you tormenting me?" Snape asked dejectedly. "Just get it over with."

Harry knelt on the floor and pulled out his wand. "Why your sudden commitment to the truth?" he asked, stalling.

"Because everyone knows, I now realize. I was the only one made to forget." Then after a pause. "Manipulative bastard."

Harry, who could remember thinking similarly about the old wizard, but had long since decided he had done all right, stared into the iridescent pool before him. But if Dumbledore had manipulated Snape that much, well . . . Harry disturbed the surface with his wand, setting up a clockwise flow that raised the level of the sparse liquid at the edges. Glimpses of Dumbledore and Voldemort flickered by in many disparate scenes connected by a twisting web of pearlish strands. Harry leaned in farther, his chest sick with dread, but seeing no alternative.

Harry walked along the corridor he had just walked down the weekend before on the way to the Order meeting, but this time he was following a figure in a hooded cloak, moving stealthily. The figure stopped at one door and listened before moving

in ghost-like silence to the next and listening there. Starting when voices were heard within, the figure tugged his hood back to listen better and Harry recognized a much younger version of Snape, with fuller hair and smooth, sallow skin. Harry listened too, trying to piece together what was being discussed. A clearer voice rang out, one that made Harry quiver when he recognized Trelawney's voice discussing her great-great-grandmother. When her voice suddenly went hoarse and her pronouncement nearly filled the corridor, Harry pulled his head back out of the Pensieve. He stared fixedly at the cabinets behind the desk without really seeing them.

When he found his voice, he said, "You overheard the prophecy."

Snape didn't respond. Harry turned his stare on him from inside a personal pool of numbness. He felt nothing. He was drifting somewhere else even though his body was clearly in Snape's office. Grabbing hold of the next thought that occurred to him, he said, "You told Voldemort." With that, heat seeped in, burning the numbness away like an acid. Harry forced himself to breath. He bit his lip hard. He wanted nothing more than to throw the Pensieve across the room, but clearly that had already been done.

Harry realized that he was gripping his wand, which was growing damp with his own perspiration. He almost put it away on automatic, but then didn't. He wanted to hold it.

"What did you do?" he asked rhetorically, finding the pathways of suspicion easy to follow. "Run off to your master in glee at the thought of your reward."

"No," Snape answered. He crossed his arms and said cockily, "I never do, and never did, anything without due deliberation. And besides, I had to hide from Dumbledore."

Harry laughed viciously at that thought, prompting Snape to say, "Thought you'd like that."

Harry stood up off his knees, again needing to resist tossing the Pensieve against the wall in the vain hope that the solid stone of it would shatter. He felt as though he were bleeding to death and that any moment he would collapse from loss of blood. Again, he forced himself to breathe past the betrayal tightening his chest. The burning inside was becoming an unleashed living thing snaking through his limbs, devouring him from the inside.

The sound of cheering wafted in on a breeze and Harry raised his wand in his left hand and threw a too-powerful charm at the window to close it. The window banged hard, deformed, and three of the panes shattered, letting the next cheer float in as

well. Angry beyond reason, Harry changed hands and waved a Reparo at the bottom opening and then another above it. He hesitated, though, before casting the third because he was noticing now the grey oddness of the first two sheets of new glass. Too angry to care long, he lifted his hand to cast the third, but Snape restrained his wrist.

Harry didn't fight him, he felt too weak to. He swallowed, forced himself to breath, and watched Snape step over to the window to peer at the odd grey glass. It wasn't just grey; wraiths twisted inside of it. Harry blinked, distracted from his anger enough to squint at the panes. Snape waved a repair at the top open light and the crowd noise quieted. He then cast series of breaking curses at the grey panes, none of which had the slightest effect on them. He jabbed his wand handle into one even, but the window merely rattled, the glass unbreakable.

Harry decided that he didn't care if he had left Snape with something annoying to take care of. He turned away, swallowed the urge to scream or kick the Pensieve, and stalked toward the door a little drunkenly.

"Harry," Snape said, causing him to hesitate.

Harry didn't want to listen, deliberate thought had fled him. He spun and demanded, "What's the matter with you? Leave me the hell alone." He wanted to accuse him of all kinds of things, such as killing his parents in order to get him, but even in his current state, that sounded absurd. The betrayal flailing inside him urged him to strike out with something though, to transfer the pain, if possible. "I hope Voldemort tortured you a few times; you deserved it." He waved his hand at the Pensieve at Snape's feet. "Got any memories of that I can watch; I'd like that."

Snape's only response to that was rubbing his forehead.

At the door Harry paused to say, "You're right, Dumbledore was a manipulative bastard. And an idiot to boot."

The corridor was silent. Harry wished not for the first time, that he could just Apparate himself away directly. Torn between going down to McGonagall's office, which was much closer, and walking, or even flying, to Hogsmeade, Harry didn't move immediately. The door to the office opened and Snape stopped in the doorway upon seeing Harry still standing there. Harry raised his wand and pointed it at him.

"So help me," he murmured, feeling deep down satisfaction in knowing Snape believed Harry could best him. "Leave me alone."

Snape didn't react, simply remained frozen where he had stopped. Harry, the pain and writhing in his core spiking to nearly intolerable, stalked off in the direction of

the staircases. Out on the lawn, with no memory of his journey out of the castle, he glanced in the direction of the pitch when it came into view, wishing he were still in the crowd, still naïve.

Harry was still moving on a strange automatic instinct when he reached home. The house was blessedly empty, which meant that Harry could wander his room to pack a trunk without being disturbed. Halfway through tossing things into it, however, he sat on the bed and stared into the trunk's depths. He was supposed to protect Candide, not run away. And back at the Quidditch match, his friends were probably wondering where he had gone off to. It would be much easier to pretend this didn't matter, and for long minutes he stared at the floor trying to make it so. But he couldn't. The betrayal of it cleaved him down the center to the point where if he let his control slip at all that violence would result. If Snape had pushed him at the end just a little bit more, Harry would have unhesitantly hit him with a curse, just to keep him away.

The room screamed the lie of the last two years at him so much that he could not bear to stay. He tossed open the wardrobe and used a pack spell on his shoes. The shoes zipped to the trunk but in their wake they left inky black wraiths that only dissipated slowly from the air. The shoes themselves looked all right when he picked them back up out of the trunk. Harry, more determined than confusingly alarmed, dumped his spare jeans and shirts in by hand and closed the lid. Trying to hover the trunk created the same bizarre effect of leaving square black outlines floating in the air and when Harry let the trunk settle beside the door, he caught a whiff of dry rotted earth. Sitting on the trunk, Harry tried to pull himself together. From her cage, Kali hissed at him.

"You can stay," Harry said to her. "I don't care." And with that, he hefted the trunk by hand and carried it down the stairs. Physical training at the Ministry had made it an easy task, even though it was his largest trunk. But at the hearth, he again had second thoughts about what he was doing. He decided that what he was doing was getting some space to think clearly, which he desperately needed. If Snape was so worried about Candide, he could move her into Hogwarts.

Harry was sitting on Hermione's couch, his feet up on his trunk, when Hermione came in.

"Harry! Here you are. Everyone's looking everywhere for you. It was only Lupin insisting that you and Professor Snape must have had a row that kept us from calling the Ministry and reporting you missing."

"Sorry," Harry said, only vaguely sorry in reality because from the depths of what he was feeling he could not dredge up significant concern.

Hermione, in her fashion, appeared to read all of this in his response. She sat down on the trunk, facing him, and asked, "What happened?"

Harry told her everything about what he had discovered in Snape's office about the prophecy.

"Merlin," Hermione muttered.

"Did you know?" Harry asked, voice half-hardened against another potential betrayal. "Did you know it was Severus who had overheard the original prophecy?"

"No." She held up her hand. "Well, I suspected it once. But Voldemort was gone and it didn't seem to matter. Something McGonagall said when I was helping her set up the first party the night you destroyed Voldemort made me wonder."

"No wonder she seemed so surprised that I'd agreed to the adoption," Harry said.

Hermione rested her elbows on her knees. "You forgave Professor Snape rather a lot, Harry. Not that much of a stretch to assume you'd forgive him that too."

"Yes, it is," Harry snarled. "He killed my parents."

"Voldemort killed your parents," Hermione corrected him.

Harry sat forward. "Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, of-"

Harry interrupted her. "Or are you on the side of Dumbledore's effing truth?" He couldn't sit still, so he rose to pace, making Crookshanks hiss at him from his bed on the bookshelf. Harry eyed the half-Kneazel to make it back down and indeed it turned in a circle and curled up facing the back of the shelf.

"Harry," Hermione said calmly. "Sit down. I'll make some tea. I am of course on your side. Everyone is. Sit down," she repeated when Harry remained standing in the middle of the room.

She filled the teapot and set it in the middle of the table. When she returned with cauldron cakes she was surprised to find the pot still cold. Harry said, "Sorry, didn't feel like heating it." In truth, he was worried how the spell would really turn out and couldn't bring himself to try it. Remembering how odd his magic had been when he had moved his things around, not to mention the strange grey glass, made Harry's arms go numb with fear and the snaking pain seemed to feed on it, making it worse.

She gazed at him with an dubious expression but tapped the teapot with a simple heating charm. She munched on a cake saying, "Wish I had some chocolate. You can stay here if you like. I'm assuming that's why you have your trunk with you."

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling better at her invitation, well enough to unwrap a cake for himself.

"I need to owl people to tell them where you are, Harry. Everyone was worried." She didn't move though. She asked, "All right?" with unusual care.

"Yeah. Go ahead."

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Snape numbly stared out the window for long minutes before focusing on the strange glass Harry's repair spell had set into the leading. Dark shadowy things alternately swam and creeped inside the glass, or more correctly just beyond the glass, as though it were a window onto another world. Swallowing hard, Snape tapped on the glass with the tip of his wand. One of the wraiths jerked as he did this, although it may have been coincidental. If it were a window onto the Dark Plane, he should get rid of it. If it were something else, something even stranger and less understood, then he truly needed to be rid of it.

Thoughts of demons drew Snape to his hazardous ingredient cabinet, still ajar from his earlier investigation of the tray of potions left behind by Dumbledore. From the back of the bottom shelf he extracted a small sandalwood box. He had not opened it since returning with it the evening Harry had given it to him for his birthday. Inside, amongst the fine glass powder, were a few larger shards, still with shiny silver backing. The clusters of iridescent rainbows shimmering in the pebbles of glass hinted at their power to attract and redirect energy. Kuromakyo – a mirror a demon has peered into without breaking it – and, ironically, then ground into a powder for easy use. With deft fingers accustomed to fine, persnickety ingredients Snape plucked out the largest of the tiny cleaved shards between his fingers and held it in the sunlight. Glaring metallic rainbows scattered from the tiny chip as he examined it before carefully rotating it to align the silvering parallel to the wraith-filled window pane. A long ten minutes ticked by, punctuated by the distant noises from the pitch where the crowd sounded as though it were losing energy. Finally, one of the indiscernible charcoal black forms twisted violently when a rainbow struck it. The figure halted, expanded as though approaching rapidly from a great distance and then the window shattered, leaving behind tiny shards that sizzled and dissolved until only fine sand remained.

Snape brushed the sand out of the window, calmly repaired the empty pane properly, and then patiently held the shard of Kuromakyo up to the second grey window.

After the second window was properly in place and the last traces of sand Expunged away, Snape systematically re-shelved all of the rare potions and ingredients. If he had stopped to think of whom they had belonged to, he may have shattered them all and regretted it later, if not immediately.

Cabinet locked and spelled closed, Snape continued to clutch his wand as he left his office. Singlemindedly, he strode down the corridor and around the corner to the alcove where a stone gargoyle slept. "Darjeeling," Snape snarled at the crouching figure, making it immediately raise its head and move aside. The helical staircase beyond turned ponderously; Snape stepped doggedly up as it turned.

At the top, the door was latched but opened with the simplest of cancelation spells. Snape stalked into the empty office – which still held traces of the calming aura of its previous occupant – and aimed his wand at the painting of said headmaster.

"You bastard," Snape said, wand wavering as he considered simply burning the canvas through to the wall.

The painting blinked at him and stroked its beard. "I take it something is the matter, Severus," the image observed mildly.

"You were a doddering old fool at the end. Why couldn't you, for just once, leave well enough alone?" Snape demanded.

The other surrounding paintings were waking up and inching to the outer edges of their frames. "Now, now, Severus, I almost always left well enough alone, many more times than I should have in hindsight. You know that."

Snape was breathing heavily as he faced the avatar of his former mentor with nothing but all-consuming anger. "I should reduce you to ashes," he threatened.

"I suspect that that will accomplish nothing," Dumbledore commented in a helpful tone.

Snape snarled, animal-like, and lowered his wand. He trembled momentarily with the effort of controlling the pain and fury inside him that sought an outlet, any outlet.

"I failed your last test . . . your last task. You set me up to fail it. You made me into something I was not," he said through clenched teeth.

The image of Dumbledore steepled its fingers. "I did that a very long time ago, Severus. Anything recent is incidental."

"Not this," he snapped back. Snape clutched his head before pacing away and leaning on the desk. "You do not know what Harry has become . . . how much danger he is in . . . how much help he needs." He turned a glare back to the painting. "And now I cannot give it!" he shouted. "Why did you give him to me just to take him away again?"

The painting fell thoughtful, or seemed to, and as aggravatingly as the real Dumbledore – could not be Legilimized. Snape said, more quietly, "You truly cannot understand what he has become. He has bizarre powers I cannot find in any books . . ." Snape froze and re-raised his wand, almost mechanically. "You know what you did, don't you?" Snape demanded rhetorically in a low voice. "That damn hat told him he would be great if he were in Slytherin. He chose otherwise and you put him in Slytherin in the end anyway."

Snape leaned against the desk and bowed slighting, dropping his wand hand into his other hand and clutching it desperately. "Did I turn him into that?" he asked the empty room.

The door to the office opened and McGonagall stepped in followed by Lupin. "Everything all right, Severus?" she asked.

Snape gestured with his wand as he explained, "I was just having a little chat here with doddering old Albus."

She removed her gloves while giving Dumbledore's portrait a curious glance. "What is happening? Ms. Granger came up to me in search of Harry, who apparently disappeared after coming to speak to you."

Snape said dismally, "He is off somewhere; I don't know where."

McGonagall took that in and asked, "Did you two have a fight?"

Snape pointed or more accurately aimed his wand at Dumbledore. "Only with him. Him and his bloody manipulation. Bending me to his will was one thing, but he's destroyed Harry this time, using me to do it."

"What are you talking about?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"I am talking about making me forget it was I who overheard the prophecy that killed the Potters. And then leaving the blasted memory where it could be found."

The painting said patiently, "The truth is not something to be disposed of lightly, Severus."

Snape continued to aim at the man's bright blue eyes. "And Harry's future is?" he snarled.

"You were the only one who could assure Harry future. If I did something untoward to accomplish that, it would have been worth it."

McGonagall moved to hang up her cloak. "Well, in that case, we need not contact the Ministry to search for him."

Snape turned to Lupin. "You knew?" he snapped at him. Lupin nodded. "And you, of course?" he asked McGonagall by half turning his head over his shoulder.

"Yes, Severus. Probably why Albus kept the memory, to sort that out should it come up again." She took a seat. "Do you even wish to know how the match turned out?" she prodded.

"I don't care," Snape muttered, crossing his arms.

"Your House cares dearly and I am certain they will expect you to make an appearance for the party they are assembling for Ms. Zepher."

Snape didn't turn around, but he asked, "So they won?"

"Yes, but only by 160 to 140. I honestly think your Chasers were tampered with," McGonagall said. When this did bring Snape's gaze around fully, she said, "But since the result is as it should be, I expect, and Madam Pomfrey cannot discern any health issues with your team, I may let it drop. But it is up to you."

"Perhaps I will make some inquiries," Snape said darkly.

McGonagall said, "The Gryffindors have also lodged a complaint regarding Ms. Zepher's unregulated, Muggle equipment, which is an easier violation to prove."

Darkly satisfied, Snape said, "Point out to them that they were a present from Harry Potter and I believe that will shut them up."

McGonagall nodded, mildly amused. "And on that topic, do you know where Harry may have gone?"

This gave Snape pause, as he was already traveling down the more pleasant path of devising a trap for certain Gryffindor students whom he was most suspicious of. "One of his friends' I expect, if he is not at home." The last came out unintentionally faint.

"Well, I asked Ms. Granger to owl if she locates him and, if not, we should contact the Ministry Auror's office, obviously."

Snape waited for a bout of dizziness to pass before leaning forward off of the desk. "I will be in my office," he said, and exited without meeting either of their gazes.

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Chapter 25

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Early that evening, Lupin knocked on the door to Hermione's flat. Harry sat, obsessively reading a book on introductory criminal law from the shelf rather than one of his assigned books. As Lupin greeted Hermione, Harry taunted from across the room, "You're an unexpected emissary from a Death Eater." He felt his face twisting into a pleasing sneer as he said it.

Lupin and Hermione gave each other wide-eyed looks. Lupin clutched his small pointed hat in his hands and stepped into the sitting area, saying, "Yes, Harry, I am." Hermione gestured for him to take a chair, so Lupin did so. "And to think, Minerva offered to come in my stead and I declined her offer." He said this pleasantly which bore more sting.

"Why didn't Professor Snape come?" Hermione asked challengingly.

Lupin appeared uncomfortable a moment before clasping his hat and hands between his knees and saying, "He resisted suggestions that he do so." He turned to Harry and said, "I can only assume you threatened him because I am quite certain that he would be willing to step in front of a Crucio for you yet does not wish to come speak with you."

Hermione gave Harry a dark look, which he ignored, uncaring. Lupin went on, shaking his head, "You have put me in the rather unexpected position of pitying Severus Snape."

"It was all a lie," Harry said, feeling that cleaving pain rending his chest as hard as ever as though the words were a spell.

"But of course," Lupin said. "In which case, we all live lies, Harry."

Harry gave him a glaring look. "That what you came to tell me?" he asked sarcastically. When Hermione rolled her eyes and went to straighten up in the kitchen, Harry prompted, "What?"

"You sound like Malfoy," Hermione explained loudly, so as to be heard.

"Harry," Lupin began as though leading into a lecture, but then he trailed off. "Well, I think you should think about things. Get a little perspective. Mostly I was sent to verify that you were safe and sound, which you clearly are." He stood and, as he turned, put a hand on the chair back. "The only thing I'll mention is an observation

of my own and given Severus' and my history I think it carries some weight. I truly do believe that Severus is sorry."

"Sorry for what, exactly?" Harry asked, still clinging to sarcasm.

"There are rather a large number of possibilities, I'll admit," Lupin said. "He's possibly sorry for most all of them."

Harry didn't have a response to that; it wasn't an objectionable assertion as much as he would like to object.

Lupin sighed. "Well, take care, Harry. I'll leave you in Ms. Granger's capable company. And do remember that if you need anything you may always ask me or Minerva."

Harry nodded grudgingly and Lupin departed. Hermione took the seat Lupin had just vacated. "You're thinking, right?" she verified.

"I'm thinking I wish I could start everything over yet again . . . like I always used to."

Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry for that, Harry." She seemed to want to say more but didn't and eventually they both settled back into their reading.

Later, she asked, "Something you want to do tonight?" which jolted Harry out of his complacency.

"Shit, I have field work tonight." He glanced at the clock and sank back in relief that he had three-quarters of an hour. "Almost forgot," he breathed.

"That will be a good distraction."

Harry stood to open his trunk to find something to wear. "Tonks is not a good distraction," he commented.

"Still holding a candle for her; are you?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, what's it to ya?" Harry came back sharply.

"It's not good to do that too long, Harry."

Harry wanted to snap something along the lines of not caring what she thought, but realized it wasn't true before the words formed. "I can't help it," he said instead. "There's something about her that . . . still is hard to make less interesting, even when I try to."

"And does she feel the same?" Hermione asked.

"I have no idea," Harry returned. "She's very professional around me."

"Well, good for her," Hermione said.

Harry paused in digging through the highly disorganized pile of his possessions and stared at her. "And you?" he pointedly asked. Hermione drew her lips in, so Harry added, "What IS happening between you and my fellow apprentice, Vineet?"

"Vishnu, Harry. Everyone in the world but you calls him Vishnu."

"Did you have a nice dinner the other evening?" Harry asked in a forced easy tone that still sounded accusing.

"Of course," she said primly, but something about her tone made Harry think she was still in the same situation he was in. "You're going to be burning that candle as long as I am," he stated.

She apparently decided a change in topic was in order. "I'm going to join my office mates at the pub then if you are busy. I'll see you back here, when?"

"2:00 a.m. or so," Harry replied, carrying his clothes into her bedroom to change.

Hermione tapped her foot. "I'll get used to those hours, I'm sure." More loudly, to be heard through the door, she said, "Be careful, Harry. Don't let your temper get the better of you in the mood you are in."

Harry didn't reply, and when he had changed, he came out looking glum and withdrawn. "Right," he uttered without any real feeling. He wanted to test his magic, but didn't want her to see it should it come out dark and strange, so he held off, thinking that rarely did he use any during field work.

In the Auror's office, it was bustling. Harry stood off to the side, out of the way, while Shacklebolt ran in and out to the file room and then the break room to talk to Rodgers. Harry normally would have tried to eavesdrop, but this evening he allowed the hurried and abbreviation-laden conversations to roll by him.

A broad figure shuffled toward him down the corridor with a distinctive and familiar limp. Harry waited until the approaching figure was at the doorway and paused before raising his gaze, which he felt certain held enough emnity to speak for him. Moody grunted doubtfully and shuffled into the back of the office behind the cubical wall, while Harry suppressed his disappointment that the old Auror hadn't started something that could be escalated into a nice violent spell exchange.

Tonks eventually came in. "Ready to go?" she asked, collecting her cloak. She took his arm and the next instant they were in the Leaky Cauldron, where a few patrons

eyed them curiously. Tonks flipped her cloak off one shoulder, glanced at him, and then immediately asked, "Something wrong, Harry?"

Quietly, Harry answered honestly, "Everything's wrong."

This reply caused her to push him up the stairs of the inn to the quiet corridor that led to the rooms. At the landing she said, "What's up?" in an official tone, although her expression belied real concern.

Harry explained what he had learned about Snape and the old prophecy. He skipped explaining how odd his magic had become since then. Tonks stared at him.

"Dumbledore really did that?" she asked, pained.

"Apparently," Harry said.

She traced the grain of the wood paneling beside her with her finger. "You know he used to have his hand in everything. When I first started at the Ministry I learned to watch for it – Kingsley would sometimes comment about some action someone took – and I was pretty good at spotting it by the end. But Dumbledore was rarely ever directly involved. He pulled other people's strings through . . . almost a kind of blackmail, except it was more like whitemail. He'd just gently remind someone of their own virtuous vision of themselves, or their youthful optimistic view of the world, and of course he knew everyone's from when they were in school." She fell thoughtful, staring at the wall, her hair cycling through various shades of pink and orange. "This is a twisted version of that, all right. He kept Severus in line all those years. I never understood how."

"He didn't want to be a Death Eater anymore," Harry heard himself explaining. "But death is normally the only way out."

Tonks' orange brows bunched together. "It was more than that. It was something to do with a mistake he made or something he regretted. I could never get a decent guess out of anyone and I never had the guts to ask Dumbledore outright, although I hinted at it enough times." She finally looked at him. "I'll admit, Harry, he made me a little nervous."

Feeling pain anew, Harry said, "I don't think he'd have considered getting my father killed a mistake."

"You sure about that?" she asked.

Harry didn't reply, even though his lip twitched as though an answer were right there.

Tonks gave his arm a hard pat on the arm. "Well, Harry, good training night for you, then."

"How's that?" Harry asked, wounded.

"This will happen all the time. Things are going wrong in your personal life, but you have a shift to do. You put it all aside." She gestured with her hands as though grabbing something invisible and pushing it away. "You put it aside and you do your job. You have no option; let it interfere and it will get you killed."

Harry found having an excuse to put his pain aside highly appealing. His heart was sore now as though it continued to receive a battering and and it felt like the damage couldn't possibly heal, no matter how long it had to do it.

"Come on, Harry," Tonks said in an official tone. "We have a call about a theft last night on Knockturn Alley, and then we'll do patrol."

Harry straightened his back and nodded that he was ready.

They stepped out into the alley, striding with matched purpose. A roof of darkness hung over the alley and the normal sounds echoed louder as though it were a real one. Everything Harry saw assaulted his determination to keep his pain at bay. The Apothecary's reminded him of potions he was given to cure his ills. Flourish and Blotts reminded him of buying textbooks for Potions and Defense class. Even Eeylops reminded him of the first room he had graciously been given to keep his owl in without trouble. By the time they turned at Gringotts and went down a few steps into Knockturn Alley, Harry had to work hard to remind himself why he was there. He copied Tonks and pulled out his wand; the feel of which helped to hold him centered.

Down here, the streetlights were dim and grimy, casting glaring, rather than useful, light across the cobblestones. Hooded shadows shied from their approach. Tonks stopped before a shop with a long sign reading Clipper & Clydewhistle where the ampersand was surrounded by the outline of a sloop as though they might sell ship's tack. The sign had been repainted, but the outlines of the previous letters spelling Borgin & Burkes were still visible beneath the white. Despite the shop's lack of light, Tonks knocked and moments later a candle flickered to life within.

A worn looking man in his thirties unlatched the door and stuck his nose out.

"Aurors," Tonks whispered.

The man stepped back to let them in, saying, "Didn't think you'd come tonight . . . if at all."

The shop still contained many of its previous items, such as the cursed sarcophagus and a row of stuffed blackbirds, which loomed grotesquely in the light of the single

candle. Harry's sense of cursedness made him walk on his toes as though ready to jump away. It required immense willpower to follow Tonks as she stepped in farther, and they were completely surrounded by putrefied magic. Her spiked hair haloed her head as though she too were a candle.

"So, are you Clipper or Clyde?" Tonks asked the man as they wove a path to the back of the shop.

"I'm Hummus Borgin, nephew of the former proprietor. Clipper and Clydewhistle are my backers. Thought a change in name might be in order." At the rear of the store behind the counter, he indicated a door in the floor that had been tipped upward, jagged-edged by the varying length floor boards making up the cover, which masked its location. The candlelight didn't reach the bottom and the sense of entrapment was acute.

"So what happened?" Tonks asked.

"This was sealed," Borgin said, gesturing so that melted wax from the candle in his hand dropped onto the floor and into the hole. "I'm the only one who knows how to open it. Even my uncle, retired to Spain somewhere, doesn't know how anymore. But I come in to open up this afternoon – don't open early on weekends, you know – and this is open, just like this. Didn't even try to hide that they'd got in." He sounded insulted.

"So what's missing?" Tonks asked.

Now Borgin hesitated and rubbed his hand on his robe as though to dry sweat from his palm. "Here is where it gets difficult for me, you know?" he said, clearly hoping for some understanding of his business. "I do not wish to say, but the value of this thing would not be clear to anyone. It was part of my uncle's personal collection and only he and I know why he kept it."

"So, what is it?" Tonks demanded, clearly losing patience.

Borgin shrugged, "It is just a watch, and a poorly running one at that."

"What did it look like?" Tonks asked and it seemed to Harry that she had interrupted something Borgin was about to add.

"Gold case; gold Albert chain; full hunter." The man shrugged again as though these were meaningless details.

Tonks scratched her head and leaned over to peer into the squarish hole in the floor. Harry said, "I'll go down."

She eyed him thoughtfully and Harry was certain she was about to deny his offer, but instead she gestured for him to use the ladder. As Harry lit his wand with a Lumos – which carried a dark halo that went unnoticed in the dark shop – and stepped backwards into what appeared to be a bottomless pit, he thought perhaps that he was feeling a bit reckless this evening, and he also believed that that was not surprising. By the time his foot hit dirt rather than another rung, his breath had grown rapid in the dank air which had a dry rotted odor not unlike the Dark Plane. Harry shook his wand to renew the Lumos and turned away from the ladder to face three rough stone shelves full of glittering objects.

Harry froze, not breathing. This was his last odd dream, this place. Jarring himself from this heart-stopping reverie, he moved to study the shelves and their objects. Oddly, fewer were cursed than those up above. Most appeared to have more intrinsic value, such as a sceptre with a massive ruby mounted in a gold claw. Harry cast a footprint detection spell that sent wisps of ink around him and made the air even more dank. He saw his own footprints and two others, each older than the next. Harry assumed the ones that took the shortest path were the thief's, who had only been looking for one thing, as opposed to the shop owner who would have verified that everything was present. Harry crouched down to renew the spell and study the prints more closely. They were made by shoes with pointed toes and significant heels on them, Harry could see the physical imprints they left beneath the magical ones.

Harry climbed back up the ladder and confronted Borgin. "The robbery was two days ago," he stated, knowing this from his dream, but thinking it could be explained by the footprints too, had he run the right detection spell.

Tonks didn't speak, just waited for Borgin to find a response. Harry tried to Legilimize the man, but he hid his thoughts well.

"I wasn't sure I wished to report it," Borgin said carefully, leaning back away from Harry fractionally.

"Why did you report it at all?" Harry then asked, giving no ground, not even to Tonks.

"I was concerned who the thief might be." He stammered then. "For example . . . I thought, perhaps, Mr. Burke had escaped, or something of that sort. You know. He would know how to get into the cellar."

He was lying; Harry could tell, but he also made sense. Harry didn't know what tack to follow with, because accusing the man of lying when he made sense would lose him his stronger position.

"We'll check on that," Tonks assured him. "No one else would know?"

"No," Borgin replied, but beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip.

Outside on the street, Tonks asked, "So, you volunteered to go down in the hole why?"

"I felt like being useful," Harry replied, which was partially the truth. Mostly, he had felt reckless and as though a little bout with danger would take his mind off things. "The shoes of the thief were odd, fancy, like a woman's with pointed toes and small heels."

"The thief left footprints?" she asked in shock. "I think someone is just jerking Borgin around. It makes no sense. To have the skill to get into the floor vault but not bother to hide your trail . . . that's really mad."

They walked to the other end of the winding alley to patrol, and Harry mulled as they went whether he should tell Tonks about his matching dream. He held off while he considered whether he perhaps was sleepwalking as Rodgers had suggested. He didn't believe so, but a nagging doubt held him from explaining anything until he could think about it more. He certainly didn't own shoes like that, which was a relief.

As they turned at the crumbling brick wall that dead-ended Knockturn Alley, Harry bumped shoulders with someone. This hooded someone cackled, jerking him to the here-and-now which he had accidentally slipped out of when he really shouldn't have.

"–Tis the Nones of June," the figure crowed in an elderly voice. "Caesar beware the Ides of June," she added, poking Harry in the chest with a long, boney finger. "All of your enemies will be after your blood on that day."

"Harry, come on," Tonks said, because Harry had stopped, rubbing the now-painful spot on his chest. "Harry."

"All right," Harry said, pulling his cloak tight around him. "What day is the Ides?" he asked.

"Fifteenth, thirteenth, something," Tonks replied absently. "Not that it matters . . . she's just a mad old bat."

"Thirteenth," the crone countered loudly from behind. "Everyone's lucky number . . ." She trailed off into another cackle.

They patrolled up and down Diagon Alley for an hour before heading off to Devon to walk patrol there. Along a relatively busy road, Tonks stopped and put her pointy nose in the air. "Chips. Let's get some food."

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They followed the scent around the corner and ate while sitting in cracked chairs around a battered table in a little shop lit too brightly for their dark-adjusted eyes. Harry at first ate with gusto due to the walking and stress, but his appetite faded quickly and his fifth bite required great effort to swallow. He pushed the plastic basket away with a comment about not being as hungry as he had thought. In truth it was worse than that, and as they departed, he was certain his throat was full of fur and that he was choking on it. Breathing rapidly, he ducked behind the dust bins and was sick.

"Harry, you all right?" Tonks asked in concern.

Harry leaned hard on his hand propped against the brick wall beside him. Disorientation made it impossible to stand straight. "Yeah, hang on," he managed to say levelly. He pulled his wand to clean up his mess and realized that he couldn't, or more accurately: shouldn't. He wondered if he could Apparate home from here, it was a bit farther than from London. "I need to clean up," he explained to her. She had approached and was looking him over with a Lumos.

"I'll come along," she said.

Harry realized then with a stab that he had been picturing the house in Shrewsthorpe as home and had to amend that. "I don't want to bother Hermione this late . . . I'm going to have to wake her up later as it is. Can we go to your place?"

At Tonks' nod Harry Disapparated, and Tonks appeared behind him as he bent over the sink in the small all-white toilet which glared as painfully as the chips shop had.

"You want to just call it a night?" Tonks suggested. "Go home and sleep?"

"No, I just need a minute," Harry insisted, certain that he could regain himself if he just tried hard enough. He stepped by her into the main room, sat on the couch, and pressed his fingers into his eyes. Occlude your mind, you know how, played in Harry's mind, unfortunately in Snape's determined and exacting voice. The pain this caused inspired more determination toward blocking all the pain out and moments later he was free, breathing easily, feeling almost himself.

"Better?" Tonks asked when Harry sat back. "Want some tea?" At his nod, she went to the stove. Between spelling cups into a clean state and heating the teapot, she said, "Talk to me a bit, Harry. What's going on?"

"I don't know. I haven't felt this awful . . ." he trailed off, not wanting to risk his newfound equilibrium casting his mind back that far. "I felt like I was choking on fur or something."

Half a minute later, he complained, "Everything's going wrong." Thinking of Snape's destructive revelation, added, "It's not fair." He immediately moved to Occlude his mind again by tipping his head back and closing his eyes, and Tonks was smart enough not to interfere. She handed him a cup of tea when he lifted his head. The strong fruity scent of it did wonders for his state of mind, as though it were alien to whatever was dogging him. Sensing that she was again going to offer to escort him home, he prepped an insistence for wanting to complete his evening duties, but then considered that he had been lucky so far not to need significant magic and perhaps he should not push his luck.

Harry stood and checked that he had his things, and only then realized he didn't have his coin purse. He checked his pockets again. "My money's gone," Harry said flatly, holding control of himself.

"Oh," Tonks said. "Grizzie must have it . . . the crone you bumped into. She used to be a pickpocket." Tonks sounded level and casual about this, which Harry was highly grateful for given that she could legitimately scold him. Tonks swigged her tea and huffed comically to get rid of the burn in her mouth. Harry took another long renewing sniff of his before setting the full cup on the counter.

Tonks said, "Leaky Cauldron," and Disapparated. Harry followed and had to catch up as she strode out the back door. The wall was already open and he rushed to leap through before it closed again. Harry was grateful for the rapid walking that meant his missing money would be resolved quickly. With some distress he was realizing that his purse constituted almost half his money and that without Snape there wasn't any more. They turned at Knockturn Alley and Tonks nudged Harry to be alert, drawing him out of an alarming realization of how very dependent he had let himself become for nearly everything in his life.

Tonks spelled opened a metal door about halfway down the alley and at the top of a narrow, crooked staircase, knocked on a half-rotted wooden door.

"Coming, coming." The crone opened the door. "Took you long enough," she criticized. She ducked under a low beam holding up the angled, sagging ceiling to move back around to where a table was arrayed with brewing apparati. "I was just fixing my favorite drink. Care to join me?" On the table lay Harry's small leather purse, its drawstring loosened. The crone dropped a Galleon into a bubbling glass of milky liquid. Instantly the liquid turned shining and golden, and she tipped it up and swallowed half of it. Smacking her lips, she said, "Golly, I do miss that."

She grabbed the purse up and tossed it to a surprised Harry. "Here then," she said, the detailed wrinkles in her face accentuated when she taunted, "Training not going so well, I've read. You scored a Needs Improvement on this as well."

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Harry looked to Tonks to see if the old woman was serious. Tonks gave Harry a roll of the eyes. "Grisley Teaberg here is simply far too familiar with us from being hauled in so many times." Tonks propped her fists on her hips. "She's looking to get hauled in again," she threatened.

"Eh," the crone waved the threat off. "I insisted on getting paid for my services, is all. Off with you,"

Tonks shook her head and led the way out. At the door Harry turned back. "Since I have paid now, what exactly happens on the thirteenth?"

Grisley raised one long-haired, grizzled eyebrow and said, "I told you already, boy. Out!" She waved her hand and the door slammed in Harry's face.

On the stairs down, Harry asked Tonks, "Can she really foretell? She looks more the Potions type."

Out on the dark, quiet alley, Tonks replied, "She does whatever she can get paid to do." At Harry's insinuating look, lit by the lamp at the corner with Diagon Alley, Tonks laughed and said, "Yes, even that. She's pretty good with potions." As Harry checked the contents of his coin purse to assure himself that only a Galleon was missing, Tonks went on with, "If she stuck to selling beauty potions she could buy Knockturn Alley. She gets jealous too easily to do that though."

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Lupin stood before Snape's desk and looked down at him. Snape sat with his hands interlaced, his knuckles flashing white as he moved his fingers spasmodically. The corridor outside the closed Defense office door was unusually quiet – the students sequestered rather than fomenting trouble, revising heavily as the term drew to a close.

"Severus, can I get anything for you? Dinner, for example?"

Snape ignored him.

Lupin said, "I almost pity you. Although, you're lucky that your inner darkness is kept at bay most of the time. Some of us face it every moon."

Snape exhaled loudly and admitted in a monotone, "I was gleeful to learn the prophecy – Harry was right. Gleeful to know something only Dumbledore knew." His chair creaked as he leaned back and apparently needing to explain to someone, said, "But I didn't run off and tell Voldemort. I wanted to know for certain who it might refer to. Although partly this was to be ready with that answer when asked by my master. Partly it was to increase the power that rare knowledge held." He turned and stared at the candle burning beside the lamp, which had run out of oil. "It was clearly the Longbottoms. Alice Longbottom's continued work as an Auror despite carrying a child was well known." Snape slapped the desk. "I didn't know the Potters were expecting. No one knew."

"Did you tell Harry that?" Lupin asked.

Snape shook his head. Condemning himself, he said, "I was gleeful. I was expecting a reward." He fell silent and the candle sputtered and flickered. "Most of all I was gleeful that Voldemort was not indestructible. 'The one with the power to vanquish.' Tormenting though, given how much time one could expect it to take, unless there was some trick to the prophecy as there often is."

Lupin looked Snape's angular face over in the equally angular light. "So, Voldemort asked you whom you thought it would be referring to . . . the prophecy that is?"

"Yes. But he either disregarded my opinion or assumed I was misleading him. He began hunting for the Potters soon after, in September or so, to the dismay of his other followers who did not know why he had grown so singularly obsessed." His lip twitched. "Being the only one who understood made me gleeful as well and it made me a closer confidant of the Dark Lord, which made me safer . . . ironically. And the Potters hid well, until they were betrayed."

Snape stared at his interlocked fingers, holding them up in the light to look them over.

"Shall I go speak to Harry again?" Lupin offered.

Snape shook his head. "If he wishes to speak to me, he knows where to find me."

A knock sounded and the door creaked open. Snape squinted across the room into the even dimmer corridor. "Candide?" Snape queried, making Lupin start and quickly go to the door to usher her in before leaving them alone.

After the door clicked closed she said. "Your owl wasn't very detailed . . . what is going on?"

"Harry moved out," Snape explained.

"He only took a few of his things in that case. There isn't much missing. His little pet seems lonely but won't let me near her."

Snape's eyes widened. "He left his Chimrian behind?"

"The bright violet thing? Yes."

"Feed and water it and bring it to me when you can. I will take care of her. I am surprised he didn't take her."

"I was worried he'd left because of something, well, I was quite certain I hadn't done anything to upset him. We seemed to be getting along jolly well enough . . ."

"It wasn't you." He said this tiredly and stood up. "I thought I made that clear in the owl I sent."

She followed along the other side of the desk and met him at the end. "You look terrible, Severus."

"I have lost far more than I realized I could possess," he said. "Harry's younger self was right. I do have to answer to my Harry."

He doggedly explained everything to her: about the lost memory, informing Voldemort, Harry's dismay upon learning all of this. He sounded flat as he recited it all as though he grew unfeeling through the retelling.

Candide stroked his arm, trying to elicit something more than a monotone from him. "Let me make sure I understand this . . . Harry knew before that you joined Voldemort willingly?"

Snape nodded. "He denied the significance of it to himself. I could see him doing it. And his fierce defense of me was symptomatic of this ingrained uncertainty."

"Maybe it's just that you did so much for him . . . it was worth ignoring," she suggested, sounding additionally meaningful.

Snape's eyes came into focus finally. "You sound sanguine about all of this."

She tapped her fingers on the desktop beside her, bit her lip, and said, "Of the things I expect you did, or fear you did, this one on the face of it is relatively benign. It just had rather larger consequences." His gaze on her didn't waver over the next half minute and she held her side of it.

Snape took the half step forward that separated them. "You can overlook this?"

"It isn't a matter of overlooking. If you regret what you've done, I've already decided I'm prepared to overlook more than this."

Snape's hand reached up and brushed her hair back. "I'll confess that I've grown overly accustomed to having company."

Her eyes flashed with sympathy before she glanced down. "Harry will come around," she said. "He seems like such a good kid."

Snape's hand grazed her shoulder as it dropped. "He's hurting. He does not behave rationally when that is the case. I wonder now that I did not have the sense to throw the memory away and beg for a Memory Charm from one of my colleagues."

She raised her chin again. They were standing about as close as they could be without actually touching. "Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't Albus?" he demanded angrily. "I did not know . . . I feared the memory had some critical meaning." He hesitated before saying, "Albus Dumbledore was my master for far more years than the Dark Lord, and in many ways he was a much harder master, demanding in more complicated ways and far more difficult to understand on top of it all."

He stepped away, prompting her to say, "If you want me to speak to Harry, I will."

Snape shook his uncombed head. "Leave him be."

"Shall I move out again?" she asked.

"Only if you wish to; although, you may be safer if you do."

"I'll stay. Harry may come back to collect his things." She joined him beside the bookcase where he was staring through the volumes before him. "And your house-elf may get lonely," she added, stroking Snape's back.

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Harry's stress at his dependence dogged him the rest of the patrol he insisted he was fit enough to complete. The last thing he wanted was to be babied, especially by Tonks. Although, he did let her escort him to Hermione's place at the end of shift.

In the corridor beside the door to Hermione's flat, Tonks said, "I'll see you on Monday, Harry." She brushed his arm and added, "I'm sorry for what's happened between you and Severus."

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling his walls coming down, which made him hurry her off and get himself inside, out of sight.

Sitting alone on the couch, which he could not safely transform into a bed, Harry felt pain returning despite his best efforts otherwise. Crookshanks jumped down from his perch and blinked at him, irises pulsing larger and smaller in the light of the electric lamp beside the couch. Harry scrubbed his forehead and rested his head in his palms. He needed a memory charm, a huge one. He dearly wanted to stop remembering being cared for, worse yet, by someone who never cared for anyone before and had to put a serious effort into it, which made it impossible to disregard.

Harry tangled his fingers in his hair and tugged. He was losing control to emotion brought on by memories and he was irresponsibly doing it in the flat of his friend who had no idea how very dangerous he could become. Harry raised his head and looked around. Crookshanks had lost interest and now reclined in the center of the floor, paws tucked neatly under his breast. Harry blinked in confusion. He didn't feel as though he were losing control, instead he felt better, despite the aching heart. It was as though this pain of losing his family was different from his previous pain of betrayal, even though they were intertwined. Taking out his wand, he tried a simple hover spell on the book before him on the table. At first it appeared normal, but black ghostly outlines began appearing and Harry could just discern black tendrils reaching for him from the far side of the floor, except here they had no barrier. Crookshanks tore the carpet in his bid to escape into the kitchen and hide under the sink. Harry cancelled the spell and caught the book so it wouldn't strike the table. The inky air drifted slowly away and he wondered with despair what the hell he was going to do.

Author's Notes:
26 just made it to rough draft form, but I will try very hard to have it on time next week.

Chapter 26.

Bleeding Darkness and Light

Harry stepped into training Monday morning feeling the sharpest disconnect yet from his fellows and his department. No one besides Tonks knew that he had moved out and presently had no family yet again, and this left him feeling lost as he settled into a desk and meticulously arranged his books and quill. As he waited, he couldn't remember how he had tolerated this state previously, even though he could clearly remember being independent much of his life. Fiercely, he tried to put himself into that mindset again.

Trying to behave as though this were an ordinary morning, Harry watched Vineet take the seat beside him. The Indian immediately said, "Nandi was most impressed when you flew away from the match on Saturday. She wished me to tell you that you are most magnificent Pakshiraja." He appeared more nervous then, which Harry had a hard time discerning through his own internal distress.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pushing his own troubles to the side with a burst of curiosity.

"Raja, King of birds," Vineet explained. Then a long pause ensued before he asked, "You have not read of such stories?"

Harry shook his head and pushed his hair out of his left eye, thinking that he should get it cut but immediately then not caring, but then thinking it was going to truly

annoy him in a hurry. His reply seemed to disturb Vineet just a bit, but it seemed unimportant to his own troubles, so he didn't ask anything more.

Kerry Ann came in and slapped Harry on the shoulder. "You're lucky you weren't on duty Friday afternoon like Vishnu and I. Ended up stuck in a safehouse outside Devon for most of the afternoon."

"Kerry Ann does not enjoy idleness," Vineet sagely opined.

"I don't either," Harry admitted. "What was the emergency that called the Aurors away?" he asked, suspicious.

Vineet shrugged and quietly said, "I did not check the log this time."

"I will when get a cha–" Harry began.

"I did," Kerry Ann admitted. "It read: Tip-off RE Rendez."

"Rendez?" Harry echoed.

"'Rendezvous' perhaps," Vineet suggested.

Rodgers entered then and they dropped the conversation and pulled out their books.

The best part of the day was their real workout time – which was only twice a week now – when Harry could take his poisonous energy out on a set of inanimate weights. Aaron, who was waiting for his turn at the bench press, said, "Are you trying to start a competition today?"

"No," Harry replied, wishing he had not been distracted from adding an extra four lifts to his set of eight.

"Good," Aaron returned. "Because I feel too lazy for one."

Limbs rubbery from excessive work, spirit numbed by physical exhaustion, Harry stood opposite Kerry Ann for drills. It may have been the workout dulling his thoughts or simply denial not allowing him to think ahead, but when he threw an ordinary freezing charm at her to begin their usual sensory attack series, the result startled him as much as his partner. The blue-white of the freezing charm was enveloped in a pocket of jet black that left shadowy wisps floating in the air even after the spell was countered, or countered as well as it could be. Black ice crackled on Kerry Ann's robes, even after the spell was gone, and Harry had to withhold an instinctive heating charm, badly distressed that he could not help. He approached his fellow, who was stiffening alarmingly with the cold. Rodgers stepped in quickly and countered with a heating charm of his own before he turned on an shaken Harry.

"What was that?" Rodgers demanded.

"I . . . my magic is a little odd today," Harry reluctantly and incompletely explained.

Rodgers gave him a disturbed glare that faded quickly when he shook his head. Beside them, Vineet and Aaron had paused, curious about what was happening. "I would say," Rodgers said. "Never seen a freezing charm quite like that one. If all your spells are like that you should skip drills."

Harry thought back over his quiet Sunday during which he had held back on nearly all magic, and couldn't assure his trainer that some spells were turning out all right. When he didn't reply, Rodgers said, "Tristan could use some help in the file room . . . why don't you spend the afternoon there?" As Harry turned the door latch to leave, Rodgers added, "I'm expecting you to have things straight by tomorrow, Potter."

Harry didn't turn around, just nodded and pulled the door closed behind him.

In the file room, Tristan Rogan was sitting on the floor surrounded by teetering stacks of folders. He turned his vaguely childlike face up questioningly at Harry's entrance. "I'm assigned to help you today," Harry explained.

Rogan blinked at him. "Really? Well, I could use it. Pull over a stool or take a seat on the floor . . . your choice."

Relief that his help was highly desired raised Harry's spirits. He sat on a low stool beside an indicated pile. Rogan said, "We've hit an utter dead end . . . this is the only time we are in here doing this. So we are looking for any prior references related to magical pottery, overly charmed objects, or anyone with a connection to Merton, even remote. Or anyone with a connection to anyone with a connection to Merton. And here's a current list." He handed over a long parchment containing a messy list of names with arrows and notes.

Harry studied the list in an attempt to memorize it before picking up the first file and paging through it. Fortunately, it was an old one which meant the penmanship was exquisite. The case was one regarding stolen brooms that were later returned to their owner with their braking charms reversed. Harry closed it, knocked it against his leg to straighten the myriad sheets inside it, and set it aside, germinating yet another pile.

Hours later, fingers dry and itchy, Rogan called a stop. Harry had only found one even remotely relevant reference to charmed garden gnomes that could burn the legs of someone who crossed their path. Rogan, at least, got a good laugh out of the discovery, and he transcribed the find onto a long parchment, made a note on a small card, and placed the file on one of his own piles.

Rogan stood and stretched his neck. "I'll have to thank Reggie for sending you to help. Maybe you can help tomorrow too," he suggested, hopefully.

"Maybe," Harry replied, thinking that his magic was unlikely to improve before then.

Later at Hermione's flat, Harry's friend was already home. "Ron wanted to go out for drinks, do you feel up to it?"

"No," Harry said, dropping down onto the couch.

"I didn't tell him you were staying here. I thought you might want to tell him yourself. I was afraid he'd be a little obnoxiously all knowing about how things turned out."

Harry pulled his backpack closer and looked for a book to distract himself with. He was feeling unpredictably moody, uncertain what the repercussions would be should something irritate him further. "I don't feel like going out anyway."

She transfigured the straight-backed chair across from him into a plush armchair and sat back hard into it. "I'm not in the mood for Lavender either, frankly." She pulled out a fat law book and began paging through the index. "Can you make tea?"

Harry stood and went to the kitchen, filled the teapot, dumped and refilled the leaf-strainer that rested in the rim of it, carried it back to the sitting room where he placed it on the low table before his friend.

Minutes later when she tried to pour from it, she said, "You like cold tea, Harry? Or tea-essenced cold water, I should say."

"You don't have an electric kettle," Harry offered, even knowing he sounded ridiculous.

Hermione gave him a low stare. "You learned so many blocks that you forgot how to do a heating charm?"

Harry stared bleakly at the tea-streaked white teapot that didn't appear to have received a thorough wash in many rounds of use. "My magic isn't working right."

She stared. "Harry, that's terrible." She closed her book and set it aside before clasping her hands before her. "How in Merlin's name are you managing at the Ministry?"

"I spent the day in the file room, but Rodgers, my trainer, didn't want me doing that tomorrow."

"Magic can get weak if one is distressed, but I'm never seen that happen to you before."

"It isn't weak. It's just gone weird. Dark," Harry confessed with a flip of his stomach. "My magic is all Dark magic now."

"Harry, that's not possible," she argued, distress clear in her voice.

Harry angrily pulled out his wand and heated the teapot, around which wraiths flowed and flared. The air filled with the stench of rotting tea. Harry ignored the tendrils rising up toward him easily this time, because he had to make himself care, and the will wasn't there to accomplish that. The effect didn't fade for a long time and when it did, Hermione banished the teapot. Harry said, "You can't see the Things from the underworld that come to feed on that energy."

Hermione's eyes were fixed wide open as she said, "And you can?"

"Of course I can," Harry replied in a difficult tone. "I've walked the plane they inhabit." Thinking aloud, he said, "Although, this is a different path for them. Usually they come through at the seam between the floor and the wall. Maybe they can reach for magical energy without actually coming through the interstice."

Hermione swallowed. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Ginny's seen them if you don't believe me." Harry sat back and crossed his arms.

"I do believe you, Harry. I'm just . . ." She stood and paced, waving a stack of books aside out of her path so she could pace across a longer space. "Harry . . . don't do any magic, I guess," she lamely said. "I'll look in the library again for anything that might help. There's a lot published regarding emotional effects on magical performance."

Harry rubbed his face and muttered, "I feel like my chest is split in two and my magic is coming out of this gaping wound . . ." He trailed off because it made him more despairing to describe it.

"Oh, Harry," she said in pure sympathy. "You look in need of a good night's sleep, too. Why don't you take some of this Muggle stuff I've got and go to bed?" She urged him to stand by tugging on his hand. "I'll transform you a bed. No wonder you've been sleeping on the couch. Why didn't you say something?" she chastised gently.

The next day, feeling groggy from the Muggle medicine, but at least lacking haunting wisps of bad dreams, Harry stepped into training and said to Rodgers, "My magic is still not right."

Kerry Ann and Vineet, who were both early, looked up at this and turned to see Rodgers' reaction. Rodgers said with an uneasy laugh, "Don't make me send you down to the Department of Mysteries to figure out what is wrong with you, Potter . . . I don't have many other options. A Healer isn't going to help with what I saw yesterday."

Harry started to speak but he had no excuses, nor any assurances that he would be better soon. He said nothing.

"Well, Tristan swears to give me his first born if you help him again today. So after review . . ."

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely.

As he took his seat, Rodgers said, "You're lucky you pick things up fast, otherwise I'd tell you to take an extended forced leave."

After lunch in the file room, the hours passed in blissful, mundane quiet. Harry picked up the three hundredth or so file that he had perused that day and read the name on the label: Debjit Thanakar. Oddly, Harry thought the name strangely familiar, but he did not know from where. A quick glance at the file's summary sheet disproved Harry's first theory: that he had been at Hogwarts. He was much too old, forty-six by the file's information. The file was only three pages long and consisted only of a Muggle copy of an immigration visa overstay report. Harry held the file out. "Why is this one in here?"

Rogan carefully put down the fat, unruly file in his hand and glanced at the one Harry offered. "He's a wizard so we make sure we get a copy of all relevant Muggle documents. Wizards who break Muggle laws will eventually break wizard ones as well."

Harry placed the file on his "done" stack and moved on to the next, wishing he could remember where he had heard that name.

"Harry," Hermione prompted carefully as they sat eating tinned pasta and doing their respective work.

"What?"

"Is Severus really a different person than he was?"

Harry put down his notes and tried to take in her question. It didn't make sense to him. "What?" he repeated.

Hermione put down her fork and folded her hands primly. "What I'm trying to say is, how . . . in what way is Severus different than he was, say, on Friday before you learned-"

"He didn't know it either," Harry cut in sharply. "Now he knows."

"But that just means he wasn't lying to you," Hermione said.

Harry stared beyond the edge of the table where their tall stacks of books fought for dominance and strained the cheap furniture. "I guess," he conceded. It hurt to think about it, and he was already raw and didn't particularly want to rub those aches with further thought.

"Harry," she said in a corrective tone that he was highly familiar with from years spent with her. "I think you have to forgive Professor Snape. You have to get beyond what is bothering you or your magic isn't going to get any better." She said this in a tentative way, as though expecting him to blow up in response.

But Harry couldn't find any anger in himself. He was empty of everything, including anger, and he could feel the hollow core the betrayal had left behind. He had been left alone again. No one was truly loyal to him, it seemed, and that thought drained him of will. "I don't know if I can do that," he answered. Oddly, he was concerned that it somehow might set a bad precedent. That, instead, some kind of example should be made of Snape. These thoughts were so nonsensical that Harry pushed them away and promptly forgot them.

Hermione rubbed her brow. "I think you have to try. Everything I read today on distressed magic says you have to eliminate the stress. Your magic could be permanently damaged, even, if this goes on too long, and they say that for people who's magic just gets weak or unpredictable. No one has written a word about people whose magic goes Dark."

Her concern was palpable. Harry tried to imagine forgiving Snape for telling Voldemort the prophecy that led to his parents' death and just couldn't manage it. "I can't do it," he said, thinking with no small ache of everything he was losing with that assertion.

More boldly, Hermione said, "I don't think you have any choice."

"Is that really forgiveness then?" Harry asked, confused.

"It's whatever works, Harry," she stated. "It's not that I don't enjoy having you around, even as mopey as you understandably are, but you have a home."

"I had a home," Harry countered, heart twisting.

"You still do; I'm quite certain."

Suspicious now, Harry demanded, "You've got an owl from Severus, haven't you?"

Angry, Hermione plucked at her robe-front in a gesture of hurt and said, "No, I haven't. This is just Hermione talking, all right?" She dropped her head. "Sorry," she whispered. "This is killing me, is all." Apparently seeing Harry's surprised look, she said, "I've been trying to be equitable to your side of things, but including what this is doing to your magic, I can't just sit on the sideline and let you self-destruct." She dropped her shoulders and the official sounding tone, and went on with, "I saw how happy you were . . ."

Harry stood suddenly and paced away.

"I'm sorry," she apologized again. "But I have to say this. You have to forgive this too, along with everything else you apparently managed to already."

Harry turned back in her direction but kept his gaze on the floor. The emptiness inside him had shifted into a less painful state where he was glad someone else had made a decision for him. You have no choice, echoed in his head. That feeling was alien to what had been possessing him just minutes before. He felt liberated, oddly enough, by losing all of his options. Or perhaps by the acceptance of it. Whatever it was, he could think clearly now.

Hermione quietly said, "Why don't you at least go talk to Professor Snape? Try, Harry, please." She was pleading with him and the emotion in her voice also seemed to free him, untangle him.

"Okay," Harry muttered, preserving his pride by sounding unhopeful. Although actually, feeling himself instead made him hopeful for the first time that day. "I guess I should go . . . now," he said, trying to imagine himself overcoming his betrayed hurt enough to even carry on a conversation with Snape. You have no choice, played again in his mind and he took out his Floo powder and moved to the small hearth, nearly hidden by Hermione's crowded bookshelves.

In Hogsmeade it was much cooler. Harry walked along the high street and watched the castle appear between the ramshackle buildings. Recent rain had rendered the castle dark and aged except for a few lights glowing high in the towers. At the edge

of the village, Harry transformed and took flight, mostly because he needed to move, and flying was a good excuse to do so.

Harry flew over the grey, choppy lake, gaining altitude at the lawn, and spiraled up to clear the wall on the south side. He spread his wings flat and wide, and leaned into a sweeping turn around the inner towers. The tall windows of the Great Hall glowed merrily, indicating the dining hour. The windows' bright colors rendered the damp grey stone all the darker in the dwindling light. Low candlelight flickered in the window of Snape's office. Harry turned, leaned back, and came to a hard stop on the window ledge.

A large, bat-like figure flapped violently to a stop outside Snape's office window before transforming into the outline of a cloaked man. The window, which had blown open from the gust of artificial breeze, rotated to a stop against the stone framing and the figure stepped down inside with lithe movements. Snape lowered his wand when Harry turned to him.

Harry reached back and closed the window, noticing as he did so that the strange grey panes of glass were gone. He rotated the brass latch to lock securely and stepped into the large space before the desk, head down, biting his lip. The pain was rising up again, bringing with it a disturbing dual betrayal that made his shoulders tighten and hunch. His fingers tried to curl into claws. How dare Snape? he wondered with strange sharpness; although, he immediately wondered why he expected Snape to obey him.

Harry cradled his forehead on his palm, elbow propped on his other arm which was wrapped tightly around his middle. Inside himself, he tried to find that sense of hopefulness again. He tried to hold in his mind the sum total of the last two years, but the good feelings were too slippery to hold for long. Harry closed his eyes and thought of all the small things Snape had done; those hurt less to remember. His gut shied away from the task, given how much worse it made the betrayal bleed. But it was the only path to finding his rational self, so he forced himself to do it.

Snape remained silent and unmoving as Harry worked through all of this, not even rustling his robes. Harry's shoulders fell as he recovered himself again. "Why did you do it?" he asked, sounding bleak.

There was a slight pause before Snape replied, "There were many reasons." He stepped out to stand beside his desk, arms hanging at his sides. He didn't appear haughty or angry, or much at all like himself; he reminded Harry vaguely of Mr. Weasley.

"I thought you were helping Dumbledore," Harry snapped, and felt a stab of disgust at the name.

"I was serving two masters . . . you will recall."

Harry considered that. He glanced back at the window, curiously drawn to knowing how it had been repaired, but anger turned him back to the topic at hand. "You didn't care about betraying my parents?" he asked, unable to keep the hurt from his voice.

"I did not betray them so directly," Snape retorted, showing some spirit. "I was certain, certain, that the prophecy pertained to the Longbottoms-"

Harry cut him off. "So, it would be all right to set them up to be killed?"

Speaking slowly and propping one hand on his desk, Snape said, "They were constantly throwing themselves into Voldemort's path. Hunted him down at every possible opportunity. I honestly believe there came a time that the Dark Lord began to avoid them due to the shear annoyance they caused him. Sending Voldemort after them was saving them the trouble of finding him themselves."

Harry stared at him, prompting Snape to add, "They were Aurors, Potter, it was their job to battle him. I did not consider in the least that I was signing their death warrant by telling the Dark Lord about the prophecy."

"But he didn't think it was them," Harry said.

"No," Snape admitted. "Not for a moment. And I certainly could not dissuade him otherwise." He waved one hand dismissively. "Perhaps the defying count for your parents was precisely three and for the Longbottoms, something closer to thirty. I do not know. "

"Did you really try to dissuade Voldemort otherwise? You hated my dad."

"Yes, I did hate him," Snape agreed firmly as though tired of the accusation. Then he grimaced and admitted, "But I would not have wanted to harm your mother." His tone was so odd that Harry gaped at him, drawing forth a sharp, "It wasn't like that." Snape sighed and tapped the desk nervously. "I think that Remus and I had one thing in common at that time: we both held your mother up as a reason to retain some faith in humanity."

Snape dropped his gaze and they both fell silent. Pained in a new way, Harry looked around the room for a distraction. "How did you repair the window?"

"With the Kuromakyo you gave me. I found a piece large enough to the purpose. If you show a demon its reflection, something must shatter, and the Kuromakyo already had proven that it would not."

Harry hit his fists together a few times to gear himself up to confess, "All my magic has become like that." Snape's head was already bowed, but he closed his eyes. "Hermione thought . . ." Harry began, but he couldn't go on. His thoughts were circling too fast to land on the word "forgive". Although perhaps there was nothing to forgive except bad circumstance. He tried to want to believe that. Replaying what Snape had told him, Harry asked, "Why didn't Dumbledore stop you?"

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose before replying, "He did not wish to."

"What do you mean?" Harry demanded, thinking that the dumbest response he could imagine.

Snape's shoulders squared slightly, though he still rubbed at his nose. "I saved him the sin of it. Although, I did not know it until much, much later." Harry glared at him, not comprehending. Snape finally said with a sneer, "Have you forgotten the previous prophecy already?"

"No of cour-"

"'Mark him as his equal'" Snape stated as though speaking to a dim first-year. "The prophecy isn't valid if Voldemort doesn't know it." Harry gaped at him as Snape added, "And believe me, as much as I hated your father but wished your mother no harm . . . I do not regret making the prophecy valid. I was enslaved to two disparate masters and had very little time for anyone's interests but my own."

Harry stared at the nearest bookshelf. None of this had occurred to him. "So you don't think Dumbledore tried to stop you?"

"I think it was the beginning of him allowing events to play out on their own, in general. Otherwise, he was as guilty as I was."

Harry jerked his head to look out the window, trying to latch onto anything that would give him some stability. He pulled out his wand and stared at it, needing to, but not wanting to, try a spell because he dearly feared how it may turn out. After struggling for a minute he dropped his hand to his side.

Snape said, "I'm sorry, Harry."

"For what?" Harry snapped back.

"For hurting you. I certainly did not intend that."

Harry breathed deeply, grasping for control, and lifted his wand hand again. Everything would work out all right if he could just get his magic back; he felt certain of that, desperately certain. Snape had risked worse than death, he had risked becoming

a shade for him, Harry reminded himself. That had to be worth something, and that was on top of many other things, small and large. Harry missed having a family, a home, being anchored. The pain of betrayal was also still fresh though, countering his desire to forgive and re-embrace what he had before.

"I don't have any choice but to forgive you," Harry said, still staring at his wand. The windows had darkened and the single candle on the desk glittered on the wand's varnish.

"I don't think forgiveness is something one can be coerced into, truly," Snape provided levelly, sounding as though he wished to be helpful.

"Then what am I going to do?" Harry asked.

"There is a version of you separate from me, I am certain. I have seen more of it of late. You simply must find it."

"Easy for you to say," Harry said, goading himself to try a spell, and still not daring.

"Easy?" Snape echoed, mockingly. "Harry, watching you suffer is worse than a Crucio. Just because I chose to not burden you with it . . ." He turned away and grimaced again.

Harry stared at Snape's stark profile, outlined by the candlelight and framed by his disarrayed hair. He couldn't find hate in himself anymore. All emotion in him had been neutralized. He breathed once, twice, still nothing. Harry shook a Lumos out of his wand. It glowed blue, lighting the center of the room. Moving it side to side didn't bring out any odd black halos. Canceling the spell, he dropped his wand hand, feeling relieved rather than triumphant.

"Is your magic back to normal?" Snape asked.

"Seems to be," Harry conceded.

"That is good."

"Don't need any more guilt?" Harry prodded, still feeling vicious and willing to strike out.

Snape did not react except to say, "I would say."

Harry put his wand away in his pocket. "I'm sorry I ran out on Candide," he said, glad to get that off his chest to keep it from gnawing at him now that they had moved on to other things. It wasn't like him to do that. "You asked me to protect her and I abandoned that duty. I shouldn't have . . ."

"You need not apologize for that," Snape said with droll tones. "She was there to keep an eye on you, not the other way around."

"What?"

"Not that I did not trust you to protect her, should it be necessary. But you have no reason to feel you shirked your duty." At Harry's continued dismayed glare, Snape said, "Come now, Potter, you were in need of an alibi should anything else happen. I would have been remiss in not assuring you of one. I was quite certain you would not move into Hogwarts, whether I ordered you to, or not."

"No, I wouldn't have." Harry, peeved still, stalked to the window. "I'll move home anyway, if that's all right."

"It is, of course, all right," Snape stated, voice oddly wavering again.

Harry stared out at the gloom beyond the window. So many things needed to be said, but his ego was getting in the way of them as was the fear that examining what had happened would bring the Darkness back again. Another long silence descended, oppressive.

"I should go," Harry finally said.

"Do be careful," Snape said.

Harry half nodded, half shrugged, before unlatching the window. The cool night air drifted in, refreshing. Without another word, Harry went out, leaping before transforming and enjoying the deathly plummet before slowing with wild flapping, barely clearing the roof of the west wing of the castle before he gained height.

Harry flew along the railroad tracks, veering side to side in violent turns. He landed in the center of the railroad bridge and balanced on a wooden tie between the rails before transforming back to himself. The long bridge was hollow and spindly and he could see all the way down to the bright, thin snake of river at the bottom. The valley lay before him, foggy and indeterminate, lit by the last glow of the sun. As the light waned, the bridge hung over nothingness. Harry had things to be doing and remembering them all clearly now, he Disapparated.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked when Harry appeared in the flat.

"All right."

She exhaled loudly. "That's good." She put her books aside and stood. "And your magic?"

"Better."

"I'm really glad for you, Harry. Must not have been too hard, then."

Harry chewed his lips a moment. "I should pack up."

"I'll help."

They worked together to locate all of Harry's far-flung possessions which had migrated around the flat. "I can always come get things later, if I've missed anything. I need to get home," Harry said, surveying his open trunk, hands on his hips.

Hermione stepped over, rose up on her toes, and gave him a hug that grew firmer rather than releasing immediately. "Take care." Backing up finally and dabbing her eye, she said, "I should have hid a few things so you'd have to come back for them."

Harry flipped the trunk lid closed with his foot and waved a latching spell at it. Hermione said, "It's good your magic is all right again."

Considering his wand, Harry said, "It is. I'd be sunk without it." He stashed the wand away and veered his mind to other things, worried he could break his magic again by dwelling on painful thoughts. He bent to lift one handle of the trunk and picked up Hedwig's cage. "Thanks for letting me stay."

After another hug, he was standing in the main hall at home. Footsteps sounded upstairs and Candide came to the railing. "Harry!" she said brightly. "Good to see you."

Harry ducked his head, vaguely embarrassed, and hovered his trunk to follow him up the stairs. He didn't know what Snape had told her. As he passed, she asked softly, "Everything all right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, glad that with that simple question, he no longer needed to explain. His room appeared starkly empty with no cages in it. "Where's Kali?" Harry asked Candide, who had drifted down the balcony, following him.

"Severus said he had given her to Hagrid to look after."

"Oh," Harry said, relieved. "She may be happier there." He put Hedwig's cage on its stand and moved to cover it, since Hedwig immediately tucked her head under her wing. "You're not supposed to sleep during the night," he said to her just before dropping the towel edge. He shook his head and decided that nothing was going to be straight.

He turned to Candide, still standing in the doorway. "Sorry I ran off."

She smiled lightly. "Not like I didn't too, once." She pulled her dressing gown tight and crossed her arms. "But you have a little more invested than I."

This comment made Harry's mind swirl through the last two years here. It still felt dangerous to do that, so he cleared his thoughts and moved to unpack.

"I'll see you at breakfast," Candide said, and went back down the corridor.

The next morning, Harry sat heavily in the seat across from Candide. He was looking forward to demonstrating to his trainer that his magic was working, but that was the only bright spot ahead in his day. He hadn't slept well, despite returning to his own bed, and he wished his heavy head could be back on his pillow.

Candide gave him a weak smile, appearing concerned about him. She seemed to know enough not to ask how he was, and instead asked him what time he would be home from training.

"As early as I can," Harry said. "No pub for me tonight. I'll have to fetch Kali this evening too." He scratched his head and then propped it on his hand because it was too heavy to hold up.

"Your training isn't really dangerous every day, is it?" Candide asked.

"No. Why?"

"You don't look fit for anything dangerous," she opined as she refilled her tea cup.

"No. I'm not." He considered that he could use some more sleeping potion. The small bottle that mysteriously had appeared, he had already finished off. He didn't feel like requesting any more, however. Maybe more of those Muggle pills Hermione had given him would be a good alternative. They had helped a little.

Harry pushed his plate away, half eaten, and headed into the Ministry early. He found Rodgers in the Auror's office, writing out a report. He scratched out the remainder of a line and put the quill down to give Harry his full attention.

"My magic is better today," Harry said.

Rodgers appeared vaguely doubtful, but he said, "That's good. Figure out what was going on?" When Harry shrugged in response, Rodgers slipped the report into a folder and stood. "Let's go try it out."

Using the practice dummy, Harry demonstrated a heating charm and a freezing charm followed by a blasting curse that he kept very light so as to demonstrate his control. Rodgers rubbed his chin and patted his mustache. "Looks good," he uttered and quit

the room, leaving Harry alone with a slowly swinging, crookedly jointed figure of a man hanging from a substantial hook on the top of his head.

Drills uplifted Harry's spirits, and by the end of the day, he was feeling confident at holding his magic true, even under duress. He passed up the inevitable pub invitation, and took the Floo to Hogsmeade directly from the Ministry.

Low clouds followed him up the lawn and around to Hagrid's cottage. When he knocked on the door a scrambling and breaking noise sounded and with a sharp whack!, a green spike came through the door, splitting the heavy wood, before retracting.

"Hagrid?" Harry called out. There was no response. He leapt over the split-rail fence surrounding the recently plowed pumpkin patch and tried to peer in the window, but it had been boarded over with rather heavy nails. "What's he keeping in there now?" Harry breathed aloud as he circled around to the other window, which was also barred. Harry tapped his finger on his wand, glanced back at the castle to see if anyone was looking and hit the cottage's door with an Alohomora.

The door clicked open and swung slightly in the breeze on its squeaky hinges. Harry held his wand out before him and leaned to the side to better peer in the crack without getting too close. Pregnant seconds of stillness passed before the door slammed open with a startling bang! and Harry had to rely on instinct to cast a binding curse at the creature that leapt out at him. Chitinous limbs sprawled into the dirt at his feet as the beast fell, limbs tangled.

Harry took a step back and looked the green and red animal over, jumping when it fluttered a moment, almost freeing itself. He added a second binding and leaned in closer to examine what appeared to be a giant hairy bug with doubly long front and back legs and sharp notched hooks on its feet.

"Hiya Harry, see you've met Willy," Hagrid's voice boomed from the corner of the castle as he came around. "Isn't he a beaut?" he asked proudly.

"What is it?" Harry asked, when Hagrid came aside him and propped his broad hands on his hips.

"Tis a Pranticore, that is."

"Right," Harry said, putting his wand away.

"A male. Fully grown. Rare," Hagrid went on as he picked up the six legged insect that, stretched out, was longer than Harry was tall. Hagrid tossed it over his shoulder

and carried it into the cottage. "The males, well, they don't usually avoid getting eaten, ya see."

"Right," Harry said again. Inside, Kali's cage was hanging from the ceiling. "I came for my Chimrian."

"Ah, yer dear little pet," Hagrid said, taking the cage down and gingerly handed it to Harry. Kali raised her head and considered him and thankfully didn't hiss. "Drop o' tea?" Hagrid offered.

"Just a small one," Harry said. He stepped over the Pranticore that, despite being no longer bound by the faded binding spell, was flopped limply on the floor, its strange half-human head with its rows and rows of pointed teeth resting on Hagrid's boot. It's black eyes stared up worshipfully at its master. Harry sat on the foot stool by the low fire and placed Kali's cage beside him.

"Where's Fang?" he asked. "And Fawkes?"

"Professor Sprout has Fawkes for the moment . . ."

"Not McGonagall?"

Hagrid shook his great, hairy head. "Does'na take to Professor McGonagall much."

"Really?" Harry asked, stirring the coals around the log Hagrid had just added. "And Fang?"

"He's, uh, around somewhere. Doesn't like Willy too much, ya see."

Upon returning home after tea, Harry suffered a twinge as he arrived in the dining room. The dark paneled walls with their row of decorative potion bottles on a high, narrow shelf brought recent tangled events back to him without his will. He put his head down and strode upstairs to put his pet away, and then to the library to arrange his books, thinking only of his studies.

Minutes later the Floo sounded and Snape stepped across the main hall. Harry closed the book on sight deception spells that he had just opened and stood up from the lounger.

"How is your magic?" Snape came right out and asked.

"Fine," Harry replied.

Some of the tension left Snape's shoulders. "That is good."

Harry sat back down and fingered the closed book to distract himself. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, prompting Snape to ask, "Are you not sleeping well? Are you having nightmares?"

Harry shrugged.

"What is in them?" Snape demanded levelly.

Harry dropped the hand still rubbing his right eye and gave up on being difficult since his dreams were worrying him. "Last night I dreamed . . . that I was tied up on the floor with something like the Torq Rothschild used on me. A longer version of that." Harry flinched as he remembered. "Someone else is there and I know they're terrified of me. They scuffle around at the edge of the room, trying to stay as far away as possible." The dream became clearer as he allowed himself to dwell on it. "I want to get at that person, badly. Do really awful things to them . . ." Harry shook his head and rubbed his forehead again. "It kept me awake most of the night." Harry also remembered that, somewhere else in the room, something was banging inside a wooden box as though trying to escape.

"I would have brought you more potion had you asked."

Harry shrugged yet again, making Snape straighten in annoyance or distress; it wasn't clear which.

"Everything is all right with Candide?" Snape asked, changing the subject.

Harry nodded.

Snape considered him a long minute, during which Harry picked up his spell book and held it on his lap, unopened, as though to show that he had things he needed to be doing. Snape finally said, "Your dream concerns me . . . but it could be merely symbolic of your recent struggles with dark magic."

"I don't know," Harry said, tapping the book impatiently.

"If your dream changes tonight, I want you to owl me," Snape said. When Harry didn't respond, he said more sternly, "Harry?"

"Yeah, all right."

An awkward moment passed before Snape stepped to the door where he turned and began to ask something but then stopped. Harry prompted, "What?" rather sharply.

"You wouldn't know anything about something the Weasley twins may have done preceding the last Quidditch match; would you?" When Harry shook his head, Snape said, "Thought we were finished with those two," rather disgustedly.

With that, Snape did leave. After the Floo sounded, Harry was glad to be alone so he could clear his mind in order to concentrate on his readings.

Friday morning arrived and Harry leisurely came downstairs late. He had slept well enough on the Muggle pills and felt pretty good. Candide had long since departed so he was alone to swear at the back page of the Prophet and the headline that read, Shocking Muggle-Baiting Affair at the Ministry: Boy Hero's Troubles Cover-Up. Harry read only the first three lines before wincing and tossing the paper into the fire. He wondered when the owls would start arriving, surprised they already hadn't.

Standing, he went to the window and opened it. Outside on the damp ground a pile of letters lay, including two burned-out howlers. An owl approached, one Harry didn't recognize. It swerved at the last moment as though repelled, before flying high and dropping the letter it carried near the current pile. Some kind of barrier had apparently been raised to prevent post from being delivered inside. Candide must have raised it. Smiling lightly at the favor, Harry hovered the pile inside and onto the hearthstone to dry, or simply be hovered onto the flames, should he decide that was best.

With a groan he returned to his chair. One of the envelopes had familiar handwriting, so Harry scooped it up and read the letter from Hermione. It was apparently from before the Prophet was printed because all it mentioned were wishes that Harry's magic was still normal and that he had accepted things with Snape. He refolded the letter slowly, thinking that he wasn't really certain if he had accepted things with his adoptive father. He had perhaps merely accepted that he had to accept them, which wasn't quite the same thing. It seemed adulthood promised a lot of situations like that, just to get through some days. He wrote Hermione a reply and in a fit of defiance, sent an owl to Ron suggesting they go out to the Leaky Cauldron that evening. He didn't feel like hiding and he was hoping to run into Rita Skeeter if at all possible.

Harry was still catching up on his letters to his far flung friends – a task that given the pile of hate mail lying in a half-dried pile by the fire, suddenly took on great importance – when the Floo went greenish and a face appeared.

"Harry?" the visage of Kerry Ann asked, looking about. She spotted him and gave a smile. "Thank goodness you're here. I have a gigantic favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"My third cousin, twice removed, is coming through London on the way to Glasgow for the afternoon. He's French, and based on the photograph my mother has, rather

hot. And my aunt swears he is just my type, so I truly, really, very much would like to be a part of his afternoon tour of London. I asked Tonks and she said it would be all right if we switched field work days, so I could take tomorrow instead . . . Please?" she pleaded. "You'll get a shift with Tonks this way . . ."

"At one?" Harry asked, noting that it was already half past twelve.

"Yes." Her hands appeared, pressed together placatingly under her chin beside a brightly glowing coal at the bottom of the fire. "I know it's not much warning . . . I wasn't as keen to ask a favor of Vishnu, but mum thought I should start with him. I was even ready to lie and say that my mother was going to arrange a marriage for me with this cousin, or something, assuming he'd feel obligated to help with that, but he's already on today's shift."

Harry chuckled. "Sure."

"You'll do it?" she asked, sounding almost childishly thrilled.

"Yeah. I'll take tomorrow off and the shift today ends in time for me to meet my friends tonight."

Kerry Ann turned away so only her hair hung in the low flames. The faint sounds echoing from the hearth were of an argument. She turned back and explained, "My mum is yelling at me for asking Harry Potter for a favor."

"I don't mind," Harry insisted.

"I tell her all the time how completely normal you are." She turned aside again, while Harry blinked at that unexpected assertion. Her face rotated back toward him again and she said, "She doesn't believe a word they print in the Prophet about you, she wants me to tell you. And she already sent a howler to them to complain."

"Tell her thanks. And I should go get ready for shift. Have a good visit."

She blew him a kiss and disappeared.

Harry set his pile of letters aside neatly, new stacked on top of old to await his owl's return. He was thinking that Candide probably didn't want to come home and sit at a messy table all evening. This thought led to him jotting down a note to her about his change of schedule.

Harry arrived at the Ministry just in time by Apparating straight into the end of the corridor. Rogan stopped outside the office door and said, "That was a good idea."

"What was?"

"Coming straight here."

"I didn't want to be late," Harry explained.

"You probably also didn't want to deal with the small mob in the atrium."

Harry stared at him. "For me?"

"Don't you receive the newspaper?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Yeah. But I'll admit I didn't read the whole article." Rogan tilted his head side to side, his neat brown hair didn't budge at all when he did this. Harry asked, "Who's Skeeter's source, anyway?"

Rogan rubbed his chin. "Good question. Arthur may have a guess. I don't listen to the rumor mill much." He gestured for Harry to enter the office before him. Tonks stood and said, "Shall we patrol the Isle of Man today, keep it quiet?"

Rogan laughed. Harry said, "I don't care where we go. I didn't do anything wrong and anyone wants to say otherwise will have to say it to my face."

"We're supposed to patrol inner London. Lots of magical folks about . . ."

"That's fine," Harry insisted.

Rodgers appeared in the doorway with Vineet in tow and handed him off to Rogan. Tonks shrugged her bony shoulders and tossed on her cloak. "Well, we'll see you around Holborn," she said to her colleague.

The two of them reappeared in an alleyway and Tonks released Harry's wrist. "I've been here," he informed her as a kind of complaint about being ferried automatically.

"Next time I'll ask," Tonks said, striding around a metal fire escape to head out to the road. At the next corner, she said, "The Prophet hasn't let up on you. Skeeter really knows how to hold a grudge."

Harry jogged to catch up when she turned. "Did you think I insulted her that badly?"

Tonks' Mohawk flopped slightly she shook her head. "No, but my ego isn't as large as hers."

"I'm glad for that," Harry said. "And, unfortunately, it's not as though she has to make up stuff about me."

"No, unfortunately not."

"Candide suggested I apologize last week before it got so bad, but I didn't listen."

Chapter 26

"I don't think that would have helped." Tonks stopped outside an ordinary-looking building and peered up at one of the upper windows. Harry shaded his eyes, and could see an owl perched on an upper sill. By the time he looked down, Tonks had spelled open the lock and stepped inside. Harry rushed to follow, holding back on asking who lived here.

At the first floor landing, Tonks halted, making the floor squeak under the moldy carpeting. Brow furrowed, she pulled her small blackboard out of her pocket and held it so it would catch the light from the curtained window at the end of the landing. She shook her head.

"What is it?" Harry asked in a whisper.

"It's going to be another bloody false alarm, but . . ." She took up Harry's wrist and the landing disappeared.

"Uf, not again," Harry grumbled even as Tonks disappeared again with a pop! Vineet was already standing by the windows, moving his head up and down to see out through the warped old glass of the safehouse pub. Harry pulled out his blackboard and stared at it, wishing it would tell him what was going on. It was blank. With a groan, he dropped onto the couch – which emitted a puff of dust as he did so – and tossed the blackboard aside in frustration. The dust tickled his nose, so he stood and wandered over to the stairs. Below, the sounds of clinking silver and muted conversation could be heard. "It'd be one thing if we could actually get service up here," he complained. "Last time we got to go to the Ministry," he continued to grumble while circling the room.

Vineet glanced over his shoulder at him. "Last time we were closer. Be grateful we are not in an abandoned yarn factory as Kerry Ann and I were last week."

"What difference does it make if you are Apparating?" Harry grumbled, feeling impatient already. He paced back so as to not smell the food.

"The path one takes during Apparation does matter if things are very unsafe. I can quote you the rule if you wish. You were given this same booklet on our first day."

Harry considered the dusty couch, feeling too antsy to sit. "Oh that."

"You did not read this important rule booklet?" Vineet asked, sounding ready to be disappointed in Harry.

"I looked at it. I didn't, however, memorize it," Harry argued, then dampened his annoyance because he didn't intend to aim it at his friend, who was only pointing out

the obvious. He sat on the arm of the couch and said, "So, how are things with you? We don't get to talk much."

Vineet crossed his arms and replied, "They are going well enough."

"Nandi adjusting to London?"

"The warmer weather has helped this, yes."

Harry scratched his nose and asked, "One year's over . . . glad you came to train here?" As Harry voiced this question, he felt it echoing inside himself as though looking for an answer there.

Vineet considered this at length, although to Harry it felt as though Vineet considered him more than the question. "Yes. I have learned a great deal, both from Mr. Rodgers and from my cohort."

"Doing what you think you should be doing then?" Harry went on, feeling the questions rolling out of him without will.

"I do not know yet. But I can be patient." He turned back to the distorted window.

Harry stared at the rounded bricks and crumbling mortar that made up the chimneys rising up through this floor to go to the roof. "It's been harder lately, but I think I'm doing the right thing."

"Your fate is written on your forehead," Vineet stated.

Harry rubbed his scar and gave his friend an odd look. Vineet turned with a chagrined expression and said, "It is just a saying. I was not realizing that it was literal in this case before I spoke."

"Ah," Harry said, and began a long sigh, but caught it in his throat as an oily breath brushed by him and a grotesque aversion swept through him. He raised his wand and shouted for Vineet to do the same. A flash of blue spell met Harry's Chrysanthemum lock with an impact that knocked him backward off of the couch arm. He hadn't intended to spell anything; the block had flowed out his arm and wand without conscious thought. Drawing in a difficult breath because the blow had knocked into his chest hard enough to compress the air out of it, he looked frantically around for his fellow. Another blast and another subconscious spell rose from his wand to meet it. Harry barely had time to note that this spell came from a different direction than the first because he had located Vineet, lying in a heap under the window. Harry threw up another block when that one failed and leapt around the corner of the couch to where his fellow was struggling to rise from the floor.

Another dagger of blue shot out at them, meeting Harry's fading block, which in desperation, he renewed with the kind of straining effort he previously only needed to survive Rodgers' forceful spells. "Vineet!" Harry shouted as he crouched beside him. The last strike had spun the Indian around by the legs which were outside the block's protection. Harry glanced around the room, looking for a target. He had counted three directions of assault so far.

Another poisonous sense of cursedness made Harry put up the same block with everything he had as two blasts struck out and the air buffeted them as they went on. Harry's wand arm went dead and numb, but he managed to hold out until the attack ceased, while trying to gather Vineet in closer as the other managed to sit up. Blood was dripping onto Harry's blue jeans and he risked a glance down to see it was leaking from Vineet's mouth.

Breathing heavily, Harry said, "Grab hold, I'll get us out."

"No!" Vineet gasped. "Barrier," he insisted, sounding panicked. Speaking made the blood foam in his mouth, worrying Harry with how very badly he may be injured.

Harry scanned desperately around them looking fiercely for anything to hit. "The Ministry barrier doesn't keep us from Apparating," Harry argued, fear rising with the notion of being trapped.

"Not the Ministry barrier," Vineet whispered. He sounded weak, as though he were about to faint.

Another oily breath and wave of evil sense and Harry, tears filling his eyes from the aching effort, spelled another block with every last ounce of power he had. With the corner of the wall to support the block, they didn't blow back so hard but it still bumped them around and Vineet let out a sound of distress. When the attack ceased, Harry tried to catch his breath and couldn't seem to. On a whim, he spelled a tar ball in the direction the last burst had come from, aiming at what must be an invisible one of those ceramic weapons. The spell hit the wall harmlessly, leaving a black patch.

"You're good at barriers . . . can you open a hole?" Harry asked desperately, while spelling another blob that only half hit the wall, as though it might have found some invisible mark in the air.

Vineet placed a shaky hand flat on the floor and closed his eyes. He was swaying even with Harry's arm supporting him. After a long breath, he gasped, "Now!" Harry grabbed fast and scrunched them both down rather than cast the block he was

readying. A blast of blue and yellow reached its deadly fingers toward them as Harry clutched his friend tightly, and then they were on the floor of ward 3 at St. Mungos.

The rows of patient beds and visitors fell silent and wide eyes all fixed on them sprawled there on the worn and stained wood. A figure in lime robes ran past them and a breath later many returned. Jittery and numb to his bones with exhaustion, Harry barely registered what was happening, only that he felt grateful that someone was taking Vineet away on a hovered stretcher to help him. Someone pulled Harry to his feet, spelling him with something that made a white flare emerge from his chest. "I'm all right," Harry insisted, not wanting any distraction from his friend. An arm under his propelled him out and down the corridor following the stretcher. They entered a small room where Harry gratefully sat on a stool in the corner and rested heavily against the wall, his body still tingling as though he had rolled bareskinned in nettles. In the middle of the room they were stripping Vineet and forcing blood replenisher into him.

Harry winced when he saw the deeply dented left side of Vineet's ribs, Shankwell was giving quick, confident orders to the four witches and wizards assisting him. Harry let that voice balm his panic. "He all right?" Shankwell demanded and it required some time on Harry's part to decide that the Healer was referring to him. The man who had led Harry here, and who was now setting up a large pan of steaming herbal liquid with what looked like a distended animal bladder floating in it, replied. "Says he is. Basic health indificator says he is."

They disregarded Harry after that and he slipped into a stupor where he focused solely on willing Vineet to be all right. Harry watched his friend's shallow, labored breathing and made himself relax enough to find that sense of blood Radiance that Per's lesson had given him. Harry's own breath faltered as he sensed Vineet's radiance leaking everywhere. Harry swallowed and fought his panic. Cold binding, he chanted in his mind, imagining packing Vineet's supine body in it, relieved beyond measure when he felt the wild leakage slow significantly. Harry half closed his eyes and held the Staunching that way while the Healers worked.

Chapter 27.

Invasive Darkness

Headmistress McGonagall's sharp footsteps halted outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. She swung the door open, and without preamble called Snape out into the hallway. Snape, instantly alert due to this unusual behavior, set his students to reading a chapter rather than practical practice they had been engaged in, and strode quickly out the door. McGonagall was already walking away down the corridor and he had to jog to catch up. When he did so, she said in a hushed whisper, "Merton has made his move." She stopped before the gargoyles and added, "He has attacked the Auror apprentices." Snape's face flattened into a stillness that previously she would have taken to mean he did not care, not that in reality he cared too much.

Her next words had to be forced out; they felt like an unforgivable curse. McGonagall said to her unnaturally still colleague, "Merton set a trap at a Ministry safehouse. It is now in ruins and . . . Harry and his fellow apprentice are missing." Missing, that was the word used in the message from the Ministry. It had a twisted hope to it. More steady, she commanded, "Go and see what is going on. Bones has been mincing about this threat and I want to know what we are facing. Do you know where the Hannover Arms was? The Order used it occasionally as well."

Snape seemed to shake himself awake. "Yes."

"Take the Floo from my office, then. Go." Her voice grew harder and that seemed to pull Snape together. He was up the stairs and gone in a flash of black cloak.

The scream of Muggle emergency sirens and dazzling lights led Snape from the alleyway where he had appeared after Apparating from the Leaky Cauldron, which had been abuzz with rumors and a few arguments over what was actually happening. Snape had ignored all of it.

Out on the glass-strewn road Snape needed an Obsfucation Charm to slip beyond the barrier of lime-yellow vested police and tape. In the middle of the street he stopped to avoid being run into by a man dragging a hose that resembled a long snake. There was little solid left of the building except the bulk of the chimneys. Steam rose from the sparse blackened remains that hung like charred teeth from the remains of the framing.

A policewoman wandered close to where the outer wall would have stood. Her bubblegum pink hair was stuffed almost completely inside her hat. Snape moved to follow her and she turned as he approached, despite the charm hiding him. "Severus," she whispered. Two other police in long coats passed close and the they remained silent until the Muggle personnel were far enough away. Tonks nodded her head that Snape should follow her and they walked around to the side of a shiny flashing truck. Oily water flowed around the tires. On the other side of the block, an ambulance slammed its doors and sped away, siren bouncing off the buildings in chorus with itself.

Tonks said, "There's no sign of them, but I arrived too late to see everyone they pulled out. Rodgers is at the hospital now checking, but he hasn't signaled yet." Gesturing with her hand, she explained, "Given the way the wood on the first floor was consumed so quickly, there must have been a magical barrier holding in the spell. Which is good on one hand, since no one on the street was hurt and the people on the ground floor got a little time." She reached into her pocket and pulled out two little chalkboards, one blackened. She put the unscathed one back away and scrubbed at the soot on her hand.

"Are you certain Harry was there?" Snape asked, trying to find something solid to grab hold of in the hollow of his chest.

"Yes. I dropped him myself just minutes before and Rogan said he'd dropped Vishnu." With real anger she said, "Merton's been working us a long time. False alarms and merry chases. He used it to work out our procedures. Knew exactly where to decoy us to get us to leave them here when we got called away." She angrily slapped her blackened hand against her dark Muggle uniform and handed over the charred tablet. "It's Harry's," she quietly said. "I used a charm to pull everything magical out. Three of Merton's devices were in there too but one was shattered completely to bits." She kept her eyes down and said with difficulty, "I'm sorry, Severus. We were trying to keep them safe . . ."

Chapter 27

Snape turned the miniature chalkboard over in his hand. The wood was completely carbonized but the slate was unmarred. With a pained expression Tonks pulled her tablet back out and stared at it. "They're at Mungo's," she uttered breathily.

Vineet began to show marked improvement and the Healers were not behaving so rushed and edgy. Harry sat back and began wondering if he were forgetting something, like checking in with the Ministry. Not finding his tablet in his pocket, he gave up on that for the moment and watched with only a few winces as they sealed the muscle and skin over Vineet's freshly straightened ribs. Harry sighed with relief when Shankwell declared Vineet's lung filled with air rather than blood, and stepped away to use a washing spell on his hands. Harry glanced around for Vineet's clothing to look for his tablet. Skelegro was forced on Vineet to his dismayed expression, which made Harry grin painfully. When the crowd around the table cleared, Harry tugged Vineet's cloak from under it and located his fellow's tablet quickly enough. A broad question mark plaintively filled it.

Moving quickly and with no little regret at having neglected the very procedures that had been drummed into them the last month, Harry erased what was there and drew "M+", the code used on the log for the wizard hospital.

Harry watched Vineet settle against the table as though released from most of his discomfort. Harry too let the tension in his shoulders ease, up to the point where he still worried that he should do something about contacting the Auror's office more concretely. But before he could decide whether he should Apparate to the Ministry to report in person, the door to the room swung open and a rather wild-looking Rodgers burst in. His eyes took in Vineet lying there, the bloody bladder now in a pan of pink water, the Healers, and finally, with unusual relief . . . Harry, sitting unharmed in the corner of the room.

"Why didn't you chalk in sooner?" Rodgers chastised him when he found his voice.

Harry, finding his normal self now that Vineet was okay, said, "I . . . didn't have my slate, and I didn't think to check for Vineet's."

"Yeah, we found yours," Rodgers stated grimly as though Harry were in trouble.

Harry's eyes went to Vineet, who was breathing normally and was getting bandaged with wide white strips of cloth around his middle, loads of it, as though he were

a mummy. "Sorry," Harry said. "I wasn't thinking, I guess." Now that everything was all right, his lapse seemed inept, even as busy with Staunching as he had been, something he did not wish to explain.

"How long does he need to be here?" Rodgers asked Shankwell, referring to Vineet, who had closed his eyes and looked as though he wanted nothing more than to sleep.

"Days, most likely."

"Days?" Rodgers retorted in surprise.

With anger in his voice Shankwell said, "If you had seen him when he came in, you wouldn't wonder." He turned to one of the others. "Take him to Ward Six. See that he gets only liquids for the day."

Harry followed Rodgers out when he was instructed to by means of a sharp nod of his trainer's head. Rodgers grabbed Harry by the upper arm when he got the chance. "And you're all right?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Harry replied. His wand arm was lead heavy and prickly from blocking but he could ignore that.

"Harry!" A voice came from down the corridor. They both turned to find Tonks and Snape approaching.

Harry started badly. "Severus?" he uttered, surprised that he was here rather than Hogwarts. Snape's eyes had an odd look in them that Harry couldn't decipher; he had a good chance to too, because Snape strode up close to look him over.

"You are unharmed?" Snape asked, voice oddly wavering.

"Yeah," Harry said confidently, worried more than he wished to be about what might be going on behind Snape's black eyes. "I'm fine." Although it was close, he considered, with a speeding up of his heart. "What are you doing here?" he then asked Snape. Rodgers meanwhile was insisting that they head back to the Ministry, muttering about debriefings in a dark manner as though Harry were indeed in some trouble. Harry ignored him, having decided that he had done what he could, when he could.

Snape replied, "Minerva received a message and sent me to see what was happening. The message said you were missing so, naturally, I came looking for you." His voice was level now, almost formal, but he appeared vaguely unhinged. Rodgers' grim expression on the other hand brought back Harry's old annoying feelings of not knowing what was going on.

Back at the Ministry atrium, Rodgers tried to send Snape off by saying that Harry's debriefing was the business only of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement

for the moment. Harry for an instant believed Snape had turned into Kali, his pet Chimrian. Snape's cloak jerked wide as he turned to confront the Auror trainer full on with prominent nose forward and eyes blazing. Rodgers actually took a stunned step backward and didn't even try to match him. Snape backed down only slightly as he stated succinctly, "I am here as the appointed agent of a senior member of the Wizengamot, tasked specifically with determining exactly what is happening here. Unless you have assigned these events as secret even to the Wizengamot, then you cannot keep me out."

Harry remained silent; he was sort of hoping to not have to tell this story in front of Snape. Rodgers actually growled, but he led the way through the golden gate at the end of the atrium, assisting Snape in checking in by bullying the man at the counter into weighing Snape's wand before those waiting in line and not allowing him to ask any questions, just hand over a badge. A few witches and wizards gave Harry suspicious looks, which he ignored as best he could. His ears burned though as the word "Muggle-baiter" drifted from a group of witches.

In the tearoom, Harry told his story while a dictation quill jotted it down. Wishing that he could just write it himself in silence, he described what had happened as neutrally as possible. He went along uninterrupted until Mr. Weasley popped his head in, looked Harry up and down, and muttered, "Good, at least I can assure the Minister that you are here," before dashing away again.

Rodgers, who was reviewing the dictation, asked with keen interest. "You believe you managed to hit it with a tar ball charm?"

"Yeah,"

Rodgers rubbed his face. "I wonder if that's why it exploded," he commented thoughtfully.

"What?" Harry asked in shock. "We got out before . . . " He paused, remembering the approaching wall of blue and yellow just as they departed. "It blew up?" he echoed.

"Quite," Rodgers said, "There is nothing left of the Hannover Arms."

Harry glanced around the faces at the table to look for confirmation of this. Snape, sitting with his arms crossed, gaze very far away, confirmed it by being so. "Did anyone get hurt?" Harry asked, remembering the noises from below just before.

Rodgers stood suddenly and picked up the parchment from the dictation quill, which poked around at the table top twice before falling flat. "Several Muggles," he replied.

Harry's heart sank. Defensively, he said, "I didn't know it would do that if I hit it with a tar ball. I wouldn't have done that otherwise. I . . . I just couldn't block another hit. I didn't know," he insisted bleakly.

"No one knows if that's what happened," Tonks said from the doorway. She stepped in carrying a large lacquer box, inside of which was the remains of the devices. There was no tar apparent on them, but most of the pieces were too blackened to be absolutely certain.

"You said though that he was trying to avoid Muggle involvement," Harry heard himself arguing, although it was cutting him inside. "That he didn't want to attract Muggle attention."

Rodgers considered him before pointing out, "Everyone is expected to recover from what I could glean while looking for you two. No one is accusing you of making a mistake, Harry."

Harry relaxed marginally. His trainer, of all people, wouldn't say that if it weren't true.

"Best one we've got," Tonks said, prodding a whole elongated ceramic bulb with only one broken edge.

"Let's hear the rest of what happened," Rodgers said.

Harry explained how Vineet insisted they could not Apparate out. Across the table, Snape, who otherwise had not reacted, stiffened as though feeling the stress of that moment. But, Harry went on to explain, Vineet had opened a gateway in the barrier and Harry had Apparated them both to hospital.

"You did good, Harry," Tonks stated after the dictation quill came to a halt.

"How. . . how is the explosion being explained?" Harry asked.

"Gas leak," Rodgers stated grimly, while collecting up the parchments on the table. "Good general excuse that works most of the time."

The Aurors picked up their reports and retreated, leaving Harry and Snape sitting alone. Snape said, "Perhaps you should move into Hogwarts given that Merton has put such serious effort into trying to kill you."

Harry sat straight. "It wasn't me . . . I wasn't supposed to be on duty. Kerry Ann called right before to trade, said a relative was visiting from France." Harry imagined his two fellows in the upper room of the pub, unaware and un-warned of the danger. They would have been killed, he was certain. Trapped and spelled until they were

pulverized. "It was a good thing," Harry breathed, feeling a sort of post-panic. Snape crossed his arms and gave him a dubious look, making Harry say, "I can feel those things. No one else can. Mad-Eye can see them, at least, but Kerry Ann and Vineet would have been sitting ducks." Harry stood. "I should go back to Mungos to see how Vineet is doing."

Snape stood also and blocked Harry's way to the door. He still appeared rattled and as though he wished to say something. Eventually, he stepped aside and said, "Do continue to be careful."

Harry nodded. Snape followed him out, so Harry took the lift to the atrium since Snape needed to use a hearth. At the gates, which were now half-closed, a crowd had gathered and a few people were shouting at Nick, the guard, who wasn't really up to guarding under such circumstances and cowered a bit behind the counter. When Harry stepped up to the open gate, the crowd quieted somewhat and a familiar voice shouted his name.

Harry searched the tightly-packed mass of robed people for Kerry Ann. He didn't have to look long, she forced her way through and erupted forward to hug him. "Thank goodness you're all right. Where's Vishnu?"

Harry leaned into her ear to whisper, "Mungos." so the very curious crowd couldn't hear.

Nick found his voice to chastise them. "Now, then, clear the gateway, go on."

A path opened, and as they headed toward the fountain with Snape following, a middle-aged portly witch and a tall man in foreign robes struggled through the crowd to join them. The witch gave Harry a tearful hug, and Kerry Ann explained, "She thinks I'd have bought it if you hadn't changed shifts with me."

"That's all right," Harry said, waiting for the long string of thanks to end and his release to happen on its own. "I'm going to see Vineet," he informed his fellow.

"Is he in a ward? Can we come?"

"Yeah," Harry said, even though he was thinking that hearing Vineet's side of the story would not help Kerry Ann's mother calm down . . . at all. He turned to the tall, lean gentleman, who must be the cousin and Kerry Ann broke in with, "Oh, Harry, this is Ambroise." And as they shook hands, Kerry Ann made a quick face of overdone delight, just to communicate her excitement over him. The next moment though, she was behaving with calm aplomb and inviting him to borrow her Floo powder as though he were nearly a stranger.

Harry smiled lightly, dearly needing to so and he was still grinning when they arrived in the hospital waiting room. That is, until he spotted Rita Skeeter. The whole room turned to watch as the reporter gave a little cry of hungry delight and clicked her way over to Harry in her high heels.

"Well, looky looky, the man of the hour. Mr. Potter, what did happen this afternoon?" she asked, quickly getting her quill poised over her writing tablet. Beside her, her photographer was struggling to reload film into his camera, but the crank appeared to be jammed.

"This morning you accused me of being a Muggle-baiter, so I can't imagine you would really want a story from me," Harry said. "In fact, you shouldn't believe anything I say."

Skeeter pasted on a fake smile. "This is different," she said.

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Well . . ." she said, dabbing the point of her quill on her tongue and then scribbling on the pad. Her manner shifted to one more calculating. "It doesn't have to be different, does it? Muggle building burns down . . . Harry Potter somehow involved. Did you get interrogated this time, too?"

"Who told you about the last time?" Harry asked in a low voice.

She smiled, feeling her position strengthen, apparently. "My sources are my secret," she said sweetly.

Harry stepped around her, nearly running into Snape beside him. "Then my day is my secret," he mocked. But her long-nailed hand grabbed a hold of his arm and restrained him from departing. Harry turned and used a mild shocking crowd-control charm on her hand to make her let go. "Don't do that," he said threateningly. He had nothing but anger behind his control and found that letting it out selectively felt rather good.

She gave him a weak smile. Her photographer raised his camera, having finally loaded the new film. Skeeter pushed the camera back down while giving Harry a wary looking over as though reassessing him. Harry caught a glimpse of her thoughts and stepped closer. "You print those things about me and you know they aren't true." He leaned in even closer and whispered, eyes narrowed, "But what if they were?"

Snape tapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry backed off, happy with the disturbed thoughts he was leaving the reporter with. Kerry Ann and her mother and guest were

waiting nearby and followed to the welcome desk. "I do hope you told that nasty lady off," Kerry Ann's mother loudly announced.

"I think so," Harry said, feeling better than he had in days, focused and in control. Beside him, Snape shook his head and appeared grim. "I don't give a damn what she thinks," Harry explained.

"You should," Snape returned in sharp anger.

His parental tone cut through Harry's darkly positive attitude. Had he really just insinuated to Skeeter that he had burned down the Dursley house? "Something's going odd with me," Harry admitted, thinking of his recent unpredictably vacillating thoughts and moods.

Snape's disturbed look was interrupted by their arrival at the lifts.

Up in the ward, they found Vineet in the farthest bed, alone. "Where's Nandi?" Harry asked, expecting her to be here.

"Hermione is fetching her," Vineet explained. "I am hoping she has not seen the news."

"Ah," Harry uttered before proceeding to introduce everyone. The ward's floating lamps congregated overhead as he did so.

Kerry Ann approached the head of the bed and rested a hand on Vineet's shoulder. "You look good. The photographs of the pub were pretty scary."

"I am having Harry to thank for being here."

"I am having you to thank too," Harry countered. "I can't open a barrier gateway. I don't have a block good enough to survive an explosion like that. I'd have been caught in it."

Vineet laid his head back and said, "I am glad you do not feel I was a burden."

"What? No, of course not," Harry insisted.

Kerry Ann patted Vineet and said, "Look at Harry there. Didn't even bend his glasses."

Harry straightened them and said, "I'm used to protecting them while I'm being attacked, I guess."

Kerry Ann's mother sniffled. "I wish my little girl didn't have such dangerous aspirations."

Ambroise on the other hand was giving Kerry Ann a rather interested look, perhaps inspired by this assessment. "These are your colleagues?" he asked.

"Uh, one more. Aaron. Not sure where he is." She hesitated. "Hopefully, he's all right."

"But, Harry Potter and the others?" he asked, sounding as though he wished have this straight. "And you can keep up with such company?" he then asked when the previous question was confirmed.

Harry laughed. "Kerry Ann always beats me out on evaluations," he easily explained, happy to help her resumé.

Kerry Ann said, "So does Vishnu though, and he's flat on his back right now."

"You shouted a warning," Vineet said to Harry. "But I was too slow. I do not know what you saw, because I did not perceive anything."

The patient sounded tired, so Kerry Ann and company made their departure, and some of the lamps drifted back to the center of the ceiling. Snape said, "I must report to Minerva, but I will see you at home." It was very nearly a threat. Harry didn't dare raise his eyes, just nodded.

Alone with his fellow, Harry pulled over a chair from between two other beds, nodding hello to the other beds' occupants when they greeted him as though he were there to visit everyone in the ward. He took a seat and watched Vineet's dark brown eyes roam over the ceiling.

"I'm sure Hermione and Nandi will get here soon," Harry said, hoping Vineet stayed awake that long.

"You were correct," Vineet said after a pause.

"I was?" Harry returned, wondering about what may be happening at the Ministry, but pulling himself back to the current conversation.

"It is not reasonable to tie oneself to someone selected for a caste or name before one has assured oneself that there is not a perfect person out there already, somewhere."

Harry rubbed his hair and gave his friend a sad look. "And here I was beginning to believe you were right," he said, trying for lightness and failing. "I'm assuming we're discussing Hermione."

Vineet nodded. "She is very smart. I have not met anyone more well-read."

"True," Harry said, glancing at the door, glad that Vineet was in a bed as far from it as possible so as to give them some warning.

"But, it is more than that," Vineet murmured as though thinking aloud. Harry closed his eyes and tried to take this in along with everything else. Vineet went on, "I greatly envy you all of the years you must have been friends."

"We were kids, getting chased by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. It wasn't . . . well, it was all right, in the end. Mostly. I'd be dead without her. Many times over." Harry sighed. "But she is off fetching Nandi for you . . ."

Vineet turned his gaze back to the ceiling. "I thought having her as a friend would be sufficient. She is a very conscientious friend and helps Nandi a great deal. But it is worse and now cannot be undone. I wonder often now if I could have come sooner to work on my studies. I may have gone to Hogwarts . . ." He shook his head, sounding almost dreamy, but in a painfully way.

This kind of regret and wishing how things could be different if something small in the past had changed was far too familiar to Harry. "You want someone you can't have and they're too close by . . . join the club."

Vineet raised his head from the pillow to look at him better. The door to the ward opened and Hermione and Nandi arrived. Nandi took up a position beside her husband and rested a cupped hand on his shoulder. Hermione remained on the far side of Harry, gripping his shoulder and then just the fabric of his robes. His friend was definitely having the harder time with this, making even him wish that things were different.

Vineet and Nandi were speaking in their own language. Harry stood and said to Hermione, "I have to get back to the Ministry and then home, where I think I'm going to get chewed out, although for what, I'm not sure." He wanted her to interpret this as a question as to whether she needed him to stay.

Hermione's brow furrowed in concern about him before she said, "I'll make sure Nandi gets home when visiting hours are over." Which Harry interpreted as her saying she was all right.

Vineet's eyes were closed when Harry turned to make his goodbye. He made it to Nandi instead.

Back in the Auror's office a discussion was going on. "Where did he get three of those things at once? According the Mystery the magic in them should dissipate rapidly if not used." Rodgers was speaking in clear dismay. "Hey, Potter," he said upon seeing Harry enter the doorway. The room turned to look at him: Mr. Weasley, Tonks, Rogan, Shacklebolt, and and the old wizard, Whitley. Only Moody was missing.

"Am I needed for anything?" Harry asked.

Rodgers turned in his chair and said, "We had a question for you, in fact. You stated that the only warning you received that the vessels were there was your sense of cursedness."

Harry nodded. "That's right. It was really strong. The worst I've ever felt."

"You're certain they weren't there all along? That was the only warning? No noise? No pop?"

Harry shook his head. "Oh, there was a slight breeze, maybe," he said, remembering the slowed down sequence from when his mind slipped into overdrive.

Rodgers gave the others a meaningful look. "That implies a portkey to me. Which should have been reported in the log in Transportation as unauthorized."

Tonks said, "I checked. Nothing into London was in the log."

Rodgers shook his head, appearing frustrated. Mr. Weasley approached and put an arm around Harry. "Good to see you unharmed, Harry. Very good. We have your transcript, and that was the only detail we wondered about. You can go on home."

Harry gave the mix of gazes another glance before waving and stepping into the corridor to Disapparate.

After he was gone, Tonks said with emotion, "We were really blasted lucky today. Bones finally going to make an announcement?"

Mr Weasley said, "She will tomorrow. Doesn't have any choice now, not with Muggles injured and Ministry property destroyed."

Rogan sat back, rocking his chair onto two legs. "Hopefully she can calm everyone. It's just a magical spelling device. Things could be much worse."

"Things are going to get much worse," Mr. Weasley pointed out, and proceeded to fill in the rest of the Aurors about the prophecy.

Clearly rattled, so that the front legs of his chair smacked the floor, Rogan said, "So, we got bloody damn lucky today. Our once and future savior could have been wiped out easily by those things."

Mr. Weasley went to the door. "Harry's amazingly resilient . . . and lucky. Everyone needs to understand that despite being merely a first-year apprentice, he may need to be given more freedom to command a bad situation than you are willing to give him. Just don't do it before it's time."

Rogan gave a dubious laugh. "And we'll know that, how?"

"Just do the best you can," Mr. Weasley tried a little lamely.

"He gets this look about him," Tonks said. "As though he's completely absorbed in what is happening. That's the sign I would use."

Chapter 27

Back home in the dining room, Harry found Candide and Snape waiting for him, Candide with her hand on the Daily Prophet with its giant picture of the smoldering pub and the headline: Suspicious Explosion and Fyre at Ministry Safe-House. "Harry," she greeted him with terribly strong emotion.

Snape stood stiffly with arms crossed. After a pause he said, "I need to speak with Harry alone."

As Candide passed Harry on her way out, she ran a hand over his arm. "Glad you're all right."

"Yeah. I'm fine," Harry replied a bit clipped.

Snape waited until the door upstairs closed. He paced once and stopped, arms still crossed. "What you said to Rita Skeeter was most unlike you."

"No it wasn't."

Snape considered him pointedly and Harry Occluded his mind on instinct. Snape said, "If it were just one . . . unwise comment to a reporter, who already prints unflattering material about you on a twice-weekly schedule, I would let it go. But it is many other things as well."

Harry crossed his arms too and put his chin out, ready to argue against anything. Snape was treading on thin ice as far as he was concerned.

A long pause ensued as though they were battling on some nonverbal level. Snape asked levelly, "Your magic is still all right?"

"Fine," Harry replied. "Witness that I'm still here."

"Yes," Snape agreed, clearly struck hard by being reminded of that, and Harry tried not to let his mouth twitch into a smile. Snape went on, "I do not wish to ever repeat that experience. Whether you reject me or not . . . I am still your father. I have come too far to be otherwise." He seemed to closely monitor the after-effects of this statement.

Harry blinked a few times, feeling guilty and slightly undone. He didn't have a response.

Snape, voice back to level, slowly said, "The revelation that I informed my master of the prophecy could not have come at a worse time."

"Is there ever a good time for that?" Harry asked sarcastically, now angry.

"I told you what happened," Snape said, almost arrogantly, looking away as though the conversation was beneath him.

Harry's shoulder's clenched. "You told me only that you betrayed everything," he hissed. "You tell me one thing but you do another." Harry rode on a rush of fury now. "I don't know why . . ." Harry began. He was going to say he didn't know why he ever trusted Snape, but he didn't really mean it, did he?

"What were you going to say?" Snape challenged.

"Nothing," Harry said, wondering where these thoughts were coming from. Looking at Snape now made that dual sense of betrayal rise up again. "Your master. Right. Like you were ever loyal to anything."

Snape pulled his wand up, aimed at Harry's chest. Harry had not noticed that Snape even had it in his hand. Harry reached automatically for his own, but it wasn't in his pocket. Snape lifted his other hand, far out of reach, to show Harry that he had his wand too. Harry took a step back and almost hit his head on the corner of the mantel. The wall was directly behind him.

"Don't know what to do, do you?" Snape asked, oddly interested rather than threatening. Harry couldn't even shake his head he was so befuddled and now his back was against the wall. Snape said, "That would be symptomatic." And then he cast a Mutushorum at Harry, who froze, helpless.

Snape let out a breath. "Sorry about that. But I want to check you for a few things without your fighting me as you would be wont to do if my fear is correct." Harry, wishing dearly that he were free to strike out, stared out, unmoving, as Snape leaned in close. "What am I doing?" he asked as though reading the question from Harry's eyes. "I am checking you for an Imperius curse. Which isn't terribly reliable, but I must give it a try given your recent behavior." He tapped Harry on the forehead with the tip of his wand and cast something, speaking casually as he went. "You are displaying a disturbingly split personality and since you were out of observation for rather a long time after you left the Quidditch match, it seems possible that someone could have got a hold of you."

Snape frowned, considering things, and went to the window and tapped the sill to check the perimeter spells. Nothing flashed outside. He stepped purposefully back to Harry. "You see," he lectured, "a remote Imperious must be quite powerful and even then, it rarely keeps hold all of the time. It should be detectable." He tapped Harry

on the top of the head with another spell. Then after some thought, tapped him on each shoulder.

He huffed. "No sign of one, however." He tipped Harry's chin up and looked into each eye, back and forth. "Even your pupils are fine; the curse can constrict them." Frowning to himself, he cast the cancellation spell at Harry, and caught him as he fell.

Harry propped his stunned feet under himself while Snape helped lift him to upright. Snape didn't release him immediately, however. "Sorry, Harry," he said. "I thought it likely given your behavior of late."

Part of Harry wanted to push away out of the embrace, but he didn't move. His heart felt as frozen as his body had been moments before.

"What were you going to say to me?" Snape asked.

Speaking into his guardian's shoulder, Harry said, "I was going to say that I wondered how I ever trusted you."

Snape huffed a laugh through his nose and propped Harry straight, but held onto his shoulders as though he may need help balancing. "Can I have my wand back?" Harry asked, not sure he was going to get it. He wanted to test his magic and needed it to do so.

Snape held it out, handle first. "Do try to keep better track of it."

Harry, warm wand in hand, felt a rush of warmth at Snape's trust. "I do. I didn't expect you to take it."

"Expect ANYONE to take it. These are difficult times," Snape stated harshly, watching Harry try a Lumos that, for an instant, flickered with a black halo. Harry shook it the spell out and tried again with his mind cleared and filled only with that warmth of trust. The spell came out fine the second time.

"All right?" Snape asked.

"Yeah," Harry answered in a difficult tone. "You were baiting me," he accused.

"Yes," Snape admitted. "I needed to see your reaction up close. I wish I knew what was happening to you." When Harry simply stared at his wand and didn't reply, Snape went on. "It seems more than just the injury of my revelation. More even than the Dark Plane impinging on you. Any more dreams?"

Harry shook his head.

"Truly," Snape sharply asked. "No more?"

"I've been taking these Muggle pills to sleep. They may be blocking them."

"Do you have the bottle?"

Harry sighed. "Up in my room. I'll fetch them." He stepped out, but Snape followed.

In his room, Harry picked the bottle up from his night stand and held it out. Snape stared closely at the sideways, microscopic print on the label before setting the bottle back down. "It is merely an antihistamine. I was concerned it was a psychotropic. It should not be blocking your dreams, but it may make you sleepy enough not to wake during them."

Harry shrugged and wandered over to his owl, who was sleeping on top of her cage with her head tucked away. He was feeling empty again, fixed into a limbo state by Snape's assertion that he would always be there no matter what Harry said or did. Hedwig fluffed herself when he petted her. Memories of the day, of the attack, washed around him rather than through him, and he scoffed to himself that the old crone had the date wrong.

Snape came over and opened Kali's cage to remove her sleepy form and examine her. "She is losing her fur and has grown quite dull colored," Snape observed.

"She was keeping residence in Hagrid's hut with a six-foot Pranticore. I don't think it was very quiet."

Snape held the Chimrian closer to Harry and she hissed at him. He withdrew her and petted her as she clambered into the crook of his arm. "I can think of no rational reason for her to dislike you. She has no choice, by blood, but to be bonded to you." His hair tossed lightly as he shook his head. "I am going to regret later not understanding this, I'm certain." He stepped to the door, still carrying Harry's pet. "Come down to dinner in an hour," he said, as though everything were normal. More normal, in fact, than it ever really was in their family situation.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, vacillating between feeling betrayed still despite trying to forgive Snape, sickened by his lack of action regarding the betrayal, and hoping Vineet was all right. He wished they'd given him something to do at the Ministry so he wasn't left to his own thoughts like this.

An hour later, moving on automatic, Harry went downstairs. Dinner was just being served on a table anchored by two tall off-white candles. Harry took a seat beside Candide and piled his plate with food that he had no appetite for. Kali slept, draped

unexpectedly over Snape's shoulder. Small talk passed between Snape and Candide as they ate, while Harry picked at his food, strangely pained by this family scene which matched any fantasy he may have previously had about having a real family.

Unable to pretend to eat any longer, Harry stood. "Finished already?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded and left for his room, expecting further argument, but not getting any. In his absence Snape said, "Any sign of unbalance from him and I want you to send me an owl by Floo, immediately. My hearth is open for your owl or Harry's."

She asked, confused, "You think Harry's dangerous or something?"

"I don't know what is happening to him. The term is finished on Monday and the Hogwart's Express leaves on Friday after examinations. I expect he will hold together that long until I can return and be here all the time."

"He is nothing but polite to me. And completely normal."

Snape pushed his plate forward an inch. "Then whatever it is, I am drawing it out of him. That is good, I suppose. Or are you just saying that to protect him?"

Nonplussed, she straightened and replied. "I wouldn't lie to you about something that important, Severus. If I thought Harry needed help of any kind, I would tell you."

"My apologies," he muttered. "Too much is happening and I feel I should see through to what is truly behind his difficulties, but I cannot." A minute later, he added, "I didn't expect the bad times to return this quickly. I was prepared for a longer break . . . a chance to . . . live a bit." The last he seemed to toss on as though it were unlike him to say it.

"How long can this go on?" Candide asked, shaken by his statement.

Snape stared into the closest fat candle, at the glow bleeding down through the beeswax. "Last time it went on for decades," he stated, voice far away.

"Last time, my family remained untouched. No one bothered us. Well, the news was always bad."

"It is not possible to remain untouched with Harry around."

Candide laughed and then soberly said, "Poor boy."

The plates and platters sparkled away. "I wish Dumbledore were here," Snape stated after another long pause. "And you do not know how painful it is for me to admit that."

"Why do you want him?" she asked doubtfully, standing to fetch the crystal bottle of fortified wine.

Snape waved her off pouring him any, and said while rubbing his forehead, "I fear he is slipping into dark wizardry, in a manner I cannot comprehend, let alone stop. I need Dumbledore's advice. I am tempted to send Harry back to Finland, just on the off chance the Shaman there can help him again."

"At least it would be summer this time," Candide offered. She sipped from her tumbler. "I'd go with him, if you wanted me to. You said that you seem to bring the worst out of him. That is, if you don't wish to send him alone."

Snape took a sip of her tumbler. "I appreciate your willingness to assist with this overwhelming responsibility I have taken on."

She grinned wryly. "Children are a massive responsibility, even when they aren't Harry Potter."

The next morning, Harry went straight to St. Mungos, where he found Aaron keeping Nandi and Vineet company. Aaron stood to give Harry a hard slap on the arm. "Hero of the hour looking unaffected," he said gamely, as though introducing him to a crowd.

"How are you, Vineet?" Harry asked.

"Improving," the Indian replied and gestured at the empty chair beside him. Harry accepted it, feeling light all of a sudden, as though the air in the room were fresher, or his chest less constricted.

They talked all morning. Other visitors came and went. Just before lunchtime, Mr. Weasley stepped into the ward. "Ah, there you are, Harry. I've come to fetch you."

Harry stood and faced him, resisting just barely a sharp comment about Mr. Weasley's poor sense of loyalty. Alarmed, Harry turned away and rubbed his head.

"You all right, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked in concern.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I think I just need some lunch." Which was half the truth; he had skipped breakfast and only had a touch of dinner the night before.

"Well, we'll stop and get you some at the Burrow before I take you to talk to the Minister. Come on."

Chapter 27

"Bones wants to see me?" Harry asked, focusing hard on Mr. Weasley's voice of concern, which was stabilizing him.

When they were out of the ward, Mr. Weasley took Harry's elbow. "Insists upon it. That's why I was sent to fetch you. But I can pretend it took a little bit longer to find you. This was the first place I checked. Molly'd be thrilled to see you."

Harry sat in the sunny main room of the Burrow, eating a slightly dry but still tasty beef sandwich. His appetite returned fiercely as Mrs. Weasley doted on him, bringing him a pitcher of pumpkin juice and making sure the food was just right.

Near the end of the meal, Mr. Weasley said, "Remus said you had a bit of a falling out with Severus."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, suddenly not hungry and in fact, slightly nauseous. "But it's all right now."

"Is it?" Mr. Weasley asked doubtfully.

It has to be, Harry thought to himself. I have no choice. When he didn't reply, but stared at his plate, he missed Mrs. Weasley signaling to her husband to drop the topic.

"Well, they'll send out the whole squad hunting for us if we don't get there soon," Mr. Weasley said, standing up.

Harry followed him back into the Ministry, by Floo this time. As Mr. Weasley held out the household canister of powder, he explained, "New security procedures. No Apparating directly into the Ministry. –Cept they will probably open an area at the far side of the Atrium because it will be too long a wait in the Floo network otherwise and people will start getting misdirected. It will be chaos."

Harry stopped a moment upon hearing that word, but he shook it off and tossed the powder onto the small fire.

At the counter there were five staff doing check-in, just as there had been before the DV-Day festivities. Harry was waved through, but Mr. Weasley got held up for extra questions. Harry waited beside the gate, amused, while his boss, in fact the Law Enforcement Department Head, located his identification and displayed it with a huff.

Up on the first floor, Harry led the way into the Minister's office. Belinda sat at the desk, writing out a letter in a slow, neat hand. She looked up at Harry and gave no outward reaction to his presence. "The Minister is waiting for you," she said to Mr.

Weasley. Harry wanted to stall and ask how Belinda was, but Mr. Weasley had a hold of his arm and was steering him around her desk and into the next office.

Minister Bones' office contained the trappings of power: fine carved furniture, lamps with attractive stained glass, dark, built-in bookshelves. She gestured for Harry to take a seat in a fine red chair with an exceptionally tall back that wrapped around its occupant. "I'll send Harry down to you when I'm finished," Bones stated pointedly.

Arthur hesitated, but nodded and on the way past Harry, leaned down to whisper, "Temper," in his ear. Harry held back on rolling his eyes. As if he were stupid enough to let anything slip to this woman, who wasn't Fudge, but wasn't really so different – attracted to power and hence manipulatable through that addiction. Harry found these revelations interesting and useful, so he let them flow, wished for more of them, in fact. Amelia Bones moved around her desk to her chair. She was wearing a cream-color polyester Muggle suit today and it made an annoying noise as she walked. She sat in her chair and fixed a smile on as she peered at Harry.

"Our little hiatus from trouble does seem to have ended. I'm very pleased you came out of that scuffle unharmed, Mr. Potter, Harry," she amended with an even more friendly smile. Harry nodded, unable to bring himself to smile in return. He was too distracted by memorizing the office, its layout, the relative distances between things, where certain things might be stored. It wasn't the kind of thing he was usually interested in, but today he was. Bones was still talking. "Your fellow apprentice is expected to recover as well. We were very lucky. I was wondering though, if you would join me in speaking to the press."

Harry bristled at the notion, picturing himself in the spotlight made him shirk instinctively. "Do you really think that's a good idea?" he asked smoothly. "After all, the prophecy isn't widely known and I would like to remain less of a target." This excuse rolled out without forethought, but on review, it sounded pretty good.

She gave this due consideration and a quick read of her eyes showed her weighing her immediate position against future assets. "You are of course correct. Perhaps it would not be wise."

Harry had to avoid smiling this time. He stood, slowly so as to not be rude about it. "If that's all Minister. I believe I should check in with the Auror's office . . ." To his own ears he sounded deferential, not realizing before how very manipulative that attitude could be.

She smiled and nodded. "But of course, Mr. Potter. I am relieved to see you falling into your role in our organization so well. And to see you bearing up under the pressure you must be under."

Harry nodded, a kind of bow, and she waved him out. As the heavy oak door, cursed in some strange way, closed behind him, Harry considered how very easy to fool they all were. Eager pawns, all of them.

Down in the Auror's office, Harry's strange confidence was shaken by encountering Tonks at her desk. Hesitating in the doorway, Harry worried suddenly what she would think of what had been going through his mind. He didn't expect she would approve. Her eyes lifted to his. Her hair was the usual pink today and stood up neatly, a sign that she wasn't completely stressed by events. Harry wished he could run his fingers through it and that thought alone made him feel as though the wind had been knocked out of him.

"You all right, Harry?" she asked in clear concern.

"Yeah. Just thi- remembering something." He felt small now in contrast to a moment before when he felt he ruled the whole place. He rubbed his eyes. Tonks grabbed his arm, which sent emotional electricity through him.

"Are you sure you didn't get hurt yesterday? Here, sit down." She guided him to a chair as he rubbed his face and eyes another round, trying to find a balance in his mind that was impossible to sustain. He felt like himself now, but where the heck had he gone in the Minister's office? Tonks leaned close, close enough to smell her shampoo and asked, "Want me to take you to the Ministry Healer?"

Harry lifted his head. "No. Really. I'm fine. Tomorrow's the Ides," he suddenly remembered. "She had the day wrong."

Tonks laughed. "Guess she did," she agreed, patting Harry on the shoulder. After she went back to her desk that spot on his shoulder continued to feel warm and tingly, and Harry continued to feel like himself.

Rogan came in then and sat down heavily in his chair. "Bloody Control of Magical Creatures."

"What's that?" Tonks asked him.

"Like I have time for this, but Rodgers asked me to get things together for the apprentice applicant testing. I went –round to various departments to check on the whereabouts of the materials we used last time and I'm getting the runaround on things that should be simple."

"They asking for forms that don't exist again?"

Rogan laughed and shook his head. "I'll try again on Monday when the people I need to talk to are actually here. Stupid me thought I get it out of the way today."

He looked at Harry, still sitting against the wall behind Tonks' chair. Harry hadn't wanted to leave, felt in fact as though he were clinging to her aura somehow and if he moved, he would lose himself again. "Need something to do, Potter? There are more files . . ." Rogan suggested.

Harry considered that. He could survive that, he thought.

Around dinner time, Rogan told Harry to go home. Stiff in the neck and with myriad paper cuts, Harry did so. Candide greeted him warmly when he arrived. His things put away, he took a seat across from her and picked up the newspaper. Candide said, "At least they're too busy to dig up dirt on you."

"That's an upside I hadn't considered," Harry said.

After a quiet dinner, during which Harry failed to notice the extra looks he was getting, Harry pulled out his assigned readings and lost himself in them. He wished he had Kali to sit in his lap, but she had no interest in coming out of her cage. She tried to bite him when he tried to pet her. "What's the matter?" he had asked her, truly wishing she could reply. She seemed to know something he didn't.

Harry slept fitfully that night but rose with a jolt the next morning as though more wide awake then normal. Jittery as though he had too much to do in too short a time, Harry did his readings for a few hours before visiting his fellow at the hospital. Vineet was sitting up and looking much more himself.

Harry was very glad to see him well and energetic. "Are you getting out today?" he asked.

"I am endeavoring to arrange that," Vineet replied.

"Where's Nandi?" Harry asked. "She must be pleased."

"Hermione has taken her to the park for a walk. Thought she needed a break from this dull room."

Harry glanced around at the dark panelling with it mysterious streaks. "Probably did." He pulled over a chair and asked, "You all right?" referring to Hermione.

Vineet rubbed his arm with his hand, one of the few nervous gestures Harry had ever seen him use. "I do not know." Harry thought that was all he was going to say and was fishing for something meaningful to offer, when Vineet added, "I cannot live with myself if I take what I want. But I also feel I cannot live like this."

"Maybe it will wear off with time," Harry suggested. "If you've never been in love before, maybe you don't realize that it doesn't really last that long."

Vineet gave him a dark look. "Why use it as a criteria then to chose a mate?" he asked in sharp challenge.

"We're back to this again?" Harry asked. "Sometimes it lasts . . . I'm trying to make you feel better, here, not make grand philosophical statements."

Vineet stared at his interlocked fingers. "Your advice is most meaningful to me," he said.

"Love is the wrong topic to take my advice on. How's that for advice?"

Harry sat back and the conversation ended, which was just as well, since the ladies returned shortly after. Hermione seemed very glad to see Harry and insisted he tell her that he was fine. Harry lied to her and told her he was doing better, which made her smile faintly, which reminded him of manipulation and the ease of it, but somehow in her and Vineet's presence those darker musings did not take hold.

Harry returned home for dinner again, assuming he was expected. If Vineet was released, Hermione insisted she could help with him with moving home. That insistence jolted him with the notion that she knew his fellow apprentice better than he did.

Candide asked Harry how his day had been. Harry didn't feel much like talking but he told her the latest about his two friends' impossible attraction and she frowned, appropriately pained.

"I never understood arranged marriages," Candide said.

"But you'd be married now if your family practiced it," Harry pointed out.

She laughed. "True. Can't argue that." She sat back and sighed. "So what's the latest on your cousin and Remus?"

"I got a letter from Pamela yesterday, but it was mostly in support of me versus Rita Skeeter. Apparently somehow she's been getting copies of the Daily Prophet. Until the school year is over, I don't think Remus can leave the castle. Not with Severus leaving so often."

Pleasant conversation and a day of relative control let Harry fall asleep without any little Muggle pills.

Very late in evening, at the summons of McGonagall's curt silver message, Snape appeared in her office and closed the door when she gestured that he do so. Cornelius

Fudge paced nervously between her desk and the hearth. He glowered at Snape upon completing his latest circuit.

"Have a seat, Severus," McGonagall invited. Her tone was one of grace under pressure. Between that and Fudge's presence, Snape had little interest in sitting, but he did so when the headmistress continued to indicate the visitor's chair by holding out her hand in its direction.

This cued Fudge to stalk over in the manner of a paunchy predator. "Professor, good of you to join us," he stated, hinting at sarcasm.

"I will deal with this, Cornelius," McGonagall said. She strode out from behind her desk to peer down at Snape from closer range.

"The same way you've been dealing with him all along? You and Albus both, I might add," Fudge criticized, crossing his arms over his belly and glowering additionally. His next question was directed at Snape. "How long did you think you could hide?"

Snape was distracted from Legilimizing the man by his colleague saying, "I will not defer to you on this, Cornelius. I have vouched for Severus in the past and will continue to do so. He has my complete trust."

Looking at her, Snape did not find this entirely true. Perhaps she merely wished to believe she could completely trust him. He waited for her to speak something useful, tenser than he wished to be. Her composing was interrupted by Fudge. "Goodness, woman, how can you imagine he has remained silent except to hide the truth."

This comment did appear to get through to McGonagall. She pressed her fingertips into her forehead. Without lifting her head, she said, "Severus, I must ask you to show me your forearm."

Snape gazed at her before tugging up his sleeve and turning his arm over with a confident gesture. It was, of course, unmarred. Fudge had stepped closer to peer at it and now licked his fingers and rubbed them hard over Snape's skin. Snape bristled at this but didn't withdraw his arm. "And you were expecting what?" Snape queried.

McGonagall explained, "The Ministry has been getting reports from Azkaban over the last few days of the Death Eaters behaving oddly and today they discovered that their Marks are darkening. Slightly, but still perceptibly."

"To the last one of them," Fudge added.

Snape stared at him, his thoughts caught in their own less-immediate circuit where recent inexplicable observations about Harry were taking on new meaning and shape.

McGonagall said, "Severus would not hide such a thing."

"Hmf," Fudge grunted, appearing unconvinced. He uncrossed his arms and fished in his pocket for a folded penknife. "I need to return. I suppose just as well the Aurors were too busy to accompany me. Get bloody annoyed when I can't prove anything." He flipped open the blade on the knife, turned it around in his hand to take hold of it, and disappeared.

McGonagall leaned back against the front of her desk. "I cannot figure that man out," she said uneasily, as though realizing Snape had seen through her less-than-complete confidence. "He was so certain of the reports from Azkaban, but they seem erroneous in view of your own unaffected arm."

Her words drew Snape back to the present. "My Mark may no longer be active," he said. "It doesn't survive death."

"What?" she asked, sounding alarmed.

"Harry has not seen me in his mind as Voldemort's servant since I fought entering the veil after my encounter with Avery."

Her head tilted as curiosity pushed in before her alarm. "You are no longer Voldemort's servant?" When Snape shook his head, she said, "I did not realize that." Her spine straightened then. "But that means the reports from Azkaban may be true . . ."

Her statement of distress narrated Snape's inner vision at that moment, which was a recent memory of Harry, rubbing his scar . . . repeatedly. Snape stood. "I must see Harry." He went to the mantel and took down her powder canister.

"I'm afraid that isn't going to work."

Snape spun on her. "I must go, Minerva. Remus is in fine shape, and-"

"It isn't that. The Floo network has been shut down for security due to the reports from Azkaban."

"They what?!" Snape asked.

"That is why Cornelius used a portkey."

Snape felt boxed in and began pacing. "I really must go."

"You may borrow my portkey . . ."

Snape considered her offer while pausing on his toes in the doorway of the office. "No, you may need it." He strode down the staircase with her voice following him, saying, "But even with Remus, please do return if you can manage it."

Broom fetched from his wardrobe, Snape tossed open his office window and flew out into the night. At the railroad bridge, he landed and attempted to Disapparate to the house, but he was knocked back by a barrier and nearly tripped over the metal rails behind him catching his balance. Why was there a barrier on the house, he wondered in increasing alarm. He picked as an alternative the dark end of the small railway platform in Shrewsthorpe, but again was knocked back, although this time as though striking something rubbery.

He then visualized the village where he and a nine-year-old Harry had stopped for ice cream. Snape didn't even know the name of it. He managed to arrive there, and immediately leapt onto his broom.

A nightmare woke Harry not long after he drifted off. Confused by the darkness of his room, he took a moment to catch his breath. Kali was frantic in her cage. Harry stumbled from his bed and opened her cage door. She hissed and in the darkness he could see her take a swipe at him with her needle-like claws. "What's wrong?" Harry asked, dismayed. Outside, misty rain had covered the window, filtering out the view. Harry left the cage open so Kali could get out rather than risk her injuring herself in her panic.

He fell back into bed and pummeled his pillow into a comfortable lump before dropping his head back on it. Moments later he jumped; every muscle in his body twitched. He was surrounded by shadows. Breathing rapidly, he stared into the grey air of his room, not comprehending his startling inner vision. He closed his eyes and with effort, got his mind to drift, confirming the relentless approach and circling of at least a dozen death eaters.

Harry grasped his wand from under his pillow, clumsy in grabbing it the adrenaline was pouring so violently into his veins. He Disapparated for Candide's room and fell to his knees on the hard floor of his own room instead. Barrier, Harry's mind told him as he crawled to the door with leaden limbs while he recovered from the shock. He then dashed down the balcony for the far door as quickly as possible. Slipping inside he hissed, "Candy, get up. Get a robe on, get your wand."

"What?"

"Now," Harry snapped. He ran the intrusion detection spell and if fluttered all kinds of colors, clearly tampered with.

She pulled on her dressing gown and approached him, sounding doubtful, "Harry, what's happening?"

"Wand," Harry ordered with a snap and she rushed back to the night stand to fetch it. "Get over here close to me so I can get you inside my blocks."

She obeyed but whispered, "Why don't we just Dispparate."

"Barrier, don't try it. It'll knock you out." Harry sensed that she believed he had lost it, but he had no time for her disbelief. The door shattered in the next instant and Harry barely got a Titan block up to keep them protected from the wood shards that launched from it. Candide frantically clutched the back of Harry's pyjamas. At least now she had no doubts. Harry sent a barrage of attack spells through the opening and ducked back behind the stone wall to assess.

"Who is it?"

"Everyone," Harry replied. "Every Death Eater who survived, I think. How are your attack spells?" he asked between blocking and casting out the remains of the door.

"What?"

"What do you have?"

"Harry, I'm an accountant."

"You must have something. Anything. Pranks from school or something you used on your siblings. You must have something."

A breeze indicated a portkey and Harry, with a powerful jerk of his arm, traded places with Candide and put up a block against the Blasting Curse that emitted from the wand of the figure that had just arrived in the room. Over his shoulder Harry snarled. "Use anything you've got on the stairs, whether you see anyone or not."

He was vaguely aware, as he battled the figure before him, of her casting a shoelace knotting hex but the sound of someone tumbling down the stairs followed. Harry stood up and threw a wind charm at his opponent to knock his hood off. Bright blonde hair tumbled out. "Figures," Harry said. "Malfoy, it would be you invading my house. Again."

A spell exchange passed followed quickly by another, both canceling out. Harry cursed; he had to win fast, his back was not protected well.

Malfoy smiled maliciously, his cold eyes glowing. "I'm going to win this time, Potter. I've so dreamed about this moment." He threw another Blasting Curse, which Harry

at least could handle easily. "I've plotted every last ounce of torture I'm going to use on you," Malfoy went on. Harry cast back a chain binding and quickly the Alibappa that he hoped Malfoy didn't know. It knocked Malfoy back, but something threw Candide into Harry's back at that moment and he had to use the gap to catch her.

"Winky!" Harry shouted. "I need a diversion, now!" Down the hallway a door opened and a screeching could be heard. A small ball of fur flew past into the face of the attacker at the top of the stairs. In the corner of the room, Malfoy was standing upright. Harry cast another Alibappa at him, but he countered this one in some way Harry had never seen, with a spike curse that continued to appear jutting out from the point of his wand. He cocked his arm though to throw it at Harry, and Harry grabbed Candide and dragged her around the corner out onto the balcony, where screaming was accompanying Kali's work on the stairs. The main hall held a swarm of black robed figures.

"Keep hold of me no matter what!" Harry commanded and ran toward the stone wall at the dead end of the balcony.

"Harry?!" Candide asked in alarm as the wall approached.

Harry held out his wand and struck the wall with a demolition spell from Ravenclaw's book. The stones fell away in a circle six feet around. Grabbing Candide with both hands, Harry ran headlong through the hole and took flight with mad flapping and a sharp turn. Spells followed them out, lighting the trees and the road.

Harry flew as though possessed, dipping low between hedges and walls, pushing the strength of his wings to the limit with his burden. Several fields away, Harry fluttered to a stop and crouched low behind a waist-high stone wall. Candide gasped when put down and didn't regain her feet. Harry used one hand to help her up, while scanning the surroundings, wand at ready. The strong smell of a hearth fire drifted on the damp wind and Harry stood a little straighter to see over the trees. A column of flames, starting low but growing, clearly had hold of the roof of the house.

Candide, breathless, leaned over the wall. "Stay down," Harry said. "I'm not sure they didn't see where we landed. I'm hoping they didn't." He wished he were alone. He would go back right now and start picking them off as they exited the burning house. When several minutes passed, Harry released the breath he had been holding. "You all right?" he asked her. She sat with her arms wrapped around her knees in a kind of self-hug.

"Yeah," she said. "Little more excitement than I have most evenings."

"Little more than I have too," Harry quipped. "Usually the Death Eaters invade in smaller numbers." He smiled then, relieved enough to have escaped to be able to joke about it. The blare of a Muggle fire siren brought his thoughts back to the house.

Chapter 27

"Damn. I hope they're gone." The trucks were approaching quickly along the main road and the alternating blare grew louder. Harry couldn't stand by and hope the firemen didn't get attacked just for fun, just because the Death Eaters didn't catch their intended quarry. "I have to go check this out. Don't move," he ordered her. "Well," he amended, "if you're in danger, obviously, Apparate away. The barrier probably doesn't reach this far. Harry ran a quick detection spell. "No. I don't see anything here. Although I'm not very good at that spell. Gotta go."

Harry transformed back into his Animagus form and flew in closer until he could step up to the side wall of their garden from the neighboring garden, which was much larger than theirs. The neighbors were out on their back patio watching the firemen drag hoses onto their property. Harry held his wand in his sleeve with just the point between his fingers. There was no sign of any hooded figures around or in the house from what he could see in the window. And he could see well inside with the flames burning so well.

Harry circled the wall, listening to the hiss of steam as the water struck the flames. He hoped Kali and Winky were out. The barrier shouldn't have stopped Winky from leaving, or so he hoped, and Kali could have followed him out. A drift of smoke stung Harry's eyes and he had to veer around three firemen running up to the house.

"Anyone inside? this group asked the others.

"No!" Harry shouted, thinking it best they not encounter the spell books and spilled potions. "We're out. We're okay."

"What happened?" a portly fellow wearing less respirative gear asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, seeing the hole in the wall from the corner of his eye. "It was like an explosion or something. We ran out rather than figure it out."

"Just as well," the man said and went back to giving instructions to the men with the hoses.

Harry continued his circling, still fearful a few Death Eaters remained hopeful to take out a few Muggles. When he came back around to the neighbor's back garden, via a gate he used an unlock charm on since no one was looking, he spied a new figure in black walking slowly along the side wall, trying to see into the house. It was Snape and Harry had never seen such a look on his face; it was one on the brink of devastation.

"Severus!" Harry called out from the far end of the garden. Firemen were manning hoses in between them and noise of their work and the pumps out on the road was

too high to communicate. Snape's head snapped around though, as if he had picked up a drift of the shout. Harry headed over to him hurriedly, sidestepping coiled hoses. Snape searched for him through the many people occupying the garden with an expression of fear, as though false hope might kill him.

"Severus!" Harry called again from closer and this time Snape's gaze found him. His eyes closed a moment and then he surged forward and met Harry just beside the stone path leading to the neighbors' back door. He grabbed Harry up in a hug fiercer than any Mrs. Weasley had ever delivered, dropping his broom to do so.

He pushed Harry to arm's length just as quickly as he had grabbed him up. "Where's Candide?" he asked.

Harry gestured over his shoulder. "I took her to safety. But we should go get her; I had to leave her alone to check that it was safe here for . . . well . . ." He gestured at the copious Muggle personnel and led Snape around the neighbor's wall. Even though many people were out gawking at the fire, they safely took off on the broomstick, just behind their backs.

Harry held onto Snape from behind and pointed where he should go. They landed just beside Candide, who sat, hunched over, on the wall. She stood and accepted the second fierce hug of the evening. This one lasted longer.

"You are all right?" Snape demanded.

After a pause Candide nodded and whispered something in Snape's ear. Thinking to give them some space, Harry took a few steps away to stand on tiptoe upon the low wall to watch the grey steam billowing from the house, only a faint orange glow emanated from the cloud's center. Harry was too far away to overhear Snape say, "You are bleeding," in alarm to Candide while examining his hand. Her reply of, "He carried me off in that giant bird form of his. His claws got me . . . but don't let on. I don't want him to know," also was too low to carry to his ears.

Figures Apparated in just beside them and Snape and Harry both had their wands out instantly, but relaxed upon seeing the Weasley twins and Ron standing there, each holding a broomstick in one hand, their wands out in the other. Harry jumped down and greeted them.

"Everyone all right?" one of the twins breathlessly asked as he set down what might have been been a prison box, except that it was circular and pinstriped, like a fancy hat box. A bit of robe stuck out of the lid. "This is the only one we caught," he said disgustedly. "Thought a barrier on the village would snare us a few more of them."

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"You put the barrier up?" Harry demanded.

"Not on your house, mate," Ron said. "We arrived just before the firemen. Dad sent us when the Muggle call was overheard with your address."

"Your dad sent you?" Harry asked in shock, looking between the three of them. As he tried to find a followup question, Ron said, "There wasn't anyone else to send. We'd gone in to help out and he refused to let us until this call."

"Rest of the Aurors and all of Magical Reversal Squad are busy right now. Azkaban's been emptied," he explained.

"Tell me about it," Harry snapped. "Half of them were in our hall. What the devil happened?"

Some hesitation passed through the three of them. In the dimness, highlighted macabrely by a low Lumos charm, it was hard to read their faces. One of the twins finally said, "There was trouble of some kind, but dad wouldn't say exactly what. They sent Aurors up to help the guards but they didn't report in." This twin faded. The other picked up and said, "So they sent two more. Only one of –em came back, and just barely. The sea is washing over the island. The place is totally destroyed."

Harry felt himself breathing, but the air felt stale and unusable. He felt suffocated. "Who didn't come back?" he asked, fear filling him.

"Well, Moody and . . . and, Shacklebolt were in the second group and Moody didn't come back, apparently." They all fell silent. Ron said, "We should take you into the Ministry. We're not supposed to tell you anything. We just have rumors, really."

Ron was lying. Stepping closer to him, Harry asked, "Tonks was in the first group, wasn't she?" He had a hold of the front of Ron's robes and was shouting. "Wasn't she?!"

The others surrounded Harry and he threw his arm out to block them. "Harry, mate, calm down. We don't know what happened yet. We weren't supposed to tell you anything." They were all talking at once, and Ron was staring at him fearfully as though he didn't think Harry would let go before harming him. Harry let go of him, his chest hollow. He rubbed his nose on his sleeve and stalked away. Without much thought, he tried to Apparate to the Ministry and fell to his knees again.

Ron came over and lifted him up. "Can't Apparate in. Security," he admonished him.

"Let's get to the Floo then," Harry said, turning and considering the scene. Remembering the train station Floo node he started that way by stepping over the wall.

"Floo Network's shut down," several voices said at once.

Harry staggered. "What!"

"For security mate," one of the twins said.

"What security is that?" Harry demanded.

"People were getting misdirected and attacked." Ron said. "The Ministry just wants everyone to stay put until they catch everyone who's out."

"There aren't enough Ministry people capable of that," Harry argued. "And if we've lost . . . three . . ." His voice faded, pained. He rubbed his forehead, hard. Snape grabbed his arm and pulled it down, staring at him intently. "What?" Harry asked, but Snape didn't explain, just released him.

Grabbing a better hold of the apparently weakening Candide, Snape said, "I need to take her to Hogwarts for Pomfrey to check. Harry, come with me."

"What? I'm going to the Ministry," Harry insisted.

Snape glared at Harry. "You are coming with me, now. You may go to the Ministry after I have had an opportunity to speak with you."

"Severus, I-" Harry began angrily, but Ron nudged him in the back with his elbow. "Better go, mate," Ron said soberly. Harry spun around. One of the twins said, "Yeah, go on. We'll take care of everything here. Your elf, for example."

"And Kali," Harry insisted. "Really, I need to help . . . need to go-"

"With him," one of the twins and Ron both insisted in unison. If Harry had been forced to put a label on their emotion, it would have been fear, and he had no idea why they were behaving so. Panicked sadness was all Harry was feeling and he could not see past it. Ron handed him his broomstick. "You'll probably need this. Three is a bit much all on one."

Snape said, "I will meet you at the railway bridge." He Disapparated, taking the light of his Lumos spell with him.

Harry spun on the Weasleys. "Go on, Harry," Ron said, sounding like his father. Shooting them a look as though he were disappointed in them, Harry departed too.

Ron swallowed and said, "I couldn't tell him. Some Gryffindor I am."

"Too cruel to tell him Voldemort is apparently back, you mean?" George asked. "If dad was right about the Dark Marks that is."

"No, too cruel to tell him about Tonks," Ron said with a flinch.

The twins shared a broom and the three of them took flight toward the dwindling fire.

Chapter 28.

Battling Chaos

The instant Harry arrived in the wooded darkness, Snape took flight again, holding Candide. Harry had to kick Ron's broom into its fastest speed to catch up. The unlit hills appeared flat and dangerous, as though one could crash into them without warning. The tiny square lights of the castle slid into view, floating disembodied against the mountains beyond. Harry followed when Snape spiraled down to land on a square of flat roof beside the hospital wing where a stone railing provided a safe landing place. A door led into the adjoining tower.

Harry followed down the half-flight of stairs and to the door to the hospital wing, surprised when Snape told him to stay outside in the corridor. Snape was only gone a minute before returning. "Candide all right?" Harry asked.

"She'll be fine." Snape trailed off and seemed to change course. "Thank you for seeing to her."

"Sure," Harry said distractedly, mind circling off onto other worries, such as what had happened to Tonks.

Snape pressed his fingers around Harry's arm and steered him to the nearest tall window and its low ledge. "Sit."

Harry glanced behind him in the dim corridor. "Severus, I really have to go."

"Sit," Snape repeated.

Harry gave in. There were too many things he wished were changed right now to fight too long over this small one.

"Look up at me," Snape said. Harry did so. With a broad wave of his arm, Snape spelled the lamps in the corridor up higher. He said, "You have been rubbing your scar rather a lot of late."

Harry did so just then, but stopped immediately. "It itches."

"Just itches?" Snape repeated dubiously. His robes rustled as he put his wand away and propped a hand on his hip.

"Yeah, why?"

Snape hesitated, frowning, before saying, "This other personality you have been exhibiting. I am beginning to believe it is the Dark Lord's."

Harry's face scrunched up in disbelief. "What? Severus, he's dead." After a pause, Harry's eyes narrowed and more mockingly he said, "What, now you aren't saying his name?"

Snape tipped his head away. "The reason the Aurors went to Azkaban this evening was to investigate reports that the Death Eater's marks were darkening."

Harry stared at him. Snape appeared frazzled, but completely, soberly serious. "What about yours?" Harry asked.

Snape shifted his sleeve and held his arm out. "But I do not believe mine is functional."

Harry lifted his gaze from examining Snape's forearm and pushed his shoulders back. "That's good." He then favored Snape with a relatively soft look. Still grabbing at denying hope, Harry said, "The prophecy didn't mention Voldemort. My earlier prophecies all did. If he's really back, why didn't it?" Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. The edge of the stone was cutting into his legs, so he shifted forward. "Severus," he nearly pleaded, "I would know."

"I believe you do know," Snape stated. "It was you who hypothesized that it was he who attacked the Dursley house."

Harry stared at the frayed and faded tapestry hanging across from him. "I wasn't really serious, I don't think. And Voldemort wouldn't have left anyone alive." That reasoning bolstered Harry.

"I cannot explain that part; I admit," Snape said. "But your odd personality shifts become understandable if you are again tapping into the Dark Lord's thoughts."

Harry stared at the threads composing the tapestry's weave. The greens of the trees were washed out but the reds were still dark. The figures in the image were all stilted,

individual, separate. "I have been feeling sort of odd," Harry admitted. "But . . ." Thinking over the last few weeks' events, he asked, "Did Tom Riddle ever work for Borgin & Burkes?"

Snape's robes fluttered as he changed his posture suddenly. "Yes."

"Right," Harry said, thinking that answer unfortunate.

"Why do you ask?"

Harry thought over his dream of the shop's vault. "Just wondering . . . er, did Voldemort have a watch he liked?"

Snape seemed to think this a rather odd question, but he answered with a shrug. "He had one, yes."

Harry blinked into the lamplight. "I wonder where his wand is." He was feeling a rush of determination now, thinking that he should go track down Voldemort's wand. Without meaning to, he had stood up. "Voldemort's wand would have left the feather pattern in the ash at the Dursley's old house."

Snape's voice dropped as he replied, "It would, indeed."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "How can he be back though? And why is he so clumsy at everything?"

Snape crossed his arms and stepped around to face Harry. It was a subtly aggressive move, but Harry made himself not care. Snape stated, "If he released all of his followers from Azkaban, destroying it in the process, that would hardly constitute clumsiness."

Thinking of the footprints – the odd footprints in the old Borgin & Burkes vault – Harry said, "Maybe he just doesn't care if he leaves a trail."

"That would be more plausible," Snape agreed.

Harry turned to look down the corridor, thinking of routes to London. Snape took hold of his upper arm to draw him back. "I do not like letting you go if you have the Dark Lord influencing your thoughts."

"His name is Voldemort," Harry pointed out.

"Is?"

Harry looked away again, pained. "I killed him; he's gone."

Snape released him slowly. "He was very powerful, Harry . . . and disturbingly clever."

"You don't understand, though. I was released from him." Harry gestured with his arms, wanting to be understood, to convince Snape that he must be mistaken. "That day down in the Entrance Hall, I was released. I had never felt like that before – completely myself."

"And now?"

Harry's shoulders drooped. "I don't feel like myself anymore." His eyes burned with frustration upon admitting that. "What'd that bloody prophecy say again?" Harry stiffened as he recounted the prophecy in his mind. "Hello . . . 'Dark Hordes will be liberated' . . . Severus, the prisoners of Azkaban ARE the dark hordes!"

"You sound . . . pleased about that," Snape accused.

"Well . . . I mean, it's not a good thing, at all, but . . . I didn't release them. It wasn't me. I thought it was going to be my fault, but it's not. 'Few will escape it'. Well, given the number of prisoners now running rampant, that seems likely." They looked at each other a long moment. "I really have to go, Severus. I think the Auror's office may actually give me something useful to do for once. Especially with . . ." He faded out, hurting horribly. He twisted the pain around and forced it to become determination. He looked Ron's broom up and down as though judging its ability to speed him to the Ministry or at least beyond the school's Apparition barrier.

Snape moved his hand to Harry's shoulder. "I am sorry, Harry."

These words only made the twisting agony worse. Harry pulled out of reach.

"Do be careful," Snape said with quiet calm, as though trying to calm Harry.

"I will," Harry said and strode back to the door behind the tapestry that led to the roof; a door that was not on his map. Before entering the dark stairwell again, he lifted the tapestry out of the way and peered back out at his guardian. "You be careful too," he said with feeling, thinking that as angry as he had been with the man who had set in motion the events that had killed his parents, Harry still wished for him to be around.

Snape nodded and, after the tapestry swung back to hang straight, stepped back into the hospital wing and down to the last bed on the left where curtains had been set up to surround it. The two students in the wing appeared to have fallen back to sleep. Pomfrey was just finishing up when Snape quietly pulled a chair over beside the bed. The hospital witch tugged the covers up and poured out a half glass of calming draught, which Candide drank too eagerly.

Snape said, "I did warn you that you may be safer elsewhere."

Candide gave him a look of vague disdain before resting her head back. "You did," she said a little coldly, and Snape thought perhaps he had taken the wrong tack. He sighed, wishing Pomfrey would retreat out of earshot.

"She'll be tip-top tomorrow, Professor," Pomfrey said while finally lifting the tray of unraveled and bloodied bandages, bottles, and tools. Moments later she had disappeared into her office.

It required half a minute for Snape to find his way through his myriad troubling thoughts to say. "I am very grateful that you are all right."

"Yeah," she said lightly, "Harry would have been devastated if anything more serious had happened to someone he thought he was keeping an eye on."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Snape said a little smartly. "But you are correct," he conceded.

Candide relented, saying even more quietly, "Poor boy is probably still trying to rescue his mother."

"I do hope he is past that," Snape retorted. A long silent minute ticked by. Snape stood, straightening his chair with undo care. "I must assist in guarding the castle. We can speak about this more in the morning."

"Be careful, Severus."

"Yes," he agreed, thinking that her existence in his life made things several times more complicated, although he found he could not bring himself to wish that trouble away. Surely if Arthur and Molly Weasley had coped all of these years, he certainly could.

Harry Apparated to Shrewsthorpe first, just to look things over. The last of the firemen were loading their equipment into the many cupboards lining the sides of their truck. With a hiss of the brakes the truck roared away and the street fell silent except for the trickling of puddles of water draining across the road onto the ground. A few neighbors gathered their families together and faded into the surroundings, except for one woman who stepped gingerly across the wet road.

"Harry, dear," Elizabeth's mother greeted him. She wore a grey robe and had her arms crossed around middle as though injured, but Harry assumed it was simply

distress. "My husband didn't want me coming down to look at what was happening until he was certain one of those awful marks wasn't hovering over the place. I tried to explain to him that those days were long over . . ."

"Er," Harry began. "They might not be," he admitted quietly. "Azkaban's been emptied and there were no shortage of Death Eaters here this evening."

Her shiny eyes gaped at him, reflecting the distant street lights. His assertion appeared to have put her in a state of shock. "Oh," she finally said, and Harry could sense her shift in attitude to one probably more in line with her husband's, one that shunned magic due to the trouble it brought. She glanced up and down the street nervously. "Well, I best get back," she said uneasily.

"Yeah," Harry said, and watched her shuffle off, clearly wearing shoes too large for her; although perhaps not her husband's, probably her daughter's.

Someone called to Harry; it was Ron. He was carrying Hedwig's cage with the owl in it. "Found her circling," he explained. The bird put her foot up around the wires and chewed a bit as though to get to Harry.

"Thanks. Did you find Kali?"

"Yup, Fred took her to Hermione's flat. Your house-elf refuses to leave. Maybe you can convince her to go back to Hogwarts."

"She's not bonded to me, so she may not listen." Harry looked the dark bulk of the house over. It was still a house; although it had a blackened hole in the corner of the roof and many of the windows were broken. And there was the little issue of the very large hole in the front that Harry had escaped through. But surprisingly, it still resembled a house. The stone walls were untouched beyond Harry's own damage and they never had stood quite straight. The scent of wet charred wood was a tad pervasive, arguing that things would require work to return them to normal.

"I'm going to take a look inside . . . make sure Winky is set."

Harry used a spell to unlock the padlock that had been added to a board nailed across the door, which had been axed out of service otherwise. Inside, water covered the stone floor of the entryway, but the wood floor of the hall looked dryer and a faint swishing noise drew Harry inside all the way to where Winky stood, mopping.

"Master," she squeaked in greeting.

"Are you going to be all right here?" Harry asked. He circled the hall looking into each of the rooms. The breeze blew in through the broken windows, lightening the

scent of wet fire. The ceiling was scorched most in the library, where the shelves and the paper had provided good fuel. But someone had already taken away the undamaged books. This heartened Harry more than he would have expected it to.

"Winky wishes to do her duty," Winky said, wringing out the mop into a wooden bucket.

Harry passed the steps down to the kitchen, which appeared undamaged, making him assume the foodstuffs were also undamaged, leaving Winky with supplies for a while. Harry looked around the broad boards making up the floor. If they dried quickly, perhaps the floor could be salvaged. Harry looked up. He could see the low clouds through the hole in the roof that ran up from where the balcony had burned, giving the fire a path up to the thick beam in the corner, which had suffered greatly. The place was damp and cold and smelt even more than usual of a hearth, but it was still standing. And Harry needed to hunt down the people who had done this.

Determination heated Harry's midsection. "If you need anything, go to Hogwarts," Harry said to Winky.

Winky may have nodded, or perhaps her head had just happened to bob more right then as she worked the long mop handle back and forth.

Outside, one of the twins had returned and was chatting with Ron.

"How are ya', Harry?" he asked.

"All right, I guess. I need to get to the Ministry, though."

"Come along with us then. Bringing you is a great excuse to go back." He winked at Ron. "Use our Quidditch pitch as a destination and we'll pick up George too. We've put a nasty barrier around the house itself."

Harry took Ron's arm and Apparated them both to the field beside the Burrow, which showed like an abstract beacon in the darkness. As they approached, a figure came out and shouted something that sounded like "goat-herder." Fred shouted "sheep's milk" back and the figure raced over.

"Want to help us escort Harry back to the Ministry?" Fred suggestively asked his twin.

George's grin was visible even in the low light. "–Course. Charlie's arrived so Bill's gone back to Gringott's for a few hours. Goblins threatened to fire the two o' you if you didn't show up for emergency duty." This last he said to Ron.

Ron appeared grim. "One of us should stay and help guard the Burrow."

"You stay, Ron," Fred said. "We'll go with Harry. As annoyed as Dad was with us two insisting on helping, he seemed most concerned about you."

"Yeah," Ron huffed. "Seems to think you two could trick your way out of anything, but Little Ronnie doesn't have a chance." He gave Harry a half-hug, patting him hard on the back. "Come back when you get a chance. And message if you need any help." The last came out with an un-Ron-like insistence.

Fred grabbed a broomstick from the shed and hovered it. Numb and almost uncaring, given the heart-emptying news he faced upon arrival, Harry followed reluctantly when the twins launched themselves.

Too soon, they were coming down in an alleyway near the telephone booth entrance. A crowd surrounded the booth, jostling and arguing. Fred leaned close and said, "The very far corner of the atrium was left outside the Apparition barrier. I'll see if it's clear." He disappeared with a pop that drew heads from the crowd. Harry turned his head away, not wanting to be recognized.

"It's clear," George said.

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"He didn't come back. 'Count to five' is the family rule." George disappeared and Harry followed.

Wands were aimed at them. Harry elbowed George aside and said, "It's Harry Potter and company." The wands lowered.

"He with you?" A burly man Harry didn't recognize asked as he held Fred down under his boot.

"Yes."

Fred was allowed to get up. "That's a dumb rule," Harry muttered.

"It's always worked before," George argued back.

Harry strode to the counter beside the gates and after some arguing they were through. The corridors were darkened for night and normally would be deserted, but tonight they were bustling. The three of them took the lift to two. In the Auror's office it was busy but somber. Shacklebolt stood up as they entered. His right arm was bandaged and his face was scraped extensively on one side.

"Good to see you, Harry," he said. "I see you have your own guards," he added with a touch of lightness.

Chapter 28

Beside Harry the twins shifted. "Where's Dad?" George asked.

"In a meeting," Shacklebolt replied.

"Who is missing?" Harry asked, not breaking the gaze he had locked on Shacklebolt's deep brown one.

The twins shifted much more this time. Shacklebolt said, "I saw Mad-Eye go into the drink myself. So he's listed as dead." In his eyes Harry could see a storm-battered slab of wet rock where clutching sweeps of water, curling with angry foam, sucked the old Auror away, out of reach of tossed lifeline spells, out of reach of the light of a paltry Lumos charm. Shacklebolt went on. "Before that, Whitley and Tonks had gone up, but not reported in."

Blackpool, hearing this conversation, came around from one of the farther desks. She appeared to have been crying. "Good to see you're all right, Potter," she said.

Harry nodded, dropping his gaze before letting it wander over the desk nearby where a stray hot pink scarf, stuffed into the corner where the desk met the cubicle wall, reminded Harry too forcefully of its former occupant. More people entered, another one with a sniffle. Kerry Ann gave Harry a hug before taking Tonks' chair beside the door. Munz took the spare chair that usually floated between the three desks in this section. He dropped into it hard and rubbed his shoulder.

"No luck?" Shacklebolt asked.

"We got Vammerpile," Munz said. "He was at home, smoking a pipe as though he didn't imagine we'd bother looking for him. No sign . . . of Avery, though." He glanced at Harry before finishing this sentence. " Rogan took off to help Reversal in Regent's Park. Said to tell you."

"Can I get an assignment?" Harry asked, trying not to sound as though he were demanding one. He wanted to ask about Voldemort's wand, but figured that he should ask Mr. Weasley.

Shacklebolt glanced at the log, which was busy scratching away without pause. "Arthur will be back presently. When he is, we can all go out as far as I'm concerned." He gestured with his healthy arm as though not used to using it. "Pick an assignment, but make it an easy one if you really want it." To Munz, he said, "Why don't you take the alarm at the Apothecary's. Came in just twenty minutes ago." When Kerry Ann stood too, Shacklebolt said, "You can stay. You're probably going out with Harry."

Munz went from relaxing to rushing out without hesitation. Kerry Ann retook her seat. Fred said, "So what about us?"

Shacklebolt shrugged, but he looked stubborn, as though ready to deny them another assignment.

Harry looked over the logbook where the recording quill was filling in next Sunday's pages already it was using so much space. The day names had been X-ed out violently enough that the nib had torn the parchment. "Do we have a list of who was in Azkaban?" Harry asked. Shacklebolt held out a scroll. A few names had already been marked off.

"Cross off Vammerpile too, will you please?" Shacklebolt said.

Harry borrowed a quill from Tonks' desk drawer and did so. The list was dauntingly long. "How many?"

"Two-hundred and sixty-four," Shacklebolt recited.

George whistled. Fred said, "We can take on a lot of them easily, you know. Some of those blokes who have been in the klink since the Dementor era can't have much left of their own will."

"That's how Vammerpile was," Kerry Ann said, dabbing her nose with a kerchief. "Didn't have any sense of what to do with himself." Blackpool sniffled too, inspired by seeing Kerry Ann do so.

"Half of them we aren't terribly worried about," Shacklebolt said stiffly. "And a quarter will probably flee the country, which makes them someone else's problem, and at the moment, I'm not feeling too bad about that. Later I will, when it is possible to have the luxury. It's the last quarter that we have to get. They're marked with a star."

Harry was scrolling backwards through the alphabetic list. His thumb stopped of its own accord on Rothschild. "I want this assignment," Harry said.

Shacklebolt squinted at the name. "Take one off the log instead. We haven't starred his because he isn't dangerous without the assistance of magical devices."

"Neither is Merton," Harry retorted.

"Unlike Merton, we don't expect Rothschild to have access to anything in the near future. His family, when notified of his escape, expressed strong assurances that they would not assist him"

Harry lowered the long parchment and turned to the log, waiting for the pen to pause before flipping back to the oldest of the unchecked notices. Break-ins, threats, fights,

and reported sightings filled the lines. After the first page, the pen had begun writing smaller, so Harry had to lean closer to read it.

The pen jabbed at Harry's hand to get him to let go of the pages. The book flipped forward and the quill began scratching out a disturbance on a Muggle road in London: Intercepted Muggle wireless report regarding strange fireworks erupting from the top of the Barbican Centre. Police are closing the roads and attempting to do crowd control . . . Harry read aloud as the pen scratched.

"Go on, the lot of you," Shacklebolt said.

"Us too?" George asked eagerly.

With a wave of his bandaged arm, Shacklebolt said sharply, "All of you. You know an Oblivate, right?" he asked, looking between the twins.

"Yeah," Fred replied as though reluctant to.

"Good," Shacklebolt said, sitting back down with care. "You're going to need it; Reversal is all tied up already but I'll send them a message saying they are needed if anyone frees up."

The four of them took up their brooms and Disapparated to the darkened Smithfield Market, which Harry and Kerry Ann were familiar with from field work. They strode to the doors with purpose, pausing only to dispense with the locks. Harry felt good, felt as though he were paying tribute to Tonks the only way he could . . . by putting everything out of the way and doing his job.

Out on the street, a car was burning as were the trees in the center of the roundabout. People were running in both directions but mostly away from the tallest building in the area, where lights and explosions were emanating. Harry grabbed one of the twins by the sleeve. "Approach on foot and Oblivate anyone who seems to have seen too much. Kerry Ann and I will fly up to the tower and take care of whoever is there.

When they arrived at the tower, they found not former prisoners of Azkaban, but instead drunken wizards taking advantage of the chaos to create more. Bound and with the more obnoxious of the two literally gagged, they Disapparated back to the market just before the Muggle police broke through the metal rooftop door. Harry watched over the prisoners while Kerry Ann went out into the mêlée to find the twins.

One of the wizards lying on the floor was laughing in an inebriated manner. "You really Harry Potter?"

Harry thought the man looked familiar but he couldn't place him. He was probably an older brother of someone Harry had known at Hogwarts. "You really so stupid?"

Harry returned rudely. He was in no mood for putting up with him. The wizard shut up and shifted on the floor as though to relieve the strain on his arms. Harry stared into the still darkness of the shuttered market. Squares of grey light came in the sparse windows, which also let in flashes of Muggle emergency lights. As time passed, Harry began thinking how very vulnerable the two prisoners at his feet were. He could do anything to them, and they would probably deserve it for making more trouble on top of the loads of it already happening.

Harry fingered his wand. He swallowed, feeling hungry for the feel of a Crucio, which he had never successfully cast in his life. Despite that, he could taste it in his mouth as though it were a familiar and expected reward. His mouth watered even and his heart rate picked up. It would feel good to torment these two, to make their screams join those of the passing sirens.

Harry shook himself. That wasn't him; it was someone else. But Harry was hurting badly enough that he had a hard time caring that these alien thoughts were so black. It would be nice to make someone else hurt as badly as he did. He used his toe to shove the closest wizard onto his back. The man looked as though he had passed out. Harry was just imagining an amusingly jolting wake-up for him when Kerry Ann and the twins reappeared with a bang! of the market doors hitting the inside wall.

The twins took charge of the prisoners; seemed very pleased to do so. Harry was grateful they did, he was shaking too badly to hold his wand without dropping it. He had been mere seconds from striking out with a Forbidden Curse.

Back at the Ministry, Harry desperately fought to get a hold of himself and just managed to by the time they dropped the prisoners in the dungeon. The regular cells for those awaiting trial were filled, so the cellars and even Courtroom Ten had been converted into holding areas.

Back on their floor, they dropped into chairs in the tea room when Arthur insisted that Harry clearly looked in need of some. Harry clutched his teacup before him, letting it burn his fingers and palms. The pain of the heat and his willingness to accept it did wonders for clearing his head. He breathed slowly in and out while the others recounted what had happened for the record. Harry listened to his own breathing more than the story. He was reliving that hungry moment in the market in his own mind with no little alarm. He could clearly remember yearning for the soul cutting feel of a Forbidden Curse, as though he had wanted the tendrils from the Dark Plane to come. Harry imagined that this might complete a circuit of power within him. He would be undefeatable, he considered, if he let the darkness have him as a conduit.

Chapter 28

Commotion in the corridor cut their report short. Vineet, Aaron, and Rogan were returning from an assignment in a celebratory mood. "Five at once," Rogan announced, scooping up the list and slashing the names off with a flourish. He sobered quickly upon scanning the remaining list.

Aaron leaned against the wall, rubbing his neck as though he had pulled a muscle. Vineet stood quietly beside him, patient as always.

Mr. Weasley said, "Don't relax anyone; it's right back out with you." He looked over a note parchment and the logbook, back and forth. "Harry you and Aaron take this one. Vishnu, you are taking a break; you are not supposed to be out at all. You can help me field memos." He tore off a strip of the parchment and handed it to Aaron. "Tristan, you take my sons with you on this one. . ."

Harry collected Aaron with a glance, wishing he were with Vineet instead, whose presence in the past had seemed to anchor him. In the corridor, he stopped. "I need to ask Mr. Weasley something," Harry told his fellow. Back inside the offices, Harry slowly approached, stalling. The others were departing on their mission, leaving Harry, Vineet, and Shacklebolt along with Harry's boss. "Can I speak to you, sir?"

Mr. Weasley appeared surprised to still find Harry there. "Sure, Harry what is it?"

Harry hesitated, but then asked, "What happened to Voldemort's wand after the Final Battle?"

In the doorway, Aaron dropped his wand and quickly bent to pick it up. Mr. Weasley did not look up from the prisoner list. He said, "It was put in the safekeeping of the Department of Mysteries."

"And is it still there?" Harry asked.

A long pause opened up, during which no one in the room moved and perhaps they did not even breathe. "No," Mr. Weasley responded. "It apparently has gone missing." He spoke as though this ground had been covered in some capacity already.

"Missing . . ." Harry confirmed, trying not to sound mocking. "Is anything else . . . missing?"

Mr. Weasley looked up finally, though only at the wall. "That's a very good question, Harry. I think I'll go ask."

As Mr. Weasley stepped around him, Harry closed his eyes, trying to take in the facts that were lining up relentlessly around him. "He can't be back," Harry muttered.

"You would know, Harry," Shacklebolt said quietly.

Harry dropped his head and closed his eyes again. His thoughts lately were clearly not all his own and minutes before he had been ready to use a Crucio on a helpless person. "Then I think he's back," Harry whispered and jumped when Shacklebolt's uninjured hand banged flat against his desktop.

"Harry," the Auror said sternly. "Why didn't you say something? We would believe you."

"I'm not certain, even now. But something IS wrong." Harry was pleading, which made Shacklebolt back down and drop whatever he was winding up to say next. "Go on with your assignment," the Auror said tiredly.

The call was for the Leaky Cauldron itself. When they arrived, it was exceedingly quiet. Harry tugged Aaron aside and said, "Look, I have to warn you. I'm not quite myself."

Aaron turned to him from glancing around the deserted pub, wand out. "And?"

Harry lowered his voice even farther. "I may be partially Voldemort right now." Harry hated to say that, but not saying it felt even worse. He released Aaron's sleeve which he hadn't realized he was clutching.

Aaron tugged his pastel purple silk sleeve down straight. "Thanks for the warning," he responded uncertainly.

"What I mean is . . . if you see me doing something that . . . well, maybe I shouldn't be, don't assume I know what's best," Harry managed.

"If you are assigning me as your moral compass," Aaron said, "you are really in trouble."

"I am really in trouble," Harry echoed, although he felt enormously relieved at having informed his fellow of the situation. They stared at each other while the strange stillness of the wizard pub grew increasingly oppressive. Harry confessed, "On the last assignment I nearly tortured the perpetrators before we brought them back."

"These the hooligans who were setting off spells over Smithfield?" When Harry nodded, Aaron said, "See, I might not see a problem with knocking them around a bit before bringing them in."

"Please, Aaron."

"Yeah, all right. I'll try to think like you and if you seem to not be thinking like you . . . well, I'll let you know."

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"Thank you," Harry said sincerely, enormously relieved.

They both turned and faced the empty pub. Chairs had been overturned and one table as well. No one was around.

"So if you have Voldemort partly in your head and you think he's back, where is he right now?"

Harry hesitated. "I don't know." The sound of ale dripping from a pool of it on a table onto the floor marked the seconds before Harry added, "I don't want to believe he's back, so I haven't tried to figure that out."

"Works for me," Aaron quipped. He then sighed and glanced around, wand lowered. "What the devil was this call about?"

They searched the room and found no one before going upstairs to search the guest rooms. In the last room on the end they found a little old witch who hadn't wanted to leave. She seemed pleased to see them, repeatedly calling them "sweet young boys". She told them that some bad wizards and witches had come and had robbed everyone in the place before sending everyone off. Apparently no one had come back.

"Not as dire as expected," Harry said. Aaron took out a notepad and wrote down the descriptions the old woman gave. Even taking into account her poor eyesight, Harry didn't think it was any of the Death Eaters. While Aaron and the old witch chatted and Aaron, with surprising skill, worked additional clues from the woman's faltering memory, Harry closed his eyes and let himself drift. There were Death Eaters nearby all right. Not in the pub, but probably on Diagon Alley. A few scattered others were in the mid-field as though in the city. Most hovered at the periphery. Harry wondered exactly how many there were in total. There were too many in his head to count. Nineteen had survived the battle at Hogwarts, and two more had been arrested at Harry's house shortly thereafter. And then there were Jugson and Avery as well. But some number had been incarcerated from before; the ones who hadn't argued their way out after Voldemort's first apparent downfall.

Aaron was standing up. He patted Harry on the shoulder. "Almost time for breakfast," he said chummily. "I say we raid the kitchen downstairs."

Harry thought his fellow had been joking, but down in the main room Aaron slipped behind the bar and searched around in the charmed cold-boxes under the beer taps. He pulled out four hard-boiled eggs and salt and pepper and set this all up with a questionably clean plate as though it were his place.

Harry cracked an egg and began peeling it as his stomach rumbled. "How are we ever going to catch all of these blokes?" he asked.

"It's only been one night, Harry," Aaron pointed out. "Most of them are pretty dim, it seems."

"If they were really smart, they wouldn't have got caught at all." Harry bit into the egg after rubbing it in the salt sprinkled on the plate. The egg was cold and rubbery but tasty in his hungered state. "We were supposed to have our official ceremony to become second-years this week," he said, thinking how disruptive this all was. "But they seem willing to send us out anyway, which is good."

"They are treating Munz like a full Auror too," Aaron observed.

"Too bad he isn't here." Harry closed his eyes again to verify that the shadows had not moved. "There are a couple of Death Eaters on Diagon Alley; I can feel them."

Aaron dropped the egg he was peeling and looked behind him as though afraid he had been snuck up on. "Want to go get them when we are through here?" he asked sarcastically picking his egg up off the sticky bar and blowing on it.

"I think probably we should have a full Auror with us. We can come back with one." This statement went against Harry's basic instinct for action and he almost wondered if Voldemort weren't somehow influencing him to delay.

"Eat up, then," Aaron said, popping his second egg into his mouth after using a peeling spell on it. As he chewed he put everything away.

Harry pocketed his second egg and the two of them returned to the Ministry.

Morning sun generously poured in the tall windows, warming the Hogwarts hospital wing. Snape stepped down to where Candide was sitting up, eating breakfast. Aware that he had not done well the night before, and acutely aware of what he needed to say, Snape took her fork away and held her hand before speaking. This did indeed get her attention.

"You are looking well," he said.

"I'm feeling fine."

He stroked the dry warmth of her hand. "You must go away from here. Somewhere remote and Muggle." Snape jerked his head to the side. "Do not think of it now. Pick a different place," he snapped. "I want you to go and you must not return until I send for you."

She didn't speak, just pushed her floating breakfast tray to the side a little roughly.

Snape said, "I cannot let this touch you. This is my past rearing up and I do not want it to involve you." She started to speak, to say something that sounded like denial, but he cut her off. "Every last one of my living enemies is free right now. Most, if not all, will be seeking revenge, as you have discovered. I don't intend to let them succeed. If you were untouched before, you can manage it again. You are good in the Muggle world. Go far from here, today, this morning, and disappear into it."

She kept her head bowed and shook it lightly.

Snape went on in a confessional tone, "I can get through this if I know you are safe. Do this for me." He stood without looking right at her. She frowned but didn't argue or shake her head again. After a hesitation he bent and kissed her on the top of the head and then departed.

In the Great Hall, McGonagall was calming the students who had risen early and had gathered there. "It is as the Prefects told you this morning, we are facing a calamitous event in the Wizarding World." She spied Snape and shook off the students to lead him behind the head table. "The Hogwarts Express has been moved up to Wednesday from Friday."

"The students are safer here," Snape argued.

"I know that, and you know that, but all the parents remember is that this is the place the Death Eaters attacked in mass numbers last time. They want their loved ones close where they can keep an eye on them, personally, even if that eye is not nearly as trained in Defense as the staff here at Hogwarts."

Suze and some other fourth- and fifth-year Slytherins were hovering before the head table and when they caught the pair's attention, one asked, "Professor, what about our O.W.L.s?"

McGonagall answered, "We have scheduled the written in place of some of your yearly examinations for tomorrow. The practical examinations will have to wait until a later time, or they will simply be waived if it is not possible to administer them." Several of the students appeared gleeful about this, but the rest frowned. McGonagall said, "I will make a formal announcement during breakfast. Go to your table."

The students moved off. The teachers stood, watching the Hall fill. McGonagall said, "I would keep them all here, like Ms. Weasley, for an extra month if I could. Protect them all . . . why not?"

Snape didn't reply. He was thinking that he would even sooner than expected be free to assist in protecting Harry full time.

McGonagall put her hand on her chair back and leaned hard upon it. "Difficult to imagine all of Azkaban emptied." She shook her head. "If ever there was a time I appreciated having you as a Deputy it is now."

Dryly, Snape said, "I hope I can live up to that. I expect that I am quite an added risk."

"Given how you organized things last night with the staff – the guard shifts, the extra trip alarms – despite your own distressing events, I believe you already have lived up to it."

Snape watched a hex exchange between a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor. Ginny Weasley was already moving to yank the back of the Gryffindor boy's robes. "They were all very obvious things to do."

"That is what makes you so valuable. These things are not so obvious to the rest of us." She pulled her chair out and took a seat, prompting the students gathered in the hall to do the same. "Things were quiet last night. Let's hope they remain that way until Wednesday morning."

They were rushing when they reached the Auror's office, but there was already more of a commotion than they had expected to cause when they asked for someone to return to Diagon Alley with them. As he stepped into the Auror's offices Harry came face to face with a very wet, but clearly very alive, Tonks wrapped in three grey blankets and sipping from a steaming mug.

Harry breathed her name almost inaudibly.

Aaron pinched Harry on the arm. "Just checking that she's real," he said with a wink.

Mr. Weasley looked up from mixing something from a variety of potion bottles that were arrayed on Shacklebolt's desk. He stopped and traced Harry's odd gaze to the occupant of the chair before him and cleared his throat. "Tonks here managed to find a door floating in the rough sea and fortunately the current pulled her close enough to shore for her to Apparate." Tonks coughed as though accenting the story. Mr. Weasley went on, "We don't think Whitley was as lucky."

Tonks shook her head sadly, making water drip from her drooping Mohawk onto her nose. "I put a block up when I heard something shatter. I was airborne a long time

before hitting water. It was a good thing we were in the guard tower and not the dungeon when everything exploded."

"You should be at St. Mungo's," Harry said, stepping closer but not too close. He was trying not to give himself away, unaware that he already had. He took the seat beside her as she hacked roughly again.

Shacklebolt commented, "St. Mungo's is a nightmare right now . . . utterly overwhelmed."

"How about Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts?" Harry suggested, desperately wanting her to get more help than was currently being provided.

"Harry, I'll be all right," Tonks said, shuffling her heavy wraps. "I just need another cup of tea." She held her mug out with this statement, pointedly then out of the way of the potion Mr. Weasley tried to put in it. Shacklebolt moved to fill it from the teapot.

"Hey there," Mr. Weasley said, "I can handle it."

The sound of the log scratching something out drew Harry's attention that way. He stepped over to give himself space to believe what was happening and to recover from feeling dizzy and so elated he couldn't feel his feet properly. The log had nearly filled the pages it had been using, including overflowing along the margins in increasingly smaller printing. Tonks was speaking in answer to a question. "The prisoners were already gone as was half the prison. We'd gone up into the remaining tower so we could see the whole island to survey the damage." She paused to cough for nearly half a minute. When she spoke again, her voice was scratchy and soft. "A few prisoners were on the edge of the far cliff. Some of the really old timers there wouldn't have the sense to leave if a cruise ship pulled up and offered them froofy drinks with umbrellas in them."

Harry returned slowly to standing before Tonks, wishing everyone in the room were absent except the two of them. He wanted to hold her with the same kind of yearning he had wanted to use a Crucio earlier.

She turned to gaze with angst at the log. "Bloody Merlin, Arthur, I have get out there and deal with some of those." She tried to toss off the blankets, but everyone moved to hold her down. Harry didn't move; he was feeling strange again, seeing everyone in the room in two starkly disparate ways as though desire were as dangerous as anger.

"So you didn't see if their marks were really darkening?" Harry asked from inside his strange haze, unaware of how dreamy he sounded.

Tonks shook her head and sat through a drying charm on her hair administered by Fred. "They were gone already. We couldn't even send a warning back. Everything at the prison had been disabled. What a time to lose two Aurors." She hacked a few times and said into her hand, "I didn't think we could ever lose Mad-Eye."

Mr. Weasley said, "Kingsley tried to throw him a lifeline but missed and another big wave took him out of sight."

"How did you get back?" Harry asked Shacklebolt.

"He had his own portkey and held onto it tightly," Mr. Weasley explained with a meaningful glance a Tonks. "Usually portkeys deactivate when you arrive on the island and won't bring you back unless reauthorized by two guards, but all the barriers were down by that time."

"I can go out on a call," Shacklebolt offered, straightening his spine as though to appear less injured.

Mr. Weasley glanced at the Auror's bandaged arm, comparing it to Tonks' bent head. "No, I'll go out. You two manage things here. Harry . . ." He waved a hand before Harry's face. "Harry? How did things go at the Cauldron?"

Aaron answered for them and handed over his notebook. Shacklebolt tore off the relevant pages and slid them into one of the folders stacked neatly on his desk. Aaron then added, "But, Harry . . . well . . . Harry sensed Death Eaters on Diagon Alley and we thought we should come back and get someone to help us out."

The room turned to Harry, who found he was even more uncomfortable now with the notion that he had such a strong connection to Voldemort's followers. Harry closed his eyes, rubbing the left one to remove the grit his long, sleepless night had deposited there. The two shadows were even closer this time. "They're here at the Ministry now," he announced, sore nerves jolted.

Mr. Weasley said, "Kingsley, go with them, I'll send alarms to the other departments. Fetch Munz from the file room and message Rodgers and Blackpool who are out on a call."

"They didn't respond when we told them Tonks was back," Shacklebolt pointed out, standing and tossing his cloak on one-handed. He then turned to Harry, "Lead the way, Champ," he said. "Where are they?"

Harry tried to sense where the shadows were relative to himself. Down was all he could discern with certainty. "On one of the lower floors. I'm not sure exactly where."

Chapter 28

"After we scoop up these two, we should get a larger group together and take you hunting afield," Shacklebolt suggested.

"Sure," Harry said, but he was looking at Mr. Weasley's unusually grim expression, wondering why he appeared so.

Everyone headed to the corridor except for Tonks. Mr. Weasley said, "Blackpool, stay here and hold things down with Tonks, just in case they get this far. I don't want her unprotected."

"It's all right," Tonks countered forcefully and with only one cough. "I can take care of myself." She grabbed up her wand to demonstrate and required a moment to notice that she was holding it backwards. She peered bleary-eyed at it before turning it around. Blackpool took up a guard's position just inside the door, wand out.

Mr. Weasley nodded his approval and they took the stairs down several levels, until Harry indicated they should try one. The corridors of the Department of Magical Transportation were busy with witches and wizards dashing about. Mr. Weasley gestured for the group to split up, with half entering the first door to the Floo Network Authority. People stopped what they were doing and turned to stare as the Aurors came through between the desks. Harry hovered in the corridor and closed his eyes. They shadows were still further down. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at Percy Weasley, standing in the doorway of the next set of offices. Percy had a hard, stoic expression rather than his usual pinched and sour one. He stepped inside the doorway, out of view.

Harry called to Mr. Weasley, and pointed at the floor when his boss looked his way. The group was recalled with practiced ease and they went down another level. Magical Games and Sports was eerily quiet in contrast. Mr. Weasley explained, "They've all been pulled to help with guard and Reversal duty." Harry closed his eyes right away this time and again, after some struggling, pointed down. They were getting closer.

A scream accompanied the door to the main floor opening. The group of them rushed forth, pausing only to pick a direction. Everyone standing near the lifts was frozen looking down the corridor the other way, so the group of them ran that way, into the offices and storage areas used by Reception. The sound of shattering furniture accompanied another scream and shouts of alarm. A sense of cursedness washed through Harry, bringing him to a halt just inside the first doorway. A corridor stretched out ahead of them leading left and right at the end of it. A witch ran by, holding her hat on. The wall exploded just behind her.

"It's one of Merton's weapons," Harry said, ducking.

"Blasted," Mr. Weasley said, but he restrained Harry from joining the group moving carefully forward. "Where are the Death Eaters now?" he asked Harry close to his ear.

"What?" Harry asked in surprise. "Oh." He closed his eyes but with the sounds of shattering things it was hard to concentrate, or not concentrate as the case actually was. "I can't . . ." Harry began.

Mr. Weasley said, "I'm worried this is a diversion. Fred! George! Come with me, now!" To Harry he said, "Hold things down here while I check the Minister's office. There's no reason to attack Reception." He took off for the lifts; Fred and George behind him, checking in confusion over their shoulder.

Released, Harry pushed his way to the front beside Shacklebolt just as the device cleared the corner of the corridor. One could tell it had by the arc of the spell running along the wall in their direction, sending the paneling into the air in a long string of flying boards. Harry had a block ready and between his and the Auror's they barely got jolted. Another shot, and then another lashed out at them, the firing rate picking up as though the thing sensed that there were good targets ahead of it.

"Think we can just burn it out making it shoot at us?" Shacklebolt asked, " . . . before it reaches the Atrium?"

They all backed up a step as the onslaught continued. The thing didn't seem to be running low on spell energy. Shacklebolt said, "Aaron, go clear the Atrium. The alarm should have gone off by now, maybe it's been disabled." After Aaron dashed away, Shacklebolt said, "Munz, check that casualty."

Harry risked a glance to the left into the office now directly beside them. Someone in pale blue robes was lying on the floor. "Dead," Munz said. A second risky glance by Harry showed that the side wall of the office had been blown inward so forcefully that the debris was embedded in the wall opposite, leaving the floor mostly clear.

They took another step backwards and this time the next shot knocked them both onto their knees when another device came around the corner, joining its strike to the first's. Shacklebolt shouted a warning, and Harry hoped it wasn't for him to do anything other than pour additional power into his own block, because that was all he could handle. His arm vibrated violently as the attack went on. Just as it started to ease, a wall nearby shattered, sending wood paneling splinters in a shower against their combined blocks.

The dust settled slowly. Harry held up his wand with a quaky and leaden arm. Beside him, Shacklebolt was having trouble righting himself with his injured arm.

Harry hauled him to his knees by his cloak and pulled them both backwards to gain a little space between them and the devices.

"Munz!" Shacklebolt shouted. There was no response. They both put another block up and the corridor wall where they had just been bubbled inward and disintegrated.

"There's a third!" Harry shouted, estimating the angle of that shot to be impossible for the two they already knew about.

During a moment's lull, Shacklebolt, on his knees with his bad arm tucked at his waist, shoved Harry with his shoulder. "See to Munz."

"You need me to help block . . ."

"Harry, that's an order," Shacklebolt growled fiercely.

Harry put up a block and used the most recent hole to slip into the office to their left. It and the ones surrounding it were now almost combined into one large debris-dangled space. The air felt oily and slippery despite the dust. The magical window behind the desk had gone dark, and the dimness and haze obscured Harry's vision. A shot went wide of Harry's block as he tossed thin paneling boards aside with his toe to reveal the black robed figure lying just shy of the pale blue ones. Harry crouched, putting up a block as his last one failed. Debris from the floor pummeled it as a shot skirted nearby.

"Harry?" Shacklebolt shouted in question.

"Doesn't look good," Harry replied, considering the still face before him with its just barely slitted eyes. A gash was open across Munz's chest, revealing bright red flesh and white edges of bone. Harry closed his eyes and felt for the radiance he knew must be leaking from him, thinking perhaps he could Staunch it. It was difficult to do while maintaining repeated blocks and with the sounds of further destruction echoing around him. But Harry caught the sense just long enough to feel the last of it leaking away and disappearing with a tiny pop. Harry swallowed and shifted his foot off of a board which was precariously lying across Munz's arm. Seconds ago Munz was just fine and now he was gone. Harry tried to accept that without much success.

"Potter, get back out here or you are going to get pinched!" Shacklebolt's voice sounded weary and much farther away.

"I can go through the other way!" Harry shouted and used his own blasting curse to knock a larger hole between the offices so he could exit close to the lifts and come

around to where Shacklebolt and now Rodgers and Kerry Ann were holding up the entrance to the Reception area itself.

"Munz?" Rodgers demanded, sounding thoroughly angry.

Harry shook his head. Rodgers moved to the point position as the next attack wave shot out, shoving Shacklebolt backwards violently. "Get him to safety, Kalendula. Potter, stay with me."

Harry joined his block to Rodgers'. When a break came, Rodgers asked, "Any sign of them slowing?"

"Not sure," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley came up behind them just as they were forced to back up again. He ducked to be certain to be in their block. "Got one of the D.E.. They were attacking the Minister's office all right. Lucky guess, I figured it was either that or the dungeons. Fred had to go to Mungo's. How are we down here?"

"Lost Munz," Rodgers stated grimly.

Mr. Weasley's face fell into deep sadness, but at that moment a sound like a teapot shattering was accompanied by the appearance of orange ceramic littering the top of the wood debris.

"So, we can outlast them," Rodgers said. "Arthur, give Harry a break will you, looks like his arm is about to fall off. But STAY CLOSE, Potter. Don't want you getting picked off from the flank like Munz."

Harry bent low behind the two of them, rubbing his throbbing, rubbery arm, which he didn't imagine would ever feel normal again. The sense of cursedness had eased from just the one device disintegrating. "Fred all right?" he asked, badly needing to know.

"Yes, I think so," Mr. Weasley replied during the next lull. The devices had slowed their advance, making Harry hopeful that they could be held here until they were spent. "Said he'd go home and help the others guard the Burrow when he was released. Seemed eager to get out of here, which is fine with me." They blocked in silence a minute until Mr. Weasley added, "I think Bones offering to give them medals of valor sent them off, frankly."

Harry grinned through his sadness as though the force of his amusement was amplified by their bad circumstances. A second device shattered of its own accord.

"One left, I think," Rodgers commented. "I can see, Potter, why you tried a tar ball. Tempting as hell, but we don't want the Ministry to go the way of Azkaban."

"Is that what happened to Azkaban?" Harry asked in surprise.

"We think so," Mr. Weasley replied. "We don't know of anything else with enough power to destroy a whole island." He switched places with Harry and shook his arm out while Harry did the now-easy duty of joint blocking just one device attacking. It was trained straight on them and didn't even graze the wall anymore. "We figure they learned how effective they could be at blowing things up when that one took out the safehouse."

"So, I showed them that," Harry commented grimly.

"They'd have figured it out eventually," Mr. Weasley assured them. "It's not as though you were trying to aid in their researches."

The third device shattered. The three of them stood in its wake, listening for anything else. Listening to the debris settle. Someone moaned.

"Injured . . . somewhere," Mr. Weasley said, rushing forward. "Let's get everyone out."

Personnel from the other departments helped with clearing out so it only required an hour to fully search and hover out the bodies. Games, it turns out, had all kinds of spells for temporary structures, which were put to use propping up collapsing ceilings and walls. In the end they pulled out six bodies and three wounded.

Everyone had been cleared away and Harry sat across from the lifts as magical barrier tape was strung up to block off the offices. Unsafe - Alert -Cursed! - Mind the Tape was printed on it, endlessly repeating, in bright yellow on lime green. Harry rested his head back. He had been told to make sure no one went in while workers from Games strung the tape up. No one seemed to have any interest in going inside, so this was easy duty. But the tape needed to be strung thoroughly across all of the doorways and the holes in the walls facing the lifts, so it was going slowly, given the need to clear debris aside to make room to work.

A flash bulb went off and Harry blinked through the spots in his eyes to ponder the floating camera before him. He stood with more speed than he thought he was capable of given his state and took a swipe at the camera with a netting charm. The camera zipped out of reach before the charm reached it and Harry followed it around the corner to where the Daily Prophet photographer was reaching through the closed gates to catch it. The crowd gathered there stirred upon recognizing Harry.

"Mr. Potter!" Skeeter shouted from beside the photographer, who was hurriedly prising his camera through the bars and looked ready to run off.

Harry walked over, trying hard not to limp. He hadn't even been aware that he needed to limp before walking this far. Given the expressions on everyone's faces pressed to the bars, Harry figured himself to be a real sight. He rubbed his hair back to neaten it, only to find it was full of dust and bits of wood. His eye twitched a few times before he rubbed it.

Skeeter said, "Mr. Potter, just one question: Is He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named back?"

The gathered crowd gasped as one and a few people in the back, upon hearing this repeated in a wave of whispers, ran off. Their footsteps could be heard echoing as they headed for the back corner of the Atrium, which must still be open for Apparition.

Harry contemplated the bright purple polish on Skeeter's nails, the sparkling hair clip holding her bun in place, her jangling bracelets. He wondered where she could find the time to put that all together given how insane everything was. Harry knew he shouldn't say anything. Every face in the vicinity peered at him with a mixture of horror and fascination, hanging desperately on his answer.

Harry said, "If he were, it would be a moot point right now."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught sight of a grey cloak stepping up beside him. He turned. It wasn't a cloak; it was Tonks, still wrapped in one of the Ministry-issue blankets, the ones with odd colors of scrap randomly woven through them.

"Ms. Tonks!" Skeeter said, even more excited and propping her notebook up through the gate so she could hold it more comfortably given how tightly the crowd behind her was now pressed in. Harry could easily take it away given that it was on his side of the bars. "Ms. Tonks, you were at Azkaban . . . do grace us with your story of what happened," Skeeter invited, needing to find an angle where her jaw could also fit though the bars.

"It was destroyed," Tonks stated as though speaking to an idiot.

"Yes, yes, but your harrowing tale of survival. My readers would so love to hear it. They are so desperate for news."

Harry was thinking that he would so like to hear it too, but he tugged Tonks away. Skeeter's last words were echoing ominously in his ears as they stepped up to the third lift in line – the first two's cages were bent from the attack and wouldn't move again until they were repaired. Behind them, the barrier taping had been completed and the other personnel were gone.

While the car moved upward, Harry asked, "Bones didn't get hurt?" In his pocket he found the egg, undamaged. He knocked it on the gate to break it and started peeling it, famished at the thought of food.

"No. She's pretty mean with a wand herself. Almost got the other attacker single-handedly and would have if he or she hadn't had a portkey."

"What is it with the illicit portkeys?" Harry asked.

"Transportation is claiming that their detection equipment is apparently faulty."

They stepped out at their level, Harry chewing. "Maybe it was sabotaged," he suggested, thinking that he had a suspect in mind for that.

Mr. Weasley came around the corner. He gestured with a bandaged hand as he said, "Harry, you've been on duty for eighteen hours. Go take a break."

"Eighteen? What time is it?"

"My boys said that Ms. Granger told them you could stay there when they dropped off your pet. Or you can go to the Burrow, but it isn't exactly quiet there. I checked; Ms. Granger wisely lives in an unregistered magical flat, so you are probably safe there."

Harry blinked. He couldn't measure the worth of that logic right then, his mind outrightly refused to weigh it. "But, I should help hunt for Death Eaters . . ." Harry began.

"You should rest," Mr. Weasley repeated kindly. "Only accidents and sloppiness happen in your state. Off with you."

Harry turned to Tonks as though looking for support. This reminded him how very grateful he was that she was there. That warmth made it easier to give in. "Okay."

"You know not to Disapparate straight there, right?" Tonks asked. "That can be traced."

Harry nodded, his head lolling with exhaustion as he did so. He Disapparated to an alley a half mile away and had a pleasant evening walk. Less pleasant for the Muggles along the way, who thought he must be some kind of dazed accident victim, but pleasant enough for Harry, so that by the time he arrived at Hermione's door and survived her extreme hug, he felt queerly hopeful about everything.

She prepped the couch into a bed in short order, heated him a bowl of tinned pasta, which he gobbled quickly, and retreated to her bedroom so he could sleep in peace while she read.

Harry started to lie down but sat back up and padded across to where Kali's cage hung from a chain in the corner. She was asleep in the bottom of it, huddled in rags

that Hermione must have provided because they were colorful and fuzzy, unlike any Harry had. A patch of bare skin showed through on Kali's haunch; she was losing significant fur now.

In the darkness of the room with the Muggle traffic audible outside the heavily curtained window, Harry whispered to her, "If Voldemort is back, I'll get rid of him quick enough, I promise."

Author's Notes:
Well, I keep thinking I'll get back to weekly posting, but it hasn't happened yet. We may be on this schedule for the rest of the story...

Chapter 29.

Skirmishes

Harry woke at midnight and lay in his transfigured bed listening to the cars rumble by outside the window of Hermione's flat. Confusing flickers of dreams chased around in his head as he stared at a small light glowing in the kitchen above the stove. He lay still after waking, connecting together what he could of the dreams. Some of them contained flashes of horrified faces, faces which seemed to be terrified primarily by recognition. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to imagine where Voldemort – if he was indeed back – may be right now. But Harry was deeply reluctant to borrow that alternative perspective at that moment, when one of his best friends was sleeping unaware in the next room. And she was asleep; the slice of light that had showed from under her door earlier was now absent.

A faint scratching at the window drew Harry from his inward search for clues. He opened the sash and Franklin hopped inside with a letter clutched in one clawed foot. Harry took the envelope, which was addressed simply Harry, presumably for security in case it was intercepted, and switched on the lamp in the corner farthest from Hermione's bedroom to read it. The hand was neat and flourished more than usual, as though Snape had actually took care in writing it out, even though it would be surprising if he had found the time to take such care.

Dear Harry,

The front page of the Prophet this evening was both distressing and heartening. Distressing to see such rampant destruction, but heartening to see that you are whole and mostly unharmed despite events that surely must have surrounded you.

Harry remembered the hovered camera and glanced around for a copy of the evening edition. If Hermione had bought one, she had tossed it away already. Harry thought that he should try harder to keep track of what was getting printed.

The students are taking their examinations at this moment – one day early. Tomorrow, the fifth- and seventh-years will be given abbreviated O.W.L. and N.E.W.T written exams. It is public knowledge, so it is possible for me to put it in an open letter to you: the Hogwarts Express is now scheduled for Wednesday. After we have deposited our charges with their families I intend to offer my assistance to Arthur in re-apprehending my former associates.

Harry frowned and sat on the floor in the circle of light below the lamp to finish reading the letter as it was longer than expected. He instinctively did not want Snape helping. He much preferred him to remain out of harm's way, such as at Hogwarts. Harry ached just at the possibility of the revenge people like Malfoy and Avery would seek to exact upon him given the opportunity.

Harry would have to send a letter back that night to be certain of receiving a reply sometime the next day. Franklin sat, fluffed and resting on top of Kali's cage. The cage swung slowly back and forth on its chain, casting a domed, barred shadow along the wall. Snape's owl would probably prefer to rest then take a return trip so soon, but could probably be convinced to go right away.

I expect that exhortations to be exceptionally careful are unnecessary at this juncture, but I feel obliged to make them in any event. Please, do be careful, Harry. As dearly as many wish revenge upon me, it is insignificant compared to what must certainly be wished upon you. Do not be over-confident and by all means do not take independent action without warrant as you have been wont to do in the past.

I should perhaps temper the previous sentence by adding that you demonstrated judicious care Sunday last, to my great personal relief. You are learning, which is also a relief. There is an end to this, Harry, do keep it in sight, even as things appear their dimmest. Houses can be rebuilt and you and I seem to know how to build lives where little existed before, so we certainly can do so again.

I am sounding vaguely like Albus, I believe, so perhaps it is time to close this letter.

Smiling faintly, Harry slowly folded the parchment. He didn't feel disappointed or angry with Snape right then. He felt worried, daunted by the tasks before him, a little alone, and very much himself. Pushing himself to his feet, he considered that forgiveness was not exactly one of Voldemort's strong points.

Harry really needed to return to the Ministry. He had rested for nearly six hours and felt remarkably alert and only moderately bruised, but he took the time to pen a letter back to his adoptive father.

I am of course being careful, but I'll admit I'm not worried about myself, but instead about you. I am surrounded by Aurors most all of the time but you have only your fellow teachers to fall back on. They may be mean with a red ink pen and an annoying curse or two, but they are not Aurors. So, it is you who should be ultra-vigilant.

We captured a fair number of those who escaped already, so it is seeming more promising than it did a day ago. Even the house appeared more promising when I stopped by on the way to London. Reparable, like many things. But only after everything is safe again. I'll see that it is, I promise. I'm feeling more myself tonight and things are clearer. I think I may be getting the hang of these prophecies.

Harry went to the window to let Franklin out with his reply and another owl hopped into the room clutching a hastily folded note addressed to Hermione. When Harry tried to take it, the owl nipped him. Harry knocked on her door. Moments later, clad in a fuzzy peach dressing gown, Hermione stood in the doorway squinting up at Harry.

"Owl for you," Harry said, gesturing at the bird circling the room.

Yawning, Hermione opened the letter. Before she read it, she glanced at Harry's dressed state. "Going already?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty well rested, so I should go. We lost three Aurors," he pointed out sadly.

She gave him a hug and then stepped back while rubbing one eye to read her missive. "They want me at the office as well. They've had someone break in and rummage for files."

"Why would someone do that?" Harry asked while locating his cloak amongst the other things of his piled beside his trunk.

"Lots of files of evidence from old criminal cases," she pointed out. "Well, we both are on duty, it seems."

"Be careful," Harry sternly told her.

"Whenever am I not?" she asked sleepily.

Harry started to answer but hesitated, thinking. "I'm sure there was a time. Let me think about that one." She had gone back into her room and pushed the door partly closed while she dressed. Harry said, "Go to the Burrow if you are done at the office and I'm not back, okay?"

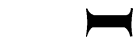
Sounding as though she was pulling a jumper over her head, she replied in a muffled voice, "Harry, really . . ."

"Hermione, I don't want to be worrying about you, too."

Dressed in attire so casual that it would have resulted in her demotion had she shown up that way during the day, she stepped out and said, "I'll do it to make you feel better, all right?"

She sounded patronizing, but Harry replied sincerely, "Thank you."

At the Ministry, things were no less busy than they had been when Harry left. The damage to the reception area was the same, except the dust had settled, leaving the gaping holes even blacker than before. The lift before him clanged to a stop and the door unlatched but the gate wouldn't open without having serious muscle applied to it. Harry tugged it closed again and watched the damaged and debris-ridden area disappear as the lift rose through next floor up.



"Draco," the unusually emotional voice repeated.

Draco Malfoy sat in the grand drawing room in the lone overstuffed chair, one that the Ministry had not bothered to take when they confiscated the household's possessions. He didn't look over at the speaker right away, preferring instead to stare at the candle burning on the small table beside him. He wanted to remain unmoved, but was failing. He had heard them enter – not stealthily and not in the way of an invasion, more the way one would if one owned a place. Draco hadn't budged from his seat; not when he heard his mother going into hostess mode; not even to try to better overhear the low murmured conversations. The Ministry had come poking around just hours before and Draco had assured them that he would curse anyone escaped from Azkaban if they had the gall to show up. Now that they had, he felt far more like getting blasted drunk than cursing anyone.

"You are home," Draco finally conceded.

"Better than that," his father breathed, sounding much more himself then, as though anticipating something wonderfully miserable for someone he disliked. "Come, Draco, you must see."

A run of prickles traversed Draco's breast bone, but he haughtily stood and strode over, doing his best to appear bored and dubious that any errand could be worth his time.

His father looked him up and down. "You've grown," he said, returning to his more emotional tone. "I have missed much. But not anymore. Come."

The hall held two large clusters of robed figures, congregating and whispering. Draco had certainly heard that everyone had escaped, but he had not quite realized how many that really meant. He hoped Pansy had the sense to stay in bed and out of the way. At the top of the marble staircase four more figures stood in a tight circle, heads leaned inward. They fell still as Lucius approached, leading his son. Without turning more than a micron, their hooded, group attention zeroed in on him.

"So, little Draco has decided to come out and play with dad's nice friends?" a voice taunted, the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Draco considered snapping back something along the lines of pointing out that she would have more friends, and a husband, and a brother-in-law, if she hadn't killed them all. He remained silent, hoping he looked too stubborn to taunt further.

Lucius swept him past this group and to the last room on the end of the first floor corridor, which led to a keeping room – a long room that ran the length of the house, front to back. Many of the things in here had also been left behind by the Ministry, but they consisted mainly of aggressively posed animal trophies both magical and non- and paintings where the varnish had discolored to the point where the scenes were no longer decipherable.

A fire was burning unseasonably in the hearth at the far end of the room and someone with long pointed ears was bending over a chair before the fire. Greyback's presence didn't startle Draco, but he stutter-stepped when he spotted a large snake coiled up in the woven wood carrier, which appeared to have been lined with someone's very expensive cloak.

Draco had no difficulty remembering every single time he had bragged about and supported Voldemort's purpose, but at this moment, he wished for nothing more than to be elsewhere, to wake up from what surely must be a nightmare. Voldemort brought only chaos and difficulty. It was much better, he had decided, to simply sneer at those you thought little of and enjoy your wealth in some decent peace, rather than gamble everything on an idea the world would see fit to fight you on at every step until you had nothing left.

Lucius was pushing on Draco's back, leaving him no choice but to approach. A few feet shy of the arm of the chair, he was shoved to his knees.

"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley greeted him when he stepped into the Auror offices. Grief and strain had etched more lines into his face than normal and he had contracted the jitters while Harry had rested, indicating that he had been taking Pepper-Up, or something similar, to stay alert.

"Maybe you need to rest, Mr. Weasley," Harry suggested. At her desk, Tonks nodded vigorously without turning around.

Mr. Weasley ignored this, saying, "Minister wants to see you, Harry. Why don't you go on up?"

"At one in the morning?" Despite his surprise, Harry shrugged. "All right."

Harry used the staircase and emerged down the corridor from the lifts. A tall, balding man stood before the door to the Minister's office suite. Harry pegged him for a Muggle immediately. The man turned as Harry approached and gave Harry a close inspection.

"Mr. Potter," Bones greeted Harry. "Mr. Tivers, this is Harry Potter. Harry, Mr. Tivers works with the Muggle Prime Minister."

The man showed no interest in shaking hands, making Harry glad he had not offered to. Derisively, the man asked, "This is your 'hope', Madam Minister? The one chosen to eliminate the difficulties you are currently facing?"

"Prophecies are tricky things, Mr. Tivers," Bones said in a much less diplomatic tone. "You don't fully understand how magic plays out in events. Perhaps you cannot ever understand with your background."

"I understand when I see an entire system of governance relying on a . . . mere boy, or young man if we wish to be generous."

Harry's eyes narrowed. This close, he could detect the man's Muggleness like a tasteless paste on his tongue. He tried not to wish him away in a permanent manner on the assumption that he would never have wished that in the past, no matter how rude the man was.

Bones stood her small frame straighter. "If you wish to assist, Mr. Tivers, in apprehending our law-breakers, by all means do so."

Tivers' lip pulled into a sneer. "We have lost quite a number of police already, Madam. You know quite well that we must rely on you to take care of things."

"Then let us get back to it, shall we?" she asked lightly which only made it stronger. "Mr. Potter, this way."

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Harry glanced back before they stepped out of sight. The man, Tivers, was furious, which made his rough complexion all the more creased. He appeared to glance around for a chance to vent his anger. For just an instant, Harry caught a glimpse of faint tread-like tendrils reaching up towards the man.

Harry stopped and Bones turned to see why. Tivers' gaze snapped suspiciously to Harry, who said, "I've handled worse, sir. With less help." Harry truly wished to reassure the man, to calm his anger, which was running high enough to damage him, apparently. It worked, partly; the man shook his head in defeated disgust and stalked off.

The office suite was empty, so Bones sat down on the couch in the reception area of the office. She did this heavily as though bodily exhausted. "Give me a little faith, Harry, I am in need of some."

Harry, who had been idly expecting a pep talk to be delivered at him, found himself trying to create one instead. The truth would not suffice; informing her that he had Voldemort in his head giving him a new perspective on things would not bring her any optimism. He tried instead to project calm confidence. He sat on the couch opposite and clasped his hands over his midsection. "I can find all of the Death Eaters, Minister," he stated and then felt compelled to qualify that with, "I can sense them . . . where they are."

"Arthur said that you gave the warning about the attack."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry admitted, still calm, still in control.

With her elbow propped unceremoniously on the armrest beside her, she rubbed her eyes. "I thought I was inheriting a relatively easy job from Cornelius. Now I find myself appalled that I understand some of his poorest decisions."

"I think Voldemort is back, ma'am," Harry stated.

She closed her eyes a long, pained moment. "Arthur relayed that already, but it is still difficult to hear. It would be one thing if he were back and had NO followers available, rather than ALL of them."

"You have no guards," Harry pointed out, glancing at the open doorway with its burn marks from the recent battle that took place here.

"Can't afford them, given the need for personnel outside. I'm half-hoping someone does show up again so I can take them out personally." She had her wand in her hand in an eye-blink, pulled from her long, folded-over sleeve. She wore a nice, but outdated, robe today, rather than her usual polyester.

A knock sounded on the door frame, and a man Harry didn't recognize bowed his head and stepped in. This man was a wizard, which Harry could tell even though he also wore an even fancier Muggle suit than the last visitor. His black hair was slicked back with something shiny and just the curls on the top front stood up, lending his otherwise dapper appearance a cartoonish edge.

"Excuse, me," the man said in heavily accented English, "I am looking for zee Minister for Magic . . ."

"That's me," Bones said, pushing herself to her feet. Harry's mind boggled at the lack of security.

"Ah, good," the man said, relieved. "My name is Rémy Roumaine. I have been sent by my government in response to your communique of . . ." Here the man consulted a letter. "June zee fourteenth." His eyes found Harry and he froze. "Is zat –Arry Potter?" The man stepped in, seeming to mince despite his grace. "Mister Potter, I am most –onored, most –onored." He held out his hand. Harry stood and accepted it, thinking this man can't be real, but sensing no ill will in him.

The man went on, "My daughter will be boiling with jealousy when I inform –er I have met you," he said. He glanced back at the Minister. "Ah, but I am forgetting," he said while hitting himself on the forehead. He rummaged in his fancy small pockets and pulled out a scroll, sealed with red wax. "My government, of course, offers its assist-anze. This is the official communique and documents."

Bones' expression changed, making Harry assume that she had figured out what this was all about. She said in clear relief, "Your help is most welcome." She pulled a seal out of her breast pocket, fixed with a chain like a pocket watch might have. She whispered something to it and pressed it to the seal on the scroll. The wax flashed away and the parchment unravelled.

Harry wasn't told to leave, so he stood quietly, curious. Bones read the missive. "How's your French, Harry?" she asked, sounding serious.

"I don't have any."

"Pity."

"I can trans-late," the man eagerly said. Pointing at various places on the scroll, he said, "We are offering the use of L'île de Cachot Méfait until the time at which you can replace your own Az-ka-ban." He paused to give Harry a grin, which reminded Harry that people used to do that to him all of the time, but at some point had stopped, for the most part. The man went on, "It is oh-est of île Jersey, well protected and

warded. Cachot Méfait is the rare Channel Island that belongs to us." Here the man winked as though this was a good joke.

Bones said, "Mr. Roumaine, come in and have a seat. You have my heartfelt gratitude, I must say. Harry has a few minutes, I believe, before he must return to his duties. She waved her wand and the teapot in the corner emptied and refilled itself and immediately began steaming.

Roumaine did seem most pleased to be seated across from Harry. "You must be quite bizzy, Mr. Potter, correct?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. He was thinking that now that he was invited to stay that he really should get going. "What is this île de . . .?" he asked, figuring he might as well ask.

"It is our wizard prison. It was constructed in 1789, so it is . . ." He waved his arm fancifully. " Ovair-sized."

Harry accepted a cup of tea and sipped it gratefully. He was not used to this kind of schedule and the tea reminded him that he was supposed be alert despite the position of the hands on the clock. "So you are going to let us use it for our prisoners?"

"That is the offer, yes. Thank you for the tea," he said to Madam Bones. "Ah, yes! But here are the portkeys. Just two. You can get more there if you fill in some papers-work." He handed over two golden bracelets, each with a charm in the shape of a fleur de lis.

Bones appeared quite relieved. This was much more of a pep talk than Harry could have managed. "Go and fetch Arthur, will you, Harry?"

She handed him the portkeys as he passed her. "And keep those safe."

Harry stopped and stared at the glittering jewelry in his hand. "Yes, ma'am," Harry said, calming his heart at the notion of such responsibility, especially given that the dark wizard who had probably released the last batch of prisoners had a tendency to knock around inside Harry's head. Harry exhaled hard when he reached the corridor and fairly ran down the stairs.

Mr. Weasley wasn't in his office. Harry found him in the tea room, talking to Shacklebolt, Rodgers, and Kerry Ann, all of whom's postures were sagging. "Madam Bones needs to see you, Mr. Weasley. Said to keep these safe." Harry held out the charms.

Everyone stared at them in puzzlement. "May I ask what they are?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Portkeys to the île de Cachot édait," Harry attempted, poorly.

Rodgers reacted strongest. "Really?"

"A representative from the French Ministry of Magic brought them." At this, Harry stopped. He had left Madam Bones alone with a complete stranger. He really did need a longer break, it seemed, to get his better judgment back in working order.

Mr. Weasley departed quickly – leaving one portkey with Rodgers – which relieved Harry's immediate worries.

Kerry Ann was grinning, peering at the charm Rodgers held up. "Ambriose came through. I asked if he knew anyone he could owl to expedite getting us help."

Rodgers turned his sharp gaze on her. "So, we have you to thank for this, Ms. Kalendula?"

"I try." She grinned more although it had a grim edge, and then frowned. "Rats, this means I owe Ambroise a bottle of Burgundy."

"Has he gone back to France?" Harry asked, finding it an amazing luxury to bother wondering about such trifles.

"No, he's helping keep an eye on the house. After what happened to you, he insisted." She shook her head. "The guy is unreal. Too perfect."

"I thought you liked him?" Harry chided.

"I'd like him better if I knew what was wrong with him."

"How's that?" Rodgers prompted as he tucked the chain into his pocket after securing it to his watch fob.

"Something must be wrong with him and until I know what it is . . . it's going to make me crazy."

Harry thought she looked forgivably cute as she said this, but Rodgers said, "Ms. Kalendula, you are reminding me why my first two marriages turned out so poorly." While Kerry Ann frowned comically, he added, "Potter, you look ready for an assignment, let's get you one."

Harry and Rogan were assigned to hunt for Death Eaters in London. This involved Apparating somewhere and trying to sense if any were nearby. Only three seemed to be in the immediate locale. They picked one to narrow in on and Apparated repeatedly and walked back and forth along St. Leonard's Road in an attempt to

get a fix. In the end they narrowed the possibilities down to a few blocks, but Harry could not discern anything more specific.

"Sorry, sir," Harry said as they stood on a boarded up corner with Rogan peering up at the dark windows of the nearest building.

"That's all right, Potter." Rogan said easily. He sounded tired as well, and reluctant to face anything serious.

Harry used an Alohomora on the nearest street-level door and stepped inside. He was too frustrated to stand still. Inside was a quiet corridor and staircase. Harry closed his eyes and drifted. He was not in the right building.

"It helps when they are thinking about me," Harry pointed out as he slipped back out past Rogan, who was leaning jauntily against the door jamb. "Then I see them much more clearly. They must have something else on their mind. Most all of them are farther away now." This both relieved and worried Harry. He would prefer to know what they were up to. "How many of them are there out?" Harry asked. "I can't quite count them."

"Twenty-eight."

Harry glanced up at the building. "If we pulled the files, we could find what address correlates nearby to one of them."

"I suspect Arthur will send us out on a more urgent call instead. Let's go; I need some excitement to wake up."

They Disapparated back to the Ministry. Vineet was assigned the task of looking through the files and Harry was sent back out with Rogan to investigate an owl that had come from a witch complaining that her son-in-law, who was supposed to be in prison, thank you very much, was living in her cellar.

This turned out to be an easy call, with nasty language getting thrown at them rather than spells. The paperwork was dispensed with quickly, and in the Ministry dungeon it was quieter since prisoners were already being ferried to the French prison.

The door to courtroom ten swung closed and latched. Rogan rubbed his head and swayed a little.

"Maybe you should take a break," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," Rogan said. "I think Arthur set up some beds in the training room, in fact."

Back in the empty Auror's office, Harry watched the log being written out. It wasn't writing quite as fast as before, but it still didn't pause much. Mr. Weasley stepped in with his sons in tow. "Dad, come on, everything is fine at the Burrow. Bill and Charlie are keeping an eye on things," one of the twins pleaded. Harry nodded hello to Ron, whom he was glad to see.

The other twin said, "Told you we should have made Ron stay home. Dad won't let him go out."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Much excitement?" he asked Harry.

"Too much. It's getting better though."

Mr. Weasley handed Harry a slip of parchment. "This one's yours."

Harry looked down at the writing, which went: Neighbors report strange goings-on in Terrance residence, Appledown.

"You've been there, correct?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Yes," Harry said, thinking of his date with Tara. Harry glanced at the three Weasley brothers arrayed around their father. "Can I take them?"

"Go ahead. No one will be freed up for a while. Do you want Vishnu as well?"

Harry was tempted, but said, "No, he's still recovering and maybe he can find that Death Eater."

As they assembled to depart, Mr. Weasley said, "I'll send someone as backup as soon as possible."

"I can take care of it, sir," Harry said with confidence, thinking that he had waited a long time for a chance to get even again. His memory of Snape getting even for him, by giving the little git a poisonous bite to the leg, left a small grin on Harry's face as they Apparated into Appledown. Harry brought Ron first before both of them went back for the other two, once Ron knew where to go.

Because of the noise they had to arrive a quarter mile away. The street lamps provided ample light for their walk, even with most of the houses dark. Thoughts of revenge were giving Harry that hungry feeling again. The twins started to cross the road, but Harry tugged on Ron's arm to hold him on the pavement.

"They can scope it out; I need to talk to you."

Ron turned his attention to Harry, and in the cone of light from the street lamp, Harry noticed for the first time ever that Ron needed a shave. It made his friend seem years older than he had just moments before.

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Harry quickly said, "It's like this: I have Voldemort in my head again."

"Big surprise, you always did," Ron pointed out jokingly.

"This is serious," Harry said, not wanting to argue about this.

"I am being serious," Ron retorted, still not really sounding it. "You were a hazard for years. Why do you think Dumbledore kept you in the dark all the time?"

Harry stared at Ron's half-lit face, reexamining old, nearly extinct memories from an adult perspective. "This feels worse," Harry said. "I want to torture people now. I want revenge. I've even been strategizing like him."

"Maybe you're more like him now," Ron pointed out. "You were a kid before."

Harry fell into stillness, thinking over Ron's straightforward point of view. Only the leaves rustled overhead. The twins were waiting at the end of the block. They looked to be checking for wards. "I hadn't thought of it that way," Harry said. "I just don't want to hurt anybody."

"We'll make sure you don't, Harry," Ron said reassuringly, taking Harry by the arm this time to steer him into the road.

Relieved to have people around who understood his situation with such ease, Harry led the way to where the twins stood, speaking in whispers. One of them had an extendable eyeball in, the eyeball end, he tossed repeatedly in his hand.

"Doesn't that make you dizzy?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Nope," came the reply.

"Makes me dizzy watching you," Ron complained. "Let's go," he said in disgust. "Oh, Harry should lead, since he can actually arrest people."

"Can I?" Harry asked.

"Can't you?" Ron asked in surprise. "Well, don't tell the escapees that," he said stridently. Behind them, the twins sniggered.

At the Terrance house, Harry called for a halt. The windows were all dark as were those of both neighbors.

"Should we knock on the neighbor's door and ask for more information?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. He gestured for the eyeballed twin to circle around. "Good luck, Feorge," the other one said.

The three of them waited. Harry closed his eyes to check that no Death Eaters were close by.

"Wake up," Ron nudged him.

"I am," Harry insisted. He then blinked. The sky had grown lighter just as they were standing there. "Jeez, morning already."

"Yup."

Their scout returned, looking sober. "Back room, far corner."

"How can you tell?" Ron asked.

"Unless the Terrances favor sharing a room and sleeping on the floor . . . seems something's up."

Anger filled Harry before he could get it in check. He gripped his wand tighter and considered the silent house. "Lay down some barriers so they can't get away," Harry ordered. The twins jumped to this task without hesitation. Ron remained beside Harry and handled anchoring the newly forming barrier to the pavement.

"You're better at this than I am," Harry said to him.

"We do these all of the time at the bank. I do them in my sleep and sometimes can't leave my room in the morning." Harry nearly broke out laughing. "Yeah," Ron huffed in a whisper, "you would think that was funny."

"Now what?" Ron asked when the twins returned.

"Go to the back," Harry said to one of the twins. "Block anyone from leaving that way. I plan to send them running if I can," he added with a certain satisfaction. "I'll take the other two of you in with me. Fred, I want you to head down the main hallway to-"

"That's me. You assigned me to the back," Fred pointed out.

Harry waved him off. "George: hallway. There is a servants' staircase to the left at the end."

"You've been here before, I take it?"

"Ex-girlfriend," Ron supplied.

"Oh," Fred said, "this is going to be fun."

"If I whistle I need a distraction in a hurry," Harry said.

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"You've come to the right place," George said, patting his bulging left pocket with tender care. Fred ran off for the back of the house.

"Good. Ready?" Harry put his wand in his teeth and took each of their arms. He zeroed in hard on the sitting room as he remembered it, not wanting to have an Apparition accident given that he was taking two other people with him, which was not recommended. George and Ron tapped their wands against each other's as though for luck and Harry scrunched them all down.

They arrived with a very loud pop!, loud enough that the vase on the mantelpiece vibrated in the wake of it. At first there was no reaction and Harry hurriedly took the opportunity to direct Ron to crouch across the main corridor, in the dining room doorway. That way they could cover each other no matter who went first. Pounding footsteps vibrated overhead as they got themselves set. Whoever approached, he wasn't taking the invasion lightly. A ball of orange light rolled down the stairs, sizzling the runner until it met the front door where it exploded.

Harry could see Ron's wide eyes across the hall from him, could see him considering that perhaps he was in over his head. But he looked at Harry expectantly, waiting for instructions. Harry, keeping his body well behind the door frame, reached out with his wand in his left hand and cast a respectable blasting curse at the movement he detected at the top of the stairs.

"Oof!" someone muttered up above.

"Cover me," Harry ordered Ron, and fixating perhaps too much on the vision of Tara kept prisoner, made a headlong dash up the stairs. He got hit with something at the top and it was a good thing he had been low and fast, otherwise he would have blown backward all the way to the ground floor. Harry rolled into the nearest doorway. Spells were exchanged. Harry strained his trembling neck around and saw that Ron was lying flat on the stairs with just his wand hand lying on the landing and his head peaking over the top riser.

Everything fell quiet. Ron lifted his head higher with care. Harry twisted painfully and put his wand in a position to cover him. A figure lay in the corridor.

"Kenny, you moron," someone hissed from the a few doorways down. A head appeared and both Ron and Harry hit it simultaneously, knocking the person into the far side of the door frame where he fell to the floor.

A woman's voice could be heard then. "I've got a wand on them. Unless you want them fried I suggest you leave nice and quiet like."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he pushed himself to his knees on tingling arms. "How many are there?" Ron whispered in annoyance. Harry shook his head.

"You hear me?" the voice, quivering with anger demanded.

"Rick?" Harry shouted, figuring him to not be doing the dirty work if he could help it.

"Potter," a low, fierce voice came back. "The man who sent me to Azkaban," he said in a kind of chant. He sounded much changed.

Harry stood up in the center of the corridor holding his wand before him. "Hoping to get even?" Harry asked. The tingling pain from getting hit was making Harry's mind swim, he felt like someone else. "Wouldn't you like revenge?" he asked with an almost sensual tone.

"Harry?" Ron whispered in concern from where he kneeled on the staircase.

Harry ignored his friend. "Come on, Ricky Rothy. I'm waiting for you. Just standing here," he taunted. "You'll regret not taking revenge," he added in a low tone. The dark corridor, which was indeed long, seemed to stretch forever ahead of Harry. Somewhere ahead of him a rival was going to appear; Harry willed it to be so. He had a Crucio ready; it made his fingers tingle in anticipation where they touched the warm wood of his wand. Below him, whiplike tendrils were seeking him like blind tentacles. An instant from now, Harry would be invincible. Nothing would be able to touch him.

A figure stepped out of the doorway two rooms down. Harry raised his wand. A sharp whistle sounded. What happened after that was a little difficult for Harry to follow because he was knocked down bodily from behind and the corridor lit up with streamers and colorful flashing lights as though they had suddenly Apparated into the center of a very crazy nightclub.

Harry raised his head. Ron had his foot on him, holding him down. Harry shoved it aside and sat up. The corridor was now decorated for a party, by someone with very garish taste. A row of sparkling mirror balls spun just below the corridor ceiling. Ron stood in the doorway, glancing into the corridor with care.

"Got –im," one of the twins said. "Tried to Apparate away, poor devil." Despite his words, the Weasley brother did not sound the least sympathetic.

"What about the woman in the room?" Harry asked, voice hoarse. He tried to step by Ron, but Ron grabbed his cloak.

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"Try anything serious and I'm taking that wand away from you," Ron snapped.

Harry stared at him in surprise. Lit only by the street light leaking in from the window, Ron appeared twice his age with the stern expression he had.

The other twin bounded up the servant's staircase. One of them said, "Someone appears to have knocked the old witch over the head with a spittoon."

Harry turned away from Ron and, holding his wand pointed at the floor, approached the bedroom. One of the twins was helping Tara to her feet, even though she didn't look quite ready to stand. Her mother insisted on taking the chair before the dresser. Mr. Terrance, curled on the floor, wasn't moving.

"Dad . . . check my dad," Tara said in great distress.

Harry stood in the doorway, feeling disconnected and fearful that he might start reconnecting with things the wrong way again. Someone lit an oil lamp and they all blinked at the brightness. The Weasleys were helping Mr. Terrance sit up. He had a deep cut over his eye.

"Take him to the Muggle casualty," one of the twins was saying. "Mungo's is overloaded."

Mr. Terrance nodded and Mrs. Terrance shakily went to fetch her handbag.

"Harry?" Tara prompted after her dad waved her off. She stood up and came over to him. "You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, shaken out of his strange state by the twisted nature of her asking that of him. "Just had a long night, but you must have too. Your neighbors reported something."

"The Muggle police came to the door but Rick and his companion escapees threatened us if we made any noise. That's when dad got hit over the head, in fact."

Harry looked her over. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, they just wanted a place to hide out. Rick was obnoxious to us all, but really not any more than normal." She looked herself over as though checking her outfit. "I should drive dad; I think Mum's in too much of a state. Not like I'm not . . ." She tossed her hands a bit girlishly and, with a stained frown, departed. Harry watched her step downstairs.

"Don't Apparate until we've removed the barriers," Ron said to Mr. Terrance. "Better go tell the others," he said in alarm and rushed downstairs as well.

Harry himself should have thought of that. Perhaps he wasn't fit to be out here. Perhaps he should be in the file room with Vineet.

Harry joined Ron by the door where he watched Tara pulling the car around to the front of the house. "How did you know?" Harry asked his friend. He felt sick and trembling remembering that moment.

Ron turned to him after checking up and down the street. "Your voice sounded really odd, Harry. You didn't sound at all like yourself."

"I wasn't," Harry whispered. Tara left the car running and got out of it, moving jerkily as though intensely nervous. Inside the house, the twins were hovering Mr. Terrance down the stairs. They paused at the open door.

"Clear?" one of the twins asked. Ron nodded and they sailed the casualty out.

When the others were well away, Harry said, "I have to kill Voldemort soon, before I lose myself to him."

"Killing him quick would make everyone happy, Harry. We can throw another big party," he promised.

"Be serious, Ron."

"I can't be for long," he pointed out as he pulled the front door closed behind them. "I'm a Weasley."

Back inside the house, the streamers lining the first floor corridor like crazed spider-webs rustled in the breeze of the spinning mirror balls.

Breakfast at Malfoy Manor was a sparse affair as the larder had already been well-raided. MacNair was arguing with Lucius over just that and whether it was safe to send one of the house-elves for supplies.

"Iony is my most loyal elf," Lucius insisted angrily. "She will be no problem."

"I can go with her . . . if you like," Draco suggested, tossing down his stale slice of hard bread that even the mice had not bothered to eat. He tried to sound annoyed and as though it was troublesome to even offer.

"No," his father said slowly. "You will stay here. The elf can go." He turned to his wife. "Narcissa, order Iony to visit no fewer than six different shops to collect what we need in small quantities. No sense bringing on suspicions unnecessarily."

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Draco sat back with his arms crossed. Pansy had argued but agreed to stay in their bedroom and Draco himself had laid down a barrier on the room's door. Even he couldn't get back in without Pansy releasing the spell.

MacNair stalked off. Lucius took the chair beside Draco's with exceptional slowness as though he wished to avoid disturbing a poisonous snake on the seat of it.

"I wish to speak with you, Draco, but it is difficult to be alone with such a crowd at the manor. Lord knows great-grandfather believed he had built this place large enough for any party . . ." He stared at his nails and then interlocked his hands with great care. Sternly, he said, "The issue is this: I wish for you to express your loyalty more strongly with our Lord."

"With that . . . thing?" Draco uttered.

His father's head tilted and a more dangerous look entered his eyes. "That . . . is the Dark Lord, my master, that you are . . . degrading so thoughtlessly, Draco. He has asked about you this morning and I want you to speak to him. Remind him of things, shall we say, such as his previous intention to give you a mark."

Draco resisted letting his arms twitch as though to avoid having them shackled; he didn't want to reveal that much to his father.

"I bet he doesn't remember," Draco said.

"He will if you remind him," Lucius stated, sounding confident and therefore much less angry. "He had simply been waiting for you to deserve it."

"I mean," Draco stated with clear enunciation, "I doubt he remembers how to give anyone a mark."

This one got through to his father at the level he had hoped the previous insult would. His father appeared wary. Lucius pursed his lips and glanced at the high double doors to the dining room as though hearing someone approach. In a lower voice he said, "We have been offered a third chance to recover our past glory and to return wizardom to its rightful place in people's minds: one of fear." He clenched his hand into a fist and held it up before himself.

"I'm all for that, father," Draco said with a tired attitude. He needed to distract his father. "But you need a leader. What you have is a figurehead . . . at best."

Lucius sat straight. His jaw worked a moment. "A very wise observation, son." His jaw worked some more and he stared off through the nearest wall. "Very wise," he whispered, eyes narrowing, lips curling.

Back at the Ministry, an owl had delivered a letter from Snape. Harry sat down with a tart and coffee in the tearoom to read it. As he unsealed the envelope, he wished his guardian was there beside him right then, wished it dearly. Harry needed someone to keep a much more suspicious eye on him. Ron had been sent away to the Burrow again, despite his loud protestations and Harry's assurances that he had performed just fine. Something about the burn holes in Ron's cloak and his singed hair had changed Mr. Weasley's mind about letting him assist at the Ministry.

"Keep an eye on Harry, then," Ron had said sharply to his father.

Mr. Weasley had looked Harry's untouched self over and said, "We always do, Ron."

"No, I mean really keep an eye on him," Ron had insisted before departing. He gave Harry a last meaningful glare before departing, shoulders slumped. He had left it up to Harry to better explain things to Mr. Weasley, which Harry was reluctant to do; he was tired of explaining. He wanted Snape nearby, who didn't need to have anything explained to him.

Dear Harry,

Things have been quiet here, which leads me to believe one of two things: either they are planning more carefully than expected, or they have bigger plans that require more organization – plans that are bigger than merely attacking this school. I am tempted to believe the latter, but we are prepared here for anything, certainly well enough prepared for only one more night.

The students are eager to return home where they assume they will not be prisoners. A strict curfew does seem to have a disproportionate effect on their little states of mind.

Your previous message was more optimistic than expected. I do hope your control is truly as good as you have implied.

Harry thought over his previous message; it seemed ages since he had sent it, rather than simply late the previous night. Harry took up a pen, dipped it, and poised it over the parchment before him. He didn't want to overly concern Snape. Tomorrow evening when the Hogwarts Express arrived, Harry could tell him what he needed to know. As badly as Harry wished for him to be here, he did not want to risk drawing him away from his Hogwarts duties.

Chapter 29

People here are looking out for me in many ways, Harry wrote as a roundabout way of explaining. Do not concern yourself with me right now. I'll see you soon enough.

Harry sealed the letter, feeling as though he had forgiven Snape more than he realized before, but he was fearful of examining that too closely lest he trigger one of his states if that horrid sense of disloyalty took hold of him. Forcing himself to feel nothing, Harry posted his letter with one of the department owls and stepped into the Auror's office.

Shacklebolt was perusing the list of escapees. Harry read the list over his shoulder. It contained rather a large number of cross-outs, narrowing the remaining names, which highlighted the fact that they had been far less successful at finding the Death Eaters.

"Did anyone check Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

"Last night. Did so myself. Deadly quiet. Just Malfoy Jr. in all his sneering glory and his little mum and wife. Even let me speak to the house-elves alone."

"Hm," Harry said, thinking that had seemed a likely place for the Death Eaters to congregate.

"Go wake Rogan and take this call," Shacklebolt said, jotting down the information and handing it to Harry.

Harry spent the day helping with easy assignments until a message came in that Vineet had uncovered the address of one of the Death Eater's cousins in the area of Poplar where Harry had sensed a shadow earlier. Out on the pavement before the address – two buildings away from where they had given up searching the last time – Rogan yawned, rubbed his eyes and said, "Go on in, Potter. I'll watch the door."

Harry stared at the Auror. "Are you sure, sir?"

"I apparently didn't get enough of a nap," Rogan said with a little laugh. "You're better off without me as a drag. Go on. It's just Treddleson, an old-timer. Shouldn't give you much trouble. Isn't even hanging around with the others."

Harry considered that and shrugged. "I'll be right back, then," he said, not certain how to argue with the Auror assigned to order him around. Rogan had always given Harry rather more leeway than the others, and the man clearly was worn thin.

Harry stepped inside. The electric lights were out – were missing their bulbs, in fact. A rat scurried away down the unfurnished corridor that led to the stairs. After he checked that the shadow in his mind was indeed very close, Harry concentrated on keeping control of himself. He absolutely could not lose control with no one here to bail him out.

Silencing the stairs before him, Harry made it to the second floor where the address indicated flat 13. Harry rolled his eyes at that as he pondered the door. There wasn't any sound. There were procedures for these sorts of things, and Harry thought he should probably use them. Stretching his neck, he took up a position to the right of the door and holding his wand over his shoulder, fired an unlocking charm followed by a blasting curse. The door swung open and smacked against the wall. Nothing moved after that. No sound of Apparition came, either. Harry had been pondering using the spell Snape had written down for him, should he need it. He hadn't been keen on using it, given its properties, especially not to track someone so minor.

Long seconds passed. Harry put up a block and slipped around the door, wand held before him. He put his back to the wall where it would support his block. A large man in a tattered and stained vest stood on the far side of the room with his beefy hands on his hips.

"Right mess ya' made. Coulda knocked."

Harry risked a long blink to look around for shadows. The man before him didn't seem to be what he saw in his head. "Where is he?"

The cousin nodded his head behind him. "Not much left of –im, ya know."

Harry pushed away from the wall. "I'm sure," he said, thinking about Sirius' state when he had escaped. Harry stepped around the man while keeping his wand aimed at him.

"He'll be honored it's you's come pick –im up."

"Right," Harry added, checking the first room, which was empty, pretty much of everything, including furniture. In the only other room sat a late middle-aged man who appeared to be repairing a split wand by winding sewing thread tightly around it. He didn't look up when Harry appeared in the doorway.

"Let's go," Harry said.

"Didn'a think anyone'd bother with me . . . for a while at lees." He held up his wand and Harry stiffened, considering spells. But Treddleson quickly dropped the wand, saying, "It'll prolly jus' blow up on me." With a groan he pushed to his feet. He was a large man like his cousin, although his heavy flesh hung loosely around him as though he had been deflated.

"–Arry Potter hisself; look a' that," he marveled while looking Harry up and down.

"Let's go," Harry repeated, gesturing at the door with his free hand.

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"Don' even wanna see my mark? Be certain ya' got yerself the right man?"

"No, I'm certain," Harry said confidently – too confidently, since it allowed that other self to leach in. He knew it had begun to invade, given the sense of absolute power he began to feel on top of ordinary confidence.

Treddleson turned and considered Harry. "You know too much. Jus' like that snake o' his, I'll wager."

Some more rational part of Harry's mind shook the alien part loose upon hearing that.

"Never cared for that beast," Treddleson muttered as he lumbered out the door ahead of Harry. "Gave me the willies the way –e knew e'rything she did. They way –e guarded her, like –e guarded that broken watch. Both of –em a chain around –is neck. Where ya' takin' me anyway?"

"You'll see," Harry said, thinking of Kali, thinking of the Borgin & Burkes vault, thinking of too many things all at once so that by the time Rogan took charge of the prisoner, Harry was very grateful the man hadn't taken advantage of his distracted state.

Back at the Ministry, Harry jotted out a report as a means of obtaining a brief respite from duty. He found that official phrasing could hide and consolidate rather a lot of facts. Potential phrases were floating ready in his head from the hundreds of old files he had read last week. Suspect found at address of blood relative. No magical boundaries were encountered. Suspect offered little to no resistance to arrest. Harry filled in the rest of the form quickly and pushed it aside. His eyes were heavy and his stomach empty. He rested his head on his arm for just a moment to gather enough strength to check the tearoom for a snack.

Someone shook Harry by the shoulder, waking him. "Go take a break, Potter." Shacklebolt said. "There's an open bed in the training room."

Harry stood shakily and nodded. Shacklebolt sat down in his place. That was another reason he wanted Harry off: Harry had borrowed his desk. In the training room, he was surprised to find Rogan asleep in one of the other beds, but he disregarded it and crawled into the farthest bed from the door and promptly dropped off.

A fire crackled despite the warmth of the room. Harry looked around in confusion, trying to remember where he was. He felt as though he had repeatedly needed to do this, to his extreme annoyance. In a basket near his feet, sitting half across the hearthstone, Nagini lay, tightly coiled. This sight gave him immense relief. He tapped

into her alert and straightforward mind to anchor himself. His followers were nearby, he sensed. This too put his mind at ease.

This confused Harry, who did not think that the presence of twenty-odd Death Eaters should be any kind of reassurance. Dizziness washed through him. A dual vision of seeing a low view of the fire, presumably out of Nagini's eyes and seeing Nagini on the floor below him, made him feel sick. He wanted to let go of either or both visions, but he was fettered to them and, like a snared bird, fluttered madly and helplessly in his mind to get away.

Someone leaned close. Someone else snarled in a victorious tone. Harry twisted violently; he was being shaken by the shoulder and again suffered dual distressing visions. "Greyback?" Harry uttered, trying to cope with seeing the half-transformed werewolf so close that Harry could count each of his crooked and broken canine whiskers.

"No, just Kingsley," Shacklebolt said, further warping Harry's reality. The Auror turned his head and said to someone else, "Tristan, fetch Arthur." He turned back to Harry and shook him again as Harry continued to writhe, trying to free himself.

"Let me go," Harry pleaded, brushing away at the air.

"Harry, it's Kingsley," the Auror insisted. Moments later another figure sat on the bed. "Thinks I'm Greyback. Bad nightmare, but it isn't letting him go."

Mr. Weasley leaned close. "Harry?" he queried in concern, brushing Harry's damp fringe back. This gesture did more for Harry than any struggle could and his viewpoint shrunk to his own with a glimmer of a second. "What's happening to you?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I'm seeing out of his eyes," Harry explained, falling lax since physical struggle was only fatiguing him. "Let me go, damn you," Harry growled, angry enough his eyes began to water. Anger was a mistake: Greyback came sharply back into focus. Harry could hear him speaking: "Master, would you like some dinner or some brandy?" he asked, sounding as though he may force the second upon him. The scent of stew rose up and Harry's stomach growled. Oddly, his hunger seemed to be what prompted the hand that wasn't his own to reach out for the bowl.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley prompted, sounding stern and a bit frantic. "What would Severus be doing right now?"

Harry concentrated hard to get beyond the vision crowding his mind so that he could dredge up the answer to that. "He'd tell me to Occlude my mind."

Mr. Weasley grabbed Harry's shoulders with renewed ferocity. "Harry, Occlude your mind," he ordered. "Now."

"Is'n so easy," Harry slurred. He was losing strength; Nagini's view of the world was overlaying his vision again. But Snape's sharp voice came back to him, almost as though he were right there: You know how, Potter. "True," Harry murmured. "You taught me."

Thinking about Snape's many lessons, feeling the swirl of confusing and conflicting emotions his adoptive father generated in him, brought Harry back wholly to the Ministry. He sat up and bent halfway over. No one moved.

"All right, there, Harry?" Mr. Weasley tentatively asked. When Harry nodded, Shacklebolt said, "You were seeing out of Voldemort's eyes? Where was he?"

Harry thought back to the vision, carefully though, not wishing to truly return. "Small room. Dark. Ugly. Dark paintings on the walls." He shook his head. "I don't know where he was. Greyback was there and Nagini, that's all I know."

Mr. Weasley stood and gestured at Shacklebolt, but Harry didn't catch it. Harry swung his feet to the floor but remained on the bed, waiting for his strength to return. Shacklebolt said, "Just rest a minute, Harry. Bad nightmare or whatever, you don't need to get up right away."

Harry nodded. Presently, Mr. Weasley returned, carrying Harry's cloak. He gestured for Harry to stand and with little will of his own, Harry did so. His cloak was hooked around his neck. "To the Burrow with you, Harry. Kingsley, you take him. Perhaps collect Ms. Granger to help keep an eye on him."

Harry looked between the two of them, feeling wounded. "I just need a little rest . . ." he began to argue.

"You are being relieved of duty, Harry," Mr. Weasley said gently. When Harry's face fell, he added, "You were correct that Nagini is missing, so this was not just a nightmare. We cannot have you around where He-Who-Shall . . . Voldemort, may overhear something, or worse yet, make you do something regrettable."

"I'm fine. I just lost control while I was sleeping," Harry argued. His gaze caught Rogan's alarmed one from where he sat on the far bed, wand out. Shacklebolt and Mr. Weasley shared a look that made Harry wonder if they were suspecting even worse of him. "All right," Harry conceded. "You'll get Hermione?" Harry confirmed, finding hope in that notion.

"Yes," Shacklebolt assured him.

"I'm fine, really," Harry said again. Indeed, he was feeling very much himself now. He felt his wand in his pocket and just for a show of his state of mind, held it out, handle-first, to Shacklebolt.

"I don't need it, Harry. You can keep it." He took Harry's wrist after putting a sticky charm on his hand as though he were a suspect, and a moment later they were in the field behind the Burrow.

Low cloud cover filtered the late evening light, making the way hard to discern. As they picked their way through the uneven tufts of long dead grass from the previous autumn, figures approached and demanded they identify themselves.

"It's Kingsley and Harry."

One figure of three approached closer, a Lumos making his wand glow. It was Bill. "Sure enough. You all right, Harry?"

"He needs some rest and little watching over. Arthur sent him here."

Bill's attitude grew very gracious. "–Course. Come along."

Harry was installed in Ron's bedroom in a second bed moved in just for him. Neville, who had been sitting at the kitchen table with Mrs. Weasley and his grandmother, joined the parade escorting Harry, all of whom put the rickety staircase to its worst test in years.

Harry wished for nothing more than to be left alone. He sat down on the bed and tried to think of poignant emotional things that would keep Voldemort at bay. Ron shooed everyone out except Shacklebolt, who said, "He's having too much difficulty with a certain Dark Wizard. I'm going to fetch Ms. Granger to help keep an eye on him."

"Ah," Ron said, rather non-commitally.

Harry said, "I want her here."

Ron capitulated quickly. "–Course, Harry. Sorry. What about Professor Snape?"

"He's helping escort the Hogwarts Express tomorrow," Harry said, by way of dissuading them from considering him. He wanted him near so badly that he felt an aversion to his actual presence. One part of Harry couldn't bear to disappoint him. Another still felt the sting of the truth of his betrayal. Yet another was scared to death that he may get angry at Snape for some reason and channel Voldemort's expected fury at him.

Chapter 29

"I'll see if I can get Transportation to give me a portkey to fetch him," Shacklebolt said, and Harry felt distinct relief that the decision had been taken away from him. "Get a little rest, Harry. I think that will help you more than anything."

Harry lay back and watched Ron take out a set of pyjamas, which he set down across Harry's shin, saying, "Guess I should feel better now that they won't let you help either."

"You are helping, Ron. Keep me together long enough to finish this damn prophecy off, please."

Ron frowned and his brow furrowed severely. "Get into those and get some sleep, Harry. It's nine already. When's the last time you slept?"

"Midnight. I woke up at midnight." Harry sat up and began shucking his clothing in exchange for the worn and exceedingly soft sleepwear of Ron's. They were tight around the hips and shoulders but not excessively long in the arms and legs as Harry had expected. Dressed, he dropped sideways onto the pillow with a huff. "I can't take care of the prophecy from the Burrow," he complained, setting his glasses on the corner of the desk. "Your dad said he'd give me the leeway I needed to do so. Looks like he's changed his mind."

"Go to sleep, Harry," Ron said flatly from where he had taken a seat at his small desk.

Author's Notes:
Too much prepping for 2 months of summer travel . . . couldn't quite get this in under the wire.

Chapter 30.

Dark Hostage

Harry didn't sleep; he didn't dare to do so. He closed his eyes and pretended to until a knock came on the door to Ron's room. Hermione entered and Harry sat up during the whispering, which halted when they noticed he was awake.

"Harry, how are you?" Hermione asked with great feeling. "I told Kingsley Shacklebolt that you have been fine the last few days, and that I would know if you were truly in that much difficulty."

"Thanks," Harry said, grateful for her support. He slipped on his glasses and looked her frazzled self over while thinking that he probably appeared similarly.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "So you had this dream . . . ?" she prompted in that way of hers.

"It wasn't a dream; I don't think," Harry said. "I have been getting glimpses of what Voldemort has been doing, but I wasn't certain that it was him until now, but it's been going on for a while." Harry told her about his dreams of the Dursley fire and the Borgin & Burkes vault. She sat with her brow low, mind working furiously. "Oh, and there was this thing Draco said that I didn't pay much attention to until this comment of Treddleson's."

"Who's that?" Ron asked. He had turned his desk chair around to sit in it backwards and was resting his chin on the chair back. He had to lift his head to talk, but set it back down immediately.

Chapter 30

"He was an old Death Eater I apprehended today. One of the one's from the first war that never got out –til now. He said that Voldemort strangely protected that old broken watch that he stole from the vault. Draco wanted some similar things back that Merton had purchased from his mother because he was afraid his father would find out they had been sold. Things that stored power, according to him: an inkwell and a seal. And this was back when there wasn't any expectation that Lucius would be escaping. Draco really was scared of his father's reaction should he find them gone, so they must have been more important than they appeared, just like the watch." Harry glanced around the room, at the Quidditch posters. The corners of some of them were peeling off the wall, making the figures on them twist awkwardly as they flew about. "There's something to all of this, but I don't know what it is," Harry said in frustration.

"Have you seen these objects?" Hermione asked. She didn't sound terribly optimistic that she could help with understanding things, more as though she was asking by rote.

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't remember the watch clearly from the dream when he stole it. Borgin said it wasn't anything special, really." He rubbed his eyes, and admitted something that scared him. "This last dream was different. I was caught inside of it. Before, I was just observing as though Voldemort didn't know I was there. This time he had a hold of me somehow. I don't know how he did that. I was stuck half-way between him and Nagini."

Harry's friends glanced at each other. "You've always had this connection, Harry. It's probably the same one."

Harry pulled the duvet up and slid down under it for comfort. "I have to kill him. I have to kill him soon."

Hermione said to Ron, "I'm going back to my flat for a few books. See what I can find."

"There are books here too, you know," Ron pointed out, sounding insulted.

Harry closed his eyes without bothering to remove his glasses and the lamplight lowered before Ron settled onto his bed. When Harry opened his eyes, he found that Ron had his wand out and was tapping it on his leg. "Do you want mine?" Harry asked.

"Your what?"

"My wand." Harry reached for his wand and tossed it to his friend. "I don't want you to think I might hurt you."

"It's not that," Ron assured him, although it didn't sound terribly truthful. He put Harry's wand on the corner of the desk nearer to himself. "I'll toss it to you if you need it. Promise."

Harry stared at the cracked and peeling ceiling of Ron's room. He wished that he only had the Dark Plane to worry about. Before, he couldn't have fathomed that things could grow to be so much worse.

Hermione returned and took up a position at the other end of Ron's bed. A stack of heavy books formed between the two of them as she finished paging through them. Harry finally took his glasses off and closed his eyes again, trying to drift without actually falling asleep. This had the unfortunate side-effect of revealing all of the shadows to him as though he had stepped inside of a gathering of them. Harry pondered why he could see them at all, something he had not wondered about for a very long time. Just like that snake of his, replayed in Harry's head. Always knew everything she did. Harry's brow furrowed over his closed eyes. He had a feeling that when he figured this out, he was not going to like the resulting revelation very much.

Whispering and page turning kept Harry company for several hours. A light knock on the door preceded Shacklebolt's return. Another figure swept in before him and gestured for the others to leave. Hermione frantically marked her pages and scrambled off of the bed. Ron had to be woken, but he groggily departed as well.

"Severus," Harry greeted his guardian with intense gratitude.

Harry's gratitude was acute enough that it appeared to give Snape pause in the middle of Silencing and Imperturbing the door. "Your letters did not give me any warning that you were in such difficulty," he said, sounding less chastening and more undone.

"I was fine," Harry argued. "I just had a bad dream . . . that probably wasn't one . . . so they sent me off." Harry rubbed his irritated scar. "I'm trying to figure some things out. And I'm afraid to sleep."

Snape reached into his robe pocket and placed a small bottle with a frosted glass stopper on the corner of the desk. He sat on the edge of the bed and considered Harry. "I brought you something for that; hence the reason for my delay. I concocted that specifically. It will only allow you to repeat a very old dream, which hopefully you can do safely. I fear cutting you off from all dreams, given your extreme need for rest."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Snape's hair fell forward as he dipped his head, deep in thought.

Chapter 39

"You should be resting for tomorrow," Harry said.

"I am actually contemplating if it is possible for me to remain."

"McGonagall know that?" Harry asked.

"We were in the midst of final preparations when Kingsley arrived, in fact. Minerva convinced him to return as well to assist, given our lack of highly qualified personnel. It is difficult to protect a train, especially one that is warded in strange ways that we have lost track of, something I have been attempting to research today while proctoring examinations." His eyes roamed over Harry's face. "But enough about the school's plans. How are you doing?"

"I needed to Occlude my mind quite severely to get free from this dream . . . or vision, or whatever it was, that I had this evening." Harry explained. Hoping for some insight that would give him hope for next time, he said, "It was like I was snared, or on a lead, and could be dragged into Voldemort's mind and kept there."

"Could you determine where he was?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "It looked like a small drawing room with old furniture and bad artwork."

"Does not sound familiar; I'm afraid," Snape said. He lifted his chin and with a twitch of his lip, said, "You do seem all right."

"I am," Harry assured him. But then rubbing his hands over one another, he added, "But I'm getting a little scared. I've gotten lucky with avoiding turning into him . . ." Or something worse, he thought to himself. "But it's getting harder." He took a deep breath.

"You are stronger than him, Harry. I am certain of that," Snape said with confidence.

"You think so?" he asked, finding those words ringing through him.

Snape nodded. "Do not forget how you defeated him the last time."

"I trapped him the last time. He's trying to do the same to me now." Harry flipped his toes around under the duvet for a strained moment. "Why am I so close to him?" he asked.

"You simply are." Snape tilted his head back, revealing his sharp brow from behind his hair. "When he tried to kill you . . ." he faded out.

"I'm like Nagini," Harry said into the space left by Snape's hesitation.

"What makes you say that?"

"Treddleson said that, when I told him that I didn't need to see his mark, that I knew he was a Death Eater already just by his presence."

"Treddleson." Snape exhaled. "There is a name I have not heard in a very long time. One of the earliest of Voldemort's followers, joined about the same time as Avery. Never seemed quite serious in his worship of Voldemort, despite, or perhaps because of, their personal association. It was as though he joined him out of boredom or something."

"I have a piece of him in me," Harry said. "A piece of Voldemort. So does Nagini." Harry rubbed his scar again. "I don't want to become him," he said fiercely.

"Harry . . ."

"Promise me you won't let me," Harry demanded in a low tone. He needed to be reassured that the damage he could cause could only go so far.

"I will never abandon you to that fate, anymore than I would abandon you to your other dark powers," Snape assured him. "I will not give up on you, but I will also not allow you to betray that which you hold dear. Is that what you need to hear?"

Harry nodded. Prickles chased over his chest and back since he trusted absolutely that Snape understood the implications of what he was promising.

"You should get going," Harry said.

"You will be all right?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry said with confidence that he found easier than expected.

Snape stood, shaking his robes straight. Before he could reach the door, partly blocked by the foot of Harry's bed, Harry said, "Severus, I think I've forgiven you."

Snape's glance, which showed his attention to be mostly inward despite the importance of Harry's words, led Harry to say, "You haven't forgiven yourself, have you?"

Snape, head lowered, face in shadow because his back was to the lamp, said, "It is far more complicated than that."

"In what way?" Harry asked, pushing the duvet down to lean forward.

"I cannot change the past, but I do deeply regret hurting you. I feel I may have pushed you into the difficulties you are having now."

Harry puzzled this. "Voldemort is pushing me into this," he said, confused.

Snape turned his head partly, but not completely, in Harry's direction. After a long hesitation, he said, "If he is indeed a separate entity, that is."

Harry's face heated. He jumped up onto his knees on the sagging mattress, his quick movements limited uncomfortably by his narrow, borrowed pyjamas. "You believe I'm Voldemort?" Harry demanded in a horrified whisper.

"I believe nothing. The possibility has entered my mind," Snape countered.

"How could you imag-"

Snape spun on him, dark eyes glittering in the lamplight. "You cannot expect me to protect you fully from yourself without considering every possibility." This made Harry close his mouth around his next appalled exclamation. Snape calmed as well. "It has been painful to consider it, but as you said yourself not moments ago, you do have part of him in you."

Harry dropped his gaze, alarm and depression trying to take hold.

"Harry," Snape prompted, and then repeated himself when Harry didn't move except to scrub impatiently at scar. Snape approached and rubbed Harry's upper arms to get him to respond.

Harry said, "Mr. Weasley thinks that too, doesn't he?" His voice sounded lonely to his own ears, which added to the burden on his state of mind. Snape's grip tightened to a painful level, which forced Harry's gaze to meet his.

"Harry, I trust absolutely in what is in your heart . . ."

"You sound like Dumbledore again," Harry accused.

"What I mean to say, in more . . . dry terms . . ." Snape said with an annoyed tone. "Is that I trust that you do not intend to be dark. Whether you are being disturbed by forces within or without does not really matter."

"Yes, it does," Harry argued. "If he's . . . out there somewhere . . . I can kill him again. If he's in my head, what am I going to do?"

Snape's hands gripped his arms harder. "He is in your head now. That is my point. Whether he has a physical manifestation or not, does not alter that." Snape's hands released him. "You must deal with him inside of your head AND kill him in either case."

Sounding alone again, Harry asked, "How do I do that?"

"I don't know," Snape admitted.

"And if I don't do that. Does that mean he is going to keep coming back?"

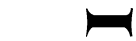
"I don't know . . ." Snape faded out and added reluctantly, "But it seems likely."

Harry dropped back onto his pillow, too exhausted to properly take that in, prompting Snape to sit beside him and reach for the potion. "Drink this."

Harry tiredly sat back up again and accepted the unstoppered bottle. He stared dismally into the distorted depths of the decorative glass. "You promise?" he asked without looking up.

"Yes, I promise. Drink up or I will feed that to you directly."

Harry swallowed the potion and handed the bottle back before immediately falling forward into his adoptive father, who put an arm around him, which was the last thing Harry perceived before morpheus took him.



Ginny Weasley trudged up the turning staircase. At the top, the door was open but the occupants of the office: the Headmistress and Professors Lupin, Vector, Cawley, and Flitwick, turned to her in surprise.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Weasley. I am quite certain I changed the password." Her hands were on her hips and she sounded miffed.

"Only took three guesses, ma'am," Ginny explained, "to figure out the new one."

"I changed to an entirely new theme," McGonagall pointed out, sounding extra annoyed about being thwarted.

"Coffee is not much of a theme change from tea, Professor," Ginny pointed out, not caring about this and wanting to move on to her real topic. "I want to know if I can travel with the Hogwarts Express tomorrow."

"You are to stay here, Ms. Weasley. I thought that was quite clear."

"I know that I have to stay here, but can't I come back? My friends will all be on the train tomorrow. It's all of our last ride and . . . and I want to help keep an eye on everyone."

McGonagall sat down and opened the drawer of her desk. "You will remain here, Ms. Weasley. I have assured your parents that you will be here, safe and sound."

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"Is anyone else going to be here?" Ginny asked, doubtful about their preparations.

McGonagall pulled open a different drawer and rummaged a bit. "Hagrid will be guarding the grounds. Professor Sprout will be guarding the rare and dangerous plants in the greenhouses. We considered simply destroying them, but do not have the heart to. Of course, Mr. Filch will be here."

"Wonderful," Ginny uttered too quietly to be overheard.

McGonagall found what she was looking for and came around the desk. "Since you will be the only student left at the school for rest of the school year, you may have this." She held out a badge that read Head Girl.

Ginny peered at it dubiously, but accepted and pocketed it. She wasn't going to be bought off so easily. "Where's Professor Snape?"

"On an errand," McGonagall replied, moving back around to her chair. The other professors gathered closer as though they all wished to return to their planning. A map of Scotland lay out on the desk, heavily stained and annotated.

"Harry all right?" Ginny asked.

"What makes you think his errand involved Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked flatly.

"It's the only thing that would draw him away at a time like this," Ginny pointed out.

"Go back to your tower Ms. Weasley."

Ginny sighed and, fingering the badge in her pocket, strolled slowly back to the staircases. You always have options, she thought decisively. The worst that could happen to her if she got caught was that they would make her stay here for yet another month's detention. If they all survived long enough to enforce it, she would worry about it then.

Harry woke with the sun streaming over him from high in the sky. He blinked at the grey duvet cover and unfamiliar room and sat up. Across from him, Hermione sat on Ron's bed, which had been neatly made. She was reading from a thin book propped on her bent knees.

"Harry, you're finally awake," she said.

Harry nodded. His limbs felt leaden as though he had slept too long. His wand wasn't lying on the desk where he had last seen it. He glanced around but didn't want to cause suspicion by asking where it was. Instead, he watched her with strange interest. He studied the fine, delicate edge of her jaw just above where her jugular vein pulsed. The soft curve of her neck, delicate as well, and remarkably fragile. Harry stood still, suspended by the stalemate within him. Appalled, frantic and determined all at once, although none of this showed on the outside.

Hermione glanced up again when he didn't move. "Harry?" she prompted and lifted her wand from the bed beside her. When Harry still didn't move, she said, "Sit back down," in a wavering voice that tried to sound commanding. "Harry."

Harry turned his head to look back at the bed that he had already forgotten was there. He was feeling bizarrely elated and expectant about something.

"Harry, so help me, I'm going to toss you back onto it if you don't move."

Her fear was getting through to both halves of him, feeding queer pleasure to the dark half but giving his true self clearer determination. He sat down on the bed and looked around as though he couldn't remember the objects in the room. They didn't match the other room he could see, which he now perceived to be larger than he had previously thought. It was just narrow, but quite long. All of the tall drapes along one wall were pulled closed making it feel cave-like.

Hermione bit her lip and pushed her book aside. "I found something in this old book of Mrs. Weasley's but I want to tell it to you, not Voldemort."

Harry glanced around, wondering again where his wand was. He should be able to feel it, he thought, he could feel everything else that belonged to him.

Hermione kept talking. "I think we let you sleep too long. Professor Snape believed that potion would keep you out of trouble, but maybe it wore off while you slept." After another pause, she asked, "Harry are you in there at all?"

The emotional pain in her voice jolted him out of his inner terror, which was a good part of what was holding him prisoner. His shoulder jerked and he blinked rapidly. "Yeah, I'm here." Severe chills made his limbs painful. He rubbed his arms. Only one room now filled his vision. "Don't . . . drop your guard again," he said, horrified at what his other self had apparently been contemplating.

The door opened and Ron stepped in, carrying more books. "Harry's awake," he said, cheerfully.

"Harry and company are awake, yes," Hermione stated grimly.

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"I think it's just me now," Harry said.

Ron glanced between the two of them and lost his cheerfulness. "Have a book to read, then."

Harry accepted the dusty, leather-covered volume and asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost ten." Hermione supplied, which explained the bright sun. "I found something, though, if you want to discuss it."

"Sure," Harry said. Snape's voice telling him that he was stronger than this was replaying in his mind, bolstering him. He had to be stronger than this; it wasn't a matter of choice. Both of his friends stared wide-eyed at him. Hermione moved first.

"This book . . ." She held it up so that the gold lettering Fiendish Wizards of the First Half of the Second Millennium was visible to Harry. " . . . has a description of a wizard by the name of Septimus. He terrified Naples in the eleventh century. According to this book, he came back from the dead three times before being killed for good. By that time he had scores of worshippers who thought it was some kind of Roman God or something." She sounded derisive. After flipping back and forth between the pages, she said, "Ah, yeah, here. Says here he had stored part of himself in a brass censer. He tore his soul in half with some kind of dark spell and stored half of it away." She held up the book that showed someone with something resembling spiky cotton balled on the end of a wand, held up in front of his chest. "They think he killed his father as part of the spell." She looked up at Harry. "What if Voldemort did that?"

"You mean the things Malfoy was supposed to keep safe? You think they were so that Voldemort could always come back?" Harry said, sounding distracted because he was thinking. "Like Riddle's diary . . . that had part of him in it too before I destroyed it. Like Nagini." After a pause, he added more quietly, "Like me."

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other. Ron said, "We don't know that, Harry. What else does it say?" he prompted Hermione.

Hermione reluctantly went on, "It says . . . the only way they could kill Septimus was by destroying the censer in a Caeruleus Fire, which is a magical fire that is especially hot. When they melted it down the normal way, it didn't seem to destroy its magical properties. They called it a Crux Horridus, or 'dreadful cross' because the censer had been taken from a church."

They sat in their respective, deep silences until Ron stood up. "Harry could probably use some breakfast. Can't face Horcruxes on an empty stomach. Come on."

In the kitchen, Molly Weasley and Mrs. Longbottom were chatting amiably. "Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said in affectionate greeting. "You don't look any less grim this morning it seems."

Barely aware of what he was doing, Harry took a seat, which made his borrowed pyjamas bind. Ron asked, "Is there a bit of breakfast for Harry?"

"Of course." As she assembled things, she said, "A nice young lady came to check how you were early this morning, Harry . . ."

"Who?" Hermione asked for him before he could get around to it.

"Hm, didn't catch her name. Attractive young lady, tall, with shoulder-length brown hair."

"Kerry Ann?" Harry asked, wishing he could be at the Ministry to help. Moody's and Whitley's memorials were supposed to be today, although they would be small and short in the interest of security. Perhaps Harry would be allowed to return for Munz's, whenever that may be. Harry's mood darkened at the thought.

"She said her name was Kerry Ann," Grandmother Longbottom said. She was folding the newspaper casually and slowly but then moving to sit upon it.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What's with that?"

No one moved. Hermione was biting her lip. "You don't want to see it, Harry."

Ron appeared angry. "Ought to know who talks to that woman by now. Registered Animagus or not, she sure gets around." Hermione elbowed him.

"What's Skeeter printed this time?" Harry asked.

Hermione took the paper from Mrs. Longbottom and held it out to Harry. "There's nothing for it," she argued to Ron's appalled expression. "Harry can handle it," she stated with the kind of certainty that implies the speaker intends it to be true by invocation.

Harry unfolded the paper. Wizard Hero Suspected of Dark Wizardry the headline read. Relieved of Duty at the Ministry's Most Dire Time, was printed slightly smaller just below that. "Who does talk to her?" Harry asked, keeping his emotions at bay by feeling numb only. The photograph was one of him from the DV-Day festivities. He looked displeased and he was gesturing with his wand, but it was just careful selection of the specific photograph from what must have been hundreds taken that day. He had been happy that day, nothing like this photo.

He folded the paper without bothering to read more. Mrs. Weasley set a plate before him containing four rashers of bacon and a tall stack of toast.

"Thanks," Harry said. "Everyone else is gone?"

"They're helping escort the Hogwarts Express," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry was glad to hear that. "Ginny's not coming home, though," he said, remembering her last letter in which she seemed to think that given the situation, her detention should have been altered. Instead, the situation seemed to have hardened everyone into doing just as they had intended to previously.

"No," Molly said, sitting down at his left elbow with her mug of tea before her. "I'm glad she will be safe at the castle. The girl gets ideas in her head, let me tell you."

"She wants to be an Auror," Harry stated. Mrs. Weasley spit out her tea, which Harry ignored, saying, "She ought to have ideas. They're what keeps you alive when things get bad."

"Arthur said nothing of this," Molly said, turning red in her cheeks and forehead.

"He doesn't know," Harry said. "Reginald Rodgers accepted her application to take the tests." Harry felt a pure and clean kind of anger seep through him. His own anger, bouyed by his own personal history of frustration. "She won the dueling tournament, why shouldn't she be able to apply for an apprenticeship?"

"She even beat out Professor Snape," Ron pointed out.

This caught his mother's attention. "Did you know about her applying?"

Ron shook his head rapidly. "No."

Molly's attention came back Harry's way. "You've been encouraging her in this," she accused.

"I heard about it from Tonks, but I think Ginny should do as she likes," Harry said, turning to his plate, which was growing cold.

"She's not your only daughter," Molly said with a hint of deeper hurt.

Harry glanced at Ron, who appeared quite pained. "I don't have any daughters," Harry pointed out.

"That he knows of," Ron tossed out as a tease. Harry shot him a dismayed look in return.

"So, you haven't been encouraging her?" Molly asked, sounding saddened.

"My trainer apparently has been. Take it up with him."

Mrs. Weasley appeared determined to do just that. "Girl cannot stay out of trouble," she complained.

The object of their musings was, at that moment, sitting in the rear compartment of the second to last car of the Hogwarts Express. She had applied a minor disguise of changing her hair to blonde, which made the Professors and her brothers glance over her as they strode up and down the train. This worked as long as Ginny turned her face away in time, and her friends signaled well in advance of her needing to do so.

Three hours had past. They had eaten their fill from the cart and now lounged lazily in their seats in the manner of people with nothing much to do for the day.

The sun made the landscape more interesting than usual, and Ginny leaned against the window and stared out. She did this until something about the rhythm of the train changed. It was as though they were going up a steep hill, even though the terrain had flattened out into low rolling hills where the track was on a path laid out perfectly flat. When her brothers ran by towards the front of the train, Ginny followed. She slapped her Head Girl badge on her chest and pulled out her wand. Her brothers stopped before the next interlink between the carriages and leaned out to peer ahead.

Bill started upon seeing his sister there. "Charlie, Ginny's here," he said, as though telling on her.

"So?" Charlie said. He glanced at his sister. "If you avoid telling mum, that'd be good." He leaned out again. "What's going on up there? I should have brought a dragon along. McGonagall wasn't keen on the idea but now I really need one to actually get up there since Apparition's out.

Ginny squeezed in between them to lean out as well. The train was definitely slowing. It rounded a broad bend and the great scarlet engine and coal tender curved to the left before slipping beyond the trees. The huffs of steam slowed as the train did. The track straightened out again and their view ahead grew less useful.

"Wonder what's up with the engine?" Bill asked.

Fred and Neville came through the interconnect. "George's extendable eye says no one is driving. Hi, Ginny." They all tried to lean out at once. Fred said to Ginny, "Better not let the teachers see you; they're coming this way."

"I don't plan to." She jumped up onto the carriage window and leapt away as a hawk. A few hard flaps later, the train extended snake-like beneath her as she veered side to side to fly slow yet stay aloft. She dove down into the rear of the engine

and regained her real form. The small compartment was empty except for the two coal-dust-blackened house-elves that cowered in the rear. The air smelt of grease and hot metal.

"Where's the engineer?" Ginny demanded.

The elf on the left put a soot-stained arm over her head as though Ginny might attack her. Ginny rolled her eyes and looked out of the scratched and dingy window that offered a view forward along the big cylinder of the boiler. One had to step to the other window to see out the front on the other side. The space between the windows held assorted levers and dials attached to long pipes coming out of the floor. The controls were ad hoc and oddly fanciful. Some of the levers were painted red, dissuading one from using them. The nearest gauge read Brake Vacuum, which made very little sense. The only dial that did make sense, the speedometer, was slowly falling to zero.

"How do you drive this thing?" Ginny asked aloud.

"Master not allow us to touch anything," one of the elves offered piteously.

"Where did Master go?" Ginny demanded. The elves cowered more. The track snaked gently and began to rise. They slowed more and finally came to a stop before rolling gently backward fifty yards. Ginny wondered if she should pull the lever marked brake, but the train came to a reluctant stop on its own.

The surrounding forest below the tracks lay in silence. No towns or any habitation were visible. The crunch of boots on gravel sounded, approaching the engine, followed by the electric arc of a spell and someone swearing. Ginny Obsfucated herself and peered out toward the rear. Professors Lupin, Cawley, and Vector were jumping between the coal tender and the first carriage for protection. A spell arc sizzled on the other side. Ginny peered out that way and saw hooded figures emerging from the trees. They emerged in twos and threes, spread far apart to make them impossible to hit all at once. Ginny looked out the first side and sure enough, there were twenty more, many more than there were total in escaped Death Eaters. They either had recruited quickly or were using Dopplegangers.

Ginny scanned to try to spot the duplicates but could not, given that they all looked more or less alike in their hooded black robes. The engineer was pushed forward into view, easy to spot in his broad, pin-striped overalls and tiny matching cap.

The teachers leapt back onto the open platform of the first of the passenger carriages. McGonagall stood, propping open the door to the inside with her foot.

"Couldn't get to the engine," Lupin said.

"No matter," McGonagall said grimly, "We know where the engineer is now. All of you down!" She shouted behind her at the students, who were creeping out of their compartments to peer out the side windows. They slunk back with worried expressions. The carriage rocked as a spell struck it and a window shattered. A few students screamed.

"That will keep them down," Vector said.

A voice called out from the trees, "We have what you want. We are prepared to make a trade."

"We don't deal with the likes of you, Malfoy," McGonagall muttered, but a searing spell took out the platform rail and sliced open the coal tender, letting coal dust leach onto the ground. "That will burn easily, won't it?" she asked no one in particular.

"Explosive, in fact, if there is enough of it," Snape pointed out from behind her. "All of you," he said loudly to the students. "Out of this car and into the next. Leave your things behind," he snarled to one Hufflepuff in particular who stopped to gather her things. "GO!"

A mad scramble ensued. Snape rushed ahead to the next coupling and vestibule and found Bill and Charlie Weasley there, making their way forward as well as Shacklebolt, who was counting the figures on each side of the train. "A couple I am certain are Dopplegangers, but it is- Severus?"

"Protect the exodus from this car," he commanded and strode back into the first car.

Shacklebolt took up a defensive position on one side of the vestibule at the open window; the Weasley brothers did the same on the other side. Professor Greer elbowed one of the twins aside and gamely returned fire when it came their way. Fred muttered something to his brother along the lines of the teachers being tougher than he remembered.

Snape strode up and down, assuring himself that the carriage had emptied. Pointed hats and sweets were spilled onto the floor. He flipped a first-year Transfiguration book out of his way with his toe.

McGonagall, still standing in the doorway nearest the tender said, "I tried to send an alarm by silver message, but I do not think it has got through."

The train rocked again, metal groaning. A voice shouted, "You have one of two choices. Either we get even by destroying the train, but that is messy and some of our allies' children are on board. Or you give us what we want."

"Which would be?" McGonagall breathed in annoyance.

Snape gave her a derisive glance as Malfoy's voice called out, "Give us our traitor and we will let the train go."

Lupin and one of the Weasley twins joined them on the platform, looking ready to do battle without compromise. Professor Greer came up behind him with a remarkably similar expression. McGonagall's face compressed in anger, but she appeared less hopeful. Snape stared out at the figures holding the engineer. The tall one on the left would be Malfoy and the other, MacNair most likely. His knowledgeable eyes scanned the assembled. The thin, narrow-shouldered one twenty feet to the right: Bellatrix and to her left . . . Avery, most likely. Another blast rang out and glass shattered across the compartment behind them.

Snape stepped out so that he was visible on the platform. The lead figure lowered his wand marginally. "Well, Severus. Good of you to join us."

Snape took a step toward the mangled gate. "Severus, what are you doing?" McGonagall asked, grabbing his arm. "If anything happens to you, Harry will not forgive me."

"I am doing what Harry would be doing if he were here," Snape pointed out smartly. Her grip loosened.

"We are not going to wait patiently." Malfoy gestured with his voluminous sleeve and Bellatrix let loose a spell aimed low that made the carriages screech as though alive and under torture.

Snape took another small step even though McGonagall still had a grip on the fabric of his cuff.

"If we can hold out, reinforcements will arrive," Lupin whispered harshly. "Kingsley messaged for them . . . but couldn't give them an exact location."

Malfoy shouted, "The next shot will render the train immovable." He held up his hand as though ready to give the signal.

"Give me your bracelet," Snape uttered under his breath. McGonagall moved quickly. Warm metal pressed into Snape's palm just seconds later. Moving with casual stealth, he tried to slip it on, but it was much too small. He dropped it into his pocket instead. "Warn Richard away, obviously, as soon as you can," Snape said, thinking ahead now with alarm to the portkey being used by the wrong person.

"I already sent him to his sister's," McGonagall said as she followed Snape down the metal steps to the gravel bed of the tracks. Snape stepped forward a few yards, wand

up. Lupin followed as well, before Snape waved him back. Lupin appeared grim and almost blameful; Snape got a glimpse of his thoughts, which were for how very distressed Harry would be to learn of what was happening.

Snape turned to face his former colleagues. "Release him," he ordered, meaning the engineer.

The man was pushed forward a few feet where he stumbled before climbing the slope a few feet. He was caught with a tether spell a few steps farther and fell forward onto his beefy pink hands.

"Lower your wand, or he progresses no farther," Malfoy said.

From the engine, Ginny painfully watched the delicate dance of the exchange. She counted the Death Eaters on each side of the tracks yet again, wishing she could be certain which were real. She sent a narrow Pea Shooter spell at one she was certain had not moved, but it flinched and looked about for someone to retaliate at.

The exchange moved closer to completion. The round-bellied engineer shuffled forward farther, almost even with Professor Snape, and Professor Snape lowered his wand to point at the ground. The engineer stepped forward again. McGonagall and Lupin stood at the edge of the gravel bed of the track, looking grave. Professor Greer stepped down beside them, looking dangerous. Ginny half-wished she could see her really let loose on this lot.

From her angle, Ginny spotted a hooded figure shifting sideways behind another so as to not be seen. Moving, it appeared to her, to get in position for a clear shot at the engineer as soon as he was beyond the cluster of Death Eaters. The figures stepped forward again and the engineer looked ready to bolt for safety. Ginny launched herself out of the window, dropping like a rock and landing hard on her just-tranfigured feet at the engineer's back, wand out with a block just as the Cutting Curse lanced out.

Spells were exchanged in very close quarters and Professor Snape lost his wand to a Whip Charm because he could not raise it in time. Ginny pushed her charge toward the engine compartment. Snape's rapier-sharp features turned to her. She had made her choice, the only one she could really live with, but she still hated it. "Harry's going to kill me," she said to him. His strangely level, black-eyed look was going to haunt her for a very long time, she feared.

McGonagall and Lupin joined her in protecting the engineer as he hauled his bulk up into the compartment. "Let's get this train moving, Mr. Stillingfleet," she said.

Moments later, steam hissed as levers were moved. The red handle under the window was turned all the way clockwise. The doors to the firehole irised open and flames

could be heard roaring deep inside. The elves shoveled coal in and the doors snapped closed. McGonagall was asking where Flitwick was, since he was supposed to be guarding the engine. The engineer grunted something negative and grim sounding.

Beside the train, a spell lashed out and Snape fell. Ginny leapt down from the engine as it began to slide forward but at that moment, the robed figures disappeared. Their Dopplegangers faded more slowly, but seconds later the clearing between the tracks and the forest was deserted.

"Ms. Weasley!" McGonagall shouted as the black metal monstrosity pulled away.

"Ginny!" Someone in the next carriage called out. It sounded like one of her brothers. "Ginny come on!" The voice grew farther away as the wall of the carriages rushed by behind her, ever faster. Ginny took flight and landed easily on the platform of the second carriage, between Bill and Shacklebolt. She reluctantly turned back into herself, finding her bird form to be a desired escape right at that moment. They all appeared very grim. Fred and George said, "Come on, help us patrol and check for injuries; we don't know anyone's names."

"Someone should tell Harry," Ginny insisted.

"McGonagall slipped Snape her portkey," George said. "And Harry's at the Burrow, relieved of duty because he can't keep You-Know-Who out of his head well enough anymore."

Ginny stared at him. "I thought the Prophet was lying."

Shacklebolt shook his head. "Maybe shouldn't stress him until we're sure Snape doesn't get away," George went on. "Come on. Help us with patrol."

Ginny followed her brothers; her shoulders slumped and heart frustrated.

Harry sat in the sunny dining room of the Burrow, his friends across the table from him. Ron was bent over his wizard chess set, contemplating his next move. His fallen pieces lay at his elbow, twitching occasionally.

"Sure you aren't throwing the match?" Harry asked.

"I haven't played in a long time," Ron insisted in an annoyed enough tone that Harry believed him.

Harry wondered what was happening at the Ministry. He wondered where Voldemort was. Sitting still when he knew he was running out of time grew increasingly difficult for him as the morning wore on. Mrs. Weasley began making lunch and asked Ron to run out to the green grocers. The chirp of the birds and the wind rustling in the trees emanating from the open door made Harry wish things were different and that he could enjoy the beautiful day just for itself.

Harry pulled the chess board closer. The bishop turned and used his long sword to swat at his fingers as though he were trying to cheat. Harry bent over the board so Hermione wouldn't notice when he closed his eyes and held them that way. The shadows in his mind were nearly all together and nearly all distant. Some stragglers still floated about, but there was a definite higher concentration of them now.

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the bishop, who was now crossing his arms, broadsword dangling confidently in his tiny fingers. His heavy brow was raised in suspicion, which Harry could discern given his close proximity. Harry shifted his hand toward the board and the chessman expertly grabbed his sword tightly and poked the back of Harry's hand, right on the scar Umbridge had given him. Harry thought this a bit insolent. That emotion gave him a glimpse of something very unexpected. Harry jerked his hand away before it could get poked again and the vision faded as he took this action. Harry blinked at the sunlight glittering off of the shiny white and black pieces as they shifted as though impatient for the game to continue.

Harry wanted to deny what he thought he had seen. It brought up old, scarred pain from Sirius and for many breaths that was all Harry could think about: the pain of being fooled and paying dearly for it. But his adult mind took over and made him rethink the vision his younger self tried to dismiss: the very familiar profile, half hidden in poorly-kempt shoulder-length hair, struggling to rise from the floor.

Had he really seen Snape in Voldemort's vision or was it someone similar in appearance? Was he simply being fooled the same as last time? Harry tilted his head back to rest on the hard wood of the chair back. He was terrified of closing his eyes again and knowing for certain, because literally anything could rise in him if it were. Harry had no idea what would happen to him if he were faced for certain with losing Snape that way.

Harry had to risk it, though; he had no choice. Across from him, Hermione's sunlit hair fell about her bent head. Her face held such an intense look of concentration, focused on her book, that he assumed she would not notice him for several minutes.

Harry closed his eyes and very carefully let the vision in again. Holding his terror at bay as he did so was one of the most difficult things he had ever done. But he had to hide it, or Voldemort would have him.

Chapter 39

Severus Snape regained consciousness and pushed himself to his knees only to be dropped again by a Crucio that made him writhe in an irrational effort to escape his own body. He gasped for air in its wake and stared at the complicated pattern in the faded rug beneath his hands as he gathered his wits, grateful that he had not cried out.

"Master," Lucius Malfoy's saccharine-laden voice dribbled. "We have brought the traitor who aided your last downfall."

The robed figures surrounding Snape parted at this. Snape starred in confusion at the sparkling, lemon-yellow-bright patent leather shoes that approached, apparently aided by Greyback, who wore no shoes since no one manufactured shoes for half-clawed feet.

Malfoy grabbed Snape by the hair and tossed him forward. "Are you bowing to your Lord and master, Severus?" he demanded with sick glee.

Snape raised his gaze while simultaneously feeling for the bracelet in his pocket with his elbow so as to not give away what he was doing. He blinked in surprise and lost himself at the sight before him.

"Lockhart?" Snape uttered in bewilderment. The man's trademark golden locks had thinned considerably, leaving merely a grim halo around his freckled bald head. His eyes, however, where unmistakeably red and slitted.

Slowly and dreamily the bizarre figure stated, "He has a portkey in his pocket."

Snape ducked his head too late and cringed. A blasting curse knocked him to the floor before he could reach into his pocket for one chance at using the key. By the time he again floated up to consciousness, Malfoy was dangling the bracelet before him. He sat back in a worn overstuffed chair and flipped the golden hoop around his index finger.

"You would have needed a wand to use it in any event," Malfoy pointed out as a taunt. "A poor hope, at best." He started to pocket it, but instead tossed it to Bellatrix who was standing across from him. "See that Headmistress McGonagall deeply regrets assisting our disloyal subject, would you? That appeared to be her house I visited."

Bellatrix smiled and slipped the bracelet onto her wrist, admiring it in a mocking girlish fashion.

Malfoy crossed his legs and said, "I am so terribly disappointed you have not attempted to Apparate, Severus. I laid the barriers myself and they are my most dreadful to date."

Snape pushed himself a little straighter, saying, "As though I could have forgotten how you did things . . ."

"True," Malfoy cooed. "Yet another reason to take you into our circle as fast as possible."

Snape stared at the figure in the other chair; the one gazing raptly at the fire. "How . . . ?" he asked.

"How was our glorious Lord returned to us?" Malfoy finished for him. This got the other chair's occupant's attention. Voldemort né Lockhart turned slowly to stare at Snape instead. Snape carefully Occluded his mind this time, still greatly pained by his earlier lapse that had lost him the portkey.

Malfoy tugged on the servant's bell beside the hearth using a spell so that he would not have to bother standing to reach. An elf appeared a moment later, bowing repeatedly.

"Bring me my pipe," Malfoy ordered, and as the elf disappeared, he aimed a hex at the creature with a laugh. "We have an inept wizard by the name of Maurdant Merton to thank for that, according to his associate, whom we have been attempting to recruit as he seems the pathetically subservient type. Merton himself escaped our grasp with the help of a surprisingly vicious second associate. During their bumbling about with spells they could not comprehend, they used prior possessions of our Dark Lord's – that should not have fallen into their hands, but it was fortuitous that they did – to recreate him thusly."

Voldemort still stared at Snape. Snape had the very odd sense that the Dark Lord was trying to remember him.

Malfoy went on, "I should not be so harsh with them as they did have the good luck to stumble upon the means of creating an entirely new kind of cursed object, the stash of which we have made good use of."

"We must create more," the red-eyed visage beside him said. "I know how."

"Uh, yes. Yes, of course, Master."

Snape looked between them. "You have promoted yourself, Lucius. What do MacNair and Avery think of that?"

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The elf reappeared with a freshly lit pipe. It presented it with a bow and promptly disappeared again. "They are out taking care of a little necessary task. There is much to be done." He puffed vigorously.

"Yes, you look terribly busy," Snape offered with clear sarcasm.

Malfoy's wand came up and although Snape tried to leap to the side, the Crucio caught him and all he could do for the subsequent minute was claw at his chest and resist screaming. When the curse let up, Malfoy said, "Your death is going to be exceedingly slow, I promise you. It will be days after you are crying and pleading for it. Days after you offer up that awful boy you call your son. I look forward to it, I must say."

"That will never happen," Snape whispered, clearly determined. The curse fell again.

Broom-riding witches and wizards swooped down upon the Hogwarts Express. From where she bent over a second-year Slytherin with a bad cut over his eye, Ginny turned to watch them pace the train just beyond the windows. The boy didn't trust a mere fellow student to heal it, so she was applying a plaster to it. A rush of excitement swept through the carriage at the sight outside.

Ginny hurried to finish and joined the teachers and other guards in the first carriage just as the train came to a brake-squealing halt. McGonagall stepped into the carriage from the front just as Ginny did from the rear. Her brothers had been set guarding the doors, and given Ginny's fierce expression, didn't resist her entry.

"We received Kingsley's message," Tonks was saying. She glanced around. "Looks like you tangled with a rather angry someone." The other Ministry witches and wizards with her were from the Beast Division. They sported fire-proof wire-bristle brooms and shackling equipment dangled and clanked on their belts.

"They took Professor Snape," Ginny blurted out.

"We know," Tonks stated. "Kingsley sent that in a followup message."

"Have you heard from Severus?" McGonagall asked.

Tonks shook her head. "Someone should tell Harry," Ginny insisted, more quietly than her last assertion, given that she did not desire to get on Tonks' bad side.

Tonks nodded in sad agreement. To Shacklebolt, she said, "Can they spare you if I leave Aldrich and the others with the train?"

McGonagall looked over the motley group of animal control people. One had a baby India Black dragon on her shoulder, albeit muzzled. She said, "They seemed satisfied with what they obtained from us, unfortunately. We can probably spare Kingsley at this point." She gazed pointedly at Ginny. "Ms. Weasley, you will remain here with me."

Harry stood, unaware that his gaze was decidedly distant.

"Harry?" Hermione demanded. She held her wand out before her and stood also; although she made the poor decision to straighten her chair. Beside her, Grandma Longbottom's hands were busy knitting and she couldn't pick up her wand without juggling her needles first.

Mrs. Weasley asked, "What's the trouble, dear?"

"Harry is . . . fading again."

"I'm here," Harry said. "I have to go. Where is my wand?"

"We're not supposed to let you have it," Hermione patiently explained.

"This is me, Hermione, not him," Harry said. "I need my wand."

"Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said, coming up behind him. "Have a seat, I'll fix you a little calming tea."

Harry spun on her and snapped, "Don't call me 'Harry dear' when you are suggesting I let my life be destroyed."

"It isn't as bad as all that," Mrs. Weasley insisted.

Harry balled his fists to keep from doing more with them. "He has Severus. Voldemort does. He's torturing him right now."

Hermione said, "Are you certain, Harry? This isn't like last time, is it?"

Harry slumped slightly. It was remarkably like last time, except Snape's face wasn't bloodied the way the vision of Sirius' had been. He writhed almost exactly the same way, though, and he wasn't screaming . . . yet. "I think this is real," Harry said.

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The sound of Apparition could be heard in the distant field. "Let's see who that is," Mrs. Weasley insisted, pulling her wand and going to the door. "Looks like Tonks."

They waited for her approach. To Harry the time passed interminably, giving his emotions plenty of time to gouge his heart out. Just before Tonks reached the door, Harry said, "Please, Hermione."

"I don't have it, Harry. I think they failed to tell me where they hid it because they figured I'd probably hand it over to you."

Harry's whole body twinged. The door opened. Tonks stepped in, ignoring the greetings. She looked at Harry and said, "Looks like you already know."

Harry dropped his head. Hermione asked, "So, Voldemort does have Professor Snape?"

"Death Eaters held the Express hostage until he gave himself up. Minerva slipped him her portkey but he must not have been able to use it." She took a few steps closer. "Harry . . . do you know where they are? Have you been seeing this?"

"I've been seeing it, but I don't know where they are. Voldemort doesn't know where he is," Harry said bleakly. "Nagini certainly doesn't know where she is and she's the other one I can see out of."

"If you get any hints, send someone with a message, all right?" Tonks said, tossing her cloak forward over her shoulder in a dismissive manner as though ready to depart again already.

"I can't stay here," Harry insisted in cold horror. "I have to help." Second by second, his whole body was cycling between numbness and painful tingling he was so keyed up. "Tonks, please don't do this to me," he pleaded when she began to put on a resolute face instead of replying.

She came even closer. "Harry, I can't override Arthur's orders. If we don't follow orders the department would be even more chaotic than it already is and we'd be sunk. I promise I'll come get you if we hear anything, all right?"

Harry didn't want to show her any more weakness than he just had done. He didn't nod, but he did retake his seat at the table, where two jagged lines of shiny black chess pieces were arrayed before him. They shifted in anticipation as though noticing his return.

Tonks Disapparated after stepping over to pat him on the shoulder. Mrs. Weasley came over with a teapot that smelled noxiously of valerian root. "I don't want any,"

Harry snapped angrily. Hermione shook her head quickly at Mrs. Weasley and the teapot was carried back to the counter. The room remained tense.

"Wonder where Ron's got to?" Mrs. Weasley wondered aloud.

"Yeah," Harry said flatly, "and if you knew he was being tortured by Voldemort you'd just stand there, even if you didn't know where it was."

"Harry," Hermione chastised him.

Mrs. Longbottom's knitting needles returned to clicking. "Let the boy rant; it's all he's got and he deserves a bit of room to do it."

Harry fell silent, struggling for all kinds of control.

When Snape next raised his head, the red glowing eyes were very close, close enough to startle him. He jerked against the binding around his wrists. His hands had been bound behind him when Malfoy was called away by other duties and could no longer keep a wand on him directly.

The image of Lockhart rose from the chair and with his nearly bald head tilted curiously, crouched on the floor before Snape. He traced a finger along Snape's jaw. "I remember you," he said softly. "I am remembering more. You were very loyal to me . . ."

"Not anymore," Malfoy snapped from where he convened with three others halfway down the room.

Voldemort went on, relentlessly stuck in the rutted path of memory, it seemed. "You told me about the prophecy. I had suspected you were Dumbledore's man before then." His lip curled in a disgusted sneer.

Snape suffered a moment of extreme gratitude that this information was not news to him. Between the torture and his already dire situation, it may have been his final undoing.

"I am glad I told you," Snape insisted in a snarl, which at least hid his agony. "It led to your demise and it will do so again." He eyed the long wand held before his nose. If his hands weren't bound it would be his, a tormenting thought.

"I have many servants. You are my servant," Voldemort insisted, eyes narrowing.

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"I was your servant. I am not any longer," Snape insisted, attracting the attention of the others in the room.

Greyback strode over and pulled Snape's head back by his hair. "You want that I tear his throat out?" he asked, eyes glowing in anticipation.

"No, far too quick," Malfoy said. "He is delusional, perhaps the Crucios are getting to his head." He crouched before Snape. "They don't fade entirely anymore, do they?" he asked. "Soon, they will barely fade at all." He stepped back and struck Snape with another one, just to make the point.

When he cancelled it, he bent over his victim and said, "Say that you are his loyal servant and we will let you rest . . . for little while at least." Snape didn't respond. He clenched his teeth in fact, which was fortunate since it made it easier too hold in the scream that clawed for release inside him as the next curse cut through him, just as he clawed instinctively for release from his own existence.

"Say it and you will get a rest," Malfoy promised repeatedly, like a maddening parrot, in between curses from him and others. It hadn't let up for rather a long while, although Snape was having difficulty keeping track. It could have been two curses or two hundred. They blurred together in a tangle of tearful agony, punctuated by his attempts to burrow through the rug beneath him.

"I will not," Snape growled. "I am not his servant."

"There no escaping it, Severus," Malfoy growled in return, sounding as though he thought Snape dimwitted.

"I. Have. No. Mark." Snape managed.

The figures in the room who had gathered to watch his breaking all paused at this. Malfoy flipped Snape onto his side with his toe and cancelled the binding on his wrists. Snape was certain this revelation was only going to result in more torture, but he did not care. To him it was the ultimate denial of his previous mistakes. Snape's arms were leaden and he could barely sit up. He was manhandled to a sitting position on the rug and his arm jerked hard. Someone gasped when his sleeve was pulled back.

"That is impossible," MacNair said. "How could that be?"

Snape raised his eyes to the speaker and tried to come up with a rejoiner worthy of taking to his grave. "You cannot understand . . . redemption," he said tiredly over his scratchy throat. His body felt close to giving out and he wryly considered that redemption was about all he had left.

"Make him scream some more, Master," MacNair said eagerly. "He does not break down when Lucius torments him," he criticized, garnering a sharp look from his associate.

Voldemort raised his wand and aimed it at Snape's chest. "He truly betrayed me?" he asked in confusion. A ripple passed through the room. This ground had been covered several times.

"Yes," Malfoy said with continued patience, very much not in his usual nature.

Voldemort still held back. "Why do I not just make him mine again?"

Snape's hands were free right now, so he resisted rubbing his forearm at that comment so as to not attract attention to that fact.

"He must be under your will before he is given a mark," Malfoy explained. "Otherwise he will weaken you rather than adding his strength."

Snape's shoulders tried to slump in relief. It required every last ounce of his will to sit there on his feet without moving, hoping for an opportunity to take away one of the wands carried in loose fingers around him.

"We should kill him then," Voldemort stated in a monotone, "so that he cannot weaken me."

"He cannot weaken you, Master," Malfoy assured him. "If you are weakening, perhaps you should sit . . ."

Malfoy fussed over his charge as Voldemort murmured. "I would be stronger . . . where is it . . . the last crux?"

"He is still asking for that?" Greyback demanded. "You said he had quitted it?"

"He had," Malfoy insisted. "We have them all. Merton used them up. They have been emptied."

Greyback knelt on one oddly jointed knee and said, "Lord, I, Greyback, the most physically powerful of your servants will fetch what you desire. But you must tell me what it is."

There was no response. Voldemort simply muttered quietly to himself, eyes narrow and far away. The others in the room also murmured and shook their heads. Only Snape thought he knew what Voldemort referred to. He dropped his gaze to the dreadful diamond pattern woven into the rug, which for the last desperate hours had been his quiet and unchanging companion.

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Battle Wounded

"Master," Lucius Malfoy said, bowing as he followed Voldemort out to the landing with its grand, grey marble railing. "Are you certain you should be moving about so?"

The disturbing visage of Lockhart stopped and said, "Your overbearing care grows tiresome Lucius. If you cease to do my bidding, you will feel my wrath."

Malfoy stepped back, bowing again, face pained and disturbed. Behind him, Bellatrix hovered, also appearing startled, but then she smiled maliciously at Malfoy. Voldemort stepped boldly to the top of the grand staircase and looked down upon the broad view of the large, empty hall, lit marvelously by the sun, which streamed in through the gauzy curtains. Bellatrix sidled over to her colleague and whispered, "It is almost as though you do not wish our Lord to recover himself, Lucius."

"That's not true," Malfoy replied loudly, but Bellatrix snorted.

A brightly dressed figure emerged silently from a ground floor doorway and began to cross the hall, head bent over a letter.

"Who is that?" Voldemort asked, sounding more his distant and uncertain self. "I have not seen that witch among my followers before."

Malfoy stepped forward and taking on the attitude of a butler, said, "That is my son's fiancée, Master."

Draco appeared from the other side of the landing, also moving in silence. "That is my wife," he corrected.

Lucius waved his hand dismissively. "Some or another elopement was involved."

Voice low and vicious, Draco replied, "You were in prison and mother said a big party would give her a headache."

"Where is your mother?" Lucius asked.

Draco's face took on a cruel grin. "Helping the house-elves, I expect."

Lucius' eyes narrowed. Bellatrix took a step back to get out from between the two of them, face cocked in amusement. Voldemort's voice interrupted their cross-armed standoff. "Bring her up here."

Draco's shoulders fell. His father's cruel grin meant he would get no support there. He strode down the long, wide staircase that curled even wider at the bottom and urged Pansy to follow him up. She nearly stumbled upon seeing who waited at the very top. Lucius was stating grandly, "Ms. Parkinson, you should be honored to finally meet our great Lord. We have been remiss in giving you this opportunity."

The red-eyed face of Lockhart stared at her intently, framed by his wild, sparse hair. "My followers are not as young and attractive as you . . . but they once were . . ." His hand gestured elegantly. "Many, many as lovely as you used to come to see me talk, some would come to my room without an invitation, even." He stopped abruptly, seeming to try to resolve conflicting memories. He tilted his head oddly, like a lizard might. "I do miss that: the cameras, the adoration." He reached out a hand to brush an errant lock of black hair that hung loose beside her cheek. "Do you adore me?"

Pansy swayed slightly, looking as though she may have forgotten to breathe. Draco balled his fists and looked ready for a fight, but no one moved until Lucius said, "Master, we have much to do – decisions and strategies to work out." Voldemort ignored him. Lucius went on, "I'm afraid you are becoming distracted."

Voldemort tugged on Pansy's hair. "Lucius adores me in this new, very alive body," he said, although it sounded mocking. "I'm afraid those who don't will have to die."

Draco's fists rose up and he made a grab that was intercepted by his father, who had his wand at Draco's throat in the next instant. Voldemort turned stiffly at the disturbance behind him. He took in the scene and said, "Does your son not adore me, Lucius?"

Speaking quickly and silkily, Lucius said, "No, My Lord, he does. He is simply having a bit of trouble with his priorities at the moment."

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Voldemort turned back to Pansy, who swayed dangerously, threatening to collapse backward down the very long staircase. "You seem content to make all of the decisions, Lucius, so you certainly can do so for the next half hour or so while I explore being alive again. As long as you make them in my interest, I will let you live."

Draco's eyes watered from the pressure of the wand stabbing into the soft flesh under his chin and he watched helplessly as Voldemort pulled again on the long loose lock of Pansy's hair, causing all of it to tumble out of its clasp.

Harry kept trying to find Voldemort in his mind, but he couldn't, no matter how angry or upset he felt about not knowing how Snape fared. It was as though Voldemort was blocking him out now, which meant he must know Harry had been getting in before. Ron had not yet returned and Mrs. Weasley grew more and more nervous, pacing the kitchen and gazing with no little stress out of each of the small dingy windows.

An owl arrived with a quick note written on a sweet wrapper that read: Got waylaid helping Lavender. While sniffling, Mrs. Weasley carefully folded the note and put it into her apron pocket.

Frustrated beyond his control, Harry stood and went around the long table which dominated the kitchen of the Burrow. As he approached, Hermione took up her wand, but she held it low, pointed at the floor.

"I can't stay here," Harry said.

"Do you know where they are?" Hermione honestly asked, not mocking at all. "You keep closing your eyes, but you haven't seemed anything less than grim when you open them again."

"I don't know where they are; I can't get any impressions now. I have to go to the Ministry in case something is happening. I can't stay here."

"Harry they'll come if they know-"

"I don't believe they really will," Harry returned angrily. With that burst of betrayed feeling the long dark room finally came into view again. He didn't want to be distracted by it now, though, so he sent it away easily by feeling terribly, terribly sorry for his adoptive father. That worked remarkably well; trouble was, his emotions were bruised and ached intolerably when used in this manner.

Harry calculated carefully. He took a very small step closer to his friend, saying. "Hermione. You know how terribly important this is to me."

"Harry, we're just trying to do what's best for you." Her shoulders fell in sympathy, as expected. This loosened her other arm muscles as well.

Harry, with the lightening reflexes of a Seeker, snatched the wand from her hand and Disapparated before she could even lean forward to grab for him.

Harry stepped out of the alleyway where he had arrived, despite aiming for the Ministry Atrium. Other witches and wizards were there as well, cursing their own redirection. A few gathered into a small group and whispered to each other angrily.

Harry rushed to the phone box where a short and round old witch was shouting into the wrong end of the receiver. Others were crowding around the door impatiently. Harry pushed them aside with a Grand Flecture and slipped in. The woman's mouth fell open upon looking up at him, but he ignored her expression and took the receiver away from her. "Harry Potter to see the head of Magical Law Enforcement," he announced.

Something fell into the coin slot as they slipped downward. Harry pulled out two badges, one that read Harry Potter, MLE and the other which read Goodwich Stillingfleet, Question for Helpwitch. Harry handed over her badge and she put it on with a broadly wrinkled smile.

"Thank you, young man. Had the hardest time explaining. Always do." She patted her badge proudly as they slid through the ceiling of the atrium, which teamed with people milling about with a larger knot of them near the security desk. The woman was still talking. "Just want to find my son. Something terrible happened, my neighbor said." She sounded more resolute as she added, "I just wan' to know what happened: good or bad. Can't stand not knowin'."

Harry spent the remainder of the downward journey feeling guilty for being so wrapped up in his own problems followed by a surge of frustration that there were too many people with serious problems to be solved. He pushed aside the doors when the box reached the atrium floor and with enormous willpower, gestured for her to precede him.

"I hope you find out about your son," Harry said.

She nodded, looking less than hopeful. Harry hoped to not catch her pessimism. He rushed to the desk to the side set up for employees so that they would not have to wait in the much longer visitor's queue.

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Harry told the clerk his credentials, but the milky-complected, young clerk pondered the long scroll before him, saying, "You are not on the active roster at the moment."

Harry held himself down with immense effort. "Can I be a visitor?"

The man pondered the long queue across the atrium. "Yes," he said, tacitly agreeing to handle it. "Of whom?"

Harry almost said 'Arthur Weasley', but then a more manipulative instinct said, "Tristan Rogan." Rogan had always given Harry more leeway and if Harry had ever needed it . . .

Rogan came down to meet Harry as expected and led him inside without comment. Back up in the Auror's office Rogan took a seat in an otherwise empty room.

"You're on duty all alone?" Harry asked. Rogan nodded. Piles of Weasley Wizard Weazes Wondrous Wake-up Wonkers wrappers littered his desk. Harry then asked, "Where is everyone?"

"Meeting," Rogan replied around a sweet he had just popped into his mouth. He had a strange casualness about him as though he may not be motivated by anything short of absolute emergency.

Harry had no time to worry about his uneasiness regarding Rogan's capacity. "Where's the meeting?"

Rogan lazily gestured upward. "Minister's office."

Harry went out the door and to the stairs like a shot. There were guards this time outside the door to Bones' office suite – two people from the Liaison office. Harry strode confidently between them as though he belonged there. A large table dominated the reception area, and nearly the entirety of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was seated around it, along with many important others. Several heads jerked hard over at Harry's appearance. Fortunately, Tonks was not present to remind him that he had been specifically told otherwise than to be there.

Bones cleared her throat and said in her diplomatic voice, "Mr. Potter, as much as your presence is desired, I do not think we can risk it at this time."

Harry stood behind Mr. Weasley's chair, resisting grabbing hold of it for balance. Across from their Department Head, Shacklebolt had slipped his wand into his hand, although he held it casually on the tabletop. That lack of faith did enormous damage to Harry's control. He wavered for a long moment, making everyone more tense. "I need to be here when you find Voldemort," he said. Several people flinched. "That's

his name," Harry pointed out harshly. "Well, it's the name he gave himself, anyway." He wavered more at that confusion, desperate not to slip into that other room that kept encroaching at the edges of his vision.

Bones sat straighter in the head seat. "Nevertheless, this meeting cannot continue with you present. And I do think it is in your best interest that it continue. We are closing in, Mr. Potter."

"I don't have much time," Harry said, trying desperately to explain. "They're wearing him down." Despite his valiant efforts, the world was now overlaid with another where someone was screaming. Harry's steps faltered and Aaron, who's chair he was now passing, reached out to steady him.

Inaction was utterly impossible. "I have to take care of this myself, then," he said, unaware how far away he sounded.

Bones voice grew firm. "Mr. Potter, you are not allowed to take independent action. You could foil all of the plans-"

Harry's Disapparating interrupted her. The room broke from its frozen tableau when the the other junior apprentices all stood. They stared at each other, but only Vineet disappeared with a good guess as to where Harry had gone.

Harry strode across Hermione's small flat toward Kali's cage. A plan was forming in his head like a living thing and he gathered it close and nurtured it as though it were his only hope. He stopped before the cage and cleared his mind of everything except his intense need to reach the only father he had ever known before it was too late. He forgot everything that ever made him doubt Snape and reached in for his ragged pet. She sniffed him but didn't fight being lifted out.

A pop! sounded as another person arrived in the flat. Harry looked up sharply at his fellow, saying, "I hope you aren't here to stop me."

Vineet bowed his head and lifted it again. "I offer my unconditional assistance."

Harry petted Kali as she tried to crawl inside his robes. "Thanks. I need it."

"I believe the others would help as well . . ." Vineet began, lifting his hand behind him as though offering to fetch them.

"I don't trust everyone just now," Harry said. He glanced around the room. "And more people will just get in the way. Let's get out of here before we're followed." He grabbed Vineet's arm and took them to the first place that was remote, easy to defend, and seemed unlikely for them to go.

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Vineet caught himself as a gust of wind tried to knock him off his feet. He turned to take in the bay spread out before them and the grey circular fortification of the castle behind them. "Where are we?"

"Falmouth," Harry explained. It was a nice day, but since there was an entire Quidditch stadium hidden nearby, the Muggles were dissuaded from coming this way, just at the edge of the drop-off. Harry, feeling confident that they wouldn't be found here by the Ministry, shook off his cloak, gently wrapped his wand and his pet in it and placed it on the ground. "Get out your wand and guard me. If, when I open my eyes, I don't seem like myself, take every action you can against me. I have to become Voldemort to see where he is. I don't know how long this is going to take."

Vineet's eyes filled with alarm but he nodded and took a quick glance around to check for anyone in the vicinity before holding his wand out before him.

Harry closed his eyes. In the darkened room, the figure on the floor before him wasn't moving and enormous will was required to not feel so much pain that the vision would be lost. Instead, Harry directed his pain into anger and hunger to strike back, which brought the vision in the clearest yet. His other self turned and stepped dismissively away from the contorted heap on the floor.

"Perhaps you should rest, Master," Malfoy was saying.

"I am fine," came the peeved insistence from Harry's lips, but he took the nearby chair anyway and leaned back. The crumpled figure on the floor still had not moved.

Hold steady, Harry coached himself. Don't give yourself away. It's the only chance.

Malfoy was down on one knee beside Harry's chair. "Do you desire anything, Lord?"

"Tea," Voldemort said. "Where is the young wench with the tea?"

Bellatrix came into view with a pained expression. "Would you like me to fetch you tea, My Lord?" she asked, sounding willing to do just about anything.

Harry found his own pure hatred for her. He wasn't sure if it was that or just Voldemort's orneriness that said, "You are an old hag, Bella. I was certainly not referring to you." Harry's lips tried to curl at her appalled expression. "The lovely wench where is she?"

Malfoy stepped away quickly. Harry wanted to urge Voldemort to look at Snape on the floor to better see his condition. He didn't need to; Snape shifted, drawing Harry's host's attention. A wand lifted in Harry's hand. He ached to beg him not to strike out. Snape lifted his head with effort and opened his pain-filled eyes. They narrowed with defiance as they found Voldemort, lifting Harry's spirits immensely.

Malfoy returned, rushing in the manner of a brow-beaten servant. "Your tea is coming, My Lord." He followed the aim of Voldemort's wand with his eyes. "Ah, our traitor has awakened," he sneered with malice. Snape's eyes didn't waver from glaring at Voldemort. Malfoy went on, "Shall we send a message to the boy hero to lure him into a trap?"

When Voldemort didn't respond, Malfoy grew patronizing. "It is just a suggestion, Master. I simply assumed you would wish to destroy your former nemesis." He gestured at Snape with a sadistic smile. "We have the perfect bait to lure him in." He turned to Snape and asked mockingly, "Or did you not think of that before you handed yourself over without a fight?"

"I could not fight," Snape stated hoarsely, making Harry wish Snape would shut up and ignore the git.

Malfoy stalked over, bent low. "Because you are weak," he said and struck out with a Crucio. Harry tried to shut his eyes, but he could not. He tried to make Voldemort yell stop! but he could not. His vision twisted to seeing Snape from a much lower view that was strangely distorted. Nagini, Harry realized quickly and tried to back out, but he had already been snared again.

Harry could feel the stiff wind and the sun on his body in Falmouth. He tried to use that as an anchor to remain himself, at least partially. Voldemort had used Nagini to trap him last time, he remembered, holding himself from panicking just yet. The sun felt reassuringly warm and, nearby, Vineet waited patiently. If Harry opened his eyes without recovering, everyone would still be safe given how hard his fellow could strike out with an attack. Harry relaxed at that and felt Nagini's grip loosen.

"Potter," Voldemort uttered, low and long.

"Yes, Master. We will get him," Malfoy said with pleasant reassurance, as though Voldemort were a child.

Snape lifted his head and said, "He will destroy you," with immense confidence, and some version of Harry swallowed hard.

Voldemort didn't reply; he was pulling Harry in again, tethering him in parallel with Nagini. Harry struggled, but panic only fed his enemy, so he stopped and waited for a better opportunity to break loose. He and Voldemort stared at Snape who was pushing himself to sit up. He seemed to barely possess the strength required for this movement.

Snape's shoulders stuck up starkly, too tired to prop his weight up, but his eyes remained defiant. "He will destroy you . . . same as last time," he repeated. More tauntingly, he said, "Or don't you remember . . . ?"

". . . Gilderoy." Snape added slowly, as though savoring the name.

Harry broke free when Voldemort's thoughts froze. His own thoughts were churning madly, wondering if Snape's sanity had slipped, but if so, why did Voldemort react so? One part of him wondered if Snape knew Harry was there and that he had needed help. In that case Snape should say where he was. Harry thought himself capable of pulling completely back into himself now, but he could not before learning where Snape was being held. He hovered, hopefully out of reach, the dark room overlaid by the veins in his eyelids, illuminated by the sun.

Frustrated, Harry growled and heard Voldemort growl at the same time. Harry said, "Where are we?" hoping Voldemort would say it too, but the growl must have been a coincidence because the Dark Lord remained silent and Vineet replied uncertainly, "Falmouth. In the case that it is me you are asking."

Figures shifted elsewhere in the room and urgent whispering followed. Someone approached, unexpectedly in a flowery orange kimono. Tea cups rattled and Harry could just make out Pansy Parkinson shakily setting a tray on the table beside him. Beyond this sunlight-bright vision, at the far end of the room, stood a very pensive Draco Malfoy, watching Pansy's every movement. He appeared as tortured as Snape.

Harry Occluded his mind with all the force he could muster. He opened his eyes onto the windswept grey water of the bay with its scattering of boats. "I know where they are."

Vineet lowered his wand. Harry stooped to pick up his cloak-wrapped pet. He unfolded the cloak slowly, sorting out his thoughts as he did so to assure that they were only his own. If he held his thoughts in a state of narrow, forward-moving discipline, Kali didn't struggle. "Lockhart," he murmured. "What does Lockhart have to do with this?" Kali climbed into his pocket as though disliking the sunlight.

"You have a plan?" Vineet asked tentatively.

Harry reached into his pocket and stroked the warm fur curled there. A leathery wing beat against his hand. "Yes, but you aren't going to like it."

Vineet held out his dark hand when Harry lifted his own in a grasping pose. Harry took his fellow's wrist and Apparated them to an empty, gently curving drive surrounded by dark woods. He had arrived here last time by flying according to Snape's instructions, directly into the space between the barriers surrounding the property and the barriers surrounding the manor itself.

Vineet appeared curious but did not speak, simply waited for guidance. Harry focused only on the core of his thoughts that he knew to be purely himself and pulled his

pet from his pocket, petting her repeatedly. "We're at Malfoy Manor. When we get inside . . . Voldemort's mine. You can take out anyone else you feel like."

Vineet nodded with a small bowing motion.

Harry held his pet up for inspection. "I need to get her through the barriers and inside the manor."

"We should step closer to them, then," Vineet suggested. Harry gestured that the Indian should lead.

They crunched along the fine grey gravel to where the first of the many smoke stained chimneys emerged high in the trees bordering the drive. Vineet held up a hand, calling for a halt. "It is right before us."

Harry bent over the sparsely furred body clutched in his hands, pressing his nose against her quivering form. If he could connect with her the way he connected to Nagini, this would be easier. He tried to imagine himself as her, seeing out of her eyes. For an instant, he managed, but her mind was as fluttery as her wings. Stress also invaded; he was running out of time.

"I know I'm about ask an awful lot of you," Harry said to his pet. "But I need you to do this. Go to him and behave as you normally do until I get there." He couldn't help smiling at the memory of her feisty nature expressing itself in the past. He straightened and said to Vineet, "Can you open a gateway all the way through for her?"

Vineet considered the lonely drive. "I can try, but there are many layers ahead." He lifted a tentative hand like a mime might to find an invisible wall.

Harry petted his Chimrian again and said, "I'm counting on you, Kali. This is very important." He held her out to get ready to release her.

Vineet didn't quite drop his hand, but his posture shifted to a drooping one and he stared at Harry. "Your pet is named how?"

Harry blinked at him, thinking this was really not the time. "Kali," he repeated.

Vineet stared at him. He seemed to have transformed into someone else, from patient and obedient into alarmed and challenging, though at a complete loss for words.

Kali was sniffing the wind and stretching her wings. Harry could feel her eagerness to fly after being bundled up and thought these quiet seconds were giving him much-needed space to connect to her, so he let Vineet struggle without pointing out that they were in a serious hurry.

Chapter 31

"Do you know who that is?" Vineet asked.

Harry cast his mind back. "Er, goddess of something . . . destruction or . . . Hermione named her," he then pointed out a little defensively.

"She creates worlds and then consumes them. Over and over. This is her age, in fact."

"It feels like it," Harry said, thinking how very tired he was of a certain dark wizard repeatedly returning. "How do we break out of that?" he asked, truly wishing to know the answer.

"When the universe finally ends for good and is not recreated. This is the last age."

The wind rustled the leaves around them. "Right then," Harry said. "Gateway?" he asked, stressed and a tad sheepishly because he really needed this man's help but somehow they had drifted far off topic; although for Vineet this seemed to be the topic.

Vineet appeared as one accepting fate and not too happy about it, if only just on principle. He lifted his hand again and closed his eyes. Presently, he opened them a crack and said, "I cannot get through all of them. But a gate is present now through the first few. She must fly as straight as possible."

Harry stood close and tossed her through the first gateway, or where he assumed it was, floating just before Vineet's rich brown hand. She wheeled in the breeze and came back to true when Harry urged her to do so with his mind. Electricity stung his arms when she passed through the next ward. There weren't piles of dead birds everywhere, so perhaps she would go unnoticed. True, fly true, Harry chanted in his head when she banked to the left to counter the wind.

The gravel cut into Harry's knees when he fell to it. Kali had struck a hard barrier full force. He could feel her clearly now, as a tumbling winged outline carved out of his mind. Bending over, hands clutched over his head to block out everything else, Harry reached out and felt her careening. Through her eyes he could see the ground crookedly rearing up. He forced her to flap, to shift her weight back and spread her rear feet for stability the way his own ungainly Animagus form needed to. The ground filled her vision but she only scraped a paw and lifted off again with a round of desperate flapping.

She was doing much better with his help, although it was probably mostly his strength that was creating the improvement. He made her turn at the corner of the manor and fly faster, giving her the extra energy to do so. The front door sailed by with a

sparkle of spell energy. She turned again with purpose, driven by Harry. The small kitchen door, used only by the house-elves, stood ajar to ease the heat inside. Kali aimed directly for it.

Inside, the house-elves reacted wildly to the invasion. Most ducked, but one swung the broom it held. Harry wished his pet could breathe fire, but had to settle for dodging instead. The swinging door at the other end was closed. He landed on the flat of it, gripping firmly to the old wood with able claws. The door swung from Kali's momentum. A long, sunlit hall spread before him with an ostentatious sweeping staircase up one end of it. The doors on the ground floor were open and appeared well-lit. Harry made Kali flap upward to land on the banister for a rest. She was breathing heavily, her head moving up and down as she did so. Harry calmed her and listened through her ears. No sounds came from the right but there was murmuring from the left. He gave her a few breaths more break before urging her to take flight again. She glided along the corridor for more of a recovery before turning sharply into the room at the end, a darkened room that appeared much longer through a Chimrian's tiny eyes. On the floor in the middle of the farthest rug, sat Snape, hunched and worn down.

Harry's surge of emotion at his success led Kali to let out a cry that made everyone in the room turn. He could feel her zeroing in on Snape on her own, so he set her loose. Her reactions were better than his when someone spelled a netting charm at her as she careened through the crowd. She dodged expertly and swooped low to take a clawed hold of Snape's chest the way she had of the door.

"What is that?" MacNair demanded over the sound of the room erupting.

Snape's reactions had slowed, but he managed to perceive that Harry's pet was not attacking him in her frantic grab for his robes. She cried out again, piteously, this time. He put his hands on her and then around her, in a crude attempt to protect her from what appeared to be overwhelming odds. Everyone around them had their wand out, aimed.

Harry nearly collapsed flat. His forehead and hands dug in the gravel as he tried to sort out the pain that seemed to be erupting from the center of his skull.

"Harry?" Vineet asked in alarm.

Harry forced his mind closed again with near heroic effort for the second time that day. The task did not seem to get any easier with practice. "I don't know what happened. But he's found her." He pushed himself drunkenly to his knees and then, one leg at a time, to his feet. He brushed gravel out of his hair while he stared up the

drive, trying to recover. His hands were shaking so he clutched them together firmly while trying to puzzle why Kali was suddenly in so much pain when she didn't get hit by any spells.

Straightening himself, he narrowed his eyes and focused on the trees at the bend in the drive. He tossed his quivering hands to his sides and wished he could see the manor. But he had seen it before and could picture it, which would have to suffice. He needed anger, his own, and only his own, hot consuming anger which required little effort.

Snape bent his head over the quivering form trying to burrow through his robes. He petted her repeatedly trying to calm her. His pain, however, was making her inconsolably frantic. The pain, as Malfoy had promised, continued on long after the curses had faded and now felt as though it would never fade completely. The Chimrian's clear concern for his fate did raise his spirits marginally. Strangely, he wondered whether Dumbledore would have allowed him to have a pet like her when he was a student. She was rather a nice pet. The room and Death Eaters blurred out and he imagined that he was arriving on the train with her instead of his small black owl.

Malfoy stepped close, eyes suspicious. "That . . . that is Potter's pet. The one that started out as my son's," he said, jarring Snape painfully out of the past. "Master, he has come," Malfoy announced.

Snape stared at him, wondering why he had not figured out himself that Harry must be close if his pet was. At least that meant this would be over soon. He gathered what he could of his dwindling will and clutched Kali tighter. Voldemort was going to die again soon, and he wanted to see that.

Malfoy gestured for some to go to the landing to get in position for an ambush. He then glanced around as though missing someone. Casting away his disturbed expression, he explained, "That is Harry Potter's pet." to the unchanging expression on Lockhart's face.

"I drew him here," Voldemort said. "I need him."

"Odd calling card, though," Malfoy muttered, turning first one way and then another as though unsure which course to take, and to Snape's relief, ignoring the speech of his master.

MacNair stepped close. "He'll try to come up here. Most should stay."

"He cannot Apparate in. Guard the doors." Malfoy gestured at the row of thickly curtained French doors that led outside to the first floor terrace.

The Death Eaters took their positions and the room fell silent.

It was Snape who started first at the noise. Malfoy apparently heard it too and glanced at the fire, which was burning low due to inattention.

"No," Snape uttered in horror. He gauged the distance to the wall from the middle of the rug and decided he could do no better for position. "Harry, don't," he whispered, not caring that his alarm was clear to everyone.

The sound of claws scratching on metal came again, louder this time. "What is he doing?" Malfoy demanded, wand lifted to aim between Snape's eyes after tracing along the wall, looking for a target.

This time a stranger sound came, like bony little limbs clacking together. "He is opening the gates of hell," Snape said.

Malfoy swung his wand away. "We have driven you into madness; I see," he quipped with a little laugh and stalked away, over to Voldemort, where he bent down and made solicitous noises.

Kali hissed. It was more than a noise; it involved a heave of her entire tiny body. Spit flew from between her long teeth. Snape loosened his grip on her. "Harry, do not travel farther than you can retreat from," he whispered. His own agony shrunk before the significance of imminent events and a kind of limbo wrapped itself around him. His first glimpse of Dumbledore floated before him as his rational mind sought the past as a refuge from the chaos and pain of the here and now. In the Great Hall, Dumbledore's distinctively blue eyes had individually taken in each and every new student huddled in wait for the sorting hat. Snape remembered now with a cold jarring of his heart that his own first reaction to that gaze had been fear.

When the gateway split open, it startled even Snape, who ducked, arms over his head. Glistening, dark bodies poured out of the seam between the floor and the wall as though a living avalanche. Kali became a screeching blur of claw and tooth. Other screams soon joined hers. Malfoy leapt to his master's defense but the other figures in the room were quickly overwhelmed and toppled.

Harry broke into a run, stopping impatiently at each of the five barriers for a cancellation spell that they had to cooperate on or for a gateway that Vineet alone opened. Harry led the way around to the kitchen door. Inside, he was knocked flat by a spell from one of the meaner looking house-elves. From his position at the base of a butcher's block, Harry lifted his wand to retaliate, but his wand slipped from his hand and zipped to the elf's he grinned triumphantly. Vineet moved so quickly, Harry

missed half of his movements. The elf took flight into the hanging copper pans from a rather awkward-looking swinging kick that nonetheless appeared well-practiced. Vineet picked Harry's wand up and handed it to him, hesitating.

"This isn't yours."

"No. It's Hermione's; let's go."

Vineet took on that darkly fateful mode again where he seemed to droop. Harry charged past him as he stood faintly shaking his head, and led the way up the grand staircase. At the top, Harry tripped in surprise. A black robe lay splayed open, gnawed half away. Blood soaked the marble floor. A creature with rancid yellow eyes chewed at the bloody corner of the sleeve. It charged at Harry, who backed up while gathering his wits. Vineet stood frozen nearby, one foot poised on the second-to-last step.

Harry had sent the creatures back away, he had believed; although doing that from a distance had felt a little weak. The snarling thing lunged for his foot. Harry snarled back, exuding confidence, and stepped forward into the attack, hand held up, palm out. The creature reeled to the side in a panic and scuttered away on one tentacle and two claws. Harry raised his head and willed it away, it and another that was creeping along the nearby wall. The creatures sunk into the white marble and disappeared.

Vineet was much slower in following this time, but he caught up with Harry at the end of the corridor, where more empty, tattered robes lay scattered. Just in the doorway, a teeth-marked thigh bone stood, half sunk into the floor as though it was being pulled down when the gateway was closed on it. Harry didn't glance back at his fellow this time, just plunged ahead.

His wand was raised, which was the only way he managed to counter the attack that flared from the other end of the room. Malfoy stood near the hearth, bodily guarding someone else. Blood ran heavily from a gash on his cheek. Harry, despite aching to do otherwise, couldn't risk taking his eyes off his enemies to check his guardian's status. Kali's hiss of greeting indicated that she, at least, was all right. Harry stepped forward slowly, trying to judge the figure on the floor out of the corner of his eye. Malfoy threw another curse at him, which Harry countered. Hermione's wand was nearly as good as his own in defense, but Harry doubted it would do as well on attack.

"Protect Severus," Harry whispered when he felt a figure at his shoulder. Vineet moved to obey.

Harry raised his wand and fired a blasting curse for cover. It flared with only half the expected power and was countered with no effort. He had to think like Hermione

for her wand to work properly, he considered. The tip felt light and flexible when he waved it. Ollivander's voice describing Harry's mother's wand came back to him: Swishy, nice wand for charm-work. With a clear image of the spell in his mind, Harry cast a bumblebee charm. A giant swarm flowed out of the wand and rushed across the room in an arrow-shaped mass landing on Malfoy's wand and hand despite his waving them away. There were so many, his hand grew to resemble Hagrid's for size. He waved his bee-infested hand violently to shake them off, and he shouted curses that sent many falling to the floor like hail, but a second later, his wand was soaring out of the smashed open doorway, borne in the center of the swarm. Harry waved a prison box around him and then stood facing the man who had been in Malfoy's shadow.

"Voldemort," Harry uttered mockingly. "Really?"

The red eyes narrowed, making Harry have to resist scratching his scar. He wondered why it didn't burn instead and hoped that meant this version of his nemesis was too weak to make that happen, but he suspected that somehow it was the opposite . . . that they were too similar this time as Ron surmised.

Between them, Vineet had lifted Snape to his feet and backed him to the wall, shielding him with his body. Vineet's blocks being what they were, Harry felt touched by this. That shook him loose from being drawn into Voldemort's mind, which had started to happen again without his notice.

"You are the last piece, Harry," Lockhart's visage said.

"You can't have me," Harry insisted and sent a freezing charm at him.

Voldemort cast one of his own to match but the spells didn't cancel as expected. Ice ran up Lockhart's arm and had to be tossed aside in a shower of shards. Sharp red eyes came around to Harry. "You do not have your own wand."

"Nope. Lost it," Harry replied pleasantly. His own arm stung with cold too, but he ignored it. He cast a block as Voldemort's attacking spell came and lanced out with an eel charm this time, aimed only at Voldemort's wand, so that it would not impact him as well. Hermione's wand liked charms. They leapt eagerly from the tip rather than needing to be pushed out with concentrated effort. But charms were not what he would prefer to attack with and he had to struggle with his own instincts to strike out with curses. "Are you sure you're Voldemort?" Harry taunted when the flying eel persisted in pestering his opponent. "You look like Gilderoy Lockhart to me."

Voldemort hesitated less than Harry had hoped. He cast a curse in response and seemed only to have grown angrier. Harry stepped back from the force of the spell.

He had been counting on that distraction and now tried to think quickly of something else.

"You doubt who I am?" Voldemort asked in a voice that Harry did not fail to recognize as the Dark Lord's. The next instant the world twisted and Harry stumbled. Cold prickled him over all of his skin and his view shifted disconcertingly to the other end of the room. Voldemort's voice came through the confusion. "You, who are part of me, doubt who I am?"

Harry righted himself and held up his wand. Kali hissed at him. His view was nauseatingly disorienting, but he could still aim if he really tried hard. He struck out with another freezing charm, but a flare of fire consumed it. "I may be part of you, but you are NOT part of me," Harry snarled. The violent tugging on his mind allowed him to find the outlines of Voldemort the way Kali's striking the barrier had allowed him to find her in his mind. He straightened, pulling thoughts of sympathy and caring for his friends from his memory, filling his thoughts with them.

Voldemort lifted his chin. "That only goes so far now, Harry. You are no longer the powerfully pure child you were before. You are an adult this time, and you have steeped yourself too long in darkness to wield the sword of light against me." Voldemort's voice dropped and he grinned Lockhart-style, which contrasted bizarrely with his crimson eyes. "I feel the rest of my memories with you this close. You have those . . . and other skills that I want." He smiled more wickedly and held out his hand invitingly. It was a young hand, well-manicured. "And I will have them as soon as take what is mine . . ."

"No!" Harry shouted, forcing alarm and his increasing heart rate down. He held his wand out straighter. He was learning to ignore Nagini's view of events with its fish-eye distortion. "I'm stronger than you, you bastard," he insisted, believing it all the way to his thudding heart. Using only his own anger, which had laid resting too long for fear of losing himself, he tossed a rapid string of charms at Voldemort. They were ones from the drills they had practiced day after day in training, and they rolled out without need for his careful attention. "I'm whole, for one thing," Harry mocked, battering himself too as each spell struck his opponent. With each subsequent spell he had to force himself not to shirk from the abuse that was coming full circle back to him.

A Crucio struck out at Harry, dropping him to his knees, but the attack stopped immediately and Harry was free suddenly of the tug on his mind as well. He jumped back to his feet. "Can't take it, can you?" Harry mocked. Voldemort, bent over from the pain of his own curse, raised his wand, looking malicious. "Go ahead," Harry said invitingly, even lowering his wand fractionally. "You will get hit too."

Voldemort hesitated, apparently not one for self-inflicted pain. Harry used that instant to lash out with a whip charm. As it stung his own chest badly enough to suck his breath away, Lockhart's figure doubled over. Harry stepped forward, hitting the helpless figure with a weak blasting curse that nevertheless crumpled him farther. Harry quickly picked himself up from his knees where the pain from the curse had dropped him too and strode forward aggressively.

"You're pathetic," Harry said as he approached. He was furious at the notion that this mere shadow had caused so much disruption, had hurt his friends and family so badly. Voldemort's wand came around to aim up at him, but Harry knocked it away with a Bludger charm that he cast on a crystal ball resting on a narrow side table. The crystal cracked the wood paneling before crashing to the floor and splitting open. Voldemort grabbed his injured hand and curled around it, looking much more like Gilderoy Lockhart as he did so.

Harry picked up Voldemort's wand, focusing only on the core of himself, ignoring the pain that had flared in his own hand as though a railroad spike may have gone through it. He stood over his enemy and carefully switched Voldemort's wand for Hermione's in his uninjured left hand and aimed it at Lockhart's chest, which rose and fell rapidly beneath his black robe.

"You've been far too much trouble," Harry uttered angrily. Red eyes opened and turned toward him. Something tugged on his mind again. "You can't have me," Harry said. He bit his lip momentarily. "And this is the last time I suffer through your return," he vowed. A pause ensued during which both of their breathing slowed. Harry was too angry to think and his anger was giving Voldemort a way into him. He let go of some of it to buy time, and wondered how to kill the sorry excuse for a wizard lying helpless before him. There didn't seem to be a way to do it that wouldn't sacrifice himself as well. He could not find the same love-filled Forbidden Curse in himself now. Voldemort was right: it was the product of being a child. Nothing in him was so purely simple now and causing death would be handing himself over to darkness.

The vertical irises of Voldemort's eyes constricted, his chin tilted to the side inhumanly. He was still attempting to grab hold of Harry. "That isn't going to work," Harry promised. He wrapped Lockhart's legs in a binding curse to stall, still uncertain how to proceed. He thought with alarm of how much the dark tendrils would feed on him if he simply murdered Voldemort outright. The heavy scent of the scattered blood-soaked robes surrounding them repelled him too from causing more death.

The only sound in the room was the breeze outside in the trees until Vineet's voice interrupted his musings. "What are you waiting for?"

Chapter 31

"I don't want him coming back again," Harry said, sounding less confident than he had felt just seconds ago. What would Dumbledore do? he wondered. Last time, he had left it up to Harry with scant advice as to how to proceed. The burst of annoyance at that thought made the pain in Voldemort's broken hand throb sharply in Harry's own before fading again. "There are worse things than death, Tom," Harry quoted Dumbledore, hoping understanding of that mysterious statement would flow from speaking it.

Something flickered behind Lockhart's red eyes. Harry's own widened as he followed the pathways of knowledge which had just opened like a blossom before him. Voldemort feared death, that's why he had cleaved his soul so many times. Death many times over hung in the room waiting to be drawn upon. "No. Worse than death," Harry breathed, feeling elated and faintly dizzy at the knowledge that was so clear now. Harry could feel the power to make a Crux Horridus thrumming through his hand and the wand that was the twin of his own. It was so simple what he needed to do, he nearly laughed.

"If I don't kill you, you can't come back from the dead," Harry said, face cracking into a strained smile. Voldemort's eyes shifted again. "Oh, you think you fear death more than anything else," Harry added, reading the currents of thought behind the queer eyes. "That isn't quite true."

Harry reached down with the wand and circled it slowly as the knowledge urged him. The heaviness of death and the scent of blood, still wet and radiant, gathered in close as the spell built. Lockhart tried to squirm away, but Harry pressed his foot down on his arm and held it there, careful not to lean hard enough to distract himself with new pain. Lockhart was just another vessel like the others into which someone had poured power and it had not yet taken up firm residence. It pulling loose with ease as the spell tugged on it. Sparking white cotton began gathering on the wand Harry held. He backed off, still turning his hand in a circle to keep the spell active; he did not want to remove all of what had been added, that would simply leave him where he had been at the beginning of all of this. Instead, like an adept spinner with a bag of wool, he plucked out just the exact tangled threads he wanted. The ball of faintly crackling blue-white energy rapidly gathered on itself. Harry drew the wand away and held it straight up until all of the trailing sparkles faded. The slippery weight of death in the air had faded, gathered up with the wooly energy, binding it together.

Harry closed his eyes a moment. His heart raced in his ears. He cracked open the gateway to the Dark Plane and threw the glowing cottony ball of power off the wand and into the gap before slamming it closed again. No one moved. Harry half-expected

an explosion, but there was no sound, and no more light flickered than was already coming in the damaged French door with its torn curtain.

Harry's eyes came to rest on Nagini's unblinking ones staring over the edge of a rope basket in front of the darkened hearth. Harry wasn't sure what to do with her any more than he quite knew what to do with himself. He turned to his companion, still standing guard before Snape. Worrisomely, Snape had slumped to his knees and leaned heavily on the wall behind him. Harry tossed Voldemort's wand down and stepped over to his adoptive father, horribly grateful that he was alive, that Harry had come in time.

Without straightening his back, Snape raised his chin. His eyes still held the same pain Harry had seen earlier in Voldemort's vision. Vineet moved to guard Voldemort even though Harry said, "Don't bother."

"I knew you would come," Snape said, but not in his normal voice, in one that wavered uncharacteristically.

Harry plucked Kali out of the way off of Snape's shoulder and pulled him forward with his other arm, pressing his ragged brow into his ribs. "Of course I came," he said lightly. He felt dizzy but intensely relieved to have succeeded. "Had to get rid of the bastard anyway," he added, trying to find some much needed cocky confidence. He felt cut down, reduced, now that everything was calm.

He squeezed Snape's shoulder harder. "You all right?" Harry asked, thinking that Snape did not seem at all himself and in fact felt odd, as though he were repellent. Kali fluttered in Harry's other hand.

"Dumbledore would not let me keep such a familiar," Snape stated, reaching toward Kali.

"What?" Harry queried. He crouched, still holding Snape steady, trying to look him in the eye to judge that strange statement better.

Snape gazed at Kali, fluttering as though she had difficulty perching on Harry's hand. "Too much like Fawkes," he said, sounding very far away.

Harry's blood ran icy. Snape had been tortured too long and seemed to be losing his grip on reality.

"Vishnu," Harry stood and said in alarm, "Can you take care of . . ." He began to gesture at the blonde figure on the floor, whose dim red eyes were fixed on him.

"You wish me to take Voldemort . . ." Vineet began hesitantly, clearly startled.

Harry frowned, duty feeling a terribly weighty burden. "I guess I should . . . be the one to explain." He gestured at Snape. "Severus needs a Healer. Can you take him to Mungo's?"

Vineet moved quickly to support Snape's wavering balance so that Harry could let go of him. Harry said, "See that he gets the Auror's Healer, Shankwell, all right?" Harry dearly hoped the Healer could help him.

Vineet nodded. "I am, of course, remembering him." He helped Snape to his feet, holding most of his weight to keep him there. He turned to Harry with a sharp, almost reprimanding gaze.

Harry found quick annoyance at this. "What's wrong?"

Vineet hesitated, "You summoned the Rakshasas."

"I told you you weren't going to like what I was going to do," Harry pointed out smartly. He was feeling himself more and more by the moment and reveled in his newly safe annoyance.

Vineet stared at him a breath longer before drawing his wand and drawing a slow circle of yellow light around him and his burden. He then put his hand on the wall and closed his eyes. With a pop! they were gone.

Harry stood in the quiet room staring at the prison box containing Malfoy, the wizard who had reduced his guardian to a state of tenuous sanity. Harry stepped over and kicked the box a few inches, making it topple. Lockhart's red, but no longer glowing eyes, watched him do this.

Kali gave a cry. Harry pulled her in closer and took his first good look at her. Her wings were torn and most of her front left foot was missing. She repeatedly tried to put it down but then had to jerk it up and fuss at it with her mouth. These injuries on top of her previous ragged state left her sorely wretched. Harry petted her tenderly. "You've suffered more than anyone else during all of this, haven't you?" he said to her, feeling aching sympathy for her, sympathy not burdened, layered, or tethered to anyone else's emotion. Her pain bled through to him, ghostly, as though he had wings right now too.

Harry waved a prison box around Lockhart and sighed into the quiet of the room. He thought of Hagrid, whom he suspected would still be at Hogwarts. With new determination he turned away from the boxes and strode out of the broken door and onto the wide terrace. Decorative urns stood at the corners with flowering plants growing out of them. Kali's pleasure at escaping the room made him elated as well

and they both deeply breathed in the fresh air. Harry strode to the edge and looked out over the drive splitting the forest. He was presumably still inside the manor's barriers. Kali curled up in the crook of Harry's arm, trusting that he would take care of things or simply happy enough just to have him back. Harry was glad to have himself back too, although he wished he didn't feel so strangely empty, as though his emotions resided alone in a large hall with too much space around them.

He felt a bit jealous of Vineet's ability to open a gateway, peeved almost, and this made him hesitate taking flight. He aught to be able to Apparate away too, barriers or not. Kali's injuries hummed in him, grating on his bones. Terrible to have damaged wings, he thought; nothing could be worse. Hagrid, he thought, he needed to get to Hagrid. He could feel this wish resonating inside of her as well and almost laughed.

"Let's see what we can do," Harry muttered aloud. He closed his eyes and fell through the cracked cement of the terrace and into the Dark Plane. He arrived on his knees with Kali burrowing frantically into his sleeve while snarling. "It's all right," he said to her, maneuvering her into his pocket.

Something howled pitifully in the distance. Claws scrabbled nearby, investigating. "I'd have thought you'd be well fed," Harry commented to the noises.

Kali's panic was bleeding into him so he did not have time to walk. Hurrying, he imagined Hagrid's cottage, fixed it clear as a photograph in his mind, but upside-down, and Apparated. He didn't know if that was going to work, hadn't thought of trying it before now, but when he opened his eyes he was in a different stretch of grey tufted land. Different scrabbling sounded nearby. Harry turned and found himself facing the wretched werewolf. "Everyone else got something to eat," Harry said to it, grinning a bit at his own poor joke. "Next time I'll try to bring you something." The werewolf sniffed the ground and blinked at him.

Harry grabbed hold of the wiry, trembling bundle in his pocket and fell again. Hagrid's cottage stood before him. He glanced behind him at the hulking grey castle wall with its looming tower and let out a joyous laugh at having arrived well inside the castle's infamous barriers.

"Harry?" Hagrid said in confusion from the middle of his pumpkin patch. Harry had not seen him there. He was giving Harry a very odd look.

"Kali's hurt," Harry said, pulling his pet out into the light.

As soon as the half-giant got a look at the miserable bundle Harry held up before him, he completely forgot that Harry had appeared out of nowhere, just as Harry intended.

Chapter 31

"Ah, le's have a look at her now." He carried Kali inside and shifted a small pot of black goo, from the shelf above Fawkes' perched, onto the fire. "You are a sad little thing," he cooed to Harry's pet, despite the fact that she had just sunk her long teeth fully into his pinky finger, quite a feat given that she was not even as large as Hagrid's pinky.

A minute later, he told Harry to pull the pot off of the fire and with a cotton swab, he dabbed the tarry substance onto her injured foot and along a nasty laceration Harry hadn't seen that went clear to her ribs. Hagrid then, with surprising grace, considering that he was working with a creature so small compared to his hands, spread her wings out on the table and ran the tar along the torn edges. Spread out like a ruined specimen from some macabre collection, she did not look as though she could ever fly again.

"I'll have to get Professor Sprout to sew her wings up. I can't do that kinda work on somethin' so tiny, but she has the hands for it." He gathered Kali up as he spoke, almost disregarding Harry in his single-minded concern for a creature put into his care.

Harry held the heavy cottage door open for him since Hagrid was cradling Kali in both massive hands. "If you see Professor McGonagall," Harry said, "can you give her a message?"

"Ay, she's here," Hagrid said as though just remembering something important. "Got all hot un'er the collar with Bones, –parrently, after finding Perfessor Flitwick dead. She left the Express to look for him after more help arrived. She's s'posed to rejoin it, but Pomfrey insisted she rest for an hour."

"Good for her, getting mad at Bones," Harry said, despite a voice that insisted that Bones hadn't behaved nearly as bad as Fudge. "You lost Professor Flitwick?"

Hagrid nodded and used the corner of his waistcoat to dab his nose. Harry now noticed the rings around his eyes that must have been there before, but Harry himself had been too distracted earlier to notice.

Harry frowned, hoping things were finally turning around for the better; he was tired of losing people. He patted Hagrid's elbow in sympathy. "Bones is who I have to go deal with right now, in fact. Can you tell Minerva that Voldemort's taken care of but that Severus is at St. Mungo's. Can you ask her to go make sure he gets proper care? I sent him with my fellow apprentice, but I think she'll know better what he needs."

Hagrid halted, stooped low in his own doorway. He turned to Harry. "You took care o' He-Who- . . . already?"

"Yes," Harry assured him. "But please send Minerva to St. Mungo's," Harry repeated, dearly wanting Hagrid to remember that part. "Have Fawkes take her." Over by the hearth, the bird fluffed himself at the sound of his name.

"Ah, that bird doesna mind anyone," Hagrid grumbled.

"No?" Harry asked, still holding the door. He turned back to the phoenix. "That's because you don't know his secret," he said in a falsely pleasant voice. Fawkes flapped his wings and gave a squawk.

Hagrid turned and ducked his head back inside the cottage. "Wha's this?"

Harry stared at the bird. "You never change back, do you? You probably can't. You'd turn to dust if you did, wouldn't you?" When Hagrid glanced at Harry in consternation, he explained, "He's Godric Gryffindor, who has simply stayed in his Animagus form all of these years. One way to live forever, I guess." The bird tilted its head at them, changing from one sharp angle to another.

Hagrid didn't speak right away, but he finally said, "That so?"

Harry said, "I have to go. Thank you for taking care of Kali." With that, Harry disappeared. Hagrid caught the door with his foot and eyed the brightly colored bird across from him, ignoring that Harry had just repeated the supposedly impossible.

Harry stepped through the broken door from the terrace and found Draco Malfoy hovering over the prison box containing his father.

"Not thinking of letting him out, are you?" Harry asked.

Draco started, not having heard Harry come in. His gaze then went a little strange as though something about Harry was additionally unexpected. "No," Draco said. The box cursed him with language more foul than Harry had ever heard. Draco kicked the box and it fell silent.

"I'm surprised at you, Draco," Harry said.

"Get them out of here before I kill them both," Draco hissed with such vehemence, it gave Harry pause.

"Right-O," Harry said pleasantly.

Draco lifted his wand to point it at Harry's face. "If I ever see him again I'm going to come after you in revenge," he spat.

Harry gently pushed Draco's hand aside. "I'll do my best," he said, unprovoked and very happy to be. Control had been returned to him: he could get angry when he wanted and let things slide when he didn't; it was wondrous.

Draco eyed him with some suspicion and then stalked away like a man defeated and angry about it.

"You all right, Draco?" Harry asked.

Draco pulled himself around and then upright although his eye twitched. "As soon as they're gone for good, I can put things back together and then maybe I will be."

"Speaking of which," Harry said, turning to the basket by the hearth, which to his relief, still contained Nagini. The snake stared at him. There was nothing inherently evil about her, she simply hosted evil. "Sorry about this," Harry said, and blasted her out of existence with a fire charm. A secondary explosion of magic followed the initial one, making both of them duck for long, sizzling seconds. Afterward, Harry stared at the glowing, cindered rope that piled in a coil on the hearth. He felt even more acutely empty now.

Draco said, "Why the devil don't you just kill the Dark Lord too?" He waved his arm at the bloodied robes surrounding him. "Not as though you held back with your little army of nightmares, Potter."

Harry found himself needing to be understood. "I thought if I didn't kill him, then he couldn't come back from the dead."

Draco's mouth puckered to the side. "Twisted bit of logic, that. And I have a feeling that from now on you are going to do as you wish." He turned and stalked away with, "Bloody hell." On his way out, he kicked a stray skull out of his path, so cleaned by tiny teeth that it gleamed.

Harry watched Draco's shadow shorten after he turned the corner and then counted the robe remains strewn in this room. There were seven. He and Vineet had seen three on the way up. That made ten. "Damn," Harry said. That left a lot of them roaming free. Strange to wish for more death, but it was hard not to in this case.

Hagrid ducked and entered the soothing shade of the plants that crowded greenhouse three. Professor Sprout sat on a tall stool, attacking the roots of a Whiskwire vine with a small hatchet. Chips of metal flew from the hatchet when it hit an especially hard tendril. Professor McGonagall sat nearby, hands folded in her lap, one of them heavily bandaged, looking as though she wanted to be more calm than she was managing. They both greeted Hagrid.

"Ah, Perfessor, I need your fine hands for some sewing, if you can put down yer ax fer a moment."

Sprout sighed and pushed her work aside. After the workbench was cleared and cleaned, Hagrid spread Kali's wings out and held her down with great care, suffering only two bites that didn't even break his thick skin.

McGonagall stared at the animal while Sprout threaded a needle. She blinked and seemed to come out of a trance. "That's Harry's pet."

"Yep," Hagrid said and then his face contorted. "Oh, yeah, I have message for you."

"From Harry?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"Yeah," Hagrid hesitated then, wondering if he should explain other things about Harry. "He said to tell you that You-Know-Who has been taken care of and that Professor Snape was at St. Mungo's . . . oh, and would you please see to it that he gets properly taken care of." Hagrid stared at the glass ceiling above him. "Yeah, that was it."

McGonagall stood so suddenly, her stool rocked and nearly fell backward. Sprout said, "Minerva, Poppy said an hour."

"Poppy's with the train and it's been a half-hour, I'm going. Have to get my broomstick, though."

"Do you want Fawkes?" Hagrid asked.

McGonagall stopped and rotated around on her toes. "Will he take me?"

"Yup, he will now." Hagrid gave a great whistle that shook the panes of glass in the greenhouse, but in a burst of feathers, Fawkes arrived and hovered in the air before them.

"Well, look at that. How in the world . . . ?"

"–arry told me the old bird's secret," Hagrid said. Fawkes gave a great squawk. "But I best not pass it on. He'll take you though."

McGonagall held out a hand and Fawkes landed on it and preened spasmodically. "How did Harry know?"

Hagrid shrugged. "Have to ask –im yerself. But . . . about Harry . . ."

"Yes?" McGonagall prompted, preparing to grab onto long tail feathers.

"Nothin'," Hagrid said and waved her off.

With another burst, they were gone.

Chapter 31

Harry picked up the prisoner boxes and used his new apparition trick to put himself into the alleyway outside the Ministry where he had been redirected last time. It was empty. He stepped out onto the pavement after glancing around for Muggles. Despite the sunshine, the road and pavements were deserted. A prickle started teasing at the back of Harry's neck. He took a deep breath and stepped toward the phone booth, but it had a sign reading Out of Sorts hanging in the doorway and it was chained closed with a padlock that sparkled with more than sunlight. Harry slunk back to the alleyway. He instinctively did not want to show off his new skills by putting himself directly inside when security was supposed to be preventing it.

A doorway opened behind him, where he didn't think there had been one before, and Mrs. Stillingfleet stepped out, the woman Harry had ridden down in the booth with last time. She had a large-bellied man with her who was wearing overalls and looking grim.

"Hello," Harry said, stepping over quickly before the brick doorway could close.

"Mr. Potter," the woman said. "Surprising to see you . . ."

"Is it?" Harry asked, wondering with a small tremor if the Ministry had printed wanted posters for him already. The opening in the brick wall behind her was fast shrinking. "Is that the new way in?" Harry asked, hoping for another convenient change of subject.

"Yep," the man said. He turned and tapped the bricks in a pattern and the wall re-opened.

Harry slipped through, nodding back at them in thanks, although the old woman gave him an alarmed gaze in return. The wall closed again, leaving Harry in darkness. He had the sensation of falling even though his feet stayed on the ground. The world settled and a lamp appeared some distance away. Harry walked toward it. The same pale-skinned young man sat at a small desk in the middle of what seemed to be a large empty space. He looked harried and his hands shook. "Name?" he demanded, voice echoing.

"I was just here," Harry said, "Harry Potter."

"Right," the man said, and began laboriously checking his lists. "Special instructions, it says. Inform Minister for Magic."

"That's exactly where I'm going," Harry assured him. "Straight to her office," he added chummily, trying to get away as fast as possible. He handed over Hermione's wand which was weighed and handed back. He realized with sweaty palms that he had left Voldemort's behind at the Malfoy's.

"Well, don't make any stops on the way," the man said. "I don't have an escort for you right now and I have to watch the desk."

The prickles moved from the back of Harry's neck to dance on his chest. "Why was the entrance changed?" Harry asked.

"–S damaged," the man replied, "–n it needs to be repaired. Only employees let in now anyways. Doorway only –lows authorized Ministry staff to open it and mos' Departments are closed right now."

Harry glanced back at the blackness behind him. He couldn't make out the bricks in the low light.

"Atrium's that way," the man said, pointing off to his left. He sat down and began making notations in the large logbook that dominated the desk.

Harry stepped into the darkness and tall hidden doors parted before him, revealing a dimly lit atrium. The poor lighting was a blessing; the atrium was in shambles. The gates had been pulled halfway down and hung like a sagging harp behind the reception desk which had been toppled. Parchments were strewn everywhere although it looked as though someone had used a spell to clean up the area around the remains of the desk. The floor was blackened before several of the hearths. The paintings were missing and chunks of gold leafed frame lay against the wall. The statue in the fountain was intact but the cement ring had been smashed and water puddled a large part of the floor.

Harry backed out and returned to the desk. "What happened?"

The man looked up and stared at Harry. "Riots. Public got wind that You-Know-Who was back and had attacked the Hogwart's express and they went mad. They thought the dark mark had been put up over the train, they thought the Minister herself was under an Imperio and had given up the train to appease You-Know-Who." The man's upper lip quivered as he said this. "They were nutters, every last one of –em."

Harry's arms were growing tired of carrying the prison boxes. He stretched his neck and shifted the weight around on his fingers. "Merlin," he said. He went back to the atrium. The gates had been propped open with a broken broomstick and only two

lifts were functional. Harry turned and eyed the still darkened reception area that ironically did not seem nearly as damaged now in comparison to the atrium. Harry thought of stopping at the floor before, but he wasn't in the mood to talk to Mr. Weasley, so he pressed the button for level one and waited while the floors slid by. The quiet Ministry felt like death too and Harry shivered.

The guards on the door to Minister Bones' office did stop him this time. One of them held a wand on him while the other went inside to say that he was there. Bones' voice tiredly told them to let Harry in.

Flanked by the guards, Harry stepped into the reception area of the office suite where six staff were working frantically including Percy Weasley. Things were only disorganized here by nature rather than by malice and Harry felt warmer. He set the boxes on the floor at Bones' feet. She stood, hands on hips, seeming in conflict about how to deal with him. Harry said, "Malfoy and Voldemort."

The office broke into panic, all except Belinda, who sat at her desk mutely staring at him.

"You brought Voldemort here, Mr. Potter?" Bones exclaimed. Half of her staff had taken up hiding in her office. The guards also ran off, but Harry suspected it was to fetch reinforcements.

Harry frowned. "I rendered him harmless and brought him here. I thought you'd want to know first-hand what had happened. If you don't, I'll be on my way . . . I have other things I need to do."

His attitude hardened her alarm into movement. She inspected the boxes and while holding her wand on them, said, "Let's hear your report, Mr. Potter."

Harry found himself faced with explaining exactly what he had done; something he had somehow neglected to foresee. Running footsteps approached and Mr. Weasley, Shacklebolt, and Kerry Ann appeared in the doorway accompanied by the guards. "Harry," Mr. Weasley said in surprise, but he lowered his wand.

"Says he has Voldemort in one of these boxes," Bones stated.

Harry cancelled the box and let Lockhart topple out onto the floor. Six wands were pulled out to aim at him. The crumpled figure raised its head and looked around at the crowd. It was Shacklebolt who broke the stunned silence with, "Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Harry was grateful to be able to tell part of the story without risk to himself. "Merton turned him into Voldemort by emptying the Crux Horridi into him. Voldemort had

left them behind to make himself hard to kill. Merton got them from the Malfoys. Nagini, who was another one, I destroyed." Harry wondered with an acute twinge exactly what he was going to do about himself.

"Why did you bring him to the Minister's office?" Shacklebolt asked in disbelief.

"He's harmless now," Harry said, "I made him into a Muggle." Harry was thinking he really needed to move on to St. Mungo's to see how Snape was doing, since his life was on hold until he knew. But everyone stared at him mutely after that statement and he had a bad feeling this was going to take a while.

"No one can make a wizard into a Muggle, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "Take them to the dungeons," he ordered Shacklebolt and Kerry Ann. With mystified glances back at Harry, they obeyed. Mr. Weasley stepped closer to Harry, his eyes moving back and forth between each of Harry's as though seeking something in them. He glanced at Bones and some silent agreement must have passed between them because Mr. Weasley went on, "We're very glad you took care of Voldemort, Harry. Where did you find him?"

"Malfoy Manor."

Mr. Weasley sent a silver message through the floor at that. "Do you want to take a seat, Harry?" Mr. Weasley offered and Harry, with a bad jolt, thought he sounded bizarrely similar to the way Lucius had when speaking to Voldemort.

"No, I need to go to St. Mungo's. Severus is there. They tortured him too long." Harry cut himself off since his eyes were stinging as he spoke and his voice was sure to go next.

Mr. Weasley's attitude shifted. "Of course," he said gently. He glanced at Bones but she didn't contradict him. Everyone seemed to be standing on the edge of something.

Harry resisted sniffling. "I can go?"

"Yes," Mr. Weasley said. Harry had the strangest sense that he was being rewarded for simply asking and nothing more.

Harry headed for the door. He turned back at the last to say, "Draco didn't help them at all, make sure no one is rough with him."

The room stared at him, a little more tensely than Harry thought reasonable. Mr. Weasley said, "Of course, Harry."

As Harry headed down the corridor to the lifts, he wished he could hear the conversation that occurred after he departed. Currents were running beneath everyone's

actions that he didn't understand and he keenly needed to. Later, he told himself. He would have time to worry about it later.

Author's Notes:
Yes, yes, terribly long time since the last update, but I have the next three chapters in draft. Been in forward-writing mode rather than revision mode. Oh, yeah and the already stressed should wait for 33 to be posted before reading 32.
got cut off before, you may want to go back and read it before continuing

Chapter 32.

A Battle of One

At the top of the staircase, Draco encountered Pansy, looking her most dangerous. "I want to see," she insisted.

Draco sighed and gestured that she should precede him. He followed her to the scene of destruction, and stood near the broken door and its warm light, as she prowled the room. Flies circled the torn and bloodied robe nearby.

"Hah," Pansy scoffed, sounding darkly satisfied.

"I'd have suggested you come in here sooner if I'd known it'd make you feel better," he said dryly.

She tapped a stray shoe with her slippered toe. The edge of the leather upper had been chewed away. "I take back everything bad I ever said about Potter," she said with queer glee.

Draco sighed. "Just as well. Doesn't seem like a good idea to be on his bad side."

A noise in the corridor brought both of their wands up. Avery and Greyback slinked into the room, Greyback sniffing the air audibly.

"There's nothing left for you here," Draco said. "Go away."

Greyback scoffed. "Where is our Lord?"

"Ministry of Magic, I expect," Draco replied. "Potter took him and my father away himself. Good of you to run off like you did."

Chapter 32

"I wasn't here," Avery pointed out with a sharp glance at Greyback.

"There was nothing to do but run," Greyback pointed out, holding out a mauled arm covered in blood-matted fur.

"My father did all right," Draco pointed out with a mix of pride and disgust.

"What the devil were those things?" Greyback asked in a growl.

"Precisely. Now get out," Draco said. "As house guests go, you are the pits and with my father gone you are no longer welcome. Besides that, the Ministry is certain to be swarming over this place worse than those things, any moment now."

Avery and Greyback whispered together and then slunk off with baleful backward glances. Draco tossed his shoulders back and chuckled oddly. "Getting all that?" he asked suggestively to no one in particular.

When there was no response to this query, he turned to an old trophy cup on a high shelf and said, "Don't think I don't see you there, Skeeter."

A second later a colorful insect buzzed through the flies and then expanded to become a colorfully suited reporter, pen already poised. "I do so very much wish that I had my photographer with me," she said, glancing around as she stepped daintily over a fallen robe in her high-heeled shoes.

"You aren't welcome, either," Draco said.

"Potter really do all this?" she asked eagerly, ignoring his statement.

"Yes," Pansy replied.

"I did it," Draco said, countering her.

"Liar," Skeeter retorted. She made a few notes as she scanned the room.

Draco aimed his wand at her. "On three you are going to deeply regret still being here."

"Oh, come now. I would pay handsomely for an exclusive interview."

"One," Draco said.

"You and I have certainly enjoyed a fine working relationship in the past."

"Two."

"Oh, all right," she huffed and disappeared. A small insect flew out of the broken door.

Draco fired an impervious charm at it in her wake. "Miserable leech," he growled.

A Battle of One

McGonagall arrived at St. Mungo's in the overly crowded waiting room. People stood or sat two-deep along the wall since the benches were full. Cuts, bruises and bashed heads were the most common injuries and two Healer trainees were working the room, trying to clear out the easy cases that they could handle themselves.

"Serves them right for getting out of hand," McGonagall muttered to herself. "As though we haven't got enough trouble."

She weaved her way across the room with difficulty. Having Fawkes on her shoulder to startle people was the only way she made it at all. Many were murmuring in frightened tones about Voldemort, and McGonagall realized that she was one of the few who knew he was gone again. She stopped and turned to the old wizard and his slightly less old son she had just cut between, but all she said, was, "Everything's going to be fine."

The older one said, "Didnja read the papers? Potter's gone dark as the Dark Lord . . . where's that leave us?"

"It will work out. It always does," McGonagall insisted.

He scoffed and waved his hand as though to dismiss her. She plowed away and dodged the desk by saying she had a previous appointment. In Shankwell's treatment room, where she assumed her colleague would be given his injuries, she found Snape. He was lying on the table in the center of the small room and looked to be asleep. A young Indian man stood in the corner as though on guard, although his wand wasn't out. He certainly wasn't in Healer's robes.

McGonagall, thinking she remembered him visiting Hogwarts said, "We have met, correct? You are an apprentice Auror with Harry as I recall?"

"Perhaps I am."

McGonagall had bent over Snape to take a better look at him. Fawkes gripped her shoulder harder when she did so. "You aren't certain about that?"

"I am violating my orders."

McGonagall decided she could sort the Indian out later. "Has the Healer been here?"

"Yes, several times. They are waiting for another to come. The specialist in such things."

"Versa?" McGonagall asked.

"You are knowing such things, yes. As for Professor Snape, he has been potioned into unconsciousness so he is not suffering. They will have to wake him, they warned, when the other Healer arrives."

She stroked Snape's unfeeling arm. "How bad is he?" When Vineet shook his head that he did not know how to answer this, she asked, "Was he talking?"

Vineet replied, "Yes, but not making sense."

"What did he say?"

Vineet recited Snape's words for her. She rubbed her forehead. "Dumbledore and a familiar . . . that's what he was talking about?" She straightened and lifted Fawkes from her shoulder onto her hand. "Nothing you can do, is there?" she asked the bird. Fawkes tilted his head to look at Snape and then cocked it at her. She turned back to Vineet. "Have you seen Harry, then?"

"Yes, he is being the reason that I am not certain I am still an apprentice."

"Ah," she said and then smiled. "If you need a job, come see me. Anyone who sticks with Harry when he needs it, we all owe dearly."

Vineet pushed away from the wall. "If you are staying here, I would be pleased to return to the Ministry to end my uncertainty and to offer my assistance again if I am allowed."

McGonagall pulled out her pocket watch and stared at it. The Express was not originally scheduled to arrive for several more hours, although the Ministry had intended to magically accelerate it with some spells usually reserved for the Knight Bus. That would make it difficult to locate again if it hadn't already arrived. She said, "The Danish Ministry of Magic sent their own witches and wizards to help, many of them came to help guard the train." She faded out and patted Snape on the shoulder. "Unfortunately, just a little too late for some. But you may go . . . I will stay. You may find things not quite as bad as expected in the Law Enforcement Department."

Vineet bowed and disappeared with a pop!

Minutes later, a young Healer came in and forced a neutralizing potion on Snape. He came to consciousness only reluctantly and with a noise of distress. McGonagall had stepped aside to make room, but when the Healer went to the cabinet and began searching for something, she moved in back beside the bed.

"Severus?" she prompted.

Snape relaxed upon finding her there, after tensing as though not certain what he expected upon waking. "Minerva," he greeted her with a weak voice.

"Ah, well at least you recognize me."

"With that bird on your arm, I almost did not," Snape commented, voice clearly pained. He stared at the ceiling and asked, "Where is Harry?"

"I'm not certain, Severus, I'm sorry. He is around, though. He brought his injured pet to Hagrid for care but departed again before I saw him. He left the message that you were here."

"The Express arrived?" Snape asked.

"It may have. When more reinforcements came, I went back to look for Filius."

"It did not seem promising."

"It wasn't," she admitted.

Snape closed his eyes. "An enormous amount of blood today."

She patted his shoulder. "But you seem all right."

He shook his head without opening his eyes. His brow was deeply furrowed and a thin beading of sweat covered his upper lip. "Harry perhaps is not all right either," he said, sounding far away and quite grim.

The door opened and a small, lithe Healer entered, trailing an assistant and a long head of hair. Without any discussion she went to work, rolling Snape onto his side with a spell and tracing her small fingers over the back of his neck. McGonagall stepped back out of the way and watched, hoping Snape was being his usual pessimistic self.

Out in the waiting room, Harry made his way through the crowd that would have parted for him if it had had the sense to. Harry assumed it was his wild appearance that made them stare at him with such befuddlement as he squeezed between people. One young witch with a thick bandage around her head stepped into his path and demanded, "When are you getting rid of You-Know-Who?"

"Voldemort. And I already did," he snapped while pushing around her.

The room stood still for a second before cheering broke out. The news traveled fast across the crowded room and people began Disapparating, even the untreated.

Harry made his way around the greetingwitch – who was distracted by hugging a patient in celebration – and stepped alone to the lifts.

In the treatment room, he found the Healer bent over Snape, and McGonagall leaning against the wall, looking in need of an overstuffed chair. "Harry," she said in emotional greeting. Her eyes then grew concerned as she continued to take him in. Harry touched his face, wondering what could be wrong with it. She smiled at him the next instant though, so he combed his hair back with his fingers and leaned on the wall beside her.

"How is he?" he asked her, not wanting to disturb Snape, whose eyes were tightly closed.

"We don't know yet," she admitted quietly.

They both watched the Healer work. Occasionally she would have to coax Snape back awake, which he was clearly reluctant to be. He acknowledged Harry with a faint nod. Harry resisted stepping closer, lest he interfere. He remembered his own similar treatment and how much better it made him feel. Perhaps the same could be hoped for in Snape's case.

"Shouldn't you be with the Express?" Harry asked when McGonagall sighed.

She nodded. "I was ordered away to rest by Madam Pomfrey, who threatened to tie me to a bed in the dispensary if I didn't obey, and since she herself went to join the train to help see to the children, I could not secretly rejoin the train and only pretend to rest."

Harry looked her over. Her shoulders were more stooped than he recalled last time and the lines in her face more extensive. Pomfrey must have been concerned because of her age, he realized, something he hadn't considered before. Among the Aurors it was the older members primarily who hadn't survived, so he was glad someone was watching out for her. "Sorry about Professor Flitwick," Harry said, drawing himself up out of his own worry.

McGonagall nodded and they stood in silence until she said, "Perhaps I should go. Fawkes may be able to get me directly to the train no matter where it is now." She turned while passing Harry and said, "Hagrid tells me I have you to thank for Fawkes' cooperation."

"Happy to help, Professor."

She smiled at him, although her eyes were still pained. "Take care, Harry. I'll come back to check on Severus after the Express' passengers are all safely off with their families."

Harry nodded and leaned back against the wall after she departed. He realized then that she hadn't mentioned Voldemort, or even asked about him. He wondered if this was more of the usual, well of course Harry destroyed him . . .

Harry's musings were interrupted by Versa collapsing to the floor, apparently spent. Her assistant calmly scooped her up with a spell and carried her off as though this was not unexpected. Harry approached the bed. Snape turned onto his back, looked up at him, and also narrowed his eyes as though surprised by something, making Harry asked in concern, "What is it?"

Snape replied, "Your eyes."

Harry's blood went icy yet again that day. "What about them?"

"They are noticeably lighter," Snape explained.

Harry glanced around but there was no mirror. "Really? Strange. But how are you?" he asked, deciding his eyes didn't matter right then if they were still green and had not turned red or something.

"Feeling better. We shall see."

"The pain's gone?"

After a hesitation, Snape shook his head. "But how are you?"

"All right. I had a bit of trouble at the Ministry taking in the prisoners. But they let me come here, so I may be okay with them." Harry put his hand on Snape's arm. Something about Snape was still strangely repellent, as if he were a cursed object. Harry swallowed. "Versa was treating you for the after-effects of the Crucios?"

Snape nodded, face fixed in a grim state.

Harry swallowed again. Snape didn't seem much better, although he wasn't speaking in riddles now, at least.

Snape asked, "What did you do to Voldemort?"

"I made him live the thing he dreaded most," Harry said carefully.

"Worse than death?" Snape prompted.

"Yeah," Harry said. "For him, the worse thing than death was being a Muggle. So I turned him into one."

After previous reactions to this statement, Harry was curious what Snape's may be. He didn't react, he merely squinted in the direction of the ceiling, deep in thought. "That explains your eyes," he said.

"How so?"

"That is very powerful magic. Mage sorcery even . . ." When Harry didn't respond, Snape asked, "You have never noticed that very old and powerful witches and wizards have very light-colored eyes?"

Harry thought that over. Dumbledore certainly had. So did Ollivander. "I guess."

"Long exposure to strong magic will do that. Your eyes are now olivine." Snape slowly lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, his usual sign of stress. "How did you know how to work the spell?"

Harry replied, "I took the knowledge of the Crux Horridus from Voldemort and modified it. I tossed his power into the Dark Plane, where I hope it will simply be lost."

Snape had closed his eyes, but he opened them then to study Harry closely. "How are you feeling now?"

"All right. A bit better." He hesitated in answering any more strongly given that he had a very big decision hanging over him.

"Feel like yourself?" Snape asked factually.

Harry breathed in and out once. "Yeah."

Snape's response was interrupted by the Healer arriving. Harry stepped back and let him stand beside the table in his spot. Shankwell said to Snape, "Versa did not believe she succeeded in neutralizing the curse. How do you feel?"

Snape had been rubbing the bridge of his nose, but he let his hand drop to his side. "It is definitely still present."

Shankwell said, "We are bringing in another Healer from Liverpool. They are just as busy as us, so he cannot come until tomorrow morning. We are simply going to potion you again until then."

Snape actually shrugged; something Harry could not remember seeing before. He swallowed hard. Another lime-green robed figure came in and waited by Snape's feet, wand out.

Shankwell went on, "We'll move you to Ward 41 until then." He looked up then at Harry for the first time and blinked in surprise. "Mr. Potter."

"Sir," Harry said in return.

Snape was hovered out. Harry waited until the door clicked closed again before he asked the Healer, "Is he going to be all right?"

"We'll do the best we can," Shankwell said, sounding over-rehearsed with that phrase. "We haven't had a patient suffering from such a case of protracted Cruciatus in rather a long while in order to offer much in the way of a meaningful diagnosis."

Harry reluctantly took this long answer to mean something in the range of "no." He dropped his gaze and went to the door. He hesitated there, wanting to say more, something along the lines of his deserving that Snape get better, but he couldn't find the words without finding more pain too, so he went out and down to the ward.

Snape was installed in the first bed on the left. The room erupted in surprise when Harry entered so he pulled the curtain around the bed and sat down in the visitor's chair. Snape gestured to the witch who had scuttled in that the bottle of potion she carried should be placed on the small table beside him, implying that he wasn't going to drink it just yet.

"I expect you'll be taking it soon on your own," the woman said smartly, before hanging a metal clipboard on the foot of the bed with a clang and departing.

Snape stared at the ceiling and didn't speak for a long time.

"You don't seem very hopeful," Harry said, heart beginning to knot up.

"If there are too many, they do not cease," Snape said.

"Crucios, you mean?" Harry asked.

Snape nodded. He had drawn into himself in contrast to how he had been just after Versa had finished. Harry rested a hand on Snape's shoulder, prompting Snape to say, "I do seem to have your forgiveness."

Harry didn't feel anything but an ache of fervent hope that seemed to require too much nurturing for comfort. "Yeah," he said.

Snape closed his dark-ringed eyes again. "It may be worth it then."

"What?" Harry whispered sharply. "Severus, don't say that." He didn't get a response so he picked up the bottle and sniffed at the contents. It was standard sleeping potion. He dearly wanted to talk to Snape about what he should do with this last chunk of Voldemort he apparently possessed, but it seemed cruel to burden his guardian further. "Take your potion."

"You do not wish to talk?" Snape asked.

"We can talk when you're better," Harry said, stubbornness coming to his rescue. "I'll see you in the morning."

Snape propped himself on one elbow and accepted the bottle. His hand shaking clearly conveyed his state. Harry took the empty bottle back and watched Snape go limp. Despite the voices in his head reminding him of all the things he should be doing, he sat there for nearly an hour trying not to plan for a future that did not include this man.

Chapter 32

"Merlin!" Tonks exclaimed when faced with a long thighbone sticking straight up out of the floor. Her wand was out and she let it precede her entering the next room, just in case.

Behind her, Aaron was covering his mouth as though to keep his dinner down. Flies buzzed, disturbed by their entrance.

"What the blazes happened in here?" Tonks asked. "Did Harry do this?"

"Explains why Harry won if he did," Aaron offered from behind his hand. "And it serves most of them right," he added with a mutter.

"Still," Tonks vehemently countered as she examined the strange coil of burned rope on the hearth. "What a mess."

The Ministry photographers took their time recording the room and the house while Aaron stood guard, his robe-front pulled permanently up over his nose. Mr. Weasley stepped into the long room and grimly examined everything with Vineet in tow. "Tell me again what happened," he said, sounding dubious that he would like the explanation any better the second time.

"Harry summoned the Rakshasas."

"Which are?"

"Demons."

"How did he do that? Did you see the spell?"

"There was no spell."

"But you are certain he did it?"

Vineet nodded somberly. He and Aaron shared a look of worry.

Tonk's voice came from the doorway. "Found someone to talk to." She had Draco by the collar, wand pointed at his chest.

"Let him go," Mr. Weasley said.

"What? Do you know what it took to track him through that trap-laden forest out-"

"I said let him go, Ms. Tonks," Mr. Weasley said more forcefully.

Tonks huffed and pushed Draco forward. "The press are at the gate too, about twenty of them."

"The Ministry has become a news sieve," Mr. Weasley complained.

"It was Rita Skeeter," Draco supplied after primly straightening his collar. "She has already come and gone."

"Has she?" Mr. Weasley asked sharply.

Draco shrugged. "The barriers don't keep out bugs."

Mr. Weasley peered around the room again as though appraising it from a new point of view. "That creates a mess of another kind." Hands on hips, he approached Draco. "Did you see what happened?"

"I heard it. Some of these queer creatures were coming down the stairs and the screams were not exactly promising. We ran, my wife and I. My mother is out and has not yet returned and given the Ministry's current invasion, I doubt she will. When I returned to see what had happened, Potter was taking my father and Voldemort away in small trunks. Everything else was as you see it."

"You are being oddly cooperative, Mr. Malfoy," Mr. Weasley observed.

"I want you to leave so I can clean up. How would you like your house to look like this?"

"Fair enough." Mr. Weasley and Tonks shared a long thoughtful glance. "Mr. Wickem, I want you to locate Harry and stay with him until instructed to do otherwise." Aaron dropped his robe down off of his face and stepped out of the room. Mr. Weasley asked Draco, "You wouldn't happen to know who all of these people were, would you?" He bent down over the nearest set of robes that were mostly intact. "Shame they didn't all use the same laundry – then they might have written their names on the collar."

"I'm not certain who, precisely, is here . . . or not here, shall we say, anymore." Draco spoke languidly and, as a result, now sounded uncooperative, or at least uncaring.

Mr. Weasley waved him off while shaking his head. "Don't go far, Mr. Malfoy." When they were alone, he said to Tonks, "What are we going to do with Harry?"

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked. When Mr. Weasley stared at her, she added, "If he'd been given a little help, it wouldn't have come to this."

"I think you're biased, Ms. Tonks."

"You should be too," she pointed out.

Chapter 32

Harry looked up when the curtain sheltering Snape's bed billowed. Aaron slipped inside. "How is he?"

"Not good," Harry heard himself admit.

Aaron frowned, honestly pained. He watched his former Head of House for a minute. "Is he out?"

"Until tomorrow." Harry stood. "I need to find my friends. Make sure everyone is all right."

As he passed Aaron, his fellow asked, "Want company?"

"Not really," Harry said, thinking that he really needed space to work some major things out.

"I'm afraid you're getting it anyway." When Harry turned to him, Aaron said, "If you want to knock me out with a Brainflumox or something I can say, well, I tried to follow him . . ."

Harry snorted lightly and led the way out of the ward. A small crowd waited in front of the lifts, but Harry didn't have the patience to wait too. On the stairs, he said, "I'm going to the Burrow . . . if no one expects me at the Ministry."

"Most of the Ministry is at Malfoy Manor right now. Honestly, Harry, if it were me, I'd do some damage control with the boss." Harry stopped on the third step and turned. Aaron went on. "It looks like the Grim Reaper came through that place." Aaron held up his hand. "No, I take that back . . . the Reaper would have taken people whole."

"What did Mr. Weasley say?"

"Not much. He's having trouble taking it in. But Malfoy's been talking."

"Draco?"

"No . . . well, Blondeboy too, but he seems to be on your side. Luscious on the other hand is in interrogation spinning you as Public Menace Number 1."

"I'm all right unless someone gets on my bad side," Harry muttered as he started down again.

"Harry," Aaron pointed out, "they say that about all evil wizards."

At the bottom as Harry pushed open the door to the ground floor, Aaron said, "I don't owe you any money or anything, do I?"

This made Harry laugh. He was still chuckling when they passed the reception area and the waiting room which fell silent when they appeared. Harry ignored this and headed straight for the exit.

"Didn't want to just Apparate?" Aaron asked.

"I need time to think," Harry said. He stood in front of the dusty shop windows that hid the wizard hospital. The Mannequins were wearing sun-faded heavy overcoats despite the warmth of summer. One of them turned to watch him. Harry started walking and Aaron followed.

They walked for ten minutes or so until they stood on a deserted road with only papers blowing along it. Harry took Aaron's wrist and they popped into the field beside the Burrow.

As they stood in the bowing grass, admiring the concoction that was the Weasley house, Aaron said, "Harry, you told me that you had Voldemort inside you and you wanted me to keep an eye on you . . . well, even he couldn't do that much damage." Harry's brow lowered in vague distress and he turned to his fellow, prompting Aaron to say, "That didn't come out quite right. What I meant was it looks like you kicked Voldie's arse pretty easily, so I don't know what you were worried about."

"He kept taking me over. He wanted to take my magic for his own," Harry said.

"Yeah, now that would be a problem," Aaron agreed. As Harry started toward the house, Aaron asked, "Did you really turn him into a Muggle?"

"Yes," Harry said without turning around or breaking stride.

"Blimey."

When they arrived at the house, Mrs. Weasley was standing outside. Harry greeted her and immediately said, "This is my Ministry escort, Aaron."

To Harry's disappointment, this appeared to make her relax and she gave him a quick hug. The scent of stew wafted out the door behind her like a charm. "Everyone has been very worried about you," she said in the tone of a reprimand.

Inside the door, Hermione stood with her hands on her hips, looking difficult. "Congratulations defeating Voldemort. May I have my wand back?"

"When I get mine," Harry countered immediately, still stinging as well. The two of them faced off there by the door, nose to nose.

Chapter 32

"Just give him his wand back," Lavender said from where she hung an arm over the back of the couch.

Ron stood and pulled one of the ugly, dark green vases down from the high shelf that ran along below the ceiling. He pulled Harry's wand out of it, brought it over and, with some embarrassment, held it out.

"Thanks," Harry said, stashing it away. "Had to borrow Voldemort's at one point, you know, because I didn't have it."

Ron flinched, making Harry wish he had not said that. "Sorry," Ron said. "Dad threatened to disown me . . . and mum . . ."

Harry considered that Ron living at home was more obedient than Ron living away at school. Ron still hadn't raised his eyes, and Harry was too peeved to give him an out. He remembered that when they were younger they had been on his side more willingly. He had not thought before that being a child was so much simpler, but now it clearly was.

Bill rescued his brother by saying. "You really did him in already, eh? Dad sent us a note as soon as you brought Voldemort in and we didn't think it was real at first. Thought it was a gag by the twins."

Harry didn't reply; he was thinking that he would prefer to be alone to think.

Charlie vehemently said, "After what they did to Flitwick, I hope you got even with a few others."

Harry stepped through them and dropped down onto the couch beside Lavender. "Ten of them plus Malfoy."

"You were keeping that good o' count?" Charlie asked. The rest of the room shifted to gather loosely around the couch.

"It was easy to count afterward," Harry said, ignoring the shared wide-eyed expressions of his audience. "Unfortunately, that leaves a lot of them still out there."

"Who is still out? Whom did you get?" Bill asked, sitting across from him directly on the low table that creaked under his weight.

"Er, I'm not sure." Harry hemmed. "I couldn't tell."

Bill's brow pushed very low. "You couldn't tell who you hit?"

Quietly, Harry answered, "There wasn't that much left."

Bill's mouth worked a moment. "You killed ten of them."

Charlie dropped on the couch beside Harry at the same time as Lavender looked to be thinking of evacuating. "Impressive. Not even Moody, Merlin-rest-his-spirit, can claim that many."

Harry didn't reply. Hermione's expression from where she stood beside the low table was vaguely pinched. Harry did not care much about Death Eaters right then; he just wished it was more likely that Snape was going to be all right. "I don't really feel like talking about it."

"Let's eat then," Lavender said.

Harry was terrifically hungry, but not really in the mood to eat. He stood up anyway when he was the last one not at the table and Hermione came back to fetch him. Even Aaron had taken a seat. He gave Harry a sympathetic expression when Harry sat across from him.

Mrs. Weasley engaged Aaron in telling her his life and career history, which Aaron embellished with flair, eventually making even Harry grin. His lighter mood was short-lived. As they were cleaning up after their late dinner the twins arrived with loud announcements about what they had heard on the wizard wireless. "They're saying that there was a slaughter at Malfoy Manor: blood, guts, bones . . . everywhere!"

"Harry!" one of them said in surprise upon encountering him there in the kitchen. "Well, congratulations . . . I guess," he added quickly. The twins glanced at each other. Harry hovered the dishes to the counter and handed the towel over to Bill, who was sorting the silver. Harry stepped over to the couch where Aaron sat and said, "I want to go back to St. Mungo's."

Aaron stood up from where he was playing wizard chess with Ron. "It's a draw anyway," he said dismissively to Ron.

One of the twins said, "Hey, Harry, don't go . . ." "We want to hear all about it," the other insisted.

"I have to get back to St. Mungo's," Harry explained and immediately Disapparated. Aaron arrived just after him and they walked up the stairs in silence. In Ward 41, Aaron pulled the curtain around the bed – the hospital staff must have opened it – waving away a child who had shouted Harry's name and was running toward them.

Harry moved the visitor chair closer to the bed and sat down. His eyes were burning. He felt much worse than he did earlier. Aaron fetched another chair and propped it in the corner, leaned back in it, and closed his eyes, which gave Harry some space.

They sat that way for long minutes. Harry discovered that while he had thought he needed quiet to think, what he really needed was support. As badly as he had needed allies before, they seemed even more critical now, strangely enough. Into this void stepped McGonagall. She came silently through the break in the white curtain and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. She still had Fawkes on her shoulder, although the bird appeared to be sleeping.

As they talked quietly, Aaron rocked forward in his chair and pulled out his blackboard. "Time to go, Bro," he said. "Ministry," he qualified to Harry's questioning glance.

"I need to go as well," McGonagall said. "I will accompany you."

"Thanks," Harry said.

At the dusky Ministry, Aaron led the way to the lifts while McGonagall tut-tuted in dismay at the disarray.

In the Auror's offices, which were lit as brightly as ever, Tonks, Shacklebolt, and Blackpool stood soberly around Mr. Weasley.

"Hello, Minerva. Have a seat, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, pulling a chair out with both hands and holding onto it as Harry accepted it. "Minister for Magic wishes to talk to you." Mr. Weasley still sounded bizarrely solicitous. Harry looked back over his shoulder to gauge him, but he mostly looked tired, not manipulative.

"About what . . . exactly?" Harry asked.

"I haven't been told the agenda," Mr. Weasley admitted. "Nor could I judge her mood, I'm afraid, when I last saw her."

Harry swallowed a sigh.

McGonagall said, "I am in need of a patch-up with Amelia as well, so I can accompany Harry."

Mr. Weasley and McGonagall chatted quietly about the riots while Harry waited to be summoned. He found he had a isolated and distant perspective on what was happening around him. None of it mattered in comparison to his guardian's condition. This left him remarkably calm in light of how very much trouble he could be in. When the time came, McGonagall offered to escort him herself, which she was allowed to do.

At the door to the Minister's office, the guards accompanied them inside until sent off again. "I certainly can handle Harry," McGonagall scoffed at them. This lightened

Harry's mood slightly until he heard a sample of Minister Bones' tone once they reached her office and the door closed.

"Sit down, Mr. Potter."

Harry obeyed and simply waited for her to speak. Exhaustion was catching up with him with swift feet – bad, body-collapsing exhaustion. He had run out of emotion for everything except his adoptive father and out of energy for anything except sitting and waiting.

McGonagall prodded him. "Are you all right?" He apparently had missed something that had been said.

Harry rubbed his forehead. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I was saying," Bones said, "that for having rendered the Dark Lord harmless, you have left us with rather a nasty situation."

"I just wanted Severus out of there," Harry pointed out. "I didn't care about anything else."

"I fear the morning papers, Mr. Potter. The wireless has been bad enough." She shuffled what appeared to be transcripts before her. "I've gone out on a limb and granted a few interviews, even, but it has not helped much." She stared at him as he stared at his fingers. "I want you to hold a press conference tomorrow, perhaps at noon for the evening edition. Things may be calmer then." When Harry didn't speak, she prompted, "Does your silence mean you are agreeing?"

"Sorry, yes, I guess so."

She huffed loudly. "Mr. Potter, Harry, do you realize there are calls for your arrest, given the scene you left behind at Malfoy Manor?"

Harry found his fingers even more interesting, and before he could reply, McGonagall said, "That is a ridiculous suggestion, Amelia, and you know it."

"I have to answer to the members of the Wizengamot who are making such a call. I cannot simply dismiss them. They wish to conduct a Darkness Test on Mr. Potter at the emergency meeting the day after tomorrow."

McGonagall gave Harry a long looking over. She crossed her arms. "He will pass it. But put them off until the next regular meeting. Harry needs a break, his adoptive father's prognosis is not promising and he should be allowed to deal solely with that. And a delay will look better with the press, whom I assume you will be inviting."

"Will I?" Bones asked, startled.

"Harry will pass it and it will ease the current situation. Run him through the test now and it will only appear desperate. Who is requesting the test?" McGonagall asked. Harry was very glad that she was there.

"You will see soon enough at the emergency meeting," Bones said, refusing to answer.

"Ogden, I bet; his son does like put ideas into his head," McGonagall said almost haughtily.

Bones ignored her and leaned forward to say to Harry, "Are you going to be ready for tomorrow?"

Harry shrugged. He didn't care. This made Bones a bit angry. "I cannot put this off, Mr. Potter. You've seen our atrium out there . . . ?"

Harry nodded. "Noon?" he confirmed.

"How about after lunch? Say, half one, or better yet, two," Bones revised, making a note to herself.

Harry nodded again. That would give him time to check in on how this other Healer from Liverpool was doing and visit with Snape. His heart took a drop on its own as hope swelled and then was squashed again.

Bones speaking interrupted his inner musings, "Are you better, Mr. Potter. You don't have Voldemort in your head anymore, I assume?"

"No," Harry replied. Not in my head, he added to himself.

McGonagall escorted Harry back to the Burrow to sleep. It was late when they arrived and only Bill and Ron were still up on guard duty. Ron took Harry to his room. "Mum still wants us on guard given how many Death Eaters are still free."

Harry closed his eyes. "None of them are too close," he said.

Ron considered him. "That's good," he finally said as though covering nervousness.

Harry did not want to make his oldest friend nervous. "What's the matter?" Harry demanded in a whisper since the rest of the house was sleeping. "Should I have stayed with Hermione instead?"

"No," Ron replied sharply. "You can stay here." He shrugged and avoided meeting Harry's gaze. "Why wouldn't you be able to stay here?"

"Look at me," Harry demanded, finding no well of patience, even for his best friend. Ron looked up at him. "What's the matter?" Harry asked, but a voice inside his own head told him the answer.

Faced with deciding what he believed, Ron shrugged. "Nothing, Harry. Nothing's the matter."

"I'm still the same as I was," Harry said.

Another shrug. "Yeah, I know. You look different though. The eyes . . ." Ron explained. "Hermione said . . . well."

"What did Hermione say?" Harry asked flatly.

Ron seemed to have found his footing. His shoulders squared and his whispering voice didn't waver. "She said only raw magic would make you that way. Sorcery . . . not the stupid Ministry-designed spells the rest of us do."

"I did what I had to do," Harry said. "If I could have avoided it, I would have."

Ron tossed his pillow to its proper place at the head of his bed and then tossed the covers back up as though suddenly caring that his bed had not been made. "That makes the difference, I guess."

Harry sat down on his own bed. "It doesn't make any difference if Severus doesn't get better. Right now it looks like he is going to end up like the Longbottoms." Harry found that he was admitting this to himself for the first time as well. He had to breathe deeply afterward to keep his emotions under control.

"Well," Ron said, "At least you got even for that already."

Harry leaned back on his pillow and said, "I hope the French wizard prison is right miserable place. Otherwise I might not have got even with Malfoy."

"Hopefully, they don't serve French food," Ron commented.

Harry scoffed. He wanted to talk more but his eyes were too heavy. He was asleep, still clothed, moments later.

Harry awoke early when someone stepped down the rickety staircase just on the other side of the thin wall from his pillow. He was glad for this, though. He headed out quietly so as not to disturb Ron. Downstairs, the Weasley parents were having breakfast with Charlie. Harry accepted a nibble, but then said that he needed to go.

"Two o'clock, Harry. Remember," Mr. Weasley said.

"Yeah," Harry said. He seemed to be off-duty. "No training today, I guess."

"Next week we hope to have things in order," Mr. Weasley said between sips of tea.

Harry hesitated departing. He finally just asked, "Am I still in the Auror's program?"

"That's for the Wizengamot to decide," Mr. Weasley informed him.

"Do you still want me in it?" Harry heard himself ask.

"Yes, Harry, we do," Mr. Weasley assured him. He sounded as though the had already thought this over carefully and had prepared that answer.

"If only to keep an eye on me," Harry finished for him. He felt reckless this morning and cared less than normal about what anyone thought.

Mr. Weasley's glance moved between Harry's eyes again. Harry Occluded his mind even though he was quite certain Mr. Weasley didn't have the skill to read his thoughts. "I suppose there is some of that," Mr. Weasley answered with a touch of lightness. "But we also owe you quite a bit of consideration."

Harry found this explanation lacking, but thought that he should just accept it. "I'm going to St. Mungo's –til the press conference," he said, but Mr. Weasley held out the paper after Mrs. Weasley bumped him on the arm with it.

"You should see this before you go," he said soberly. "You should know what you are facing."

Harry stepped forward and reluctantly turned the paper around. There was no photograph from inside the Manor, just one from the drive showing the Ministry personnel swarming around the grounds casting spells and taking notes as well as waving the photographer away. The headline read: Dark Lord Defeated but beneath that the second line was: In apparent battle for dark wizardry dominance. The first few lines describing the scene made it clear that Skeeter had been inside Malfoy Manor. Horrific scene of slaughter now greets visitors of this once stately Manor. Bloodied cloaks and robes are strewn with bones bizarrely cleaned to a shine. The cloaks and some objects in the room appear to have been gnawed by thousands of tiny teeth. No expert on dark wizardry could tell this reporter what spell would have produced this outcome. Since even the Dark Lord would not have inflicted this upon his own followers, one can only assume that Harry Potter's actions caused this decimation and destruction when he attacked, on his own, strictly against Ministry authorization. The Wizengamot is assembling to investigate what further actions should be taken with regard to our former Wizard Hero.

Harry gave the paper back. He hoped Skeeter stopped by the hospital so he could have a word. If not, he would certainly see her at the press conference. Mouth set in a line, he nodded goodbye and disappeared.

In the hospital reception area it was still busy, but slightly less so than the day before. The room quieted when he entered with a few people whispering his name to others

nearby. He glanced around at the wide eyes following him and then ignored everyone, but held his head high and avoided appearing to skulk. He repeated this in Ward 41, where again the room came to a stop at his entrance.

Healer Shankwell was leaning over Snape and glanced up at Harry. "Healer Hedgepeth is here. We're about to move the patient back to the treatment room where it is quieter."

Chest tight, Harry followed the floating, unconscious Snape out of the room. Whispering broke out as the door swung closed.

Hedgepeth waited in the treatment room with the nursing staff gathered around him. He had his hair slicked high and back on his head like the Muggle Elvis and he had a boyish face to match. He immediately reminded Harry of Lockhart in his mannerisms, especially when he gave a wink to a small blonde who hurried out, apparently supposed to be elsewhere. Harry fought hard not to lose all hope.

"Well, so this is the patient," Hedgepeth said in the way of an announcement after Snape was settled onto the narrow table in the center of the room. "You say he was tortured by Voldemort himself?" he asked Shankwell.

Shankwell nodded, mouth in a frown. Harry felt better that it seemed Shankwell was as turned off by Hedgepeth as Harry was. Hedgepeth bent to his patient, turning Snape's head this way and that, touching his thumb to Snape's sharp brow. Harry was very glad that his guardian was not conscious for this. He swallowed yet another sigh.

"We are still very busy. Perhaps I will leave you to him," Shankwell said, and departed with a few other staff, leaving behind two assistants and Harry.

Harry moved in beside the table where Shankwell had been. "Hm," Hedgepeth muttered, deeply absorbed in what he was doing, which Harry found reassuring. Hedgepeth turned to one of the assistants. "Need him awake now," he commanded.

With a swallowing charm, potion was forced on Snape. Harry waited with his breath held. He wanted to talk to his guardian, to see him awake, but did not want him in pain. Snape drew in a sharp breath but did not open his eyes. No one moved and Harry lifted his eyes to find Hedgepeth staring at him in befuddlement.

"Harry Potter is here?" Hedgepeth asked no one in particular.

"He's my father," Harry explained, gesturing at Snape lying between them.

This did not decrease the befuddlement. "Is he?"

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"I want him to get better again," Harry said.

"That's a very tall order," Hedgepeth said, recovering, perhaps because the conversation had moved to the professional. "You do realize that?"

"So was destroying Voldemort . . . yet again," Harry pointed out. He sounded threatening, he could hear it and couldn't quite squelch it.

Fortunately, Hedgepeth's ego was larger than Harry's reputation. He said, "So, I hear. All we can do is the best we can, Mr. Potter." A long lock of his slicked hair fell when he looked down again, making him look even more boyish.

Harry hated that answer, but could think of nothing more to argue about. Snape came awake with a shake of his head. Hedgepeth directed that a stool be brought over for him to sit beside the table. Snape glanced around and found Harry. The pain must have grown worse, because he shook his head again as though to shake some invisible thing off of himself. Hedgepeth moved in and began asking Snape questions such as what day it was and who was Minister for Magic. Snape did not answer with the scorn Harry hoped, he honestly seemed to have to think. Hedgepeth made Snape roll onto his side toward Harry and ran his fingers along the back of his neck the way Versa had. Snape fortunately could not see him shake his head as though startled by what he found.

Harry assumed he was feeling the curse that Harry could feel still sense also, the one that made Snape feel abhorrent, despite deep emotion to the contrary.

"How long were you tortured? How many Cruciatus curses were used?"

Snape shook his head. Harry replied, "Almost five hours."

Hedgepeth shook his head again but continued to concentrate on the back of Snape's neck. "Keep him awake," he ordered minutes later. "If we can avoid giving him an analeptic it makes it easier to work."

Harry bent down and shook Snape by the shoulder and called his name. Snape woke back up reluctantly. "You have to stay awake," Harry said, wishing he didn't have to. Snape did not deserve to suffer anymore.

Harry pulled the other stool from his corner of the room and parked himself beside the table. He put a hand on Snape's arm so he could pat it or shake it as necessary.

Out of the blue, Hedgepeth said, "I hear you left a scene fit for a house of horrors behind yesterday."

"I was rescuing him," Harry said, indicating Snape.

Hedgepeth did not react. He seemed to be able to work and talk at the same time. "Must mean a lot to you, then. Didn't know you had a father still alive."

"I go through them quickly," Harry stated coldly. Some part of him seemed to think behaving in a vaguely menacing manner was appropriate or might help change things. He knew better, but couldn't stop himself.

"They brought the remains here to the dungeon morgue for identification. Never seen anything like it."

"So?" Harry asked sharply.

"Wrong answer," Snape said from the table.

Harry dropped his gaze, chastised. He squeezed Snape's wrist. Snape felt less offensive now as though what Hedgepeth was doing was actually working. "Can you make him better?" Harry asked, feeling hopeful for the first time that day.

Hedgepeth didn't reply right away. He worked in silence for a minute first. "Most people I work on have had three, maybe four curses used upon them by someone not well versed in Unforgivable Curses, just someone angry. Those patients just need to be healed and for the curse to be suppressed. That is remarkably easy, just tedious and lengthy. On the other hand, the person who placed these curses-"

"Persons," Harry corrected.

"So much the worse," Hedgepeth said. "The persons who performed this curse knew well how to do it – which speaks of horrific practice – and they didn't let it fade between casts, which builds it up. It wishes to win. It becomes a force of its own. The victim wants only to escape and the only place to do that is inside their own heads, away from the curse."

"Stay awake, Severus," Harry said when Snape closed his eyes.

For three hours, Hedgepeth worked. He was nearly as exhausted as Versa had been, but he had more physical reserves given his size, so he did not collapse. He set his hands on the table and leaned upon it. "We'll have to see if that reduction sticks. Then we won't have to start at the beginning again for the next round." He staggered out while asking the staff following him if there were pastries around anywhere.

Snape wasn't quite asleep.

"Feeling any better?" Harry asked.

Snape gave one of those frowning smiles of his, which was answer enough. "How are you?" he asked Harry, changing the topic.

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"I have to give a press conference at two this afternoon. Everyone thinks I'm an evil dark wizard."

"I doubt it is everyone," Snape corrected him. "But your attitude is not helping."

"I don't care anymore," Harry said.

"You should," Snape said. His eyes were closed but he was remaining awake.

Silence descended. Footsteps went by in the corridor outside the door. The fairy lights floating near the ceiling shifted around, uncertain where it was best to cast light.

Snape said, "There are things you wish to say. You didn't say them last time, either." Fatigue was settling into his voice.

"I don't want you worrying about me," Harry said.

Snape scoffed derisively. "Try me anyway," he said slowly as though mocking Harry's intelligence.

Harry adjusted the height of the stool lower and leaned on the table. He was glad Snape had not been moved back into the ward so that they could be alone. "What am I going to do with this piece of Voldemort I'm carrying?" he asked. "I destroyed Nagini . . . but . . . I don't really feel like doing that to myself."

Snape, with a gasp, rolled onto his back. Harry rested a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, do you feel like yourself? I asked you that already, didn't I?"

"Yes. And I do."

"Then what is there to do?"

"That's what I'm asking you." His voice dropped. "I can't use the Crux Horridus spell without killing anyone. I was thinking of that."

Snape grabbed hold of Harry's robe-front and tugged it down with surprising strength given that he could barely roll from his side to his back. "Don't you dare attempt that," he hissed.

"What am I going to do?" Harry asked. "What if you aren't here to help me?"

"Ask the Saami wizard what you should do, in that case," Snape said, voice growing quieter as he spoke. "But do NOT attempt such a horrific spell. If I were well, I would ground you for a year for even suggesting it."

Harry's lips curled lightly through his frown. "What do you think I did to Voldemort?"

"That was reversing an unnatural spell someone else had performed. This is quite different. You are whole right now, Harry." His voice faded farther but he struggled to stick with it.

"But I'll just be a path back for him again," Harry argued. "You said yourself that he could keep coming back."

Snape held up his finger and pointed it in Harry's direction but he missed because his eyes were tightly closed. "Promise me."

"Yes, all right," Harry said in a difficult voice even though he was a bit relieved. He had a terror of attempting the spell, even as desperate as he was to take some action toward ridding himself of Voldemort.

Snape was out after that.

Harry sat beside him for a while, until his stomach growled and the time showed he had just a little while to find something to eat. He did not have much appetite, but he would need his strength for his battle with the press. He stood and out of curiosity, rested his fingers at the base of Snape's neck, just reachable because his head was turned to the side. He couldn't feel anything beyond the radiance of him overlaid by the unclean feeling of the curse.

Harry nearly ran Hermione over as he left the ward. She was carrying yellow flowers and dropped her eyes while he steadied her.

"I brought these," she said. "How's he doing?"

Harry shrugged.

"Maybe those were a bad idea," she said, indicating the flowers.

Harry resisted shrugging again. He gestured for her to lead him out of the ward, figuring Snape would prefer fewer people see him in such a state. "I'll just keep them."

"Are you going to be all right, Harry?" she asked as they strolled slowly to the lifts.

"I don't know," Harry answered honestly. He should not have answered; he felt weaker hearing himself say that.

"I heard you had a press conference," she said, making conversation. "Glad I caught you beforehand."

"Yeah. I have to go get ready for it," Harry said. They both stopped in the middle of the corridor, forcing a staff member to walk around them, rather than collide. Harry

felt disconnected from his old friend and thought that was because she had not been there this time during the battle and as a result he could not begin to make her understand.

"If you need anything, Harry," she said. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't help you before," she said, sounding pained. "You were so out of sorts, though, not like now. I'd give you your wand and my wand in a second, now."

"Yeah, I understand," Harry said.

She seemed satisfied with that answer and gave him a small wave goodbye. Harry Apparated to the alleyway near the Ministry and this time the desk clerk called an escort for him. Mr. Weasley came himself to lead him inside. The Press were already gathering early and they shouted questions and came across the atrium to surround them.

"Not yet. Not yet," Mr. Weasley said, pushing the way forward through the gates which had been straightened somewhat. They loomed now when one approached, and swayed precariously after the gate latched. Mr. Weasley took Harry to the Auror's tea room, chasing the others out of it and closing the door. "Eat something; I heard your stomach growling all the way up here."

Harry took put the flowers in a water glass and took a sandwich off the cart, which Mr. Weasley paid for by dropping a coin in the tin after the cart rumbled, insisting on payment. Harry took a bite, not tasting what he was eating. Mr. Weasley sat across from him and said, "This is very important, Harry, as I'm sure you're aware."

Harry nodded. Not as important as Severus, he thought, but kept that inside.

"When you go down there, you need to be the opposite of how you are being portrayed in the press," Mr. Weasley went on. "You're a good kid, Harry. They have you wrong, but it's been too easy to paint you as the opposite, given events."

"Even you thought I'd attacked the Dursley's old house," Harry pointed out.

"I didn't imagine Voldemort was back, Harry. There didn't seem to be any other suspects walking around with a wand like yours." He seemed honestly contrite, so Harry let it go. "You need to be calm but firm. Don't waver. Don't get angry, no matter what is said."

Harry nodded. "I'm worried about Severus," he admitted, re-wrapping the uneaten half of his sandwich.

"You need to worry about yourself right now."

"It's tough."

"Harry, the last thing the wizarding world will tolerate is another evil wizard rising up. Take a look around the atrium when you go back down. That's what people do when fear and anger override their better judgment."

"I don't want to tell them the truth," Harry said.

"Then don't. But make up a damn good lie in that case." Mr. Weasley stood. Harry stared at him, never expecting to hear him to say that. "Time to go, Harry."

He led him down in the lift and stopped just before the gates. Bones was already at the podium that had been set up near the smashed fountain. There was a lot of press now, forty or more.

"Calm, Harry. Gentile. Harmless," Mr. Weasley whispered in his ear. "That's how you must come across."

When Harry reached the gate, with its squeaking, warped door, he realized that Mr. Weasley was describing Dumbledore. He let his face relax and stepped slowly over to Bones, ignoring the questions being shouted early. Had he really massacred all of the Death Eaters? How many had really been killed? Was the Ministry lying about everything?

"One at a time," Bones snapped at the gaggle of them. Her guards stood just before the podium and their gestures for quiet did the trick. "As promised . . . Mr. Potter is here to answer questions." The roar started up again. "BUT, only if you can behave yourselves," she shot back and the crowd again fell to muttering. Harry found this amusing somehow, perhaps it was just the strain making any little thing funny. "Harry, choose who you want to ask a question. I'm turning it over to you." She stepped down off of the small dais that had been placed behind the podium and Harry stepped up. The reporters all had their hands in the air and all appeared far too eager.

Harry's eyes found Rita Skeeter, who was only raising her feather quill just a little, as though certain Harry would not choose her and she did not want to lose face by trying. "Ah, my favorite reporter," Harry drawled as though they were playing a chess match instead of playing with Harry's future. The crowd turned to look at Skeeter; some began to grin. "Ms. Skeeter, you don't have a question?" he asked in a kind of mystified disbelief, with a calm that required so much effort he felt his breathing becoming difficult. It worked though; others buried their grins and most relaxed and poised their quills.

She required a moment to get over her surprise. "Did you really kill ten Death Eaters at Malfoy Manor?" she asked, tossing her hand out with the question as though she knew she asked the obvious.

"Yes," Harry said.

She asked, "Why didn't you just tell the Ministry where they were and let them handle it?"

"That was two questions in a row," Bones pointed out beside Harry.

"That's all right," Harry said easily. "They had my adoptive father captive and were torturing him. I didn't feel that I could wait to wade through the bureaucracy that was being far more careful than I would be."

When Skeeter started to speak again, to follow up on this "father" issue with a strong point, Harry waved her off. He could read in her eyes what she was going to ask and if things were going to be exposed he needed to expose them himself. "Someone else," Harry said gently, as though cakes were being dolled out. There was power in that. They expected him to be nervous and defensive and were counting on using it against him. He refused to hand them that weapon. He choose the least offensive looking person he could see, a small man whom Harry found familiar.

"Lovegood with the Quibbler," the man said. "We were the only magazine to pick up the American Wizard Press article about your new father, which we were roundly accused of fabricating," he said, clearly insulted. The other reporters muttered and snickered to each other. "Why have you not discussed him more openly here in Britain?"

"Because he is a former Death Eater," Harry said. This shut them all up. Harry felt like a gambler must when he slides his entire stack of chips onto one number and watches the wheel spin. But he had to frame all of the facts himself to have a chance. He made it look as though he were giving Lovegood time to scratch that out, before adding, still calmly, "He was spy for Dumbledore for many years, so it isn't quite as bad as it sounds," he added lightly, as though sharing a secret with a friend.

Skeeter frowned, looking peeved. "And this was sanctioned?" she asked, sounding very annoyed.

"Yes. As I'm sure a thorough reporter like yourself is well aware," Harry said, trying not to grin. "But it wasn't your turn, I'm afraid." He scanned the eager faces again and picked out a dusky-skinned woman with a white scarf wrapped around her head and knotted in the front "Tawil Times, Mr. Potter," she said in a lilting voice. "We

are all quite grateful that you ended this before it spilled over into other wizarding communities. But there is concern that you yourself are the next great dark wizard. How do you respond to this?"

Harry assumed a regretful expression, which was not hard. "I'm not trying to be a dark wizard," he said, but was interrupted by a man with a Scottish brogue before he could add to that.

"You weren't just eliminating a rival, then?" the man asked derisively.

Harry feigned being surprised at being interrupted. "I was eliminating an old personal enemy . . . the one that killed my parents and was working hard at doing the same to my current father. I regret not working within the Ministry to do this, but I couldn't wait for the kind of deliberate decisions that they must take."

"Don't think you overdid it?" the man asked as a follow-up.

"There were a lot of them in relation to me," Harry said levelly, factually, which was getting easier. "I had to even things out."

"So, you'd do it again?" Someone else asked.

Harry took a breath, unclenched his hands from the podium and resisted wiping them on his robes. "I guess I can take you next, but please, some order next time. In answer to that I'd say that I'd not only do it again, I'd do it sooner." He chocked that confession up under "don't waver".

Faces contorted and much scribbling occurred. Harry picked someone else and they addressed Minister Bones: "Do you agree with that? Are you disciplining Mr. Potter?"

"The Wizengamot is deciding that tomorrow at an emergency meeting," she provided.

Skeeter raised her hand quickly. Harry pointed at her. "They want to give you a Darkness Test, are you going to agree?"

"You are at the bottom of the sieve, as usual," Harry quipped, to a few snickers. "But yes, I'll agree to it." Trying to sound demure, he added, "I'd prefer to be trusted outright, but I don't believe I have anything to worry about."

"So, you'd prefer not to take it?" Skeeter asked suggestively, quill poised.

"Wouldn't you?" Harry asked, still letting his voice lilt just enough. He had no idea what the test entailed, but he could only imagine it was unpleasant. Skeeter seemed to agree; she frowned as she wrote. She raised her hand again, but he didn't call on her.

More pointless and repeated questions were asked by others. Harry tenaciously held onto his Dumbledore mask throughout it. Afterward, as they were taking down the podium, Bones said, "Well Harry, you have a career in politics ahead of you, I can tell."

Harry felt the mask still firmly in place and let it answer. "Perhaps." Rather than expressing the alarm and horror he really wanted to. "I have to return to St. Mungo's," he informed her.

At her nod goodbye he Apparated away, leaving her to chat with the reporters. She seemed to bask in their attention, reminding Harry of Fudge.

At the wizard hospital, Versa was working on Snape while Hedgepeth stood nearby. "Ah, there you are. We need you to keep him awake . . . doesn't seem to want to be."

"Would you?" Harry asked rhetorically, pulling a stool over. He shook Snape's shoulder and his head snapped towards the thin pillow as though pain had shot through him. Harry cringed.

When Versa sunk to the floor some time later, Hedgepeth smoothly took over. Hours later, he too rubbed his own face, shook his head, and departed.

"It is not working," Snape said when they were alone. He strained to roll onto his back. His head jerked again as though a ghost had slapped him. "It is getting worse."

An assistant came in with a potion. Snape impatiently gestured for her to set it on the nearby cart and then waved her out. She shuffled out, appearing insulted. When the door snapped closed, Snape said, "How did the press conference go?"

"All right. I did better than I thought I could."

"That's good," Snape said, sounding as though he were plotting in his head. He didn't speak again, though.

Harry said, "I pretended I was Dumbledore. He always did a good job of appearing harmless when in actuality he was one of the most powerful around."

Snape reached out blindly and patted Harry's arm. "Wise idea."

"It was sort of Mr. Weasley's, but he left it to me to figure out. I think he raised enough sons to know what he is doing, even if I don't always think he does."

Snape tapped Harry's arm with his knuckles. "He is a good guide, Harry."

"Don't say that," Harry blurted, voice breaking. He bit his lip and wrestled with himself. "I'm not looking for a replacement father."

"But it is true," Snape stated.

"He doesn't trust me like you do. No one does." Harry hadn't considered it before, but now realized how very important that was. It seemed, in fact, to be the very foundation of himself right now.

"Keep behaving like Dumbledore and eventually others will," Snape added, voice the weakest yet.

"You can't give up," Harry said desperately.

Snape replied, "There is nothing but pain in this world now. I held on a very long time . . . because I knew you would come."

"You can't give up now, then, of all times," Harry argued, hearing a younger child take over his voice. He stood up and found the potion with blurring eyes. "Take this," he said.

Snape began to say something else but stopped and accepted the bottle. He was out seconds later.

Chapter 33.

Allies & Reflections, Part 1

"Remus, I didn't expect to find you here," McGonagall said from the doorway of the Defense Against the Dark Arts office.

"I stopped by the Burrow and heard that Severus was not well. I stopped by St. Mungo's in search of Harry, but didn't find him."

"He was instructed by Amelia to hold a press conference. You must have missed him."

"Severus is seriously hurt. It doesn't look good," Lupin said, sorting folders with more purpose than the upcoming long summer break called for.

"So you thought you would come and do his work?" McGonagall queried, simply trying to understand.

"I needed to do something meaningful. That and I had a bad moment during the riots last night. Someone recognized me for a werewolf and I found myself in a duel of sorts with several angry wizards." He shuddered. "I find the notion of this defensive castle quite reassuring right now."

"Harry could use your support," McGonagall said.

Remus raised his head. "Hm." He stood and closed the files that were open. "I have a better idea."

He fetched a broom out of the cupboard and said, "I'll see you later," before departing out of the window.

Lupin Apparated when it was possible to and then strolled into Godric's Hollow using his broomstick as a walking stick. Pamela only worked part-time so she may be home, although he wasn't certain until she opened the door to his knock and immediately gave him a hug.

"If I knew I'd get such a reception, I'd have come sooner," he said as he stepped inside.

"Why haven't you?" she criticized.

"If you only knew," he said, waving away her invitation to sit. "I need you to come cheer Harry up a bit. Severus is in hospital-"

"Severus is? What happened? Your letters said something bad was happening and then that you shouldn't write anymore since someone could intercept the owls and that was risky."

"That was true. Voldemort's followers all escaped and then it turned out Voldemort was back, so I didn't want you put at risk. But now Harry is in a bad way with all of this. He rescued Severus, but perhaps too late. I was thinking you may be able to provide some support."

She jumped up and fumbled for her handbag. "Let's go."

He took hold of her hand and led her out to a copse of trees where he hovered the broomstick and helped her on it.

"Well, this is romantic," she said. "Never flown on one of these. I've flown on KLM, but this is really different."

"Apparition can be traced," he explained.

"Things sound bad, Remus," she said as he got on behind her and put his arms around her.

"They are, though hopefully they're improving." He leaned forward and the broom shot through the trees and up the hillside.

A few miles away he landed, took hold of her arm, and the next moment they were in the field beside the Burrow. Inside the house, Pamela was greeted warmly.

"Why don't you stay and I'll fetch Harry from St. Mungo's?" Lupin offered.

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"I want to come along," she said, stepping out of the ring of redheads surrounding her.

"They'll let her in with you," Bill said when Lupin made doubtful noises. "Things are crazy over there."

"Well, come along then," Lupin said. "We'll give it a try." He took her to the closest alleyway to the hospital, since taking her in directly would set off an alarm.

At the old shop window he waited for the pavement to clear of others. "This doesn't look much like a hospital," Pamela said.

He stepped closer to her to say, "It's hidden. The road has to clear."

She stepped closer as well so that they were touching. "I guess I can wait," she said.

"It's good to see you," he admitted.

"You need support too," she suggested, reading his tone correctly.

"I didn't have a good day yesterday either. But nothing like Harry's so I can't complain."

"What happened to you?" she asked, sounding as though it mattered to her.

The road was empty now, but he explained instead of turning to the mannequins, "Wizardom rioted yesterday, on top of everything else."

"Is that why the wizard hospital is inside a closed shop?" she asked.

"No, it always is," he said. "But angry people will do anything and a former student from Hogwarts recognized me as a werewolf. It was one of the worst moments I've had in a while. This was after a harrowing train ride where we couldn't prevent Severus from being abducted by Death Eaters."

Her gaze widened in alarm. She glanced around. "Can we go in now?"

Lupin turned to the mannequin inside the glass. "We are here to see a patient, Severus Snape."

The mannequin looked from one to the other of them before tilting its head and pointing at Pamela. "She has an exemption through Harry Potter, as his cousin," he explained. The dummy's head straightened and it moved its finger for them to come closer.

"Close your eyes," Lupin said and led her through the glass.

It took a while to find the treatment room where Snape had been left alone. The assistant who was finally convinced to lead them there closed the door on his way out. Pamela moved beside the still form on the table and said, "Oh, this is terrible . . . but where is Harry?"

"I don't know. I doubt he's gone far, though." He sniffed at the empty potion bottle left sitting on the floor beside the bed. "Hm, sleeping potion and something else," he observed.

Pamela straightened from leaning over Snape and asked, "Sleeping potion?" She then stared up at the fairy lights in surprise because they were congregating to help her see better.

Lupin explained, "After what happened to him, he would be in a great deal of pain if he was awake."

"Aren't they treating him? Should we take him to a normal hospital?" she demanded.

"Pamela, a Muggle doctor would not understand that he's been cursed and that the curse is continuing to exact its toll upon him. Yes, they are treating him. Everything is being done that can be."

Her shoulders fell. "Where is . . . Candide, his girlfriend?"

"No one knows. He sent her away when the trouble started. I don't even think he knows where she is."

"Remus, this is terrible. Harry can't lose another parent."

Lupin scrubbed his hands together. "There is nothing else anyone can do."

Harry, at that moment, was striding across Ward 49, approaching the far beds on the left. Mr. Longbottom was curled up under a blanket, with only the top of his mussed hair sticking out. Mrs. Longbottom was in her usual spot, holding her stuffed lion, although it was rather in need of replacement at this point. She didn't offer it to Harry as she had the previous time he had seen her, when he and Tonks were investigating Lockhart's disappearance. Perhaps she could not see him because an Obsfucation Charm still clung to him from slipping in behind one of the staff. He had also transformed his robes to lime green to make himself harder to spot as a stranger.

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Harry shook his head; if only he had known then how much trouble Lockhart was going to turn out to be. But it wasn't him, exactly, it was Merton. Harry stood in the quiet ward, thinking idly. He was thinking that things felt unfinished beyond Snape's injury, and that notion loomed menacingly over him . . . until he put it aside and concentrated only on what was in front of him.

Harry had come to this ward to see the Longbottoms, who threatened to represent Snape's future as well. Harry couldn't imagine it, even as he stood there clearly witnessing it. He ached the strongest yet for Neville all those years, and felt nothing but panic at the notion that he too may be making visits here to someone who barely recognized him. He stepped closer to Alice Longbottom, feeling for the curse. There didn't seem to be one. Perhaps it had faded over this much time. That carried a small reassurance with it.

Harry reached around to touch the top of her spine, where the Healer did on Snape. She didn't move, seemed uninterested even. Harry let his focus fade and felt with startling clarity exactly what the trouble was. The radiance of her was hopelessly knotted and tangled. This explained a lot of the Healer talk that had passed between Hedgepeth and Versa about unwinding and unweaving. He could trace the tangle of her as though it were visible, as long as he didn't concentrate too hard, in which case he could only feel the bones of her spine. He relaxed until he could see again, and gave the smallest tug to loosen the least-tangled of the knots. Something similar to a curse rose from this action like heat. Harry Staunched the heat with the same cold he was taught to use for bleeding. The knot relaxed with one less twist in it. Harry stood, listening to his own breathing for over a minute, before trying another.

Time passed; Harry had no idea how much. He had no sense either if anyone else had come into the ward since he had arrived. Surely the Obsfucation Charm had worn off even if his paltry disguise had not. There was nothing beneath his fingers left to unknot that had not become part of a solid mass, which seemed very unwise to touch. He ran his fingers up and down making sure all of the heat was gone and all of the easy tangles had been unwound. Mrs. Longbottom swayed under Harry's hand and, frightened, Harry lowered her to her bed and leaned close, ready to call for an alarm with the large button on the wall. But she seemed only to be sleeping, he discovered with profound relief.

Harry turned and lowered the blanket slightly on Mr. Longbottom. He could feel nothing when he touched him. He truly needed to be awake, just as the Healer had insisted with Snape, and awake was not a state Mr. Longbottom ever seemed to be in. Harry pulled the blanket back over Longbottom's head and could see his own

hand shaking. He needed to eat, desperately. Danishes sounded wonderful, and this made him smile crookedly.

In the corridor, he was startled to encounter his cousin Pamela. "Harry!" she exclaimed and gave him a long hug.

"What are you- Oh, Remus. Hello," he said to his former teacher.

"How are you, Harry?" Pamela asked firmly as though expecting him to lie.

"In need of dinner," Harry said. "Shall we get some?" He was keen on eating really well and coming right back to the hospital.

"I'll cook. Take us to my place," she insisted, glancing between them.

Remus took them to the field outside the town adjacent to Godric's Hollow. "I'll come back for you, Harry," he suggested, but Harry transformed into a Gryffylis and tossed his head to say that he would follow. Pamela would have fallen over backward at the sight of him had Lupin not caught her. "He is a vision, isn't he?" he asked, amused.

Pamela found her feet and stepped forward, clearly intrigued. "What is that?"

"Harry. Showing off," Lupin suggested, teasing.

"You sound jealous," Pamela returned gently. She raised up her hand and Harry bent his head down to get a rub on the short fur atop his nose. "Wow, what big eyes you have," she said.

"Better to eat you with," Lupin drawled.

"No, he's beautiful," Pamela argued. "Eat you with . . . sheesh." She rolled her eyes.

Lupin looked Harry over with a more discerning eye. "Maybe I can manage an Obsfucation Charm strong enough to cover you," he said, and held out his wand for Harry to bow his head low again to have the charm applied.

As they flew, Pamela pointed out things along the way, excited this time to be flying. "I had a boyfriend once with a motorbike. I thought that was the tops."

Harry veered away from them around a patch of small trees, thinking that he would have to loan Lupin his motorbike for next time.

Pamela said, "Sometimes I can see Harry, and sometimes I can't."

"That's because you know he is there," Lupin explained. "Otherwise you wouldn't see him at all."

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The copse near her house again covered their landing. Harry returned to himself and staggered.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Lupin asked. "You look like I do after transforming."

"I'm all right," Harry insisted. "A little short on food and sleep." He was thinking that Versa's collapses were not so overdone.

Harry crashed onto the couch and they let him sleep while they cooked. Harry woke to soft conversation and rubbed his eyes. The scent of tomato sauce filled the small house. He longed to rush back to St. Mungo's but had to eat, he knew. He listened to the two of them making dinner with a small smile before he went into the dining room and leaned on the door jamb to the kitchen.

"Well, have a good sleep?" Pamela asked. She then stopped, holding a steaming bowl of sauce before her. "What happened to your eyes? I thought they looked strange earlier, but I thought it was just the funny lights at that magic hospital."

Harry frowned and looked down. "It's a long story," he said.

"Strange. I didn't know eyes could change like that," she said, carrying the bowl past him to the table. "Have a seat." When they were all seated, she asked Lupin, "Did you know that could happen?" He nodded soberly. "What causes it?"

Harry had insight at that moment into Snape's difficulty with her curiosity.

"Harry performed magic too powerful for him," Lupin explained.

"It wasn't too powerful for me," Harry argued.

"I don't think it would have done that to your eyes if it hadn't been," Lupin said.

"What did you do?" Pamela asked while passing the serving spoons to Lupin.

"I turned Voldemort into a Muggle."

"Good idea," she said after a pause. "Then you can just put him in any jail, right?"

"Then he can't come back from the dead again, was more my thinking," Harry said while pouring sauce onto his pasta.

"He has a habit of doing that?"

"Yes," Harry replied disgustedly.

Everyone else started eating, but Pamela asked, "Is Severus going to be all right?"

Lupin frowned and moved as though he wished she had not asked that. Harry said, "I hope so."

Allies & Reflections, Part 1

After a filling meal where Harry ate thirds for the first time since he was a first-year at school and was trying to keep up with Ron at dinner, he Apparated back to St. Mungo's from a spot miles and miles away from the village. He was grateful for Lupin's care that no one learn that wizard activity was happening in the village again. It looked as though Lupin might spend more of the evening there as well, which made Harry feel light-hearted despite everything else.

Back in the treatment room, Hedgepeth was working on Snape again, but he did not look as self-possessed as before. His hair had fallen out of its pompadour and had been flattened on one side as though slept on. He gestured for Harry to take over from Shankwell the task of keeping Snape awake. Hedgepeth gave up soon after, drooping and with the rings below his eyes even more pronounced. He didn't look at Harry before he departed. Shankwell moved to give Snape more potion, but Harry intercepted him saying, "I want to talk to him a little."

Shankwell nodded with some sadness and departed. Harry set the potion down beside the wall where no one would see it should they come in. He added a sticking charm to the latch to make it open only with effort. He then bent over his guardian. "Severus, wake up," Harry said, yet again. Snape was barely aware of what was happening. Heart pounding rapidly, Harry reached around to the back of his neck and instinctively jerked his hand away. The tangle was still forming like a living thing, cursed and miserable. Harry breathed in and out a few times and unfocused his eyes again. He Staunched the curse, slowly and gradually, just in case he could do damage working too hard on such a critical spot. Snape relaxed so much he slipped into sleep and Harry had to shake him awake quite violently.

Harry Staunched more until the curse eased and stopped growing. He then began unwinding and unravelling with immense patience, remembering bending for hours over the small band he had been taught to weave in Finland. This was both harder and easier than with Alice Longbottom. On her, the curse had long since dissipated, but with Snape it would start up again as soon as Harry eased off. But here all of the raveling could come apart again; none of it was fused. Harry unwound everything with great care over nearly an hour. He pushed the curse away out of the radiance so it wouldn't re-tangle. This was the most difficult task; the curse was slippery, it felt as though he were trying to push oil down under a layer of water. Harry Staunched the heat of the curse and then pushed the curse itself away. Everything remained as it should for a few moments but the curse began to seep in again as simmering vile

heat. Harry cooled it and pushed it away again. Finally, after repeating this until he was shaking, the winding and tangling didn't begin again.

Harry let go. He let Snape fall asleep. He watched him breathing, certain he was dreaming. The lights in the room appeared to have changed color his eyes were so tired. He rubbed them and fetched the potion from the floor, put it in his pocket, and stepped out.

It was night time. The corridor had been dimmed. Harry swayed, threatening to collapse. He Disapparated for Hermione's flat. He must have passed out when he arrived because the next thing he knew Hermione was bending over him with a water spritzing charm.

"Harry, are you all right?" she asked frantically. She was wearing a pink dressing gown and fuzzy pink slippers and seemed like a dream as well, albeit an alcohol-induced one.

"Yeah." He pushed himself to sit up. The electric lights were on and they stung his eyes.

"You had a bottle of sleeping potion in your pocket, but it broke. Doesn't look like you need it though," she commented, sweeping the broken glass away with her wand. "Here, take off your robe so I can clean it properly and so you don't get cut."

Harry stood and clumsily did so.

"Did you get hit with something?" she asked. "Do you need a Healer?"

"I'm fine, really," Harry said, feeling better than he had in a long while, considering his state. He felt hopeful, which was sustenance for his starved spirit. "I just need some sleep. Do you mind?"

She waved her couch into a bed and gestured for him to help himself to it. "Thanks," he said, flopping down. She moved about turning off the lights. "Did you see the evening papers?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Were they any better than the morning papers?"

"A bit." The last light went off.

"Hmf," Harry said, rolling over to pillow his head on his arm. Crookshanks jumped up on the bed and sniffed his face. "You don't think I'm an evil wizard, do you?" he asked, letting it sound vaguely playful to cover.

She scoffed from the doorway to her bedroom. "No. I think you lack restraint. But that's always been the case."

"Okay," Harry said, deciding that he really didn't want to get into it, even though he himself had brought it up.

"Goodnight, Harry."

Hermione woke him while cooking breakfast seemingly moments later. Harry shakily made it to the table where he downed all the toast. "Have you been eating?" Hermione asked.

"Not enough, I guess."

She put more toast on. "You're a wreck, Harry. I hate to ask, but really want to know if Professor Snape is doing any better. How is he?"

"I don't know. I hope better. They sent a Healer from Liverpool to look him over." Harry felt this fib flow out of him without effort. He felt defensive, even about this, even with such an old friend. Until he saw Severus healthy he couldn't bear to assume he really was and he couldn't admit to his very practical friend what reckless thing he had just tried.

"I hope he gets better, Harry," she said.

"Thanks," Harry said. "And thanks for breakfast, I have to go. Be careful still," he admonished before disappearing.

Snape woke slowly and found Shankwell bending over him. He had been moved back to the ward and the noise of people eating breakfast sounded too normal. He stared up at the healer in a strange daze. It required long moments to figure out what was wrong, and what was wrong was that the pain was gone. It had become part of his core, his entire reality, and now he floundered without it.

When he lifted his head, Shankwell said, "Are you feeling better?" with some surprise.

"Yes," Snape replied. "Considerably."

McGonagall stepped in at that moment. "Severus, you are awake," she said, pleased.

"Yes," he replied again, unable to come up with more. He sat up with determination, done with lying down for now. He ached everywhere from inactivity.

Shankwell stared at him in surprise. "You are that much better?"

"Yes." Snape stared at McGonagall. "I am talking like a parrot, however." He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Let me fetch Hedgepeth," Shankwell said, raising his wand to send a message.

"I am deathly tired of that man," Snape grumbled.

McGonagall took hold of Snape's arm. "Are you really feeling better?"

"Yes," he replied with annoyance. "Why do you keep asking? There have been a tag-team of Healers tormenting me for the last day. Lucky I'm still sane enough to complain about it, I suppose."

Hedgepeth came in and stared at Snape. "You are feeling better," he said. It wasn't a question, so Snape didn't answer it.

The man stepped around and put his hand on the back of his neck, which made Snape stiffen but he held still for it. "Well," Hedgepeth said, "That is remarkable." At Snape's odd look he quickly added, "But very good. Wasn't sure how many more rounds we could manage, quite honestly." He stepped back a few feet and put his hands on his hips, looking vaguely confused.

Snape decided he finally had the luxury of ignoring him. He moved his legs as a test before swinging them to the side. "I am getting out of here," he grumbled.

"Severus, are you certain?" McGonagall asked in alarm.

"Yes. I cannot take it here any longer," he said, standing up. Shankwell pulled the curtain so he could get dressed, which he did, clumsily enough that he was grateful no one could see. He was straightening his collar when Harry appeared. His face upon finding him upright cancelled out rather a lot of the previous day's misery. Harry's face expressed pure joy and then he bit his lip as though forcing even more of it down.

"You're all right," Harry said.

Snape pulled his spine straighter than it really wished to be. "Yes. That's why I am leaving. Going home."

"Where are you going to go?" Harry asked.

"Ah," Snape said as he tossed his former hospital gown aside. "I had forgotten. Perhaps Candide's flat."

"You may return to the castle," McGonagall offered.

"I just got out of the castle for the year."

"You still have enemies abroad, Severus," McGonagall warned.

"And they won't find me if they don't know where I am."

"Anything I can do for you?" McGonagall asked.

"Check me out of this place if you would," Snape said, and held his hand out for Harry to grasp. Harry did so, but didn't know where to Apparate away to. He took Snape to the stairwell of the accounting firm where Candide worked. The offices were dark either because they were closed or because it was too early for them to have opened. Snape Apparated them the rest of the way, although he sat heavily on the bed when they arrived.

"Severus, are you certain that you should have left like that?" Harry asked in alarm.

Bent over with his hand propping up his head, Snape replied, "I've been horizontal too long is all. I am fine."

"You look like you need to be again," Harry pointed out.

Snape glanced around the room. It really was terribly small, even as bedsits go. Harry asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Something to eat."

Harry made a quick search of the cupboards. "I'll run down to the Cauldron for some soup; all right? If you haven't eaten for a while you shouldn't have anything heavy."

"Yes, Mother," Snape said quietly.

"Keep that up and I'll bring your mother here," Harry threatened, but he smiled afterward. "I'm very glad you're better, Severus."

With a regretful twitch of his lips, Snape said, "I'm sorry I gave up."

"You didn't really. Otherwise you wouldn't be here," Harry pointed out. They stared at each other until Harry said, "I'll fetch the soup."

Harry Apparated down to the end of Knockturn Alley, and then tried to make sure that no one followed him as he walked to the Leaky Cauldron. Perhaps it was his extra paranoia, but he felt uneasy, as though someone did follow. The few early morning denizens of Knockturn watched him warily and he watched them back the same. Finally, he strode out into the sunlight of Diagon, turning repeatedly to check the corner leading to Knockturn, but no one came out before he reached the end. In

the Cauldron, things were relatively normal and the guests were breakfasting. Tom slapped his hand on the bar upon recognizing him.

"Harry, Harry," he said in warm greeting. "What can we do for you?"

"Soup. I need take-away."

Tom rubbed his head. "I can put a bit of last-night's on the fire for you."

"Just put it in a cauldron and I'll heat it myself." He waited while Tom ladled soup out. A family by the hearth was watching him as though he were part of routine in a circus, one perhaps involving fire and long sharp knives. "Have a nice breakfast," Harry said to them upon departing, pretending that he couldn't see the fascinated worry in them.

Harry half expected Snape to be unconscious when he arrived, but he was still sitting up, looking thoughtful. Harry heated the soup with a charm and put it in a bowl.

"You have your wand back," Snape observed as he accepted the soup.

"Yeah, the Weasleys gave it back after Voldemort was taken care of." This still stung. He turned the single chair backwards and sat close to Snape, resting his chin on the chair back. "I'm really glad you're better."

"You said that," Snape pointed out.

"It's still true."

A bird twittered outside on the sill. Snape finished the soup and handed the bowl over to Harry who asked if he wanted seconds. Snape shook his head. Harry rinsed the bowl and watched his guardian rubbing the back of his neck. Harry ached to check if he was really all right, but that would lead to long explanations.

"The Wizengamot are meeting this evening to decide what to do with me," Harry said, mostly to distract himself. "But you're all right, so I don't care what happens."

Snape stood and stepped over to him. His robes smelt of the freshening charm that the hospital also used on the linens. "Do try to care before you walk into the meeting, if you could."

"I'll try," Harry said. He glanced around. "Maybe I should fetch the chess set in the meantime."

"The Ministry does not expect you?" Snape asked in disbelief. "You must have duties."

"I want to keep an eye on you. You don't even have a wand, do you?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps I will go procure another one from Mr. Ollivander," Snape said. "Were you truly intending to babysit?" he asked sharply.

"I was thinking about it, yeah," Harry said.

"Given your skills at detecting Death Eaters, you are much better employed doing that." Harry closed his eyes a moment, prompting Snape to ask, "Any on Diagon Alley?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, that is something. Must be in confusion."

"No one is certain who survived," Harry pointed out.

"I am. Would you like a list?" he asked.

"Very much so," Harry said.

Snape's gaze grew distant. "Bellatrix was absent when the attack started so I suspect she is still around. Greyback leapt out of the window and Avery had been sent away on a task. MacNair is dead for certain." Snape went on with the list.

"You're certain Bellatrix escaped?" Harry asked and then remembered. "Oh, yeah, Voldemort insulted her, didn't he?" he said, thinking aloud. Snape's narrow look of surprise made Harry say, "I thought you knew I was seeing everything. I thought that was why you distracted Voldemort by using his real name." When Snape shook his head, Harry added, "Well, that explains why you didn't announce where you were so I would know. It wasn't until I saw Pansy that I knew. Thanks for the distraction, even it if was an accident. I needed it."

Snape clenched and rubbed his hands together still deep in thought. "Draco and Pansy survived, I assume?" Snape asked.

"People at the Ministry said they did."

"Good."

Snape sat back down on the bed and stared at the wall. "And you have returned to yourself, it seems."

Harry exhaled, tossing the tea towel he held about as he gestured broadly. "I still have part of Voldemort in me, and I don't want it."

"I don't think you have any choice."

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"I can do the spell again," Harry insisted. Snape's eyes rose in a very dark look. Harry added, "I don't want him in me. I don't want him coming back."

"He isn't dead, how can he come back?" Snape retorted.

"I did the spell once, why don't you think I can do it again?"

Snape rubbed his forehead as though he were fighting a serious headache. "Harry, you performed the spell on someone who was not whole to begin with, a human menagerie of sorts. That is not the same."

Harry appeared merely stubborn. Snape said, "If I find you are attempting such a spell, Harry, I will take your wand away and toss you into the lower Hogwarts dungeon for a very long time."

"You can't," Harry retorted, feeling acid pleasure at saying that. "I can Apparate anywhere. Even inside of Hogwarts." When Snape simply stared at him, Harry said, "Want me to prove it? What would you like from your office?"

"A book," Snape said, gesturing at the small shelf above the hearth where a pile of Witch Weekly was stacked. "There isn't anything here to read."

Harry disappeared. There was no sound; he simply vanished. He reappeared the same way ten seconds later. It was as though Snape had blinked, rather than Harry exiting, except he held out the latest issue of Potions Review, still in its envelope which had Snape's address on it at Hogwarts. Snape straightened and tilted his head back. "How did you do that?"

"I slip into the Dark Plane, Apparate there, and slip out again." Harry was glad to tell someone this; he felt unburdened by doing so.

Snape turned the rough grey envelope over to examine it. "Do not let anyone know that you can do that, Harry. Does anyone know already?" he asked, sounding deeply concerned.

"Hagrid might."

Snape thought that over. "That may be all right. I may use a memory charm on him though, just in case." He tore open the envelope and banished the wrapping with a toss of his hand.

"You have to teach me how to do that," Harry said.

"Allow me to cling to one spell that you do not know," Snape said gruffly. He set the potions journal aside and said, "Harry, if you attempt the Crux Horridus you will put us all at risk."

"How so?" Harry asked, still sounding difficult. "Seems like not doing it is the real risk."

"You must kill someone first, of course or, even if you had a convenient accidental death to utilize for it, you are casually discussing cleaving your soul. You would damage yourself and not know it. You would become the very menace you most fear." Snape rubbed his hair back and added, "And given your skills, it would be end of wizardom, I believe."

Harry stared at him, judging his seriousness. He swallowed hard. "So, I'm just stuck with it?"

"You feel whole, correct?" When Harry nodded, Snape added, "Then you are whole, I believe, and you are stuck." After long seconds, Snape added, "And you promised."

Harry nodded reluctantly, frowning.

Silence descended until Snape said, "Perhaps you will heat me a bit more of that soup."

Harry jumped to do that, solicitously handing over a steaming bowl a minute later.

"You are turning into a house-elf again," Snape criticized, but his eyes held affection. When Harry bit his lip as he turned away, Snape added, "Sorry, you are worn too thin, I see."

"I thought I was going to lose you when I need you the most," Harry said, not looking up from bending over the kitchen sink where he had started the dishes with almost an obsessive attitude.

"You should be capable of getting by without me," Snape said slowly, holding off on eating.

Harry wiped his cheek on the edge of his sleeve with a jerking motion, surprised it had become wet.

"Harry," Snape said painfully. He set the bowl on the small shelf above the bed and came over to where Harry was putting things away. He tugged on Harry's arm to get him to stop what he was doing and turn toward him.

"You should read the papers before thinking I don't need you anymore. What's a Darkness Test, anyway?"

Snape's eyes narrowed. "They intend to run one on you?"

"So Minister Bones has warned me. Minerva made her put it off until the next regular meeting of the Wizengamot."

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"There will be time to prepare you, then," Snape stated confidently. "Keep your soul whole and you will do fine."

A knock sounded on the door. Harry ran a peep-hole spell and opened the door for McGonagall. She greeted them both. "Still feeling all right, Severus?" she inquired. Fawkes flapped to the coat rack and fluffed himself.

He nodded. "I can keep an eye on Severus if you wish to check in with the Ministry, Harry," McGonagall said. She sounded as though she wished to speak to Snape alone or wished to rescue Harry's career, or perhaps some of both.

Harry hung the tea towel back up and Disapparated for the upstairs of the Leaky Cauldron, and then from there to the Ministry alleyway, just to make it harder for him to be traced. Things were reassuringly busier inside the Ministry. He even had to wait in queue at the temporary reception desk.

Back in Candide's flat, McGonagall said, "I would like Pomfrey to take a look at you, Severus."

"For what reason?" he demanded, crossing his arms.

"Neither Healer at St. Mungo's who treated you seems to believe that they did so successfully."

"They must have, I am here and feeling quite well."

"I'm wondering if you have slipped into insanity in such a way as to not be recognizable as such."

"Oh, well, thank you," he said, truly insulted.

"It will only require a few minutes, Severus." She stepped to the door and opened it again. The Hogwarts Healerwitch stood in the corridor.

Snape sat when instructed and waited impatiently through an examination. While putting her things away in her black bag, Pomfrey said, "He seems to be quite all right. Underfed as usual and lacking in proper exercise."

"No sign of a curse disorder?" McGonagall asked.

"Not more than usual," came the reply, which made Snape roll his eyes.

"If you both don't mind," Snape said stiffly, "I would like to get some quiet rest for once, which is surprisingly difficult in hospital."

"I told Harry I would keep an eye on you," McGonagall said, shrugging off her cloak and hanging it over the chair. Pomfrey made her departure, leaving them alone to glare at each other.

With a huff Snape reclined on the bed, arms still crossed. "You wouldn't by chance have an extra wand on you, would you?" he asked.

"You didn't get yours back?"

"Perhaps the Ministry has it. Perhaps Draco has found it. I don't know. I'm not actually certain who took it from me since I was unconscious at the time." He re-crossed his arms to put the other on top. "I feel quite naked without it," he admitted.

"Ollivander's should re-open this week. He cleared out his shop during the riots but promised to reopen as soon as he could."

Snape rolled his eyes again and shook his head at his poor luck.

"Ah," McGonagall said, standing suddenly. "Will you be all right alone for two minutes?"

"Yes," Snape stated forcefully. McGonagall smiled, prompting Snape to ask, "What?" with equal force.

"It is very good to see you in such typical spirits, Severus," she said, which deflated his annoyance before it could become anger. "I will be right back." She closed the door. Snape watched it sparkle momentarily from the impervious spell she put on it from the other side.

She was absent slightly longer than two minutes, which gave him time to peruse the Potions journal Harry had brought him. He wasn't reading though, so much as thinking about how Harry had fetched it.

After she shrugged off her cloak, McGonagall held out two wands. "Try the red one first."

"Where did you get these?"

"Try it first and I will tell you."

Snape waved a hover charm at the stack of magazines on the mantelpiece. They hovered well enough, but the charm required two waves to be cancelled out. "Better than nothing, I suppose," he said, studying the poor workmanship of the wood.

"You are not using it properly," she said pleasantly. She placed an unlit lamp on the mantelpiece beside the magazines and incanted: "Wingardifacis Leviosa." The magazines hovered and the lamp lit. She handed the wand back. Snape stared at her strangely. "It is the 3W Mark 2 Ultimate Duelers Wand. Lets you cast two spells at once. Still experimental, however. No guarantees."

Snape accepted it back and gave it a more positive appraisal. "The trick, I assume is in the incantation in order to avoid hovering the lamp and igniting the magazines, not that there would be any great loss in that."

Handing over the second one, she said, "You may have that one and here is a normal one that the twins do not believe they have damaged yet while experimenting on it. The first one is supposed to allow for simultaneous block and attack during a duel. The twins are apparently keen to outfit all duelers with them in next year's tournament to raise the excitement level."

"And their sales level, I would assume," Snape added dryly. "I will have to thank them . . . unless they did not realize the wands were for me."

"No, they did," McGonagall assured him. When Snape hmmed she said, "The Weasleys are nothing if not forgiving."

He glared at her, holding off on trying another spell. "What? You think I was too hard on them."

"Yes. I do."

Snape shook his head and stared down the length of the wand while aiming it. "Troublemakers, all of them. Except Percy, that is." He snuffed the lamp and made the top Witch Weekly hover up and open to the first page with a Hands-free Reader's Charm. "Hm," he said. "Damn creative of them, though."

McGonagall grinned and took the other seat in the room.

"Now I truly do not need sitting," Snape pointed out.

"I promised Harry," McGonagall repeated.

Snape experimented with the wand a while longer before turning to the journal and trying to ignore his colleague. His head nodded shortly after and the wand slipped from his hand. McGonagall picked it up from the rug and set it on the shelf close by.

McGonagall went to the mantelpiece and took down the top magazine, realizing that even though it was months old, she hadn't had time to read her own copy. The first article discussed hair color, highlighting, and what it implied about a witch's personality. The author insisted that those who were still clinging to the old style of warts on the nose, could trade that in for green highlights as long as they were of sufficiently disturbing green. Her reading of this escapist pointlessness was interrupted by the latch turning. She pleased herself with how rapidly she was up with her wand out, but it was only the flat's owner.

"Headmistress . . ." Candide began before noticing that she was being shushed. "Severus!" she exclaimed, waking Snape anyway.

"Candide?" He sat up and looked around to get his bearings. "I am quite certain I didn't send for you yet," he criticized, rubbing his head.

She propped her hands on her hips. "Good to see that you are better than the newspapers made you out to be," she said with feeling. When this didn't reduce his annoyed glare, she said, "One: I couldn't figure out how you were going to send for me when you didn't know where I was-" "I have ways," Snape muttered. She went on, talking over him, "And two: it seemed unlikely that you would manage to do so from the ward for the incurably insane." At his derisive look, she pulled out a newspaper from her large handbag and held it out. It had been folded all sorts of ways to put an inner article on top. He waved it off. "It says that the Healers expected you to be moved, permanently, to the closed ward by tomorrow."

Snape scratched his ear, accepted the paper, but set it aside, unread.

Candide said, "So, I thought I should come. I tried not to read the papers, but it became too hard to not seek out any information and there were a lot of other magic folk half-hiding the way I was so it was harder to get away than I thought."

McGonagall put her cloak back on. "Perhaps I will leave you two alone." She exited, wearing a small smile.

Candide picked up the journal and newspaper from the bed to set them aside, and sat on the edge close to Snape. "You aren't really unhappy to see me, are you?" He shook his head, and she bent forward to kiss him.

"What was that for?" he asked, but the rancor was absent from his voice.

"For surviving."

"That is usually its own reward," he commented. He leaned back into a reclining position and closed his eyes.

"Are you certain you're all right?" Candide asked in concern.

Without opening his eyes, Snape said, "If another person asks me that I am going to start throwing curses around."

"Sorry," she said affectionately. "Didn't realize anyone else cared enough to ask."

Snape canted one eye open to glare at her but she only smiled mischievously and kissed him again.

Chapter 33

Neville Longbottom was let into Ward 49 with very little notice, given how familiar all the staff were with his presence. His parents were as they usually were: his father sleeping and his mother sitting up, staring into the distance beyond the far wall. His mother held out a stick of chewing gum to him.

"Thanks," Neville said. Usually it was only the wrapper that he received. "Sure you don't want it?"

She shook her head. Well, it was barely a shake, more of a sideways nod, but it was a response that made him freeze in surprise. He often spoke to her, but usually received only pointless reactions in return that he couldn't help but string together into something that made sense. Neville put the stick of gum in his pocket. "Uh . . ." he said, not certain what to say next. "Oh, yeah, Voldemort is gone again. Well, sort of. Harry did something quite startling this time. I thought I should come and tell you though that everything was all right again."

There was no reaction to this and his heart raced. Maybe it had just been a coincidence. "Maybe the staff already mentioned it," he muttered.

"My old friend came," she said. Her voice was scratchy, unused to speech. Neville nearly fainted.

"What? Who?" Neville leaned on the bed and glanced around, but there were no staff just then, the hospital was still very short-handed. He moved closer, half sitting. "Did you just say something?" he finally asked, thinking he must have imagined it.

"So long," she said, sounding wistful.

"So long since what? I'm sorry I couldn't visit the last few days. It's been madness. You've been lucky to be in here where it's quiet."

After a long pause, she said, "Old friend."

Neville tugged on his hair with both hands and then made himself relax. It was almost more maddening to have her communicating about things he did not understand than not communicating at all. He said, "Wait here. I'm going to go get the Healer."

He returned minutes later with Healer Strout. "She was talking," he was explaining. "Well, sort of. I'm not sure what she was talking about though. Did someone come visit her?"

The Healer shook her head and examined Alice Longbottom. "She seems about the same. Maybe a little more reactive to stimulus."

"Say something, Mum," Neville urged.

Healer Strout appeared dubious, but Mrs. Longbottom said, "Nice lady," while patting the Healer's arm.

"Well, that is quite extraordinary, especially given how long it has been." The Healer bent over the chart which rarely got more than small status tick marks on it. "I'll order a full assessment to see how she is doing." She hung the chart back up and said, "Talk to your son, he's waited a long time to speak to you." She then strode out.

Neville sat across from his mother and said, "Do you remember me?"

Without really looking at him, she patted his arm too and said, "Nice boy."

"Well, that's something, I guess," Neville said quietly. He glanced at his father, but he hadn't moved. Neville sighed and patted his mother's hand in return.

Harry made it to the front of the queue at the Ministry temporary reception desk. "Potter, right?" the clerk asked. It was the usual man, not the young one who had been there previously. "You're on the roster addendum, go on." He waved Harry off. This lightened Harry's mood until he reached the atrium where workers were repairing the fountain, pouring concrete into a magical form. The man running the mixer stared at him in surprise when Harry stopped to watch them work. He elbowed his companion and this man also stared at him, gaze shifting to suspicious. Harry turned and stepped away, encountering a woman hovering stacks of boxes from the dungeons. The boxes were stained as though they had been wet recently. She stepped to the side quickly to let him pass. He wanted to stop and demand to know what she thought he was going to do, but he knew what she had been reading and his attention would only make it worse. What could he say to fix that kind of fear? Even before everything happened, the press had been telling people that he had gone dark and now his defeat of Voldemort could believably be merely his elimination of a rival. It didn't calm most people down to think that, even if things were much better now.

Harry tried not to let his shoulders slump as he waited for the next lift. Three of them were functional now and banging from below indicated that others were being repaired.

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The Auror's office was empty except for Tonks, who sat at her desk, writing out a report by bending far over it as though badly nearsighted. Harry suddenly feared her reaction to him would be the same as everyone else's.

"Hi," Harry said quietly.

Tonks glanced up. "Hey, Harry," she said casually.

Harry's heart did a strange little dance of relief.

"Ready for the Wizengamot this evening?" she asked, as though it were merely a Quidditch match he may be playing in, not yet another determination on his future.

"I think so," he replied. He felt as though she had just handed him his future already by treating him as she always did. She kept writing. He liked the way her shoulder arched into her neck the way she sat with her black robes hanging loose behind her, pulled down by the weight of the hood.

She stood and Harry failed to get out of her way even knowing that she would be heading for the file room. "Harry?" she asked in a dubious voice as though thinking him clumsy or distracted.

He was indeed incredibly distracted because he had his hands on her arms and the scent of her was so strong.

She seemed to read his thoughts. "Harry . . ." she began chastisingly. But he kissed her before she could say more. A breath later she was kissing him back and when footsteps sounded in the corridor, approaching, Harry Apparated them away.

"Harry," she scolded lightly again upon looking around his bedroom. Harry hadn't thought carefully before coming here. The room was unexpectedly cool, damp, and breezy. A blue tarp fluttered over the hole in the roof, making Harry wonder who had taken care of that. The room had been emptied of everything except the bed and the wardrobe, which had its own tarp protecting it. Tonks wasn't angry, more resigned to his actions and reluctantly tolerant, which gave Harry a rush.

"They're going to kick me out anyway," Harry said, stepping close again. All he cared about at that instant was that she didn't care what he had done and thought of him exactly as she had before. Her hair cycled to light brown, something he rarely saw short of a disguise.

She tried to cross her arms but he stopped her. "They don't want to kick you out, Harry. Not everyone, anyway. They didn't leave you any choice about what you did."

Harry kissed her again and pushed her back onto the bare mattress of the bed, laying across her. He lifted his head and waited for her to say something. Her eyes dodged away before coming back to his.

"This makes things so much more complicated," she warned.

He ran his fingers through her hair. She still had two small scars at the edge of her hairline from the explosion at Azkaban. He traced those lightly and then kissed them.

"You're not listening to me and you are making this very difficult," she said.

"I don't care," Harry repeated, and it was the absolute truth.

"You've looked so lost lately," she said, brushing his hair back, even though gravity pulled it forward again. "You look like you've found yourself now, though." she said.

"I have," he said, bending to kiss her long neck.

She slapped him on the arm once and then put her arms around him. "Oh, hell," she muttered.

Harry had fallen asleep in a tangle of his cloak and came to awareness only gradually. Tonks was warm and pleasing against him.

"I need to get back to the Ministry," she said. "I didn't technically sign out."

"You've been there non-stop for days. Don't you deserve a break?" he asked.

"Yes. I certainly needed a nap . . . and other things . . . but there is always a call that isn't going to get handled if I leave."

He studied her eyes which were violet right then. He felt on hold. He badly needed to know if this was just another one-time.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked.

"Can I take you out to dinner tonight?" he asked. "Come over to your place afterward?"

"Well," she said, "they can't afford to fire us as far as I can tell. You have to face the Wizengamot this evening and here you are breaking even more rules." She sat up and scratched her head. She was amazingly beautiful as she moved to pick up her clothes. "Your timing could be a little better."

"I needed you," Harry said even though his pride railed at that statement.

Her shoulders fell and she gave him a look of sympathy. "I noticed," she said.

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"Everyone is scared to death of me," Harry said, needing understanding more than his pride for another round.

"That sucks, but they'll get over it. And if they don't . . . too bad for them." She stood to slip on her robe. Her hair straightened up and she looked herself again. "I'll go back first. You should wait a while before following." She looked down at herself and shook her robes out. "Might as well not invite disaster right away."

Harry grinned. She studied his eyes with something different than everyone else did, as though she wanted to understand. "Later, Harry," she said and then departed.

Harry dressed and hooked on his cloak. The scent of smoke had faded. The house had aired out at least, with all of the broken windows and open holes in the roof. He needed to arrange to get it repaired. He didn't know where to hire wizards like the ones working in the Ministry today. Not that he wished to invite them over to give an estimate, particularly. Maybe they should hire Muggle workers instead.

He grew bored within a minute of standing in his room to delay departing and took himself to Hagrid's cottage to check on his pet. Fang the Boarhound and Willy the Pranticore were sitting against opposite walls – Fang on the bed, using Hagrid's huge pillow as a shield, Willy below the window. They were eyeing each other with low regard. Kali lay curled in a homemade cage hanging from the ceiling. She raised her head when he touched the cage and then stood up, moving each leg carefully. The cage was too small for her to stretch her wings fully so he lifted her out. She flapped and stretched on his hand, wings marred by the black lines of tar and the tiny white threads that bound the membranes back together.

"Maybe you shouldn't fly for a while," he said to her. "Maybe that's why Hagrid put you in that smaller cage. Looks like he made it just for you, in fact."

She tilted her head at him as though listening. Fuzzy violet fur had already begun to cover her bare spots. He shifted her to his sleeve because she was pricking him with the one claw remaining on her injured front paw. She must be overcompensating and could not avoid doing so.

"If I had a home to take you back to, I'd do so, but I think you should stay here and let Hagrid keep looking after you. Hedwig's at the Burrow, but I think it is better here for you. All right?" He held her up to the open cage door to see if she was willing to go back inside and she was. He took that as her answer and re-twisted the wire holding the cage door closed. He wanted her with him but had to wait. He would come back in a few days and check on her again.

Outside on the lawn, he peered up at the high castle wall. He could just see the tip of Gryffindor tower behind the Headmistress' tower. He Apparated up there to look

for Ginny. The common room was empty, the hearth cold. He still had not used up the full half-hour he needed to. He asked the Fat Lady when she had last seen Ginny.

The portrait primped herself hurriedly before replying, "She's assigned to the kitchen today."

"Perfect," Harry said, thinking that he needed lunch anyway.

He was leary of Apparating again within the castle, because he could not risk getting caught doing so. He took the stairs instead, which reminded him of how few staircases were in his life now. By the time he got all the way to the area below the Entrance Hall, he wondered now how he and Ron could have decided so many times that a late-night snack was worth so much effort. He tickled the pear and tugged on the handle. Only a few house-elves were present, but a much taller figure sat among them, casting spells to the elves' delight.

Ginny looked up from the very large spoon she was repairing with a welding charm. "Harry!" The spoon clattered to the table as she jumped up. "How are you? I sent you about a twenty owls, but didn't hear anything back. I've been going nuts!"

"Sorry," Harry said.

She stepped close, looking defeated. "Gosh it's good to see you," she said. "Thank Merlin you're all right."

"I don't have much time for a visit, I'm afraid."

"No one does," she complained. "Headmistress is trying to get Bones to turn the Floo Network back on. Until then I don't expect too many visitors. The papers arrive here only a day late, and I swear the teachers told Peeves to hide them from me when the headlines are too awful. How is Professor Snape?" She asked this last with clear reluctance.

"He's fine now," Harry said.

"Is he? Harry that's wonderful." She gave him the hug then that she seemed to be resisting moments before.

"I'm glad you're here, Ginny. One fewer person to worry about." He took up a scone from a bowl on the next table and nibbled on it.

"Yeah," she uttered, shoulders falling. She went back to the bench where the elves waited, examining random broken metal cookware that waited to be repaired. "So everyone says. From the papers, it didn't seem like you needed any help anyway. Good job though." She sounded down even about that.

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"You're learning to weld?" Harry asked, changing the topic.

She tossed her arms. "I'm learning all kinds of useless things."

"That's not useless," Harry argued. When she shrugged, appearing more stubborn, Harry asked, "Where's Dobby?"

"The elves have been helping clean up Hogsmeade after the riots. McGonagall loaned them out. I couldn't get myself loaned out as well." She stared at the broken cauldron hook laying before her. "I can't believe I have another month of this. It's maddening being here when everything is happening out there."

"I know," Harry said, thinking that she was not at all accustomed to being alone, unlike himself, and that must make it harder. "I can come visit more often," he said.

"When they open the Floo Network. Otherwise it's a hassle," she said grimly. Being alone had clearly already taken a toll on her mood.

"Not for me," Harry said, thinking that if they were alone, he would show her what he could do. "I'll come. Kali is here and needs visits too. I'll try to owl, but I don't really have a home address for owls to easily find me and the Ministry is too chaotic for personal stuff."

She smile faintly. "Thanks, Harry. Glad you're all right. Glad you got rid of Voldemort." The elves around her cringed and one covered its ears. Ginny rolled her eyes. "See what I have for company? Sorry I couldn't help you. McGonagall assigned Professor Lupin and Professor Greer to guard me the whole rest of the trip on the Express." She shook her head. "They're bad enough as teachers when their attention is spread over a whole class . . ." She put two rusted-out hooks on top of each other and made one new one out of them with a spell that sent sparks up to the cauldrons hanging like bunches of fruit above the table. "You probably have to go," she said sadly as the new hook glowed red-hot. She hovered it to a cauldron full of water, sending billows of steam to the high ceiling.

"I do," Harry said, sounding distracted, "but I've never seen these spells before."

At the Ministry, Harry walked around the long way to Mr. Weasley's office rather than stop at the Auror's office. Mr. Weasley's desk had disappeared under tilting piles and rolls of parchment. Paper airplanes were scattered in the corners of the floor, unfolded just enough to read them.

"Harry," he said when he glanced up.

"Can I get an assignment, sir?" Harry asked. Mr. Weasley rubbed his chin while he thought. Harry added, "I've been added back to the roster, I noticed."

"You have," he confirmed, not looking up from the memo he was reading. "But I think we should wait until after the Wizengamot meeting this evening." Harry rubbed his hair back and tapped his toe on the floor, trying to think of an argument. Mr. Weasley asked, "How are you, Harry? I heard Severus is doing better."

"I'm all right now, Mr. Weasley," Harry assured him. "It's nice to be all alone in my head again."

"I can imagine," Mr. Weasley said with a tilt of his head. "You did well at the press conference." He picked up a battered quill to add a reply to the bottom of the memo he had opened. He had to write awkwardly high, on top of the stack just before him on the desk, and then he had to hunt for his inkwell, which had been buried. "Hopefully we can manage to resume your training regime soon as well. Losing Munz was quite a blow," he said sadly. "On top of Whitley and Moody."

Harry, who clearly remembered that moment, sighed and thought even more that he should return to his duties. After a minute, he asked, "Can I go out in disguise? I can disguise myself as Aaron or something . . . No one will know as long as I don't get assigned to the same call as him."

Mr. Weasley finally looked up. "It's those eyes you need to disguise," he said. "Well, ask Shacklebolt if he will take you out under those circumstances. We certainly are short-handed."

Harry's face broke into a smile. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Weasley grinned in response. "Good to see a smile around here for a change."

Harry stopped in the toilet and put on a disguise, beginning with changing his eyes to an ordinary looking brown. This did change his appearance rather radically. He hid his lightning scar with a charm that took three tries because it was actually an anti-wrinkle charm. He paused and dropped his wand hand to his side; his father was staring back at him now. "You think you had troubles," Harry said to his altered reflection.

He quickly finished his face and hair, leaving his body unaltered because he and Aaron were only slightly different in build. Down in the Auror's office, Tonks did a double-take. "What's with this?"

"Mr. Weasley said I MAY be able to go out on an assignment if I disguise myself."

She smiled and stood up to examine his work more closely, making all kinds of tingles race through his body at her nearness. "You need to change your voice too," she said.

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Harry tapped his throat with a voice-deepening charm. "Better?" he asked. He was dearly looking forward to this evening. He felt alive twice over standing there with her so close. "Where's Kingsley?" he asked. "I have to get his permission."

The record quill scratching furiously reminded him that he could just check for himself. "He should be around," Tonks said as Harry bent over the logbook, which at least now didn't overflow from one day into the next, even if the pages were dense.

Shacklebolt appeared right then. "Tonks take this assignment, will you? Take Aaron there since he's back. Where's Reggie?"

"That's not Aaron . . . it's Harry," Tonks explained to Harry's dismay because he was about to get exactly the partner he wanted.

Shacklebolt turned and stared at Harry. "So it is." He then appeared dubious.

Harry said, "Can I go out like this? Mr. Weasley said I could if you would take me."

"Me?" Shacklebolt asked with a touch of dismay. Harry's elation dropped significantly. "Your determination is appreciated, Harry, but are you even-"

"I'm on the roster," Harry stated, guessing what what was going to be asked. Shacklebolt's attitude made Harry realize how dearly he needed to return to normal. His mood was swinging sharply downward now. There was still Tonks that evening, he reminded himself.

"Arthur said that, eh?" Shacklebolt said, perusing the logbook. He frowned, "Since you aren't Aaron, you don't know where Reggie is. Hmf." He picked up the slate tablet and scratched something on it and then waited. Nothing happened so he set it down again. "All right, Potter, I'll take you with me to look for Reggie and Aaron since they aren't checking in. Tonks, wake Tristan to take over the office and take this other call." He swung his cloak on and took Harry's wrist while holding his wand up with the other. Harry did the same and they Apparated away.

Harry had to rush to follow out of the abandoned shop where they had arrived, hiding his wand inside the edge of his cloak as Shacklebolt did ahead of him. They passed through a crowd on the pavement, not entirely Muggle, Harry realized. He turned his head backwards to look over a group of three men in their late twenties, standing beneath a kabab house sign and wearing slightly less fashionable clothes than the others around them. One of them turned to him but didn't react, which was a strange change for Harry.

Shackebolt stopped at the corner and looked each way, scanning the people out in the nice weather. "There were three wizards back there," Harry said.

"Where?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Under the Lebanese restaurant sign."

"How do you know?" Shacklebolt asked, sounding doubtful.

"I can just tell," Harry insisted. "Really."

Shacklebolt considered this and him before walking back to the group. He used a subtle repelling charm to get the others nearby to decide to move away. The three men looked Shacklebolt's cloaked self up and down and then glanced at Harry.

"Have you seen anything strange happening around here?" the Auror asked.

"Someone Apparated in over that way," one of them said quietly. Harry felt very uneasy to be overlooked and unrecognized. He glanced around them, including up at the surrounding windows.

"That was us," Shacklebolt informed them.

The others shrugged that they had nothing to offer. The first one said, "You an Auror?"

Shacklebolt nodded, he also was looking around and looking frustrated already even though their search had just begun.

"Sweet," one of the wizards said.

"Stay here . . . Aaron, and keep an eye on the road." Shacklebolt stepped down two doorways, used an unlock charm and went inside. It wasn't the nicest area of town, and Harry was not even certain what city they were in.

"And you?" someone asked Harry.

"I'm in training to be," Harry explained, scanning the people walking on the pavements and the cars driving by.

"That means you're in training with Harry Potter, doesn't it?" the first asked. "Creepy," another said.

Harry tried to concentrate on keeping watch while he tried to imagine what Aaron would say in his place. "Potter's okay," he said, feeling awkward.

"My uncle says they're going to arrest him tonight at the Wizengamot meeting," one of the men said. "Everyone's been talking about it."

Harry unclenched his teeth, swallowed a sigh, and scanned the road as though he was too busy at that to really care. "Who's your uncle?" he asked with a casualness that made him quite pleased.

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"Ogden. He works at the Ministry in a job he can't talk about. Very important job. He always knows what's going on before anyone else does."

Harry felt as though he was floating beside his own body. "So, you are telling me this so I can warn Harry?" Harry asked with a mocking tone.

"Are you going to?" the man asked, stunned by that notion.

Harry looked up at the building Shacklebolt had entered, wishing the Auror had told him how long to wait before following, wishing he knew more precisely what the assignment was. "He's a good friend of mine," Harry said. "We're all trainees together."

One of the men said, "They say he's worse than Voldemort. He killed all those Death Eaters with a spell no one knows."

Harry shrugged. "So?" he asked snidely and there was no immediate reply.

To Harry's relief, Shacklebolt returned and gestured for him to follow. He looked concerned. When they were away from the others, he said, "False call it looks like."

"Again?" Harry asked sharply. "Merton again?" he added in a whisper.

"I don't know," Shacklebolt said grimly. "Let's check the empty buildings in the next few blocks. Something really has the hair on my neck going mad around here."

"I know what you mean."

Inside the foyer of the fourth building, Harry closed his eyes and quickly tugged on Shacklebolt's cloak to restrain him from mounting the stairs.

"D.E. nearby," he whispered.

"How many?" Shacklebolt asked. Harry held up two fingers and then nodded toward the door, it felt like the shadows were behind him a block or two away. Outside, Harry stopped again and closed his eyes before leading the way around the corner where a news shop's racks blocked the way. He didn't mind hunting Death Eaters, but wished that he was incapable of it.

"I'll go around back, you go in the front," Shacklebolt ordered when Harry gestured at a narrow, dilapidated building that felt likely.

Harry waited a count of sixty before using an unlock spell on the front door whose only labeling was a series of half-peeled house music stickers. Inside it was much nicer than expected, with sparkling marble floors that were probably house-elf cleaned. He slipped off his shoes to walk silently. The mirror ahead on the right felt cursed; Harry

ducked under it and glanced into the first room, which was empty. He turned to go up the stairs but someone came barreling out of the room he had just checked and would have run into Harry if he had not had his wand up and in the way.

"Pickley!" the rotund man shouted and a house-elf appeared between them, knocking Harry with a gust of wind when he raised his hand. This gave the man cover to draw his wand. They exchanged spells once before the house-elf knocked Harry back again into the cursed mirror. Arms reached out of it and began straightening his robes the way an impatient schoolmarm might.

Harry didn't want to take his wand off of his opponent to strike at the mirror behind him but the mirror had many more arms than he did and he couldn't shake it off. One of mirror-arms grabbed his wand hand in a vice-like grip that prevented him from aiming, except at the ceiling. The feeling of aversion at the contact made him cringe. He hoped Shacklebolt came along very soon.

The short, round wizard cockily strode forward as someone appeared at the top of the landing. "What is all this, Amycus?" the woman grumbled.

"Someone has invaded our house."

"Oh, the Carrows," Harry said, recognizing the name.

"You come calling and you do not know upon whom?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Well . . . that happens," Harry said to stall. He wasn't certain with this cursed thing holding onto him if he could successfully drop into the Dark Plane or not, let alone Disapparate.

At the top of the stairs, something or someone silently jerked Alecto backwards into a doorway. Harry avoided staring, instead distracting his captor with a mocking, "You don't know who I am either."

"Some busybody from the Ministry of Magic, presumably. Blasted inconvenient to have to move again. Rather like this place." He waved his wand and the hall and corridor were suddenly bare of their fine plaster decorations and marble surfaces, cobwebs hung everywhere. Everything had been an illusion. The elf cowered, backing into the grey and dreary shabby room behind him as though allergic to peeling paint and dust.

"Nicely done," Harry said. Shacklebolt was creeping down the stairs, wand aimed.

The wizard grinned sloppily. "Generous of you to say. So, who are you?"

Harry's face grew serious. "Your master's destroyer," he stated, knocking his head back hard enough to smash the mirror, which released his wand hand.

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Amycus turned to run, collided hard with Shacklebolt, and they both disappeared with a bang!. Harry stood, staring at the spot, wondering if he should attempt the spell to follow. He thought he should check on the other one, which was a good thing because the elf was trying to free his mistress from the binding holding her in a robe-covered lump. She was unconscious so hadn't taken advantage of the loosening on her bonds. The elf raised its long-fingered hands to strike out and Harry said, "Don't you dare," while cracking open the Dark Plane so the elf could feel it.

Pickley screeched horribly and scrambled away to cower again. Harry closed the gateway, rolled Alecto over, grabbed her wrist only to realize that he was still in his socks. This took the rush out of his success at apprehending another Death Eater. More so, he Apparated her to the alleyway leading to the Ministry. He had some difficulty hovering her wide body in while the gateway was open and needed three tries, for which he was glad there were no witnesses, but then he remembered: he did not look like Harry Potter, so it did not matter. As he chuckled to himself he thought that perhaps he should spend more time disguised as his fellow trainee.

Chapter 34.

Allies & Reflections, Part 2

Severus Snape rose from the narrow bed he was sharing. The angle of the sun indicated that several hours had passed. He dressed slowly, testing his body for any sharp pain. There was none; the Healers had done their job, even on the parts of him not in the worst condition.

Dressed, he stared into the mirror on the back of the door to check his appearance.

"What are you doing?" Candide asked, sitting up.

"I am going out."

"Where?" she asked, gathering the duvet around her and scratching her head.

He looked at her in the mirror, rather than turning. "The Ministry." He pulled the two wands out of his pocket. He couldn't tell them apart without looking at them, a design flaw he would have to mention to the Weasley twins. He wondered if they would mind if he put a notch in the handle of one of them.

"You sure you're fit to be up?"

"Yes. I've been much worse. Quite recently, in fact." He fingered the wands further, the normal one wasn't actually straight, he would have to remember to hold it so the tip pointed downward, not sideways. "I owe a few people, and I should pay them

back. I've been given yet another chance to even out my debts and I intend to do that."

She stumbled out of the bed, tripping over the covers bundled around her. "Where are you going, exactly?"

"To the Ministry, to help round up my former colleagues." He slipped the normal wand into his right-hand pocket and the other in his breast pocket. In his reflection, they didn't show.

"Severus, are you nuts? You just recovered from your last run-in with them. Why would you want to see them again so soon?"

"I'm feeling strangely fearless right now given how much I have survived."

She propped her hands on her hips. "Oh really? So does that mean you're not too chicken to agree to marry me?"

In the mirror, his brows went down very low before one went up in annoyance. "You have a one-track mind," he criticized.

"And so do you, Mr. I-Can't-Ever-Consider-Myself-Redeemed."

After this exchange they stared at each other's reflections. Unfortunately for Snape, the duvet wasn't covering her very well, so he was weakening without his will. He turned around, which did not help his resolve. "Bloody hell," he said with little feeling.

"You need help with Harry more than you ever have. Have you been reading the papers?"

"No, but I can imagine."

"I don't think you can, Severus. You wouldn't believe what a few nutters are suggesting. They want to put him away now so he can't become the next Voldemort."

"I do not think it will come to that, but if they ever attempt to do so, I will exercise no restraint to prevent it. And I will take him away from here . . . very far away. Are you prepared for that?"

"I would be fine with that, Severus."

He held his finger up. "One other thing. You do not understand him; stop assuming you do . . . it is annoying. But if you can manage that . . . fine."

She blinked at him. "Did you just agree?"

"I have to go," he said, and disappeared.

At the Ministry, he slipped in behind workers carrying sacks of concrete through the opening in the alleyway wall, which had inexplicably been changed to a barn door, presumably to make it appear more reasonable to the Muggle eye. The Muggles going by on the distant pavement paid no heed in any event. The workers dropped the bags with audible groans and moved to hover them instead. Snape offered to help, which was welcomed eagerly.

At the desk, the clerk was arguing with a little old man by shouting into the trumpet he held to his ear. When a barrier tried to stop them, to much grumbling, the construction worker in charge shouted to the clerk to cancel it for them, which he did with only a quick glance in their direction, during which Snape made a point of being behind the widest of the workers. As they moved on, he shook his head but accepted the oversight.

In the Auror's offices he encountered an Auror slumped at a desk, head resting on his hand. He had assignment sheets spread out before him and was fingering one idly that had been crumpled up and flattened out again.

"And you would be?" Snape asked him sharply.

Rogan looked up. "Tristan Rogan, who the hell are you? You don't have a badge." He started to raise his wand, but Snape was faster, snagging it with a charm and catching it out of the air. This brought some alertness to the man, who made it to his feet with effort.

"Are you alone here?" Snape demanded. The man fumbled in his pocket, prompting Snape to take his small slate board away from him as well before pushing him aside to look over the assignments. The crumpled one was a Death Eater sighting. Snape raised his wand to point it at Rogan's nose. It was almost unnecessary, since the man appeared on the verge of collapse.

Someone stopped in the doorway. "Arthur!" Rogan said. "Stop this man."

"Severus?" Mr. Weasley prompted.

Snape didn't lower his wand. "You left this man in charge in here?" he asked, sounding doubtful.

"Yes. Why?"

Rogan took a step backward and Snape followed, keeping close.

"Severus, really, whatever are you doing holding a wand on one of my Aurors?"

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"Something not quite right about this one," Snape said darkly. Rogan had taken another faltering step and now had his back up against the cubicle partition.

"Honestly, Arthur," Rogan pleaded in disbelief.

"Severus, what are you doing?" Mr. Weasley asked more sharply.

Snape grabbed one of Rogan's wrists and said, "Something you should have done rather a while ago, I should think."

Rogan fought him, freeing his hand. He appeared terrified but with a wand hovering beside his cheek he did not attempt to go far. His knees were slowly giving out.

"It's been a long while, hasn't it?" Snape asked. "How many reprieves have you received?"

Rogan's knees bent farther. He lost the last of the defiance he had mustered and his face fell into misery. He shook his head, looking as though he wished to explain but could not.

"Severus?" Mr. Weasley prompted in concern.

Snape took hold of Rogan's wrist again. "Pull up his sleeve."

Moving as though stunned, Mr. Weasley did so. Tell-tale blue electric lines crawled up down his arms to his fingertips. His head bent and he slid to the floor.

"That's what Harry had," Mr. Weasley said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Snape demanded of the Auror. "Imbecile," he snapped. "Someone would have helped you, but instead you were traitorous to everyone here."

"I didn't do that much of what they asked," he argued, finding some fierceness in the midst of his collapse. "They said only another Death Eater could remove it. Last meeting they didn't show."

"Probably dead," Snape stated pleasantly. "And as to the other: today is your lucky day, it seems." To Mr. Weasley, he said, "Put him on the floor."

"Why are you obeying him?" Rogan complained to Mr. Weasley in a bit of a whine while he was manhandled onto the warped wooden floor in the small space between the cubicles.

"Severus is a very old friend," Mr. Weasley explained, standing to stretch once Rogan was flat on the floor and looked unable to rise even if released. "I need to sort

through these assignments," he said with some stress. "See what in Merlin's name has been happening." He turned to the doorway where Vineet had appeared silently, eyes keenly taking in the scene.

Snape crouched and tugged Rogan's robe open, revealing a worn singlet underneath. "I need a second for the spell," he said. "Vishnu, perhaps you could give me a hand."

Vineet knelt where he was instructed to by a quick hand gesture. He mimicked Snape's hold on Rogan's other shoulder. "A Mutushorum, as powerful as you can cast, right on that spot." Vineet nodded, prompting Snape to say, "No wonder Harry wanted you with him. On three, ready?"

When Rogan fell limp, Vineet said, "He is dead."

"Just for a minute or so." Snape tugged Rogan's sleeve off of his arm and waved the overhead lamps dimmer to see better when the lines finally stopped. Vineet observed everything closely.

After Rogan was revived, Vineet asked, "What has happened to him?"

"He was being blackmailed. Kept alive just enough to make him useful longer. He is a fool," Snape growled, standing up and stepping over the Auror as he struggled to sit up.

"I didn't do that much," Rogan insisted again, ducking.

"Where did you send Reggie?" Mr. Weasley asked, sounding as though he feared the answer.

Rogan sat back against one of the partitions and clumsily pulled his robes together. "Not where it says there," he admitted quietly. "But Aaron, I sent him to Coventry, told him to wait in a pub there for instructions. I didn't put him in harm's way."

"Who was blackmailing you?" Snape demanded. For a moment he reached down as though to grab the man by the hair, but he balled his hand into a fist instead and held it at his side.

"MacNair . . . and Lestrange."

Mr. Weasley looked quickly through the logbook.

"I will go," Snape said.

"Are you certain you are up to it?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Snape gave him a smile containing no pleasure. "Yes. Quite. But, you wouldn't happen to have my wand?"

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Mr. Weasley said, "Everything collected from Malfoy Manor is in the evidence archive. Locked away." When Snape shook his head, Mr. Weasley added, "If it's there, it will be returned when the investigation is closed."

"Never mind," Snape said, gesturing with the normal but bent one that he had.

Mr. Weasley said, "I'll recall Shacklebolt and Harry and send them as well to follow you."

"They will only get in the way," Snape warned, thinking that some of the things Bellatrix was fond of arranging, he certainly did not want Harry to see.

"Vishnu is on probation but you aren't official anyway. Do you want to take him?"

Snape considered the Indian. "His obedience notwithstanding, I will manage better alone. He could end up a hostage, I'm afraid." To Rogan he demanded, "Did you send Rodgers to North Plaitton or St. Anthony on Abbotwy?"

"Plaitton" Rogan replied, surprised by Snape's guess.

"How long before she said to send help after him?" he then asked, increasing Rogan's surprise.

"Another hour from now," Rogan replied, appearing damned even further by how much Snape knew.

Snape took a deep breath. "I'll be back," he said, and disappeared.

"A trap?" Mr. Weasley said sharply. "She was setting up a trap?"

"I guess," Rogan muttered.

"And were you going to cooperate with that?"

"I wasn't . . . I hadn't figured what I was going to do. I thought Reggie wouldn't have any trouble with her. I hinted to him . . ."

Mr. Weasley said, "Vishnu, take him down to one of the interrogation rooms and lock him in." Vineet tugged the Auror to his feet. As Rogan was led past him, Mr. Weasley added angrily, "I wish I could put you up before the Wizengamot this evening, Tristan, rather than Harry. But for now I want you close at hand while we sort this out."

Rogan lowered his head and allowed Vineet to lead him out of the room.

Snape stopped before a line of half-fallen trees bordering a collapsing canal. He cancelled the alarm spells he found there and proceeded cautiously through the nettles. Bellatrix could be viciously creative with her spells but she tended to be recklessly over-confident with setups that had worked previously. He crossed the trees and a gravel path that meandered to the rusty railroad bridge in the distance. Stacks of grim flats were visible beyond, their windows dark or missing. Ahead of him an old woolen mill stood, its decorative brickwork optimistically contrasting with its decrepit condition.

He circled carefully, peering in the broken-out windows. There was nothing on the ground floor that he could see except for graffiti. Opportunistic trees grew close against the side of the building inside the wrought iron fence. Their branches invaded the missing windows on the upper floors. Snape surveyed this situation before transforming into a snake and spiraling up one of them.

At the window, he hung from a branch and tasted the air with his tongue. Fresh human scent nearly overpowered him. He slipped inside and glided behind a large contraption that still held strands of thread from its many spindly arms draped like giant spider webs. He returned to human form and stepped out into the dusty sunlight.

At the other end of the narrow room, lay Rodgers. Snape approached slowly, wand out, turning around frequently to check behind him. The dust on the floor had been disturbed and then masked again with an reverse-chore charm, which hinted at where traps had been laid, although they could be false clues.

Rodgers had been left in one of Bellatrix's invented tormenting positions. He rested on a large metal ball on which he had to balance his back or risk touching the cursed floor. He had not heard Snape approach, which was fine since Snape did not want to risk any movement that might spring the secondary traps surrounding them. Only Rodgers' feet touched the floor on legs bent to give him the best balance. Given how much the Auror's muscles quivered trying to maintain his position, it was possible Bellatrix had been absent for a while, leaving her victim to strain to survive until rescuers arrived, only to be taken down themselves by other ambushing spells. Without warning of the severity of the situation, even an experienced Auror could fall prey long enough for Bellatrix to descend and cause him or her grave difficulty.

Snape took a few steps to the side to enter Rodgers' line of sight. To his credit, Rodgers' didn't move beyond his eyes, which grew furiously alarmed and hate-filled beyond the pain they already held.

"Show me what she did," Snape whispered, holding the Auror's gaze. When Rodgers' appeared even more distrustful and shifted his gaze away, Snape hissed, "Do you wish to live or not?"

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Rodgers' eyes closed for a breath. He opened them again and brought them back to meet Snape's but he appeared stubborn about it. Snape Legilimized him, watching in his memory as Bellatrix laid the traps just in front of where his feet now were.

Snape backed up a half step to gain a little space. He paced slowly to where he estimated the right hand side of the inferno trap to be and drew a spell line from the center of it, out to the plaster wall. Sparkles began draining from it. He did the same on the left. The cursed floor itself was more difficult. He crouched and placed the point of his wand on the half-rotted wood. Nothing happened. He raised it up and placed it down inches closer in.

As he repeated this with great care, Rodgers made a noise of impatience. Snape said, "Do not speak; you will set it off, as I am certain she warned you."

He moved the wand point down on the next board over, looking for the start of the cursed floor. It could only be cancelled from the very edge of it. "Contrary to what you are probably assuming," Snape went on conversationally, "I do not find enjoyment in your suffering . . . and I am hurrying."

Finally, he found the edge. The curse made his borrowed wand smolder, which he did not care about. He spoke the cancellation, which was a long string of latin on the topic of quieting the spirit of lightning and the hunger for pain. He knew the cancellation because he had years ago seen her practicing and perfecting the spell.

The wand ceased to smoke. He lifted it and said, "It is all clear now."

A long hesitation passed before Rodgers allowed himself to roll to the side. His hands were bound, which Snape assumed was why he did not try to rise immediately as the metal ball rolled away a few feet until it found a large knothole and rocked to a stop. Checking that they were still alone, Snape strode over to the Auror and crouched beside him. Rodgers was trying to hide his face, it appeared, by turning it toward the floor. Snape removed the simple binding charm from his wrists and Rodgers put his hands over his face. His chest heaved once.

"You had better be stronger than that if you are going to continue to train Harry," Snape criticized. "Get up; we must leave quickly."

Rodgers struggled shakily to his feet. As with most people, the moment of rescue generated the largest flood of distress, but Rodgers got a hold of himself quickly and looked around alertly. Snape handed him the normal wand and removed the other from his breast pocket. Rodgers held the burned wand at ready and studied Snape as though he were a mysterious new creature that may yet turn out to be poisonous.

A bird twittered and took flight outside in the front. "Stay here," Snape whispered. He slid soundlessly over behind the pillar closest to the stairwell, cast a spell at his feet, and waited.

Rodgers shook himself and held the wand behind him. Snape was impressed that he easily took up an attitude of victimhood, which would make him much better bait. Rodgers sidled over to the high window and looked out, judging the distance to the ground. Bellatrix came into view on the stairs and immediately raised her wand.

"Well, lookie at this. Came just in time, didn't I?" she purred, flipping her cloak with a snap. The metal decorations edging her bodice glittered as she moved.

Rodgers glanced around him as though hoping for escape, then he backed up.

She glanced around as well, even cast a detection spell, but it didn't find her former colleague who had charmed himself to avoid detection by just that spell. "However did you get out of that?" she asked, gesturing at the metal ball sitting alone.

"You aren't as good as you think you are," Rodgers sneered. He swayed slightly despite his emotion and looked about to be sick.

She raised her wand, but Rodgers was faster, hitting her with a Blasting Curse, which sent her binding charm at the leading on the window. It groaned and plaster rained from the wall above it. Rodgers was shaking with fatigue, though, and his next curse only grazed her. She would have hit home with a Crucio in return if Snape had not hit her from behind with another spell, knocking her flat. She rolled over and cast back at him, but he had the Weasley twins experimental wand in his hand and he blocked as well as struck out with a disarming spell. Her wand tumbled away. Rodgers hit her from the other side, making her curl over her midsection.

Rodgers approached her, face contorted in hatred.

"She almost certainly has another wand," Snape stated just before Bellatrix pulled one from her boot and sent a spray of flame first at Rodgers before bringing it around to Snape who easily countered it. Rodgers patted his robe sleeves to stifle them smoldering.

The three of them fell still. "Give it up," Rodgers said.

"If you don't mind," Snape said, "I'd like to take her down, personally."

"You'd like to?" Rodgers snapped in disbelief. "I think I have first dibs."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and then unexpectedly somersaulted toward the nearest pillar. Both of them lashed out, but Rodgers' prison box blocked Snape's chain binding, so

what ended up sitting on the floor was a chain-wrapped box. Snape made a gesture of concession, but Rodgers didn't note it since he had fallen to his knees in exhaustion.

Snape stepped over to him and held out a hand to help him back up.

"Surprised you didn't bring reinforcements if you weren't here to help her," Rodgers said as he accepted the assistance and then hung on for balance. Snape started for the stairs despite this, forcing Rodgers to struggle to stay upright and keep pace.

"I wanted to face her myself," Snape said. "She was Voldemort's most loyal servant." After a few steps he gave in and put Rodgers arm over his shoulder to help him down the staircase with Bellatrix's box hovered before them. The dueler's wand did not work very well for hovering and the box kept striking the steps, which Rodgers didn't comment on. "Also, I am accustomed to working alone and not worrying about anyone else."

From beside the canal, Snape Apparated Rodgers to St. Mungo's. Rodgers looked around the hospital cellar and snapped correctively, "The Ministry. Hell, I'll take myself. No, give me that," he said, gesturing at the prison box.

"I am quite certain that you require some care," Snape pointed out.

"You should have just taken us to the Ministry," Rodgers criticized.

"I thought you should suffer at someone's hands, given that you did not trust me," Snape said. "A Healer's would do."

Rodgers shot him a look of renewed dislike but it broke down and he laughed a bit. "Ministry," he repeated. He was handling the box now and he disappeared. Snape followed just in time to slip through the doorway off the alleyway that, of the two of them, only Rodgers could open. At the desk, Rodgers berated the clerk until he gave Snape a badge and then led the way inside and down into the dungeon. In the damp, low-ceilinged corridor leading to the holding cells below Courtroom Ten, he turned over the box and signed some paperwork. His swaying was only noticeable to Snape.

As they headed back to the lifts, Snape said casually, "I usually find it is advisable to sit down before suffering the embarrassment of falling down."

"I'm not going to fall down," Rodgers insisted, but he clung to the gates of the lift after they latched and the cage rose with a shudder.

"Reggie," Mr. Weasley said with feeling upon them stepping into the office. "Did you get her?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Rodgers nodded and dropped hard into the nearest chair. "She's in the dungeon. Aaron all right? I didn't see him."

Mr. Weasley leaned close to look him over. "I sent Harry to fetch him. Tristan hadn't actually sent him to meet you."

Rodgers waved him away impatiently. "Tristan fall asleep instead of sending Aaron?"

"Worse than that; I'm afraid," Mr. Weasley said. "He was having difficulty working entirely for our side."

Rodgers stared at him. "What?" he breathed as though socked in the stomach.

"Rest a minute and you can go speak with him. Interrogation room one."

Rodgers drooped, looking his most injured yet.

"Thank you, Severus," Mr. Weasley said, upon turning to Snape.

Snape crossed his arms. "A sacrifice rescuing him . . . but I think I will live it down." Mr. Weasley patted his arm in mock consolation on his way out.

"I won't," Rodgers muttered, resting his head in his hand.

After Mr. Weasley departed, Snape said in a low voice. "You can pay me back by treating Harry equitably while continuing to train him."

Rodgers tenderly rubbed his neck. "I have no problem with keeping Harry on here. We desperately need him."

"Then we are already even," Snape stated.

Harry entered the wizard pub called the Dragon's Deep just three blocks from where he they had apprehended the Carrows. Well, Harry assumed Shacklebolt would successfully track down Amycus. He had not yet reported to the Ministry before Harry was sent off again. Something serious was happening when he arrived but he was not given any details, as usual. In fact, he was hurried off almost unceremoniously.

Aaron sat in the corner, watching the Falmouth player, Gregor, and his friends court trouble in the other corner.

Harry sat down beside him at his small table. Aaron gaped at him. "Harry?" At Harry's wide grin, he asked in distress, "Are you pretending to be me?"

"Yes," Harry said, grinning. "Haven't you checked your tablet? You've been called back."

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Aaron fumbled for his pocket with a strained expression. "Rats. Yes. Checked it about three-hundred times when I first arrived; then these guys showed up."

Harry followed his gaze. Aaron's targets were indeed skulking suspiciously.

"I was hoping to catch them doing something," Aaron explained.

Harry closed his eyes a long breath. "They aren't Death Eaters. Let's go." When Aaron hesitated, Harry said, "You know where to find them later . . . just have to look at the Quidditch match schedule."

Aaron swigged the last of his ale and gave in. "True."

Back at the Ministry, Harry jerked in surprise as he entered the office, "Severus!" He automatically gave his guardian a hug.

Snape pushed him away to look him over. "You are masquerading as the twin of Mr. Wickem?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted.

Snape's thumb grazed the center of Harry's forehead where his scar was hidden.

Harry explained. "I wasn't technically allowed out until after the Wizengamot hearing this evening. Well . . ." he hesitated, remembering what he had overheard on the street. "If they let me back on duty, that is." He noticed his trainer slumped miserably nearby. "Are you all right, sir?"

Rodgers raised his head marginally. "Worst day of my life, but . . . I figure it can only get better from here."

"We caught the Carrows . . ." He glanced around the office. "Well, I brought in one of them; Shacklebolt was fetching the other . . ."

Mr. Weasley came over and steered Harry out of the room by the shoulder. "Speaking of the meeting this evening . . . let's get you some dinner and a moment of quiet before you face them, hm?" Snape followed them out and Harry allowed himself to be led to the tea room.

"Where's Tonks?" he asked.

"Out on assignment," Mr. Weasley explained.

"Are you sure you should be here, Severus?" Harry asked in concern. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

"I will manage," Snape stated loftily.

"Severus has been a life-saver today," Mr. Weasley said. "Perhaps he can see to you while I handle assignments?"

Snape nodded and Mr. Weasley departed hurriedly, tossing, "You are still Mr. Wickem, you realize," over his shoulder.

Harry had taken a bite of one of the stale sandwiches left from lunch. He removed the disguise spells as he chewed. Snape pointed at his forehead. "You will most likely wish to remind them of that one."

Harry had forgotten to unhide his scar. He tapped his forehead with his wand and his old scar reappeared. He rubbed it and put his wand away. "Good to see you up, Severus."

Snape nodded. "I wished to assist, if possible."

"As long as you're careful." Harry finished the sandwich and crumpled up the paper wrapper. "I should be nervous about this hearing, shouldn't I? Somehow I don't care."

"That is your prerogative, but I would strongly recommend, at the very least, pretending that you understand their concerns."

"I heard a rumor . . . when I was in disguise . . . that they intended to arrest me at the meeting, and I still can't make myself care."

Snape straightened his cloak with a shrug. "You are standing in the department that would have to execute that order, and it does not seem as though they would willingly do so. Perhaps that is why you are dangerously sanguine."

Harry popped the cap off of a jar of pumpkin juice. "I think I can do this," he insisted between sips. "I just need to behave as Dumbledore would, so I don't scare anybody. Powerful . . but harmless." He stared into the empty bottom of the jar with its ring of pale orange liquid. "I could really use an ale."

Snape took the jar and tossed it into the bin. "Later, when you are finished."

Harry looked him over. "I'm really glad you're all right, Severus," he said with feeling. "I can get through a lot, knowing that."

"Touching, I'm sure," Snape said lightly enough not to insult. He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Perhaps you should head down early."

Harry sat instead and crossed his arms. "No way. Last time I worked myself up until I was too nervous. I don't like waiting outside that door. Tell me about this Darkness Test in case they decide to run it this meeting despite what Bones said."

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Ten minutes later, Shacklebolt and Tonks appeared. When Harry began asking about Carrow – partly to cover his fierce blush and to think about something appropriate – Shacklebolt waved him off. "We're your escorts and we have to go right now."

"Can Severus come?"

Tonks said, "Given that his injuries argue in your favor, and the Wizengamot requested the Healer's report along with everything else . . . I don't think you want them to see how well he is doing."

"Good advice," Shacklebolt concurred.

The hearing was held in the usual meeting room, which was brighter than Courtroom Ten and its tiered seats loomed less. Harry took the chair in the front middle of the floor. He rubbed the carved wooden armrests as he sat back. They were notched but also smoothed from years of nervous people sitting right were he was. Tonks and Shacklebolt flanked Harry and stood at attention, wands lowered, but in hand.

Harry took a deep breath and let his eyes trail over the faces peering down at him. Most wore glasses, most were white-haired. Their plum robes made them appear more festive than they ever could be.

Bones started things off. "Mr. Potter, you are here before us again, it seems." She sounded as though this were a paperwork issue, which let Harry breathe more freely. She certainly was flipping through a thick stack of parchments before her as though looking for a particular one. "We have some questions for you regarding the events of the last few days." She adjusted her monocle and peered at a long parchment before setting it down and letting it unfurl and hang far over the front edge of the table.

"Yes, Minister," Harry said loudly, because the muttering in the upper tiers bothered him and he wanted to start off sounding cooperative. McGonagall's gaze was one of the few actively friendly ones.

Bones said, "We have a broader issue of your disobeying your direct superiors, but that is an aside for the moment, amazingly enough." Harry tried not to let his shoulders fall. "We have reviewed the Department of Magical Law Enforcement reports about the events at Malfoy Manor on June 14, but they are insufficient to determine what exactly we are to do with you, Harry." She waited to see the result of that statement before continuing on. "We are most interested in learning more about the spell you utilized to render – and I don't mean that as a pun – ten wanted Death Eaters into little more than bloodied robes and a stray shiny bone or two."

"It wasn't a spell, really," Harry said.

She read from the parchment. "The official report states that you summoned creatures called Rakshasas to dispose of your enemies. I am not personally familiar with these, perhaps you can illuminate us."

"I thought they were Shetani," Harry said. "I hadn't heard of the others before."

"Shetani, Rakshasas, d'Jinn, Ifrit . . . from my burning the last drops of my lamp oil last night reading, I have concluded they must all be the same thing. Barring that doing so is in violation of Decree 84 regarding casting of un-approved spells, let alone Decree 13 forbidding conjuring of anything not of this Plane. Summoning such a creature requires rather lengthy preparation of a expert diagrammed node, the use of rather un-seemly sacrifices, long, obscure, and difficult incantations. Months of time would be expected to pass from start to finish. By the timeline in the report, you must have had ten minutes at most."

Harry's hands clenched the polished wood armrests. "When I get angry they come very easily, ma'am."

"Just like that?" she asked doubtfully as the assemblage shifted, whispering to each other.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah."

She gazed at him, deep in thought. Someone in an upper tier asked, "Can he summon them now, here?"

Bones relayed the question. "Can you, Harry?"

"You want a demonstration?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"No. Harry," Bones said, sounding vaguely alarmed. "We are merely asking a point of information."

"Oh," Harry sat back again, even though the hard wood was hurting his spine. "Here at the Ministry, it feels like it would be harder to do it. Something about the protective spells." The assembly let out a collective breath. He wasn't sure how true this was anymore, given that was strong enough to slip into Hogwarts, but it felt true as he had said it, before he thought twice, so he left it at that.

"But outside the Ministry?" Ogden asked. "You could conjure these beasts at will?"

"I think so," Harry admitted.

Muttering resumed.

"Let's play a little game, Harry," Bones said. "It is Monday and you have been confined to the Weasley residence because you could potentially give away key plans

to Voldemort through the connection you share. Your adoptive father has not been abducted . . .” Harry put himself back in time to that place, dearly wishing what she said had been true. “What are you doing instead of carrying out your own assault on Malfoy Manor?”

“I would have just kept trying to see where they were hiding out. When I found out, I would have told someone who could relay the message to the Auror’s office.”

“And if you had been ordered to remain where you were while others took care of things?”

“Voldemort is my responsibility,” Harry pointed out. “It would have been unwise of the Ministry to keep me away.”

Bones frowned. “Clearly you dispensed with him easily enough, but if you had been so ordered?”

“I don’t know what I would have done. I guess it depends on how bad I thought things would go without me.”

A few members took note of that. A grumbly old voice asked something from behind Bones. “Ah, yes. There has been some interest in what you did to reduce Voldemort to a Muggle, a spell no one, even in this wizened collective, has ever heard of.”

“I changed a spell into another spell.” Harry thought again, remembering that intense moment of knowledge, “No, that’s not quite true. I used a spell Voldemort knew, but I was very selective about what energy I took away. Instead of cutting his soul out, I cut out his magical power.”

The voice grumbled again. “Could you repeat the spell?” Bones asked. “On Mr. Malfoy, say?”

Harry froze in his chair. Beside him Shacklebolt shifted uneasily. “It isn’t a very good spell,” Harry explained. “I used the Crux Horridus spell and made it do what I wanted and that’s a terrible spell. I wouldn’t want to do the spell again. Not for that.”

“Do you like Mr. Malfoy, Harry?” Bones asked, sounding strangely level, the way Snape did when the question was a trap.

“No. He tortured my father nearly into madness,” Harry said, voice unsteady. “He keeps wanting Voldemort to come back. He’s tried to kill me many times. I don’t like him at all.”

More muttering came from the upper seats. “It would be a most appropriate punishment, don’t you think?” Bones asked.

"Yes, I suppose," Harry said. He didn't want to seem uncooperative, but his own aversion was winning out easily. He imagined Malfoy's terror stricken face beneath him as he circled the wand to carve out his magic. He could most likely repeat the spell, but for Lucius Malfoy, it felt a worse act than simply killing him. And Harry wondered how he himself would feel afterward. Sick seemed most likely. "I . . . It's just that the spell . . . it's not a very good one to perform. Voldemort was different; he wasn't whole. Lucius Malfoy is. Spells like that take a toll on the caster too."

Bones was smiling faintly. "Of course they do, Harry." She glanced meaningfully behind her. "And we will be certain to arrange appropriate punishment for Mr. Malfoy without resorting to such things."

Harry let himself relax and take a deep breath in preparation for the next potentially trap-laden question.

"As to your disobeying orders . . ."

"I couldn't sit still while my family was being tortured," Harry said, interrupting. Tonks hand landed on his shoulder, presumably to quiet him.

"And if you had it to do over again?" Bones asked sternly.

"I'd disobey them sooner," Harry stated, not wavering in holding her gaze. Tonk's hand gripped tighter.

Bones broke the stare when she flipped through her parchments again. "The Healers support your argument that haste was justified, but there is still a disciplinary issue which I assume your department will handle. If they don't, it may be re-addressed here at a later date." She glanced at Shacklebolt as she said this. "As to the other rules violations . . . you must appreciate our concern, Harry, as to your fitness as an Auror."

It was Harry who dropped his gaze this time. Gathering calm around him as best he could, he explained, "I . . . wouldn't have done it if I'd had a choice . . . saw a choice."

Bones sighed loudly. "Given that the prophecy is now dispensed with, we could make an exception for extraordinary fate-willed circumstances . . ."

Someone scoffed loudly in annoyance and several began to argue about Harry already being under investigation for dark magic.

"Dispensed with?" Harry heard himself echo, ignoring the other comments. The room quieted and many gazed at him with renewed concern, but Harry went on. "It hasn't

been dispensed with." He swallowed, part of him thinking his speaking at all was not well thought out. "Merton is still out there. He's the focus of the prophecy. They conjure allies they cannot control. That's what the prophecy said."

"Convenient," An old wizard three down from Bones cackled. "Your previous investigator is dead and you are still too valuable to be disciplined for crossing the line yet again."

"I'd hand off this prophecy if I could," Harry said, sounding more angry than he wished. He straightened in his chair and tried be serene. How had Dumbledore managed it all those years?

"I'll address your concerns in a moment, Murgatroid," Bones said. "Harry, you don't believe the prophecy has been fulfilled?"

"It doesn't mention Voldemort, by any name, like all the others," Harry pointed out. "He's just part of the unleashed Dark Hordes." This had been bothering Harry during the brief moments he could think about it and now he finally found his thoughts getting a chance work themselves out. "He didn't set this in motion, Maurdant Merton did and we haven't got him yet."

Minister Bones now appeared alarmed and thoughtful. She stared at Harry. "Mr. Shacklebolt, what is the status of this other investigation?"

Shacklebolt's deep voice said, "I think we will have to get you a report in the morning Madam Minister. We obviously have not had much time lately to follow up with our previous cases."

In the corridor on the way back to the Auror's offices, Shacklebolt said, "A little warning would have been nice, Harry."

"I didn't know they assumed the prophecy was finished. I didn't know anyone did."

"It's all right, Harry," Tonks said. "Witness that you are still free to return to the office. You did fine."

Harry turned to her in the lift, wishing that they were alone with an overwhelming ache. "Thanks," he said, thinking volumes more he couldn't say, but he was going to have to get used to that.

As soon as they arrived in the offices, Tonks and Shacklebolt were immediately sent off on assignments. Harry was left to recite to Mr. Weasley and Snape how things had gone. "And they didn't make a decision about me . . . said they had to debate it further and have the results of the Darkness Test," he said, finishing. He swallowed a yawn. He had planned to take Tonks out this evening, but it was already late and she wasn't available. "If you needed Tonks, why did she stay with me?" Harry asked his boss.

"Kingsley and Tonks had to remain and stand guard," Mr. Weasley explained. "Otherwise they were going to use Courtroom Ten."

"Oh," Harry said, grateful, in that case.

A knock sounded on the door frame. Rogan stood there, guarded by Vineet and looking sulky. "He wishes to speak to you," Vineet informed Mr. Weasley.

"My office then," Mr. Weasley replied stiffly.

"What's with Rogan?" Harry asked in alarm. Snape filled him in on what had happened.

"This department's in trouble," Harry said.

"I think that is to your benefit," Snape pointed out.

"I would rather it not be," Harry said. He rubbed his aching eyes. "Where are you staying?"

"With Candide again."

Harry's lips twitched. "Are you?" he asked with a hint of suggestion.

Snape's brow rose. "Hmf," he said, sounding dangerous.

"Maybe I'll see if Hermione will put up with me another night." He rubbed his head and sighed, "I wish they'd made a decision so I would know." He glanced around the office. "I guess we've been left manning things here. Or I have. Why don't you go get some rest?" Harry suggested, thinking that if Tonks returned he could stay the night with her. That thought brought him to new levels of nervous alertness. He took glance over the logbook and the assignment slips that were nearby. "Really, Severus, I can handle this."

"If you insist."

"I do," Harry said, letting affection rule his voice. With a small bow Snape disappeared and Harry stared at the spot he had been in, thinking that had been much too easy.

Chapter 34

Kerry Ann came in and did a double-take at Harry running things. "Are you allowed back on duty?"

"No," Harry said. "Or, not sure yet."

She laughed. "Honestly, they can't keep you off duty. Things are getting worse here, even as mad as they were before."

"You look chipper," Harry observed.

"I slept like a rock." She said and muttered something afterward.

"What?"

"I got a nice massage; helped me sleep," she repeated more clearly.

"Ambroise is still in town then?" Harry asked, crossing his arms and looking down his nose at her playfully.

She flushed. "He is . . . Wants to know how you are doing, actually," she added quickly as though as a distraction. "He said to tell you the French Ministry Department of Magie Police would be happy to have you if they send you off from here."

"Oh. Thanks," Harry said, realizing there were more possibilities than he had considered before. He mulled things to himself and then asked, "Do they have an apprenticeship, because I need a little more training I think."

"You'll have to talk to him, or them; I didn't ask." She was smiling as she said this, but then soberly added, "I hope you get to stay, Harry."

"Thanks."

"Oh . . . or maybe we can both transfer to the French Magie Police," she suggested, eyes bright.

"I could make that a condition of my acceptance," Harry stated.

This caught her by surprise. "Would you do that, really?"

"Of course. I wouldn't want to transfer alone."

She chewed her lip. "What if I asked Ambroise to arrange for an offer for you. Just something you can wave before the Ministry."

"That's a great idea. Would he really do that?"

She waved her hand as though to dismiss him and rolled her eyes. "Ambroise worships you."

Tonks returned and dropped into her chair, hair drooping over her eyes.

"You need a break," Harry stated firmly.

She stared at her wand hand, which was shaking faintly. "Yeah. Have to finish the report for this call now though. Can never remember anything the next day."

"I'll help," Harry said, sitting down close beside her to arrange quills, report forms and ink. "Talk, I'll compose," he said, not realizing how very gentle and protective he sounded.

Kerry Ann punched his shoulder. "Tone it down, Romeo." Harry looked up at her in surprise, making her add, "Really, that was far too obvious."

Harry put on a formal tone, put his shoulders back, and said, "I shall transcribe if you describe the events."

Kerry Ann shook her head. "Still not there."

"Really?" Harry verified in concern. "Uh oh."

Harry wrote out Tonks' report after a few restarts where she amended what she remembered due to being too frazzled to describe things well, or in any particular order. As she sat with her head in her hand pondering whether the witch had fired a spell before or after the door to the back had opened, Harry said, "You are too tired to be on duty at all."

"Someone had to take the call, Harry."

"I'd have been happy to take it instead," he pointed out. "You need to rest." He folded away her report in a file folder and put it on the corner of her desk. "Let me take you home," he said, standing up. "Kerry Ann can take over." The two woman shared a look, and Tonks Apparated herself and Harry away.

In her flat, she started to straighten up the piles of dishes and crisps wrappers. Harry took her wand away and forced her to sit on the couch. "Let me take care of everything. You rest."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, clearly touched.

"Least I can do."

She fell into her bed ten minutes later, even as Harry was trying to find a place to store the huge strainer in the tiny kitchen. He went in a short while later and touched her shoulder.

"I'm really very tired, Harry," she said.

"I noticed." He didn't leave her alone, though; he began rubbing between her shoulder blades, remembering what Kerry Ann had said. This generated lots of pleasing noises so he moved up to her shoulders. She was alarmingly fine-boned with much less muscle than himself. It made him worry acutely about her even though magic was mostly what she needed in the field. Once unleashed, this protective instinct only grew in him, even as he realized it was going to make things that much harder at the Ministry. Harry shucked his shirt and wrapped himself around her as she slept, no longer tired, but alert for any danger approaching. He monitored the shadows behind his eyes. They were in two groups now, but far away.

The next morning, Tonks had a much more business attitude. She showered and dressed quickly, giving him a peck on the cheek before saying, "Give it a half hour before you show up at the Ministry, especially this early."

In Tonks' absence, Harry sat at her small table, sipping weak tea from the bag's third cup, wishing it were coffee. Tonks had not done any shopping for weeks, so it was lucky there was even that. He had too many things to think about, too many uncertainties. His mind eventually settled on worrying about Mrs. Longbottom. In the quiet light of morning, his actions felt reckless and he hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake. But Snape was all right, so perhaps at least she was the same as before.

Harry put the dishes in a stack, Apparated to St. Mungo's and made his way up to the closed ward, where he peered in the window. Mrs. Longbottom was lying down, which concerned Harry. A staff member was working inside on another patient. Harry waited by the door for this person to leave and slipped inside covered by an Obsfucation Charm. He did not bother to change his robes this time since he wasn't staying long.

At the far bed, he bent over Mrs. Longbottom and tried to see if she was all right. There were new notes on the chart at the foot of the bed, but Harry could not decipher them. He went back to studying her sleeping, wondering if he should try to wake her up, just to end his worry. He did not hear the door open, the click was masked by the noise of another patient rocking in her bed.

Neville Longbottom froze in the doorway, wondering who this was leaning over his mother. He stepped over quickly and grabbed the figure's arm to jerk him around.

"Neville," Harry greeted him.

Neville stared at him, at his eyes. "Harry? What are you doing here?" he asked with less force than intended.

"I was just seeing how your mum was," Harry said, glancing back down at her.

Neville said, "Oh." He was befuddled, trying to put things together. Harry had an alien feel to him. His eyes made it seem as though he was seeing farther than anyone else and knew it. Neville swallowed hard and said, "Were you here before?"

Harry hesitated answering, but Alice Longbottom had woken and sat up mechanically. Harry didn't have time to be relieved by this. She smiled at him and said, "James."

"Er, no," Harry said with a laugh. "I'm not James, I'm afraid." She did not seem to understand this, just peered at him happily.

"'Old friend'," Neville quoted. He grabbed Harry's arm again. "You were here before. What did you do?"

Harry was at a loss to explain. He gently peeled Neville's fingers off his arm and said, "I wanted to see what caused, well . . . Severus was going to end up like your parents because of Voldemort and Malfoy torturing him, and I wanted to see more closely what the result was." He stopped, gauging how that went over. Neville was not the brightest, but his alarm was making him smarter than normal.

"Did you do something," he asked, "to make her talk?"

"Uh, I tried this thing I learned in Finland from the Shaman," Harry explained. He wanted try to say what Dumbledore would, but faced with Neville's strong ingrained reactions, he couldn't think clearly what that might be. "I could see what was wrong, so I thought I could fix it. I did what I could," he heard himself mimicking the Healers.

"You did this? You're not a Healer, Harry."

"I was very careful," Harry insisted.

"So long," Alice Longbottom said, interrupting. "No visit."

"She still thinks you're your father," Neville said.

Harry turned to her. "Sorry, I would have come sooner if I'd known you remembered me," he said graciously to her. He had no trouble pulling Dumbledore around him when talking to her. He tried to hold onto it when he turned back to Neville, who was vacillating between disturbed and wary. "I wasn't trying to hurt anyone," Harry said. "I just wanted to help Severus." Neville didn't react, so Harry added, "And it helped to see what the curse did. Once I thought I could help a bit, I couldn't not."

Neville's face went through a series of small contortions as he bounced between considering that and glancing at his mother, who was gazing up with a face of childlike innocence. "Ask next time, okay?" Neville said, sounding uncertain.

"If you'd been here, I would have."

"No one knows," Neville pointed out in a whisper.

"I kind of prefer it that way," Harry explained. "Things are mad enough already."

Neville did not look up again, but sat down facing his mother to hold her hand. She patted his hand in return. Harry thought that the change in her was small, but any improvement would make a big difference to Neville. "Well . . . thanks, Harry."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"Yeah," Neville said, still sounding befuddled.

"Has your father been awake?"

Neville glanced over at the thin lump under the covers of the next bed. "Not in years."

"I'm sorry, Neville," Harry said, feeling clear in his voice.

Neville shrugged. Harry took his leave, feeling even more so as though he were intruding.

In the waiting area on his way out, Harry overheard someone asking at the desk for Severus Snape. Harry diverted in that direction and found Shazor Snape hounding the greetingwitch to tell him what room his son was in. Harry rescued the woman behind the desk and explained that Severus had been released.

"Has he?" Shazor asked in surprise. He had a two-day-old beard and an equally old newspaper clutched under his arm. He pulled the paper out as though to reference it, but tucked it away again. "Where is he now? I stopped by the house . . . but it was abandoned." Like everyone else, he was staring at Harry keenly whenever he looked his way.

"Er, he's staying with a friend," Harry explained.

Shazor pulled out the newspaper for real this time. The flow of people went around them standing there in the way beside the desk. "We left for the countryside like many others when the trouble started. Gretta's still there in fact. She, uh . . ." Shazor trailed off.

"Have you heard from Anita?" Harry asked, thinking of Snape's mum.

"No," Shazor replied as though disturbed by the very notion. "Nor would I, normally." He crossed his arms and raised his chin. "If they have heard news of the recent troubles

at her place, they'd be smugly snickering about it not being able to touch them." He huffed. "But my son is all right, you say?"

"Yes, he's fine," Harry assured him. Harry considered that Severus himself should explain about Candide. "If I see him, I'll tell him you were looking for him."

At that moment, Severus Snape was eating breakfast across from the woman he now must reclassify in his mind as his fiancée. The domesticity of the scene kept trying to irk him but, given how many similar mornings he had already shared with Harry – with equal legal entanglement – there was no real justification for his ill-ease.

Candide departed in a rush after noticing the time, sparing him from a much-dreaded sappy departing scene. The resulting quiet felt too much so, however. His mind wandered back to the night before, to the nightmares that had dogged him. In them he had relived the terrible, pain-filled moments at Malfoy Manor before his defiance had kicked in, that and his faith in Harry. Brushing off nightmares was easier when no one else witnessed them. He couldn't even be annoyed with Candide over that; her response had merely been to roll to the side and suggest that if he wished to talk, he should wake her. This was almost enough to make him feel annoyed at being too well understood. That would be preferable to the undone feeling he was currently experiencing. He would have to find something to occupy the day with other than these thoughts, that was for certain.

When a knock sounded on the door, he jumped slightly, and then rolled his eyes in annoyance at himself. McGonagall entered.

"Shall I expect a visit every day?" Snape asked, but it held no rancor, making it come out pretty much the opposite of how it was intended.

McGonagall stopped and smiled as though also understanding too much. She perched Fawkes on the empty kitchen towel rack and swung off her cloak. "I was early for a meeting I have with Amelia and thought I'd drop in again to see how you were and to discuss Filius' funeral preparations."

Snape gestured that she should take the one chair at the table while he himself moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

She peered at him and, rather than starting up the topics she just mentioned, asked, "Are you certain you are all right?"

"YES," Snape replied, happy to snap at someone.

"Hm," she muttered doubtfully, but she switched to discussing how they may arrange a funeral by Saturday – assuming she could convince Bones that the Floo Network could safely be brought back into operation.

"You need to find a replacement for him, as well," Snape pointed out during a lull.

McGonagall huffed. "Let's at least mourn him a bit before pushing him aside, Severus."

Snape bowed slightly, not wanting to argue. "I was not trying to be crass."

She straightened her robes. "No, I suppose not. I'm still a bit sensitive, perhaps."

He stood. "I am going to see if Arthur requires assistance again today."

He sensed her watching him move as he collected together his things. When he was prepared to depart he slid his narrow gaze her way. "What?" he asked sharply despite strong suspicion of the reason she watched him.

"I keep expecting you to relapse," she admitted.

"I don't intend to," he pointed out.

She laughed lightly. "Did you will yourself out of the effects of the Crutiatus?"

Snape stared at the burned, borrowed wand in his hand. "No. Quite the opposite," he admitted quietly. "I had given up, in fact."

She swung her cloak back over her shoulders, saying, "Good thing Neville Longbottom didn't give up on his mother; apparently she's made a very small but meaningful recovery herself."

Snape stared at her. "Did she?" He could not comprehend his colleague's offhanded tone, given the sheer coincidence of what she was saying. "Did the visiting Healer look in on her as well, or something?"

McGonagall shook her head. "They are saying it's spontaneous. It happens you know. I looked in on her myself, it's a small thing really. She says a word or two now and then, but she's not much more than a child."

Snape's previously unoccupied mind was churning rapidly now. "Hm," was all he said.

Chapter 35.

Prisoners Dilemma

At the Ministry, Harry was allowed to man the office and keep track of assignments which he found good to bury himself in. He even took on the annoying task of straightening out the assignment slips with the log for the last few days. This reminded him that it had been tampered with at one point, to lie about where Tonks was. Harry wondered if Rogan had done that, but it was before the Death Eaters were loose. He could not have been blackmailed before then, could he?

Around noon, Rodgers came in with a tray. "Can you bring Tristan some lunch? I'm not sure I can resist smacking him around if I do." At Harry's surprised expression, his trainer amended. "Not really," although he did not sound as though he meant it.

Harry accepted the tray. "Sure," he said.

Harry unlocked the interrogation room, which had been converted into a cell with the addition of a cot and a charmed chamber pot. Rogan lay on the cot, arm and chin drooped over the edge. He did not look up at Harry as he entered. Harry, uncertain how dangerous to assume the Auror may be, set the tray on the floor. "Lunch," he announced. His own stomach growling at the thought.

Rogan shrugged. Harry asked, "Did you modify the logbook?"

"No," Rogan replied. "That's a hassle. I told Arthur that already. The logbook's correct."

"Well, except for the time I saw it had written out that Tonks was out on a call in the Docklands, when she wasn't. That message disappeared."

Rogan sat up slowly, twisting his neck to stretch it. "If you're asking if I did that, the answer is 'no'." Rogan's eyes had narrowed as though he were thinking. He looked concerned now, making Harry feel he was not as bad as his actions.

"What are they going to do with you?" Harry asked, feeling an odd bit of kinship with the man.

"I don't know," Rogan replied. "Wizengamot meets Sunday. Don't know if they'll put me on the agenda or not."

"I already am," Harry admitted. "Need anything else besides lunch?"

Rogan's mood had definitely improved since Harry had entered. The Auror stooped to pull the tray closer to the cot as though interested in its contents. "No," he replied.

When he returned to the Auror's office, Snape was standing by the logbook, peering over it.

"Severus," Harry said in bright welcome. "They let you keep that badge?" he asked, hoping to distract his guardian from asking where he had spent the night. The badge had printed on it: Evanescent Deputy.

"Yes, apparently. Thought I could assist again today. Minerva is meeting with Madam Bones to argue that the Floo Network should be restored. She wishes to hold Filius' funeral at Hogwarts, but it will difficult to attend if people can not arrive by Floo."

Harry dropped his gaze, remembering the Charms professor and trying with difficulty to imagine him gone. "I'd like to go, when you find out where it will be."

"I am certain it will be announced widely . . . when the time and place are set." Snape's voice sounded regretful enough that it gave Harry pause.

"Your father was looking for you, by the way," Harry said, intentionally to jolt his guardian out of the unusual demeanor he had fallen into.

"Was he?" Snape asked dryly, recovering a more normal tone.

"I told him I'd tell you," Harry said, dispensing with that duty. "Are you sure you're up to field work?"

"Yes," Snape replied more forcefully, but he patted Harry's arm as though thinking he needed reassurance.

"I just don't want you to get hurt again," Harry began explaining, but Rodgers came in, so he let it drop.

"Oh . . . Snape," Rodgers greeted him with obvious mixed feelings.

Harry jumped to arrange his trainer's files and made sure the assignment slip from his call was accounted for. Rodgers stopped what he was doing and said, "Good to have you around, Potter."

Harry stopped as well, unseated by this unexpected statement of support. "Thank you, sir," he responded sincerely.

Rodgers gave a little laugh. "You're all right, really."

Tonks and Kerry Ann entered, the later combing her hair with her fingers as though she were mildly frazzled. Harry busied himself with the logbook, searching out the entry that corresponded to the assignment slip in his hand, even though he had already found it moments ago. He didn't have to distract himself long, Rodgers sent Tonks back off to join Blackpool on a stake-out. He settled into his desk, saying, "Have a report due to the Wizengamot this morning. Remind me to yell at Kingsley for not saying that we'd get it to them next week sometime." He pulled open the drawer and took out an inkwell. "If there's an emergency, Ms. Kalendula, would you mind going out with your former professor there? We should keep Harry in until the Long Beards make a decision on him."

Kerry Ann shrugged and gamely said, "As long as I don't have an exam afterward, no problem."

"Potter, fetch these files for me," Rodgers instructed Harry while holding out a slip of parchment with a list of names on it.

Harry took it and headed out, missing the rare look of understanding that passed between his guardian and his trainer.

That evening, Tonks was out in the field when Harry decided he needed a break, especially since he had been given nothing more to do, which was somehow more wearing than having too much work. Blackpool seemed alert; although, she still had moments when her face fell into terrible sadness before getting distracted out of it. Harry said good evening to her with some delicate feeling, trying to communicate that he understood. She simply nodded and waved him off. "You'll be all right here alone?" he verified.

"Yeah, yeah. You aren't even supposed to be here."

He took himself to Hermione's flat. Hermione was cooking, or more precisely, there was a pot on the stove with a self-stirring spoon circling in it and lovely scents filled the flat. She greeted him in surprise.

Chapter 35

"Do you mind if I stay yet again?" Harry asked.

"–Course not. You always can." She did a quick double-take at the newspapers spread on the table and moved to expunge them.

Harry stopped her before her wand could complete its spell gesture. "That's all right. I need to read them."

"You sure?" she asked doubtfully, still holding her wand poised.

Harry nodded and sat on the couch, pulling the papers closer to chose between them. They all looked equally hazardous. One had a headline about Harry's upcoming Darkness Test. Another entitled: You Were Warned, claimed to recount his entire long history of poor behavior that led unequivocally to his current state.

Harry sighed, drawing Hermione over from the kitchen. "Sorry," she offered.

Harry shrugged.

She fidgeted with the wooden spoon in her hand. "I've been feeling awful about not being on your side enough either. I just . . . well . . . I'm sorry about that too."

"You're on my side, now," Harry pointed out. "You trust me enough to sleep in the same flat with me, Dark Wizard Extraordinaire."

"Course," she said.

"That's all that matters. You think most of Skeeter's readers would?"

She frowned rather than reply. Harry slid down to rest his head on the back of the couch. Exhaustion had caught up with him again. "I need a holiday," he said out of the blue.

"We all do."

After dinner she kept watching the time. "I have a date for drinks tonight."

"You do?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Cousin of someone I work with. Muggle."

Harry thought this sounded like a good thing even though her tone sounded defeatist and perhaps even stubborn.

She added, "I didn't want to start with something as major as dinner out, so I suggested a drink after dinner. And I do need a break, if only for an evening."

"So, how long will you be out?"

She shrugged. “Probably just an hour or two.”

“Where is he taking you?”

“Just some . . . hey, what are you, my mum now?”

“I . . . just . . .” Harry straightened, defensive. “I was just thinking that you should be careful.”

“Harry, he’s a Muggle, if he tried anything, I’d kick is arse.”

“I don’t mean that,” Harry said. “People might guess that you are with me, sort of, and, well, I don’t want you put at risk because of that. Lots of people still want to get at me.”

“More than usual,” she pointed out. She stood and went into her bedroom. “I’ll take my chances.”

Harry thought that he did not want her to, but she was intelligent enough to make her own choices, and Harry considered that he could probably get her out of most any jam, now.

She put on clothes flashier than he would have expected her to wear and departed. As she pulled the door closed, she appeared annoyed with her errand, making Harry believe she was still pining for his follow apprentice.

Harry moved to clean up. Crookshanks repeatedly slipped between his legs as he moved around, despite his lifting the cat aside gently with his foot each time. “What is it?” he finally asked the animal. Crookshanks meowed. “Oh,” Harry said, “your dish is empty. If you didn’t feed so much of it to the mice, it wouldn’t be. Hermione’s going to end up with rats in this place if you keep it up.”

Harry dug out the cat food box from the fridge where it was kept to keep the too-clever pet from getting into it. He poured out a bit and pushed the dish out of the way of his walking around. He did most of the clean-up by hand because he needed something concrete to do. Under the toppled box of bread crumbs on the counter, he found the ground meat used in the sauce. It had been out long enough to get tainted with a dark edge. Harry stared at it. He set it aside and rushed to finish the dishes and wash down the table.

The package of ground meat rested on a blue foam plate which was then wrapped with cellophane. He folded it over itself to better carry it and dropped into the Dark Plane.

The grey world with its grey sky felt very familiar now. The odd noises that greeted his arrival didn’t faze him at all. He began walking, looking about for the werewolf.

Chapter 35

He walked awhile, honestly enjoying the queer stillness of this place where he need not worry about running into Rita Skeeter or anyone else whose reaction he would have to brush off. Harry remembered that last time he had found the werewolf near the inversion spot for Hogwarts. Harry Apparated there and began circling. A double set of footfalls approached and the familiar, mangy and injured creature came into view, half crawling, half walking on all fours.

"I brought you something," Harry said. He unwrapped the package under the animal's watchful gaze and set it down before stepping away.

The werewolf approached suspiciously, sniffing. It put a half-paw, half-hand on the package to steady it and gobbled down the raw meat as though famished. It then sniffed out and ate every bit that had escaped, grey dirt and all. After licking its jaw it raised its nose to Harry and stared at him.

"That's all I brought," Harry said. The werewolf continued to stare at him. Harry wanted to leave, so he stepped backwards rather than turn his back, in case his treat be viewed as just an appetizer. This attitude of worry about his safety brought many other creatures near, all sounding hungry. Harry halted, growled lightly, and simply Apparated away without much thought to where he should go. He arrived in an abandoned area of landscape with more than its share of twisted metal and drooping tufts of saw-edged grass. He walked a little, just looking around and regaining the sense of superiority that kept the evil creatures here at bay.

Just as he was thinking of heading back to Hermione's flat, something caught his eye. Lying at the base of a tall hillock was a flat drum and beside it a fork of polished antler. Harry picked these up and grew concerned. "Per?" he shouted, his voice absorbed rather than echoing back at him. Harry took the objects and, concentrating hard on the lake shore in Finland, Apparated and slipped back into the sunlight.

The contrast between where he arrived and his memory of that place could not have been greater. The sun hung high in the sky, even this late. The lake rested in blue stillness except for a fish jumping. The hills were green and dotted with yellow and orange flowers as well as the ubiquitous grey exposed stones. But most stark was the buoying warmth that now wrapped softly around him as he stood there taking everything in.

Most of the huts had tendrils of smoke rising from the cages on top of them. Harry walked along and knocked at the one he remembered staying in last time. There was no response. The door to the next one opened and a man Harry didn't recognize peered out before emerging. Harry said, "Per Hossa?"

The man reached for a walking stick and walked away in the other direction. Harry, with a stuttering start, followed.

Up on the ridge over looking the lake and the hills on the other side, sat Per, smoking a pipe. As soon as he was in view the first man walked away, never speaking a word. Harry approached Per, glad to see him safe and sound.

Per finally noticed Harry's approach and turned his startled gaze to the drum he carried. Harry held it out to him. Per stood slowly and accepted it. He seemed vaguely befuddled.

"Hi," Harry said. "Found that. Thought you might have dropped it." This was a lot of words, Harry knew. And in a language Per knew very little of, but Harry couldn't help speaking them all.

Per took a seat again on a large flat rock and struck the drum lightly at about the pace of a heartbeat. Harry, uncertain if he should stay or leave, fidgeted with his hands in his pockets. Finally, he decided to sit down, but he kept having to remind himself to just sit quietly, which he had lost the instinct for. Per refilled his pipe and lit it without a match with an ease Harry had not seen previously. Harry smiled lightly in lieu of commenting.

After a long wait, twenty minutes perhaps by Harry's internal clock, Per said in awkward English, "You are in trouble."

"Me? Oh, in Britain, you mean. I'll manage."

Another long pause ended with, "Confidence is power."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Someone came here." Per pointed at the ground at his feet with his pipe stem and made a circle with his fingers and held it before his eye. "Look for you. Many questions."

"For me?" Harry thought of Moody. "After I left? What'd you tell him?"

Per's face took on a gruff appearance and he waved his hand as though to ward something off. "No English. No English." Per than laughed.

Harry laughed as well, and his vision blurred strangely the way it did when Per pulled a pocket of the Dark Plane around them. Harry wondered how he did that. This time when Per spoke it came out clearly. "You now hunt dark wizards in herds?"

Harry chuckled. "It's faster that way."

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Per tapped his pipe on a rock to empty it. Minutes past and then: "As long as you are not starting your own herd."

Harry shook his head vehemently. "I'm just trying to make sure everyone survives." He remembered Snape's insistence that Harry seek out Per's advice if he himself was incapacitated. Harry would not mind getting the Shaman's advice, but feared it would take a whole day and a night to do it. Thinking he should get back, Harry stood, but was interrupted by Per saying, "You brought my drum to me."

"You didn't mean to leave it there, did you?" Harry asked, only now considering this.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I did not need it anymore."

"Oh, sorry. I can drop it back off on my way home. Didn't realize it was so easy to come for a visit."

"Must be a long walk."

"No, I Apparated . . . within the Plane."

Per raised a surprised brow but didn't speak about that further. "I keep the drum," he said, tucking it under his arm.

"You sure?"

"It used you to return to me. I should not question that." Then Per said, "Sit," as though uncomfortable that such quick follow-ups were necessary.

Harry did so and Per began beating the drum again. He pulled a ring from his pocket and handed it to Harry who, when signaled to by a head nod, dropped it to bounce on the drum. They both watched it migrate around and finally stall over a stick figure drawing of a woman.

Per gave Harry a dubious look. "You hunt woman," he said.

"Sort of," Harry said.

"Easy life," Per said, setting the drum aside.

"You mean, that's all I have to do?" Harry doubted this but found an aching hope in him that it could be true.

Per nodded and began to meditatively refill his pipe.

"There are still a lot of Death Eaters out there and another dark wizard I have to catch."

Per shrugged.

"Last time the ring kept landing on the demon and I did have to hunt demons," Harry said and Per nodded. "Woman certainly sounds better," Harry added, hope finding traction in him.

Per sagely nodded yet again.

The next day, Snape stepped into the Auror's office and gestured for Harry to follow him out. Harry asked for permission from his trainer, who waved him dismissively out. It had been on the quiet side that morning, but that was certain to change by evening, given that it was a Friday.

In the corridor, Snape said, "Let's go to the house; I have a few things to discuss with you."

Harry took his guardian's wrist and took them both to the main hall of the house in Shrewsthorpe. The house was cool and drafty. Snape paced down toward the kitchen and Winky came up to meet him, rubbing her hands together a little nervously.

"Men will be coming next week to begin repairs. You will stay out of sight at all times."

Winky bowed. "Master wish tea?"

"Yes, please, if there is some."

"You hired someone already to fix the house?" Harry asked. He himself had not managed to get past thinking about it needing to be done.

"Yes," Snape replied while pacing the length of the hall to examine the walls and ceiling.

"Do you know who put the tarps up?"

"The insurance company, I assume," Snape said dismissively.

"We have insurance?" Harry asked in surprise. "Wizards have insurance?"

"Certainly," Snape replied. "Through Misfortuna Mutual, a Gringott's holding." He paced to the drawing room and went to his desk and began taking stock of the drawers, talking as he did so. "When I filed the claims paperwork, which listed this residence as being yours as well, they issued me gold on the spot . . . expeditiously enough."

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There wasn't any damage in the drawing room so nothing had been removed. Harry hovered in the doorway, observing. Snape said, "Just seeing what should be stored for the duration in case of curious Muggle fingers." Finally, he closed the drawer he was searching through and looked up at Harry. "Sit down," he ordered, in an unexpectedly stern tone.

Harry hesitated just long enough to recover from his surprise. He sat in one of the straight-backed chairs after turning it to face the desk. Snape watched him do this, his face relaxing oddly, as though he were pleased by something. Harry was too busy wondering if somehow Snape had found out about his getting serious with Tonks to pay much heed to this. He waited patiently for Snape to say more, managing not to fidget.

"I learned something interesting yesterday," Snape began. "It seems Alice Longbottom experienced a sudden although minor recovery, strangely around the same time as my own."

Harry pulled his new calm persona around himself and replied, "I heard that too." He was Occluding his mind, so when Snape's eyes bore into his, they got nothing.

Snape straightened the blotter on his desk with his long fingers. More quietly, he said, "I don't remember much from my time in St. Mungo's. The mind has many survival responses to pain. One of them is poor recall." He stared at Harry additionally. "But I do recall your presence."

"They made me keep you awake . . . which I didn't like doing." Harry spoke as though confessing. The memories were still too raw to easily go over them.

"I ignored the Healers, I think. That is why they assigned you that task." Almost inaudibly, Snape added, "Harder to ignore you." He sat in his chair with deliberately slow movements and leaned back, hands steepled before him. He resumed staring at Harry, who felt a squirm pass through him with some serious fight to get out.

"What do you want me to say?" Harry asked, before more drawn-out moments could distance him additionally from the truth. A loud car went by out on the road beyond the heavily curtained window, the thrumming beat of its radio distorting as it passed.

"Why are you hiding?" Snape asked softly.

Harry shrugged, but realized quickly that that wasn't going to suffice. "There's already too much . . . I don't know . . . concern about me. I want to go back to when people stopped noticing me so much."

Snape gave him a doubtful look. "Sometime before you were born, you are saying . . ."

"No, just before they would look as though they wanted to run away in fear."

"You should not have become an Auror, then."

"I don't think that's the primary problem," Harry argued. "Things happen to me or around me and I have to take care of them no matter what. It's hard to make people understand that."

Snape said, "It is impossible to make people understand. Do not waste your energy on the attempt." He pressed his steepled fingers to his lips thoughtfully. "So I owe you my life twice over this time," he commented.

"How can you owe me anything, Severus?" Harry asked, exasperated. "I need you around."

Winky appeared with the tea at that moment, bowed, and vanished again. There was only one cup. "Did you want some?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "What I do want is for you to run me through this Darkness Test. Can you do that? You said there were six spells . . . do you know them all?"

"Yes." Snape sipped his tea, stood and went to a small trunk in the corner of the room. He crouched and began searching through the bottles within it, hair obscuring his face. "If I don't have everything we need, you may have to fetch it for me . . . ah, here." He pulled out two small corked vials and pocketed them before re-latching the trunk and putting a Muggle repelling charm on it.

He passed Harry with his swooping stride. "In the hall, perhaps. Bring the chair."

Harry stood and did as instructed. He placed the chair where indicated and sat upon it. Snape moved a few steps away and said, "As I explained before, this is a test of core disposition. That makes it very difficult to fool . . . unlike other methods of detecting dark wizardry. Some claim to have apparati that will detect dark magic's taint, even years after it has been used. Dumbledore had several, in fact, all of wildly dubious accuracy. The Sorting Hat is far more effective than any of them, but it works more along the principals of the test the Wizengamot intends to give you."

"Yeah, but the Sorting Hat-"

Snape cut him off. "I agree with Minerva: you will not fail this test; it plays straight to your strengths."

"I still want to know what's coming," Harry argued. "I can't fail it; I don't know what will happen to me if I do."

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"Nothing permanent will happen to you, I assure you," Snape uttered in the manner of a promise.

Harry sighed and sat on his hands because he didn't want to wave them around. "I don't necessarily feel like moving to Australia."

"South America is also a possibility . . ." Snape offered with a lightness that implied he was trying to be humorous. "Better than being incarcerated."

"Pitcairn Island would probably take me," Harry tossed out.

Snape approached. "Give me your wand." Harry pulled his hand free long enough to hold his wand out. When he moved to sit on his hand again, Snape said, "You will not be allowed to do the test that way."

"No?"

"Not by any means." Snape put a sticking hover charm on the wand and released it to float before Harry. He strode away again with purpose to his movements. "You will be asked to verify . . . stop sitting on your hands . . . that you can retrieve the wand and cast a spell with it. Do that now."

Harry stretched his shoulders, took up the wand up in his hand and cast a Lumos with it.

"Release it to hover again where it is within easy reach." Snape began pacing, almost agitated, making his robes swing when he turned sharply at the mirror under the staircase. He began to sound like a lecture. "The test most likely will have two parts: the series of six spells that will be cast at you will be done once approximately as you are now. Given your sometimes annoying penchant for self-sacrifice, I do not think you will have any difficulty with that. The second set will be much harder. Who is running the test on you?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me. I'd expect Moody . . . if he were around to do it."

"As would I," Snape muttered. "Hm, perhaps I should have asked Minerva. If the tester dislikes you, that will make it all the more difficult."

"I imagine," Harry said. "You said I can't defend myself."

"Correct," Snape replied with an overdone roll of his tongue.

Harry looked down at his wand hovering in the air, bobbing just a little from side to side as though impatient. Harry argued, "This test just shows if you're a looney or not and can take pain."

"The first part certainly does. Anyone with sufficient discipline can pass the first part."

Harry swallowed. "So, what happens in the second part?"

Snape approached while reaching into his pocket. He held up a small violet glass vial. "You will be given a forty-nine percent dose of Veritaserum."

"Forty-nine percent? Why forty-nine?"

"Enough to weaken you and reduce subterfuge but not enough to eliminate your will entirely. If the dosage eliminates your will, then the test is for nought."

Harry scratched his head. "Why not just give me a full dose and ask me if I'm a dark wizard?"

Snape propped his fists upon his hips as though seeing an advantage at Harry's question. Harry had a flashback to the many, many times when he lost house-points just moments after such a gesture. "That is trickier than you realize," Snape explained. "Everyone's viewpoint on good and evil is different from everyone else's." At Harry's dubious expression, Snape went on, holding out the small vial. "If you gave Lucius Malfoy this serum and asked him if he were doing wrong by plotting to eliminate Muggle-born wizards, what would his truly honest response be?"

"'No'," Harry conceded.

"But," Snape said with the most energy that he had shown since the battle, "if you were to put him in the position you are in and strike him repeatedly with borderline-injurious spells . . . especially if you yourself or someone he despised did that . . . what would be his response?"

"He'd strike back."

"Odds on, yes. Especially with a half-dose of serum making it nearly impossible to hide that he yearns to . . . maybe even without it." Snape approached then and uncorked the vial. "You will be given this by some means that eliminates the possibility that you have not actually swallowed it. This will be accompolished either by putting it on dissolving paper that you must eat or simply dropping it into your mouth. Tip your head back."

Snape counted out thirteen drops as they fell onto Harry's tongue and re-corked the vial. Harry sucked the oily liquid off of his tongue. He felt woozy after the first swallow.

Snape paced away again. "Good for you to experience what a half-dose feels like. In a hundred and fifty seconds it will take effect as fully as it will ever do so."

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Snape stood waiting with wand in hand, silhouetted by the excess light coming in through the damaged wall behind him.

"How do you feel?" he asked minutes later.

"A little strange."

"It is unfortunate that we do not know who your tester will be," Snape said. "Although, just as well Moody is not available," he uttered darkly.

"You've had this test before," Harry said. This realization came unexpectedly out of the fog of his thoughts.

"Yes," Snape admitted.

"Moody?" Harry queried with difficulty. It was as though he was not supposed to be curious about anything but could be if he worked hard enough at it.

"Yes," Snape repeated. He was standing more stiffly now, shoulders squared against the light. "Dumbledore did not think it necessary, but Moody insisted anyway . . . in secret. What he did not realize is that I had inured myself to Veritaserum so a half dose was more like an eighth for me."

"Would you have passed it anyway?" Harry asked.

Snape shifted, tugging his wide sleeves straight. "I do not know. I like to think so. Like you, I was not taking any chances." He tossed his hair back in an unusual gesture and raised his wand. "Remember, do not reach for your wand."

Harry nodded. He felt as though he were watching a dream from a half-awake state. He waited.

Snape lowered his wand and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. "I think I have grown too weak to be of use to you."

"Wha- why?" Harry asked.

Snape shook his head and tossed his wand-burdened hand to the side. "I cannot do this."

Harry stared at him, requiring a bit of serious thought to remember what it was exactly that they were doing. He stood, pushing his wand aside and leaving it to hover beside the chair. Snape shook his head again with more disgust as Harry approached. "It is too much . . ." Snape began, but trailed off. "Ridiculous to be so weak," he insisted to no one in particular.

"You aren't weak, Severus," Harry argued.

Snape stared at Harry and then beyond him, at the empty chair. "I cannot even make myself do it if I remember that it is for your own good," he uttered in disdain. Snape continued to stare beyond Harry. He spoke only when Harry prompted him with his name. "I don't recognize myself," Snape said.

"Maybe it's too much like what happened to you," Harry suggested. He might have censored that if he had possessed the ability.

Snape frowned in reply. His posture had shifted. His shoulders were now slumped and he looked reduced and beaten down a bit. Harry gave him a hug.

Snape said dryly, "Clearly, I need to give you the antidote." He freed his arm to fetch the other vial from his pocket. "Drink a sip of this," he said, holding it up before Harry, who was resting his head on his shoulder. Snape sounded amused rather than commanding.

Harry put his fingers around the tiny bottle that was almost too small to grip reliably. "You aren't weak, though, Severus. You know that's the truth." He sipped the potion, mostly because he wanted to feel like himself again without the cottony veil of the potion obscuring his senses and willpower.

Harry straightened as the recovery potion washed through him and handed the vial back.

"I am sorry," Snape muttered. He frowned and tossed his head in self-recrimination.

"It's all right, Severus," Harry insisted. "I'd rather you not be the kind of person who could hurt someone, even if you thought it for the right reasons. And like you said, I don't hate you, so it wouldn't be the same anyway."

Snape nodded, but his head remained bowed. "True," he conceded. He handed Harry his wand, and carried the chair back to the undamaged drawing room.

"I'm glad I know now what a half dose of Veritaserum feels like," Harry said, sounding upbeat. "I think I could tell a lie with just that much."

"You most likely could," Snape responded. "More difficult is to moderate your temper when it has been riled by something." He held up a finger. "Remember that," he commanded, recovering some of his earlier sternness.

"Yeah . . . keep my temper."

"Be prepared for the worse possible tester you can imagine."

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"Fudge."

Snape began hovering the contents of his desk drawers into a trunk. "That is the worst you can imagine?"

"I'm assuming they wouldn't allow Malfoy . . . or Bellatrix to run it," Harry pointed out. He watched Snape as he packed things up. He still seemed reduced and his shoulders curled too far forward. This was the first time ever that he had failed to do what needed to be done, no matter how distasteful. Harry was having second thoughts about whether that was as acceptable as he had insisted just moments before. "We need a holiday," Harry said. This was instead of asking Snape if he wanted to try again, which he had almost done, but did not want to reveal his doubts or risk facing Snape's new weakness again. Harry's guts went icy; what if he had somehow changed his guardian when he suppressed the curse? That would not be terribly far-fetched given that he had wielded magic he had little practice with, to solve a condition he only loosely understood.

Into this cold fear, Snape said, "There is something else I should inform you of . . ."

"Yes?" Harry prompted, making himself breathe levelly. He could not imagine what was coming next and hoped it was something typically Snape-ish to ease his concerns.

"I have agreed to marry Candide."

Snape did not look up from the papers he was examining, but he commented, "That is a most unusually befuddled expression you are wearing."

"That's . . . that's great. I was . . . just wondering if you were all right," Harry managed to say.

Snape put the papers down with a sharp rustle. "I have been yelling at people who ask me that, especially repeatedly."

Harry dropped the issue. Snape was alive, as sane as ever, and well enough. Harry certainly could not reverse what he had done; if indeed he had changed something fundamental about his guardian.

Harry rang the bell at Vineet's flat in Greenwich. The Indian wasn't supposed to be on duty that day, but most of the Aurors wished to attend Professor Flitwick's funeral and Harry had been sent to ask him if he was willing to cover. Harry had an

ulterior motive as well: he had not had a good chance to talk to his fellow trainee since events at Malfoy Manor. Vineet had not held back on anything he had told Mr. Weasley, but Harry had not expected him to, either. It would have hinted at his thinking, at least, if he had.

The door opened and Vineet stood holding it. Behind him stood Nandi, who began to ask who it was. Her expression shifted upon seeing Harry there.

"What is he doing here?" Nandi asked sharply.

Harry closed his mouth around the greeting he as going to give. He glanced between the two of them. Nandi appeared challenging, Vineet tense.

"Sorry," Harry said, "didn't mean to intrude."

Vineet opened the door wider. "You are not intruding," he intoned.

Harry clearly saw the invitation of the door, but did not feel he should cross the threshold. "I was just sent to see if you were willing to fill in this afternoon . . . during the funeral."

"A funeral?" Nandi interjected. "For all those wizards you killed?"

Harry sensed that responding was not going to get him anywhere given the mocking tone, but the silence was worse. "For Professor Flitwick," Harry said.

"Aren't they holding funerals for the others?" she asked, sounding coy.

Harry hadn't considered that. "I suppose," he replied. "They were Death Eaters. They killed Professor Flitwick, in fact," Harry pointed out, finding his bearings, and a sharper edge for his voice. He glanced at Vineet, who seemed suspended there, holding the door. "Perhaps I should go," Harry said, truly apologizing. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you both."

Vineet bowed his head and Harry departed. Harry was still distressed by the encounter when he reached the Auror's offices.

"I don't think Vishnu's available," Harry said to his boss.

"That's why he followed you here?" Mr. Weasley asked, amused.

Harry turned and found Vineet standing behind him. "Oh."

"I would be happy to watch the office, if needed," he said to Mr. Weasley. "Please give my regards to Headmistress McGonagall and the other teachers when you go."

"Thank you, young man," Mr. Weasley said, and patted the Indian on the shoulder on his way out.

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Vineet turned and said to Harry, "You are using my usual name now." His eyes were as intense as Harry had ever seen them.

"Well . . . you said that's what you preferred." Harry shrugged. "And after you helped me . . ." Truth was, Harry was not entirely certain why he had changed how he addressed his friend. It just felt entirely appropriate to do so, especially given that he had previously been using his formal name mostly as a way to get under the inscrutable man's skin.

Vineet exhaled hard – Harry could see it in his chest – and turned to sit at Rogan's desk. Like many mysteriously minor things, this seemed to have much more meaning for his friend than Harry could understand.

"I'm sorry about the scene with Nandi," Harry said. "I didn't realize . . . I wouldn't have come, if I'd known."

Vineet froze when Harry brought this topic up, his hand poised, hovering, over a closed file folder. After a space, he said, "She is angry with me for not stopping you."

"I'm glad you didn't," Harry said, trying not to experience latent panic at how badly things could have gone in that case.

"She knows now that I fully had the magical power to do so. I told her I unconditionally assisted you," Vineet said, strangely level. "She does not understand."

"It's hard for people to understand if they aren't there," Harry said. "You don't regret helping me, do you?"

"I am here in England because of you. Because of your story, which showed me that fate is something to be faced full on, even if one is dwarfed by it."

Harry ran his hand over the cubicle partition. "That isn't actually an answer."

Vineet still sat facing a closed file folder, but now his hand was clenched. The paperclips, which had started inching toward his hand, backed to the rear edge of the desk. "I entered into your service intending not to regret doing so."

"Well, that's closer to an answer," Harry said. "I do very much appreciate what you did. All I wanted to do was rescue my father, and I only saw one way to do that."

"A noble cause," Vineet stated, and finally opened the cover of the file.

Harry entered the Great Hall and stepped to the front where the teachers were gathered. The noise generated by awareness of his entrance passed like a wave through the assembled, quieting them before shifting them to whispering. Professor McGonagall's broad smile of greeting, despite her red-ringed eyes, pushed most all of it away.

"Lots of people here already," Harry observed.

"They are celebrating being able to travel by Floo again, I think," she said, putting a green-clad arm around him. "And how are you?" she asked directly in his ear. "Ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes," Harry replied. Snape was speaking with Hagrid and Firenze, and Harry caught his eye as he said this.

McGonagall said, "We have a seat here for you, with the teachers. Filius would be most honored to have you sit with us. Took a liking to you from the start . . . because you were so small, I believe." She winked.

Harry found a smile, partly in remembering how thrilled he was to be at this school, especially in the very beginning. McGonagall patted his back and turned to Professor Sprout. Snape approached.

"Ignoring the crowd is best, I think," he said.

Harry shook out his dress robes and pulled a piece of lint off his sleeve as he responded, "What crowd?" He did seem to be the center of attention of many who were pointing and standing on tip toe.

"Precisely," Snape intoned teasingly.

As he brushed down his robes, Harry felt something in his pocket and pulled out a thick disk, slightly larger than a Galleon. Dusty memories fluttered to life and he remembered that the last time he had worn these robes, one of the twins had tried to bribe him by slipping him something that he had had to stash quickly away. Harry peered at the grey, waxy disk and tried to read the writing scratched into the surface. Monster Mush, it appeared to say, although the fancy cursive was difficult to read. Mystified, Harry slipped it back into his pocket.

Snape's gaze shifted from eying the crowd to looking over the coffin at the very front of the room. It was white and propped up on two gold-painted Corinthian columns. A Ravenclaw banner covered the middle third of it. Somberly, Snape gestured that Harry should chose a seat, since McGonagall was mounting the dais to begin.

As Harry sat listening, he considered how many funerals he had missed. This one would have to stand in for some of the others, especially the ones for his colleagues:

Munz, Whitley, and Moody. McGonagall, voice a bit weak, spoke of Flitwick's background as a champion dueler and how in his first years he frequently challenged the other staff and even some of the students to duel. She spoke of his dedication and patience with teaching, which grew out of that desire to groom students for an art that was no longer practiced, leaving charms the only safe outlet for his dueling passion. Harry, who remembered the Charms professor only with affection, wished he had known half of these things about him while he was alive.

Harry followed the flow of the eulogy for a while but found himself remembering Nandi's accusations. There are no perfect answers, he thought, wishing he had thought to say that to her at the time. Someone a few rows back was sniffling. McGonagall began to recite from a poem, and Harry pulled himself back to the present.

The thoughtless World to majesty may bow, Exalt the brave, and idolise success; But more to Innocence their safety owe Than Power and Genius e'er conspired to bless.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power, And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave, Awaits alike the inevitable hour. The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Can storied urn or animated bust Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

And thou, who, mindful of the unhonoured Dead, Dost in these notes their artless tale relate, By night and lonely contemplation led To linger in the lonely walks of Fate,

The headmistress sat down into the contemplative silence. Hagrid stood and shuffled over beside the podium, which he dwarfed and did not bother to stand behind. As he blew his nose in prelude to speaking, Harry glanced at his guardian beside him; he was somber and looked equally far away as Harry had been. On his other side, Lupin appeared more openly grim.

Several more teachers stood to speak in turn, including Flitwick's granddaughter, who was about the same stature as her older relative. The Great Hall grew warm with the crowd and the intermittent summer sun. People fanned themselves with their hats or copies of the Daily Prophet. Antigone Flitwick finished and took her seat and the ceremony drew to a quiet close.

Ginny found Harry as soon as the crowd began filing out. "You'll stay for a while, right?" she asked, sounding terribly hopeful. "Neville said he would, and Ron, and some others."

"Sure," Harry said. He was not technically allowed on duty, anyway. "Let me just tell Shacklebolt in case . . . they are expecting something of me." Harry made this offhanded statement because he had spotted Skeeter within hearing range. Her chin went up and her lips pursed. Harry looked away, trying to project serenity.

Five of them stayed late, keeping Ginny company and having an impromptu party in the Gryffindor common room. Harry lit a small fire despite the heat because he found the common room lacked something without it, especially once the sky darkened. He sat on the rug with his back resting against the side of an overstuffed chair and watched the flames, trying to decide whether he had actually changed Snape somehow when he had healed him. Certainly Snape had changed significantly before then, but something felt different about him now. It was as though he had been filled in and had his sharpest edges rounded off. Snape had done the impossible and agreed to marry his girlfriend on top of making peace with Rodgers – a story Harry could not get out of either one of them. Harry wondered now if he had somehow healed more than the damage from the recent Cruciatus curses, that he had also healed the damage from Snape's early use of dark magic. This thought eased his heart, as that would not constitute too much intrusion into his guardian's life.

Ginny's sharp laugh and voice cut into Harry's thoughts: "You guess food; I guess they're off snogging somewhere."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron's not much of a snogger. It's definitely the kitchens that have him."

"What's this?" Harry asked.

Ginny replied, "Ron and Lavender aren't back from getting extra bedding so you guys can stay the night."

Harry glanced around the common room. The curtains were blowing steadily as the high tower caught the night breeze. He vaguely remembered Ron departing . . . but that was rather a long time ago. "They're still gone?" he asked.

The three of them fell silent. "You looked like you were lost in the Forbidden Forest there, Harry," Hermione said. Neville's eyes were wide and round as he stared worrisomely at him. He had not spoken to Harry all evening except in direct response to a question.

Harry stood. His bum was sore from the hard floor. "I was just thinking about things."

"Figured that," Ginny teased. "That's why we didn't want to disturb you."

"Why didn't you just ask Dobby to bring more bedding?" Harry asked.

"Dobby only answers to you, Harry," Ginny pointed out. "I've tried to get him to answer to me regularly, but he doesn't like to. He gets grumpy and then I get only oat porridge for breakfast."

"Dobby!" Harry shouted into the cooling air of the tower. There was no response. Harry called again. The hairs on his arms began to prickle. He considered Apparating to the kitchens, but decided against showing all three of them that he could do that. "Hermione, want to come with me to look for them?"

Ginny moved to stand as well. Harry waved her back. "Stay here. Get your broom out in case you need to get out the window."

Ginny put her hands on her hips. "I can fly, Harry, I don't need a broom. And the teachers took it away anyway."

"You can't carry Neville as a bird," he pointed out. "They took your broomstick . . . my broomstick?"

"Yeah."

Harry shook his head. "We'll be back. We'll silver message if we find them."

Ginny's voice called them back, "You know, the twins are hanging out in the castle tonight too. They didn't want anyone to know. Have something they've been dying to do for years and only now have the stuff for it."

"We'll watch for them too," Harry said.

Hermione was still talkative in the corridor. "Ron's probably helping the twins," she said cheerfully. At the staircases, Harry held up his hand for silence. "Harry?" she prompted, sounding worried.

"I may just be overly jumpy, but something doesn't feel right." He started down. At the next landing he stopped, thinking he should just Apparate. The paintings all watched him curiously, so he sped up instead. The castle stretched on much larger than expected in the quiet darkness. At the third floor, Harry considered walking around and down to Snape's office to see if he was there. Some of the teachers had decided to stay late after the funeral as well, although the castle was so quiet now, it felt as though no one was there at all.

They were only halfway to the kitchens at this point. Harry urged Hermione off the third floor landing and into the nearest classroom. "Stay here. And please don't tell anyone what I'm about to do."

Her mouth had opened on a question, but Harry was gone. He arrived in the long, main kitchen, which was deserted. The hearths were cold, a small knife lay abandoned on the floor beneath one of the long tables where someone had been chopping carrots. Harry wondered if the elves had all been sent off to assist elsewhere. But surely some of them were needed today. Ron certainly would not have found this particular kitchen to be much of a lure. The only food in the room was the unwashed carrots and a leg of what looked to be bison, hanging to age in the corner.

Harry returned to his friend, who gaped at him in shock. "Wow. How the hell did you do that? You don't even make a sound." She sounded jealous.

"You really don't want to know," Harry said, scenting the musty air of the Dark Plane clinging to his clothing when he arrived. "Unlike regular Apparition, I don't know if I can take anyone with me. I've never tried that before. I'm kind of afraid to try. But Severus said to not tell anyone I could do that."

"Yeah, I can imagine," she cryptically agreed.

"There's no one in the kitchens. So, which cupboard was Ron's favorite snogging one?" Harry teased, moving to the door.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

Back in the Gryffindor common room, Ginny quickly grew tired of waiting. She paced to the portrait hole. "Think something's going on?" she asked Neville.

"Harry said to stay here," Neville pointed out.

"Harry's not my keeper," Ginny retorted. "If I'm going to be a prisoner in this place, I'm going to be a prisoner of more than Gryffindor Tower."

Neville just frowned at her.

"Coming with me?" she asked, pushing the portrait aside.

Neville shook his head.

Author's Notes:
The excerpts of poetry are from Thomas Gray, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (various versions)

Chapter 36.

Castle Rook

Ginny took the stairs two at a time, seeing no one, not even a ghost. At the first floor, she thought she heard something to her right. "Harry? Ron?" she called out, getting no response. She hesitated calling for her other brothers by name in case a teacher may overhear. Ginny pulled her wand, stepped off the landing, up two stone steps, through a heavy door, and into the narrow, darkened corridor. At the end, shadows lengthened as a door at the bend swung gently as though in the breeze, its hinges creaking faintly.

Ginny had spent the last week growing accustomed to an empty castle as home. This was most likely what made her bold enough to step to the end of the dim corridor to investigate. At the corner, the runner rug had been oddly shifted to the left and piled up against the stone wall so that it resembled half a giant decorative bow. A heavy stone statue also rested on its side, blown in the same direction. On the floor in between these two things lay something difficult to recognize in the low light. It bore a faint likeness to a human form, except one lengthened to the point of being peeled apart and it was haloed by a black shiny pool. A piteous howl went up. It was Mrs. Norris, crouched beside the crude old boot lying at one end of the disturbing remains.

The door at the end of the corridor slammed closed and Ginny raised her wand and put up the block of her life which, given that she was still thrown hard into the wall beside her, perhaps was the only thing that saved her life. As she fought falling to her knees and the fireworks that had erupted into the darkness of her vision from her head striking the stone, she realized with an oath, that she had walked into a trap.

Her next block had time to fully form before the rush of the second curse arrived, so she had a chance to send a blasting curse of her own in its wake. A curtain rod clattered to the floor somewhere in the distance and someone grunted. Ginny sent another after that one, feeling heat rising from her core and a growing detachment to what was happening around her. She blocked to her right down the corridor where she had entered, just as a flash of something appeared there. The cutting curse shredded the rug piled at her feet, but otherwise flowed around her. Mrs. Norris hissed and howled. Ginny felt liberated as she cleanly followed her block with her own vicious cutting curse and then ducked behind the corner to avoid the next attack from the other direction. The spell wash prickled her arm painfully. She should have put a block up anyway.

"You could take down one of them," she hissed at the cat, tired of its plaintive caterwauling that did nothing except break into her concentration.

Mrs. Norris's glowing eyes spun away and moments later a human gave loose a plaintive howl of his own. Ginny snorted as she countered and attacked yet again as though the flow of the battle were as natural as flying.

"Did you hear something?" Hermione asked as he and Harry stepped into the corridor.

"Sounds like a ghost," Harry commented, regarding the echoing, inhuman howl filtering up to them.

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm and looked both ways down the corridor. Harry already had his wand out, but he raised it then, freeing himself. Hermione pulled her wand back out too. "I don't like this, Harry."

"The castle should be safe," Harry said. "The Ministry secured it additionally for the funeral, in fact. I could try taking you out of here, if you want."

"What . . . abandon the others?" she demanded.

"Just a suggestion," Harry said as they started toward the armory, vaguely in the direction the howl had come from. He did not want to tell her that he thought she was not up to a serious fight; they had too much history of fighting together for him to find the words. "Stay close, all right?"

The double doors to the armory stood open and moonlight filtered into the corridor. Harry let his wand lead him into the room, but it was deserted. A third of the way along what was really a wide corridor, a creak brought his wand around. One of the suits of armor had taken a step forward.

"Harry!" Hermione gave a sharp tug on his robe. Something whistled through the air over Harry's lowered head. The battle ax that had nearly missed him was caught

by a suit of armor on the other side and thrown at them again. Harry hit it with a blasting curse and turned to face the suit on the other side. Hermione threw a rusting charm at another, slowing it.

"Back up!" Harry shouted, pushing her bodily toward the doors where they had entered. A clatter brought his wand over that way. The suit he had shattered apart had reassembled and approached again, dented but unhindered. "Blast!," Harry muttered. He used a netting charm this time on the nearest one that was swinging its sword a little too close for comfort. Again the pieces, with a great flutter, freed themselves and re-assembled.

"We need Ginny and her welding charms," Harry muttered, mentally kicking himself for not having her teach them to him on the spot; his stupid pride had been in the way. They were almost to the doors, which gave them a wall to back against for better defense as well as an escape route down the side corridor. "Send a silver message to McGonagall's tower," Harry ordered her. "I'll hold them off. And Severus too, just in case he's in his office."

Harry needed a Titan block to ward off the next battle ax that was thrown their way. His whole arm rang with the vibration of the strike. The ax fell to the floor, only to zip back to its owner, who, along with half a dozen other suits of armor were fighting their way out the double doors toward the two of them. Hermione sent off the messages and Harry yelled, "Run!" and cast a netting charm wide enough to cover the door for the precious seconds they needed to get away. He could hear it being rended as they turned the bend and reached the open staircases, where they paused.

A voice from above called out: "Have you seen Ginny?"

Noises could be heard everywhere now. Ominous noises. Hermione yelled back, "No, isn't she with you?"

"No," Neville called out sheepishly.

Harry closed his eyes despite the danger approaching. Ten or so shadows hovered close, menacing. Harry swore.

"Have you seen Ron?" Hermione yelled upward.

"No."

Hermione began running downstairs. Harry grabbed her robes and pulled her upward instead, ignoring the sword that embedded itself in the step just in front of them, thrown from the corridor. "Run, Neville!" Harry shouted. "Get in a defensible

position and stay there!" At the next floor up, Harry dragged his companion down the widest corridor.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The library."

"Harry . . ." she said breathlessly as they rounded a corner. "You sound like me!"

Harry slammed the door of the library closed and headed quickly for the Restricted Section. "Stay back," he said in warning when she followed. "Guard the door."

Hermione stopped and stood watching him. "The door, Hermione," Harry repeated as he went to the far wall to retrieve Ravenclaw's book.

"What are you doing, Harry?" Hermione asked. He could hear her casting something. Hopefully it was something with enough power to buy him enough time.

Harry turned the thick and varied pages of massive volume, glancing over each, refreshing his mind with each spell and each plan he found. "Just guard the door!" Harry shouted. He tried to speed up, but the book rattled, threatening to slam closed and make him start again. Sweat dripped down Harry's ribs inside his shirt as he passed pages of the spells that were supposed to be protecting the grounds. He longed to just Apparate away and make sure Snape was all right, and McGonagall, and Hagrid, and Ginny, and Ron, and any other teachers left in the castle. He could not rescue everyone in time, he was certain. This was going to have to do.

Remus Lupin heard an odd scratching at the door to his office. Just as when Snape was direly injured, Flitwick's funeral made him want to do nothing more than throw himself into work. Teaching was not something he had ever intended to do when he was younger, it was not a calling for him like for the others, but working on teaching felt like the only way to fight down the helplessness that overcame him when something tragic happened to one of his colleagues.

Lupin opened the door, but the corridor was empty. He started to pull it shut, but something forcefully restrained it. Lupin had his wand out just as the leering figure of so many of his nightmares stepped into the light from the reading lamp. Lupin cast a blasting curse, but it wasn't enough to halt the oversized half-werewolf as he leapt inside. They scuffled on the floor. Lupin got in another grazing shot, even though

his wrist was grabbed up and pressed to the floor. His wand hand was lifted by a powerful arm and slammed down. Something cracked, making him cry out. He held desperately onto the wand still, but could not tilt it to aim.

Greyback laughed in a canine manner, oversized tongue lolling and his breath heating Lupin's face. The fatefulness of his dilemma made Lupin give in. His arms went slack.

"What? No fight? What kind of werewolf are you?" Greyback mocked. "You take all the fun out of it."

"Good," Lupin uttered, half-laughing out of stress.

"You're a pathetic excuse for a wizard," Greyback said, and snapped his jaws threateningly.

"You aren't even a man," Lupin mocked. He displayed a sneer of his own and gave his attacker a hard knee to the groin. Greyback flung himself aside in an attempt to curl over his middle. Lupin grabbed up his wand in his uninjured hand but as he brought it around a powerful jaw closed around it. For an interminable moment, Lupin was paralyzed by the horror of recollection, but then he jammed his fingers into Greyback's eyes as hard as he could with his broken wrist.

One floor below, Snape pushed his chair back and stood, the silver message still dissolving in his hand. The floor above him creaked as though something heavy had fallen. His wand raised in that direction out of natural reaction. Moving rapidly, he waved the protective charm off the potions cabinet and grabbed out two bottles stored as far from each other as possible. With the bottle necks hooked between the fingers of one hand, he slipped quickly around the visitor's chair to stand beside his office door. He took a deep breath followed by another.

Had the silver message come from anyone other than Hermione Granger, he would not be assuming the worst. Anyone else, even Harry perhaps, he may have believed them to be exaggerating the behavior of the castle's armor. What would he do if he were invading a castle? He would recruit the objects within it to his cause, and he could only assume his former associates would act the same. If he were wrong, he would simply have to replace the potions and apologize to Mr. Filch for having to clean up the mess.

The next breath he held in tightly. He cracked the office door open just far enough to toss the bottles out into the corridor before slamming it closed again. A spell struck the door, but Snape had propped his foot against it, which kept it from flying fully open again. Yellow vapor snaked in before he could slam it closed again, Its touch caused his heavy sleeve to curl and smoke. He shook his arm to dissipate it. He continued to hold his breath and began to count slowly to thirty.

The glass in the door to the library shattered. "Harry!" Hermione shouted.

Harry glanced up to see that she was hovering a table onto its side and hurrying to get behind it. Harry was carrying the heavy, stone-bound book on one straining arm while building up energy in two spell columns as the diagram indicated. The notes did not give instructions on how to do this, so Harry was enormously grateful that Snape had once explained how while showing him more powerful magicks. The power foci stood as glowing blue columns of heatless flame. He paced between them and began the long incantation. "Lacrimablius incurcio phychrucio incurcius . . ."

"Harry, what the hell are you doing?" Hermione demanded. "And it's most likely psychrucio; what you said is nonsense otherwise."

Harry repeated that the whole phrase and continued on, thinking that Salazar Slytherin should have learned to spell. The door to the library splintered and a rush of flame could be heard followed by billows of steam, which Harry assumed was from Hermione's water charm. More flames could be heard following this exchange.

"Harry!" Hermione pleaded. "I don't know what you're doing and I can't . . ." Another explosion of flame filled the air. The scent of burning paper followed closely. " . . . hold them off."

"Just half a minute more!" Harry shouted and finished the last line, ". . . aegrescere laquetomorphos," while circling the wand around his head like a lasso.

The spell columns erupted into a rippling network of lines that crawled rapidly over the walls before sinking in and making the stones glow. Their effect could be seen out of the window spreading over the adjoining wing of the castle. The room fell silent.

Hermione stood with a groan and spritzed the smoldering books lying on a nearby table. The overturned table she had been using as a shield was blackened and also leaching smoke. "I couldn't hear all of that spell, but it sounded awful. All shall be trapped in a nightmare of madness. What was that?"

Harry pushed the debris of the door aside with his foot. "It was labeled as the Doomsday Spell. I'm pretty sure it's of Slytherin's making."

"You cast a spell Salazar Slytherin left behind in an old book?!" Hermione demanded, aghast.

Harry gestured at the two Death Eaters squirming on the floor of the corridor, wands cast aside, hands grasping their heads, faces contorted in horror. "Yes," he replied.

"It affects only the castle's enemies, those who don't belong within. It will lift when every last one of them is removed. I didn't see any other way of helping everyone at once. There are a dozen or so Death Eaters here."

"There are what?" she blurted. "Why didn't you say?"

"Because I didn't want to panic you," Harry calmly replied, striding away. "We should check on everyone. Find Ron and Lavender."

Severus Snape made the stone gargoyle at a run just as it leapt out of the way on its own. The walls nearby were scarred by recent spells. Two figures lay nearby, thrashing in small jerks. Snape Accioed their wands and held his wand aimed at them, even though they seemed thoroughly incapacitated.

"Severus, thank goodness," McGonagall said. "I received the strangest message from Ms. Granger about the armor coming to life. Fawkes refused to take me to the spot – pecked me even. Dumbledore's portrait insisted we stay put in the tower where it was safest, used some reverse password on the gargoyle to keep us in." She huffed angrily and then noticed the figures on the floor. Richard and Professor Sprout stepped cautiously out behind her, brought down by the turning staircase.

"What is happening? Are the walls glowing, do you think?" Richard asked as he reached out a hand, but pulled it back before touching the stone.

"I don't know quite what is happening," Snape said, relaxing his aim on the enemy slightly. "But I fully expect that when we locate Harry, we will find out."

"Your sleeve is burnt," McGonagall said in concern.

"Battle with Avery," Snape stated. "One I won this time. Fortunately, I also received a message, which gave me just enough warning."

Harry came running. "You're all right," he said in relief. "Headmistress? Professors?" He glanced at Richard, surprised to see him still in the castle. As the other's nodded, he stared at Harry with the same alarm as previously. Harry ignored him, since McGonagall presumably could take care of him.

"Yes, Harry, we're fine. What . . . exactly did you do?" McGonagall asked, gesturing at the figures lying nearby.

"Trapped in a horror of their minds, or some such," Harry tossed out casually. He went over and tossed their hoods aside. "Dolohov and Jugson, look at that," he said happily. "There are about twelve of them here in the castle." He paced back to the others. "Can't count them in my head when there are that many. We may have got the lot of them," he said with satisfaction, smiling.

"You may have got the lot of them," Snape corrected.

Harry's smile faded quickly. "But we need to check on everyone. Did you check on Remus?"

"I admit I came to check on Minerva first."

Harry started to run off again. Snape's voice shouting after him slowed his pace. "How long are we safe?"

"It will only release when the very last enemy is removed from the castle," Harry quoted

They watched his figure dwindle down the corridor and turn on fleet feet. "Your main job overseeing Harry continues to be as interesting as ever, Severus."

"It is all right," Snape said. "I do think he is going to be all right, now. If things would calm down I could catch up to where his power is. It grows by leaps and bounds as he needs it. I think if he did not need it, its growth would slow." He dropped his wand hand, deciding that the Death Eaters were truly no threat. "But we should contact the Ministry and search the castle."

"I'll go down to the Great Hall. Don't have the Floo in my office yet. Didn't expect to need it," she grumbled. "Better bring Poppy in, too."

Snape followed in the direction Harry had departed. He would start with who he knew to be present and then begin a floor-by-floor search. Presumably the Ministry would assist with that when they arrived.

He approached the Fat Lady's portrait, which was empty. He found her hiding two portraits away. "It is safe now, and I have the password," he stated, finding patience somewhere, knowing that brusqueness did not always work with this fictitious woman. The Fat Lady picked up her skirts and tip-toed back to her own portrait, looking around for danger all the while.

"Someone dark and mysterious came. He didn't have the password."

"Very good," Snape said. "Periwinkle."

The portrait flipped open and a freezing charm came rolling out, making the portrait hole crackle and steam with ice. It did not seem like a Death Eater kind of spell. "Who is there?" Snape queried, shaking ice from his robes.

"Professor?" Neville asked, bending down to look through the hole.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom."

Chapter 36

"Harry said I should find a defensible spot and stay there," Neville said, sounding as though he wanted it clear he had been obedient.

"Yes, very wise idea. But I need help searching the castle now, so come out of the tower."

Neville stepped out, wand raised. "Who attacked?"

"Death Eaters." Neville's eyes widened and he peered oddly at his former teacher. Snape spun on his heel. "Come along."

At the staircases someone was shouting and Harry came running up to them. "Is Pomfrey here?" he asked breathlessly.

"Minerva is bringing her in by Floo right now." Snape hurried to follow down to the third floor and Lupin's office.

The office lay in disarray and Lupin sat on the floor, clutching his injured arms around his waist, staring at Greyback, who like the others didn't have attention for anything beyond his own internal horrors. Harry crouched beside Lupin and said to Snape, "He's got a bad bite and his other arm's broken, I think. Remus?" Harry prompted.

Lupin responded only slowly. He held up his bitten arm. "Look," he said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You cannot see it?" Lupin demanded.

"Let's get you to the hospital wing, Remus," Snape said. "Pomfrey will be here momentarily. Come."

Between the two of them they put him on his feet and led him out. In the corridor leading to the hospital wing, they found Lavender crying.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked, nearly panicked by the scene.

Lavender pointed through the doors to the dispensary. Harry left Snape to handle Lupin alone and rushed ahead. Inside, he came to a stop. Ron stood between two beds looking down at something. "Ron!" Harry said, "you're . . ." The object of Ron's attention came into view. Firenze was splayed on a sheet on the floor, skin ashen. Blood dotted the sheet. "Oh, no," Harry said. He closed his eyes, but there was nothing left. Snape and Lupin came in and stood beside them. "Where did you go?" Harry asked his friend.

"Out in the Rose Garden," Ron said dully. "Came in the side door and found Professor Firenze like this. I didn't know what to do for him." He tossed his arm helplessly.

Pomfrey rushed in, followed by McGonagall. Heading for the door, Harry said, "We still have people missing."

"Ministry's on its way," McGonagall informed him just before dropping her head at the sight on the floor. She quickly turned to the obviously battered Lupin and forced him to take a bed at the other end.

Harry went at a jog back to the staircases. "Where's Ginny?" Footfalls came up behind him and Snape joined him. Harry informed him: "I told Hermione to start searching from the Dungeons up, so I know where she is. Ginny's still missing. And the twins."

"The Weasley twins?" Snape inquired with interest.

"Yeah. Ginny said they stayed after the funeral to plan some prank."

Snape raised his wand. "If it was they who weakened the castle's security, they are in serious trouble."

"Yeah," Harry said, worried that may be the case.

Harry started down the next staircase, thinking of checking on Hermione's progress. A door banged open and Ginny stumbled out. "Ginny!" Harry said, relieved and alarmed. She was clutching her middle.

Ginny swore colorfully and leaned back against the wainscoting. "Witch used the same hex as last time."

"Here, let's get you to Pomfrey," Harry urged, propping her up with his shoulder.

"I was doing so well, too," she grumbled.

Harry grew alarmed by something moving inside Ginny's robes. "Pomfrey. Now. Stop talking," Harry ordered and marched her to the staircase.

"Yeah, but . . . I think Filch . . . " Ginny pointed behind her, looked up and spied Snape. "Professor," she said in clear dismay.

Harry read the potential for embarrassment in her tone. "Severus, can you find Hermione?"

Ginny overrode him. "Filch is dead back there, I think," she clarified.

Snape gave her a sharp glare as though to verify what she said and then headed through the rough wooden door.

"What'd you get hit with?" Harry asked as they reached the corridor leading to the hospital wing.

"Don't ask." She heaved as though she might be sick and then made a very pathetic noise of distress.

"Oh, Ginny. Almost there." He kicked open the door.

Ginny flopped down on the first bed, too wrapped up in her own troubles to notice the dead centaur across the way, still very recognizable under several crisp white sheets. She curled herself into a ball and moaned.

Pomfrey left Lupin's side to assess Ginny, saving Harry from fetching her. Ginny shoved Harry. "Go –way!" she insisted with an almost childish voice.

Harry backed up, confused. Pomfrey efficiently Accioed a set of curtains and set them up. Harry stood on the far side of them, too concerned to move far. Pomfrey's reassuring voice drifted out. "Now, now, the Tentacle Erasing Ointment will work in just a half an hour."

Harry shuddered in sympathy and stepped down to where Lupin sat, propped up on pillows, his broken wrist already safely in a Kwikcast. He was staring closely at his other hand and this time Harry saw that his nails were just a bit too pointed and his knuckles hairier than before. His bites had been wrapped in rags soaked in something purple and foul smelling.

"Can you become more of a werewolf?" Harry asked in surprise.

"I'm becoming like him," Lupin said bleakly. "Half a werewolf all the time."

"I'm sorry, Remus," Harry said.

Lupin shrugged as though trying to pretend it did not matter, even though it clearly did. "Better off than others, though," he said, nodding his head in the direction of Firenze's body. "Always have to keep that in mind." He rested his injured arms at his sides and leaned his head back. "Something overcame Greyback. He just went mad."

"I did that," Harry said.

Lupin's thicker than usual brow went up. "You did?"

"I cast an old spell of Slytherin's that was described as bringing bane to the castle's enemies."

"If you were still my student, I would yell at you for trusting such a spell source. But since you're not . . . I won't." Instead he appeared quite grateful.

McGonagall entered with a group from the Ministry: Arthur Weasley, Shacklebolt, Vineet, and Tonks. Harry patted Lupin's shoulder and joined them. McGonagall

crouched and pulled back the sheet from over Firenze's head. His light hair was barely distinguishable from the bleached sheet. "Never really fit in. Living in a castle is hardly natural for such as he."

Harry thought McGonagall must still have eulogies on her mind, since she seemed to be giving another again already.

"Who knows what happened to him?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Ron found him," Harry said. "I think he's taken Lavender somewhere quiet. One of the nearby classrooms, maybe."

Shacklebolt departed.

"Up to helping with a search of the castle?" Mr. Weasley asked Harry, who had been communicating silently with Tonks.

"Yes, sir." Harry glanced at the nearby bed with the curtain drawn around it. He did not say anything, figuring if Ginny wanted her dad's attention, she could have easily made enough noise to attract it.

On the second floor staircase, they encountered Hermione. "I searched everything below here, except I don't know the password for the Slytherin common room."

"It's the same as the Gryffindor one," Harry said. "They make them all the same over the summer."

"'Periwinkle' didn't work though."

"Well, we'll look into it," Mr. Weasley said, "Vishnu, why don't you join Ms. Granger in continuing to search upward."

Hermione appeared to be controlling her reaction to this by biting her lip. Vineet soberly followed her as she led the way up to the next floor. On the way down, Mr. Weasley asked Harry, "Tell us a bit more about this spell you used . . ."

Harry glanced back at his friends a few times before reciting the notes surrounding the spell. Snape stepped out of the narrow side corridor off the first floor landing, looking grim. "We have another body and three more Death Eaters here," he said.

Mr. Weasley gestured for Tonks to take care of it. "We also need assistance with getting into the Slytherin common room, apparently."

In the much cooler dungeon, while Snape investigated the stuck door leading to his house's common room, Mr. Weasley said, "So, you think the spell was one left behind by Salazar himself?"

"I suspect," Harry said, "that of the four founders whose notes are in the book, he seems the most likely candidate. He also apparently couldn't spell . . . words, that is." When Snape gave him a borderline insulted glance, Harry added, "The other notes don't have quite the same issue with the English language."

Snape considered the door. "The password has been changed. Anything in the Ravenclaw book about the commons' gateways?" he airily asked Harry.

"Yeah," Harry said. "It says: be certain not to forget the password."

Snape stepped back, gesturing for Harry and Mr Weasley to do the same. As he aimed his wand at the exposed hinges, Harry said, "Don't want to try to guess it?" Snape ignored him and fired a cutting charm at each hinge until they blossomed and clanked to the stone floor. The door still refused to move.

"The magic is on the door itself, it seems," Mr. Weasley observed.

McGonagall appeared then, Minister Bones in tow. "If I ever get two good nights of sleep in a row, I will be forever grateful." She waved her hand before her nose to disperse the smoke. "What is this?"

"The password's been changed," Harry said. "And we don't know it."

"Well, for goodness sake, Severus, you should have said something. There is an unlock charm just for this situation that only the headmaster or mistress is allowed to know. Turn around, all of you." She cast something without an incantation and the door crashed to the floor, making them all jump. "At least it was your house door you damaged," she said as she stepped by Snape to enter. "Well . . . it . . . was your house."

Harry followed her in and stopped dead at the oppressive sight before him. The entire place had been redecorated as though by a mad grandmother afflicted with an obsession for pink and white doilies. Harry could not hold back a gasp. Simulated windows had even been added, complete with bright sunlight – despite the post-witching hour, probably just to highlight the yellow and blue flowered curtains pulled aside with broad pink sashes. The room made his arms tingle with revulsion; he rubbed them, which did not help. Snape reached up to tear down a Gryffindor Rulz banner but it snapped viciously at him.

"Oh, wonderful," Snape said. "And it is all cursed."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Bones propped her fists on her hips and said, "Quite an improvement, I would say." When Harry turned to her to gauge if she were joking or not, she said, "Thanks to you are in order, Mr. Potter, for your quick actions this evening. Quite a coup."

"Quite honestly," Harry said, "I was just trying to save my friends, as usual."

Snape turned sharply and leaned into their conversation with: "What he means to say, is: Thank you for the accolades and I hope this means you will be supporting me tomorrow during the meeting of the full Wizengamot."

Minister Bones smiled faintly. "Harry is not a political animal, Professor."

"No," Snape breathed in mildly disdainful agreement. "Despite my numerous attempts to change that."

A noise attracted Harry's attention to one of the dormitories, which was only partially redecorated. On the floor – one by the doorway and the other by a half-formed, simulated window that rose and set rapidly between day and night – lay the twins, clasping their heads and thrashing as though caught in a miniature fit. "In here!" Harry shouted.

"Fred and George!" Mr. Weasley exclaimed. "Buy why . . . ?"

"Enemies of the castle," Harry said. "At least the castle thinks so." He moved quickly to hover the twin who was tangled in curtains with a bright pattern of doe-eyed kittens playing with yarn or curling up to sleep with puppies. "I think if we get them out of the castle, the spell will lift."

He and Snape hovered the two of them while Mr. Weasley cleared the way, showing distress at the state of his sons. They glided them out onto the dewy, moonlit lawn where the shadows cast by the torches stretched away to the lake. The twins fell unconscious, which was definitely an improvement. Something howled from the forest and a colony of bats fluttered overhead.

"Serves them right," Snape muttered, too quiet for Mr. Weasley to overhear. His long shadow shortened as he bent down to check that the nearest twin was breathing all right, even rolling him onto his side and checking that he had not swallowed his tongue.

Mr. Weasley was shaking his head as he knelt beside the other. "Should get them to St. Mungo's," he said. To Harry, he asked, "Any idea what the recovery time on this spell is?"

Harry was forced to shrug, which made him feel almost regretful. He had not meant for anyone he cared about to get caught in the middle. With a cry of yah! one twin violently sat up, holding his head. "Bloody hell," he kept repeating.

"Guess they'll be all right," Mr. Weasley said and Harry slumped in relief.

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Harry followed Snape when he moved to return to the castle. Mr. Weasley also stood, pointed his wand at the nearest befuddled twin and said, "Stay put!"

Ron stood in the castle doorway, looking out. "You found Fred and George?"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Weasley reassured him.

Ron took the heavy door from him as though heading outside, but spotted something that made him turn back and say, "Wha's that?!"

Everyone turned and watched Lavender approach, carrying a familiar creature with matted and tangled fur. It was purring loud enough to hear across the hall. "I found her crying on the fourth floor," she said, petting the animal.

Ron let the door go and it fell closed with a resounding boom! "That's Mrs. Norris!" he exclaimed in horror.

Lavender petted the cat. "But she was so sad. And now look at her." It was true that the cat was completely at home in her arms.

Ron was nonplussed. "But . . . but I HATE that cat!"

Lavender pointedly turned sideways as though to shield Mrs. Norris from Ron's anger and petted her some more.

In a far wing of the fourth floor, Hermione and Vineet walked in silence. Hermione had only made two attempts at conversation but they had elicited nothing more than one syllable responses so she had given up. By this time her excitement at getting this assignment had dulled to a manageable tingle that was renewed every time she turned to her companion. They had not found anything for a while, so Hermione jumped more than expected when Vineet grabbed her robes to pull her back from approaching the curved stone staircase that led upward at the dead end of the corridor.

"There is a barrier here," he said, sounding concerned.

The light was poor but Hermione could see the sky outside the windows reflecting in a small pool of water on the floor. "It's just this," she said, shaking him off to step closer. A frog leapt from the reeds, making a splash that reached her shoes. She stared down into the black water with some sadness. "This is where Professor Flitwick moved the portable swamp to get it out of the way rather than get rid of it." She gestured along the corridor. "No one ever comes down this way, usually."

Melancholia pervaded Hermione's mood as they continued. Two corridors later, this allowed her to identify Vineet's mood, although not the source of it. She wondered if she should ask Harry what was wrong with his colleague, but did not look forward to his look of disapproval if she did not ask very carefully.

When the search was finished and all eleven captured Death Eaters carted away, Harry stepped into the Great Hall in search of Tonks. Voices echoed from the pair sitting at the Gryffindor table near the freshly lit hearth. Harry came to a stop far enough away as to not interrupt Tonk's interview of Ginny. The clock on the end wall was difficult to read without squinting, but it showed half past three. Harry yawned.

Ginny was saying: "Then this cutting curse came from the staircase side."

"That's what happened to the rug?" Tonks asked, writing all the while.

"I guess, yeah," Ginny replied.

A figure approached Harry and stopped beside his shoulder. It was Mr. Weasley. Ginny went on, gesturing with her hands to show the layout of the corridor and the gestures of her spells, "I moved to get a wall between me and the attacker down the corridor . . ."

"But that one was farther away," Tonks pointed out.

"Yeah, true," Ginny said thoughtfully. "I guess I was thinking that was where the fatal spell that took out Filch must have come from. But I wasn't thinking much . . . didn't really have time."

As Ginny continued to relate her part of the battle, Harry turned to his boss. "All right, sir?" Mr. Weasley did not appear to be all right. He ignored Harry's question, so Harry said, "She's pretty good. With a little training . . ."

Mr. Weasley grimaced and approached the two of them hunched over Tonk's report parchment.

"Hey, Dad," Ginny greeted him happily.

Mr. Weasley put a hand on her shoulder. "Go on," he said.

Ginny finished describing the spell exchanges, growing more agitated when she had to describe the Tetchy Tentacle Hex that she had not managed a counter for, despite getting hit with it previously. "Do you know one?" she asked Tonks in near desperation. "I hate that hex."

"I'll find out one for you," Tonks assured her.

"You should get home; it's late," Mr. Weasley tiredly said.

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"I . . . can I go home?" Ginny asked eagerly.

Mr. Weasley rubbed his forehead. "That's right. I forgot."

"I can't forget," Ginny retorted, sounding grudging.

"It was supposed to be safer here for you," Mr. Weasley muttered.

"Yeah," Ginny said. "How many teachers are dead now?" She frowned deeply and noticed only then that Harry was hovering on the edge of the light. "Hey, Harry."

"You're in better spirits," Harry said, approaching.

Ginny rubbed her robe front. "Yeah, better without tentacles in uncomfortable places." She blushed then, which was clear even in the firelight. "Can I really go home?" she asked her father.

Mr. Weasley continued to rub the thinning hair on top of his head. "I don't know," he admitted.

Ginny stood. "Guess that's a 'no'," she muttered. "I'm going back to the tower then." A few steps away, she said, "G'night, Dad."

Harry hovered, waiting to see if Mr. Weasley would leave as well so he could talk to Tonks. Mr. Weasley rubbed his hair back and forth again, looking beaten down. Tonks said, "She's not a baby anymore, Arthur."

"Seven kids. Six boys," Mr. Weasley complained. "Why does SHE insist on being an Auror? Why not one of them, like Bill?" Grumbling, he departed.

Harry sat down beside Tonks. He wanted to hitch an arm around her shoulder but worried someone may come in and see. He stroked her thigh under the table instead, feeling like a silly student again.

Tonks remained business-like. "I need to interview you next." She found a fresh report sheet and filled out the top of it. Harry clasped his hands before him on the table and behaved himself.

Giving his version of events went smoothly. He had written out enough reports by now to easily order and describe the right details. Halfway through, while he waited for Tonks to finish describing Hermione's defense of the library, Harry asked, "Do you want me to write?"

"No," Tonks replied in such a way that Harry wondered if he had offended her but she was trying to hide it. This served as a reminder that maintaining a working

relationship was not going to be straightforward or easy. Harry sat quietly after that, waiting for a cue to continue.

Without warning a hand fell on Harry's shoulder. "You need to rest for tomorrow's Wizengamot meeting," Snape said.

"We're still finishing up reports," Harry pointed out, not wanting to leave Tonks' side quite yet.

Sounding immovable, Snape said, "You can finish it tomorrow after you have slept. It is quite late."

Tonks rolled up the parchments and stashed them inside her robe as she stepped over the bench. "You go. I should relieve Kingsley anyway; he's patrolling the grounds."

Harry asked, "Have you figured out how the Death Eaters got in?"

She shook her head. "Not entirely. They came in the side door where Firenze looks to have been waiting for a rendezvous with someone."

"Another centaur?" When Tonks shrugged, Harry said, "Could the centaurs have carried the Death Eaters over the barrier spells?"

"The centaurs would never consent to do that," Tonks said.

Harry turned to Snape. "But that would work, wouldn't it?"

Snape pondered a moment before he agreed that it could. He patted Harry's shoulder as though to get him moving. Harry stood and said, "But what happened to the elves?"

"To bed," Snape commanded. "You can solve the rest of the wizarding world's problems tomorrow."

"But . . ."

Snape pointed and gave him a shove in the direction of the doors. Harry moved his feet to remain upright and went that way reluctantly. As he approached the open center door a large figure blocked the way.

"Hey, Hagrid."

"Got someone for ya'," Hagrid said and held out a small mummified bundle.

Harry stared at it, shifting into the Entrance Hall where the light was slightly better. "Kali?"

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"Aye, she took to thrashing in –er cage. I couldna calm –er down. Didna realize that meant trouble I –ave ta admit," Hagrid explained as Harry lifted the tiny fox-headed bundle from his massive hand. Hagrid went on, "–Fraid if she re-injured –erself badly she'd never fly again. We should keep –er like that fer a while, ta give –er a chance to heal a bit."

Harry cradled her on his arm, where she immediately rested her head against him. A sense of utter relief washed through him, leaving his limbs jelly-like. "Thanks, Hagrid," he said. He glanced back and hesitated on his toes while he judged whether Tonks' or Snape's postures, clearly outlined by the fire, indicated that the conversation may be one of concern. Harry decided not and gave Hagrid a wave before departing. His pet was asleep before he made it to the top of the Grand Staircase.

Chapter 37.

Lux & Veritas

The boy's dormitory in the Gryffindor tower stood empty, as everyone else had decided to sleep at home. Harry, not having a home at the moment, decided he might as well stay as originally intended. He used a spell to put the bedding from the pile in the common room onto his old bed. He stripped to his t-shirt and dropped onto the mattress leadenly with Kali cradled against him. Either his own fatigue had caught up with him or hers did, because he was hard out immediately. He was so solidly asleep that he did not wake when Snape came up to check on him and he had to be shaken hard hours later when morning arrived.

"Harry," Snape's voice cut through his distorted dreams. A hand passed through his hair, turning his face upward. Harry blinked into the sunlight, forced to shade his eyes. As he sat up, Kali made a chirping noise and struggled inside her bindings.

Snape peered at her with a disturbed expression. "What an unfortunate creature."

Harry scooped her up and stood to collect his robes. "I trust that Hagrid knows what's best for her. What time is it?"

"Half past nine."

The Great Hall was empty. Snape sat across from Harry and watched him eat breakfast. Harry pushed his watery scramble around his plate and said with some trepidation, "This doesn't look like normal Hogwarts fare. What happened to the house-elves?"

Snape scratched his chin to stall and said, "There were only six in the castle last night. The rest are still on loan helping to clean up from the troubles. Had there been more about, I doubt they could have been overwhelmed."

Harry put his fork down. "What happened?"

Snape crossed his arms. "The elves here are not tightly bonded to their servitude. It is difficult to bond them, even if the school wished to, since the spell works with an individual or a family. Were they bonded to the Headmaster that would create issues during succession."

Harry began to see the possibilities. "The Death Eaters bonded the elves to themselves?"

"Yes."

"Dobby even?" Harry asked, feeling terrible for the elf as soon as he considered this. When Snape nodded, Harry asked, "Where are they now?"

"Two cannot be located. The other four are at the Ministry in the care of Control of Magical Creatures."

Harry glanced at the clock. "I'm going to go see Dobby, then."

"Wizengamot meeting is at 1:00, remember," Snape sternly reminded him.

Harry nodded and lifted Kali up from resting in his lap. "Guess I'll take her back to Hagrid for now."

Snape held a hand out. "I will take her. Why don't you get on your way; it is getting late in the morning and the Auror's office may wish to give you further instructions given that thirty members of the press have been invited to the meeting."

"Are you going to be there?" Harry asked.

"I was intending to, unless you would rather I not." He rested Harry's pet in the crook of his arm and placed his other hand over her to hold her there.

Harry felt dizzily uneasy and then secure as this transpired. "No, I'd prefer you be there." Harry glanced at the doors to the hall, considering Apparating.

"Take the Floo," Snape ordered him.

McGonagall approached Snape as he crouched on the floor, cleaning up his office. Burnt files littered the floor, some burnt not by spells but by the smashed potions that had also stained and etched the stones.

"Faring well enough, Severus?" she asked.

He stood with a stack of less-damaged papers in his hand. "I should have cleaned up last night; the potion ingredients would have done less damage if I had." He set the stack down on the desk and spread them out.

"Did you see Poppy about your arm?" McGonagall asked, either remembering his burnt sleeve from the night before or seeing something in the way Snape moved.

"It is no matter. I'll mix a bit of plaster for it if need be."

"Severus, that's ridiculous, go up and see Poppy now. Things have quieted down." When Snape did not respond, but continued to sort out the salvageable files from the hopeless, she commanded, "Come along right now, then if you are going to be that way."

Snape glared at her. "It is literally a scratch."

"Now, Severus, or I will call Fawkes down here to haul you away."

"The bird would regret that," Snape threatened. They stared at each other before Snape gave in with a roll of his eyes.

In the hospital wing Snape took a seat where directed to. Pomfrey bustled out and upbraided Snape for waiting so long getting himself tended to. As Snape sat through having a burn plaster applied, his eyes narrowed as he took in the occupant of the bed across from him. Snape glanced meaningfully at Pomfrey and nodded in Lupin direction. Pomfrey simply shook her head. Snape then glanced at McGonagall, who whispered, "Maybe you could speak to him."

"Me?" Snape mouthed.

"You have a better chance of shaking him out of it," McGonagall said in an extremely low whisper. "He doesn't expect anything from you."

"No, I imagine he doesn't," Snape muttered inaudibly. He used this task as an excuse to shake himself free of Pomfrey before she was finished. He ignored the hospital witch's tossed up hands and crossed to Lupin's bedside.

Lupin lay curled up as though asleep but given the late hour, this seemed unlikely. At the sound of his name, he rolled onto his back and propped himself up slightly

with the pillows. The change in him was still very subtle, having been arrested by the quick application of a wrap to draw the mutagen out of his bites. "What can I do for you?" Lupin dully asked.

Snape sat on the next bed over and clasped his hands together. He had no good conversation ideas and felt out of his depth with this task. He finally settled for the basic truth: "You are looking quite well, Remus." Indeed, the slightly furred point to his ear would not be visible if he failed to cut his hair for a month and nails could be trimmed shorter to hide their slight points. The more subtle change of his shoulders hunching fractionally forward like a quadruped's, would be harder to mask.

Lupin's pursed lips appeared to restrain a counter argument. He didn't speak.

Snape crossed his arms and said the next thing he thought of. "Not the best evening, facing one's most reviled nemesis, whose encounter was almost fatal the last time."

Lupin stared at Snape. "Avery come and see you?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Snape replied casually. "Fortunately, I had a bit of warning that things were amiss. One you missed getting, unfortunately."

Lupin looked him over. "You all right?" he asked. "I noticed you've got some bandaging there." He seemed to be trying hard to pull himself out of his emotional morass using concern for someone else.

"It is minor," Snape said dismissively.

Lupin scrubbed his face with one hand, a sign that he was slipping down again.

Snape said, "How is the damage to your office? I only ask because the Defense files have been rather badly damaged by both fire and potion as well as fiery potion." Snape spoke with an edge of beaten down fatigue that he did not really feel but suspected may be effective.

Lupin rubbed his arm and glanced around the wing which was otherwise unoccupied. "I guess I could go," he said. "Pomfrey hinted as much enough times during breakfast."

Snape handed him his robes which were hanging behind the bed. Lupin was exhibiting the trait that Snape found most annoying above all others: self-pity. He steeled himself for a rather long remainder of the morning but a half hour later, Lupin had sufficiently engrossed himself into copying examination keys and lecture notes over to clean parchment that he didn't speak much, although he still sighed too frequently, usually after studying his less than human hands.

"Does it really matter that much?" Snape finally asked after one such incidence.

"I like moving among Muggles. I'm going to have a hard time doing that now," Lupin replied. "Muggles aren't particularly fond of . . . creatures."

Snape returned to his task of returning files to an unbroken drawer beside the door.

"Avery made a mess, didn't he?" Lupin observed.

Snape surveyed the room. "It was my deflection block that did this damage," he said, indicating the smashed cabinet from which the parchments had spilled. "I was not going to underestimate him this time, even though I hoped my first offense would be fatal to him."

"They listed Avery as taken away in one piece. Why didn't you just kill him?" Lupin asked. It was an unexpected question for him.

"Feeling a bit more the vigilante than usual, Remus?" At Lupin's shrug Snape said, "I was most pleased that Harry had not taken that action last time, so I did not have it as an option, myself."

Lupin squinted at a sheet of notes and diagrams demonstrating locking charms. "That doesn't sound like you, Severus."

Snape crossed his arms and leaned against his desk. "There was a time when I would have been satisfied with considering Harry's virtuousness as my own redemption, but I do not find that valid anymore."

Lupin put down the sheet he was holding and stared at Snape. "You feeling all right?"

In the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Harry was directed to a cage in the massive back storeroom which held four tragic-looking house-elves, three of whom were passed out on the floor with open bottles of butterbeer near or still in their boney hands. Dobby crouched near the door of the cage, his nose pressed through the bars.

"Harry Potter, sir," he squeaked when Harry approached.

Harry crouched down opposite him. "Mr. Diggory said you should be un-bonded very soon."

The elf nodded without freeing his nose. "Dobby's master is bad wiz-" the elf started to say and then felt compelled to slam his head against the bars. The bars were too close together for Harry to reach in and keep him from doing this.

"Dobby, just don't talk about your master, all right?"

The elf fell still, but muttered, "Dobby bad elf; could not help Harry Potter."

"I didn't need any help. It's all right. You'll be all right. Have a butterbeer."

Dobby blinked his big eyes and said, "After watching Winky drink butterbeers Dobby not want any."

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry said. "I'm sorry I can't stay; I have to get upstairs."

Dobby tugged on the bars. "Harry Potter is great wizard for visiting Dobby in the Clink."

"Just hang in there, all right?"

Too soon, Harry found himself escorted into the large meeting hall of the Wizengamot. To his surprise, he was brought not to a seat in the front center of the floor, but to one along the wall, amid the reporters, who gazed at him with inquisitive wariness. Snape had been hovering near the rear of this pack, but stepped forward to stand just behind Harry's right shoulder. Minister Bones was saying, "I now move us onto the main issue of this meeting, and that is making a determination on Mr. Harry Potter's future in this organization."

Harry swallowed. Tonks leaned close and said, "Minister thought you should hear all of the debate; that's why she asked that you be brought in at the beginning." Harry let his shoulders fall and tried to relax.

Bones went on: "Because Mr. Potter is an apprentice in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, investigations concerning him have been overseen by the Department of Mysteries." Beside Harry, some of the more foreign journalists were taking note of this. "Cornelius Fudge will be leading the debate over Mr. Potter. So I will turn this over to him."

Harry's heart sank. Fudge, sporting his old self-important attitude of walking with his chest pushed out to compete with his belly and his hands hitched around his lapels, strutted down to the floor. Percy followed him, carrying his parchments, which he arranged neatly on a nearby podium. Fudge said, "First off, I would like to make clear to all present . . ." Here he bowed to the reporters, including explicitly to Rita Skeeter, who had appropriated a member's seat on the end of the lowest tier. ". .

. exactly what Mr. Potter's rogue magic is capable of." He turned to the door with a sweep of his arm and it opened. Tertius Ogden stepped in, walking backward to guide a heavy wooden chair that was being hovered in. Lockhart, still sporting the dull red eyes of Voldemort, was chained to the chair. His vicious eyes scanned the room as though lining up who he would make victims of first.

The reporters backed up against the wall, ignoring their earlier desire to keep some space between them, and a few of the elders gasped. The chair was lowered to the floor with a thud. Bones visibly gathered herself. "We would have used Courtroom Ten had we known you were bringing him in here."

"But why?" Fudge asked with sarcasm. "He is harmless." With a snap of his fingers the chains fell away. Ogden backed up a step to aim his wand at the prisoner, presumably in case he tried to leave the chair. The room was definitely on edge now. Voldemort, using Lockhart's soft face, sneered at the assembled.

"If I may?" Fudge asked, still using his airy tone.

"If you may what?" Bones asked.

"Demonstrate?"

"If you must," Bones said, sounding uncertain about what she was agreeing to.

Fudge pulled his wand out and handed it to the figure in the chair. One of the reporters ducked behind the others and some of the Wizengamot looked ready to leap up and run despite their advanced age. Voldemort clutched the wand in both cherishing hands, his face the picture of ecstasy. With a snap of his arm, he aimed it at Percy, who had taken a position beside Fudge, but now clearly wished he were elsewhere. Voldemort shouted a curse, but nothing happened. He shouted another to the same lack of result. Eyes wild, he moved his aim among the tiered seats, where many ducked. "Avada Kedavra!" he yelled repeatedly, but soon ended in a sob. Still clutching the wand as though it were a lifeline, Voldemort slipped off the front of the chair onto his knees. He sobbed heavily now, head bowed, shoulders shaking. The rest of the room was utterly still, not even the reporter's quills moved.

Fudge stepped forward and easily snatched his wand from Voldemort's beautiful hands, which in his distress had gone nearly limp.

"Unprecedented," Fudge announced. "A threat to the very foundation of wizardom itself."

"What?" Harry heard himself utter.

"No one," Fudge went on, sounding more and more like a carnival sideshow announcer, "in the history of wizarding, has ever before, removed the most fundamental energies from another being, the very thing that makes them magical. Until now." He turned to glare at Harry.

"You'd prefer I killed him?" Harry asked.

Fudge pointed his wand at him, although it felt less a threat and more like simply pointing. "You are not called as witness at this time, Mr. Potter."

Voldemort had fallen into a heap, his head resting on his bent knee. Fudge stepped by him as though he were part of the furniture. Harry wished he would at least reach out and trip the man, but Voldemort had no will left to care about his surroundings.

"This is just one of many roguish spells Mr. Potter has demonstrated he is capable of. He has also . . ." Fudge began counting on his pudgy fingers. "Communed with the Dementors, admitting in fact that he negotiated with them. His Animagus form is a beast of unusually large and dangerous proportion. He has the power to SEE Voldemort's servants when they are not present. He could see through Voldemort's eyes when he chose to do so. He can call forth all manner of vile creatures from the very underworld . . . and these creatures remain at his command. Just yesterday he executed – on the very first try, I might add – a long and difficult spell left behind by Salazar Slytherin himself." Fudge tossed his waistcoat back and paced once in front of Voldemort, who still had not moved. "Ladies and gentlemen of this fine committee," Fudge said with a hand held up and out to them. "I submit to you that Harry Potter . . ." Fudge's hand swung around to Harry. " . . . is the new Dark Lord."

Harry stared at the former Minister for Magic. The reporters stared at Harry, most holding off on describing the scene in their notebooks. Tertius Ogden hazarded a glance behind him to gauge Harry's reaction. Harry remembered to breathe.

Fudge was approaching, so Harry sat up straighter. "No comment, Mr. Potter?" Fudge asked.

"You said it wasn't my turn," Harry pointed out, grateful that he wasn't supposed to speak until he had figured out where to begin. He felt a bit dizzy as he tried to formulate a strategy for responding. He made the mistake of glancing over his shoulder at his guardian.

Fudge took this cue and leaned in Snape's direction, hands on hips. "I won't even start in on your choice of adoptive fathers, Mr. Potter: Death Eater and all." He spun away. The reporters began scratching madly. "Need I say more?" he announced to the room.

Harry realized with a fast sinking heart that he had no power to protect Snape anymore; he could barely protect himself.

"Take him out of here," Fudge gestured at the destroyed man on the floor.

Ogden and Percy hovered him out.

Bones, at least, seemed unimpressed with Fudge's performance. Others around her were leaning forward, appearing disturbed and interested in hearing more. Bones said, "Mr. Fudge, we are well aware of Mr. Potter's resumé, off of which you have left a long list of things, including his exemplary performance and dedication as an Auror's apprentice, his fine leadership at the Demise of Voldemort Day festivities . . ." She glanced at the empty spot on the floor where Voldemort had just been removed and added more quietly, "Perhaps soon to be renamed." She pulled her monocle out of her eye and polished it calmly. "As I see it, Cornelius, you are one of the few harboring the belief the Mr. Potter is a dark wizard and are merely using fear to compel others to your belief." She ignored someone clearing his throat in the tiers behind her. "Let's move on, shall we? You have insisted that we run a Darkness Test, so let's do that then and put this to rest. And I expect everyone to honor the results, whatever they may be." She glared pointedly at the former Minister.

Fudge gave a little bow and gestured – still with that annoying grandeur – that Harry should come forward. Almost pointedly, Harry was directed to the chair Voldemort had just vacated. It was a sturdy old thing with broad armrests freshly marred by the chains that had been around them. Ogden hustled up with a small trunk, setting it down on the floor and taking bottles out of it.

Fudge stood with his hands behind his back, flicking his wand rapidly. "Ever have a Darkness Test, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry honestly replied, glad that he could.

"It is believed that no dark wizard can pass this test. Not worried at all?"

"I'm not a dark wizard," Harry said.

"You insult our intelligence, Mr. Potter," Fudge muttered.

Harry held in all kinds of retorts, such as, not particularly difficult to do that. He sat quietly while Ogden hovered Harry's wand before him. He stepped back and instructed Harry to take it up and use it. Harry did so and even held onto it, intentionally waiting for the instruction to let it go again, so as to not seem to have lied just moments before.

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"You are not to touch the wand again during the test," Ogden stated.

Harry assumed it was he who was going to run the test. He was mid-preparation for what kind of tester Ogden may be when Percy strode over and stood beside him, face set like a mask, wand in hand.

"Mr. Weasley will be administering the test for our department," Ogden stated and stepped aside.

Harry waited, trying to adjust to this new development. The room rustled and fell quiet as though a play were about to begin. He glanced down at the wand hovering before him and told himself that he could do this, easily; certainly everyone had faith that he could.

"I'm prepared to begin," Percy nasally pointed out.

"Go ahead then," Fudge said.

Percy raised his wand and aimed it straight at Harry but, unlike Snape, he had no difficulty in striking out. A stripe of pain like the lash of a whip cut across Harry's chest, making him gasp. The pain faded quickly, but before it could disappear completely, a second spell came at him. It was the third spell, a Blasting Curse that pushed him hard against the chair-back, that made Harry's arm jerk in the direction of the wand hovering before him. It was instinctive. He arrested the motion before getting even close, but Percy had spotted the movement.

Percy sneered with pleasure. "Go on, Potter. You know you want to hit me back." He cast a spell that doubled Harry over so that his forehead grazed his floating wand. Percy dropped his voice so that only Harry could hear. "Of course you want to hit me, I have Belinda now." While Harry forced breath into his reluctant lungs, Percy went on. "Shall I tell you about what we did last weekend? She is always saying how much better I treat her you know. She's such as willing young woman if you tell her all the nice things she wants to hear."

This was not a line of assault Harry had prepared for. His face heated and his jaw clenched. And just as he filled his lungs finally, a Glove Hex materialized to redden his cheeks all the more from the slap of leather. Every ounce of Harry's being longed to smash Percy back across the room with a Blasting Curse.

"Come on, Potter," Percy mocked a little louder this time. "You are such a faker, playing at hero." His voice dropped again, "But I hear you can't live up to it in bed."

Harry fists clenched and he began to doubt that with he could possibly hold out with his will further weakened given how very close he was to losing control clearheaded. If Percy had been within reach, Harry was certain he would simply throttle him.

The sixth spell was a Delirimens Curse that made Harry feel as though hundreds of insects were crawling all over him, biting him. Percy was maintaining the spell by turning the point of his wand in small figure eights, making it last as long as he could. Harry could not help scratching and clutching at his arms and back as his brain screamed at him to strike back to shut it off. Finally the spell faded and Harry bent forward, needing to catch his breath yet again. He was doubting himself for part two of the test and that was taking away some of his breath too.

Ogden approached with a piece of stained dissolving paper. Harry ate it, dreading what was coming. Seconds ticked by and Harry's frantic worry melted away to a dull concern. Ogden leaned close and repeated slowly. "Remember, you cannot touch your wand." Harry needed this slow instruction as his brain wanted to forget what was happening. As a litany, he repeated it to himself so as to not forget. "Don't touch the wand. Don't touch the wand."

Again, Percy raised and aimed his wand, a peeved crease distorting his face, perhaps because he had not defeated Harry on the first round. The sting that arced across Harry's chest felt simultaneously far away and sharply inescapable. "Ah!" Harry said and rubbed his collarbone, unable to hide the discomfort this time around. "I'm go–" Harry cut himself off. He had almost verbally threatened to kick Percy's arse later, but better sense shut him up just in time. He scowled instead.

Harry was ready for the Blasting Curse, but still had a dangerously weak moment, during which it seemed completely sensible to grab for his wand and utterly insane to hold off on doing so. He forced his fingernails to bite into his palms instead. In the curse's wake, he tried to catch his breath, but could not. He was suffocating, breathing heavily but not getting any air. His arms felt bound, even though they were not really. This confused him, which rattled his control. He had to be insane not to defend himself. What was wrong with him that was not blasting this sneering idiot out of his sight? He certainly deserved it. But Harry could not move his arms.

The Glove Hex weakened Harry all the more. He glared at Percy, who continued to drop insults supposedly passed on to him by Belinda. Harry was so focused on his hatred that his control of the interstice to the Dark Plane began to weaken. A musty chill wind floated under his robes. Harry dipped his head and drew on reserves of control he was previously unaware of. Releasing the creatures here would be the end of his current life, and that he feared far more than a mere childish insult or even a stinging slap across the face. The truth of this simple priority gave him much better control and he could even release his frantic grip on the armrests. Nothing else in the world mattered, only surviving this ordeal intact, and the ordeal would end very soon. He was almost there.

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Harry raised his head and defiantly faced down the last of the six curses without even flinching. Percy's lips twisted sourly when Ogden called the test to a halt. Harry wanted to glance away from his own knees over at his guardian, but could not transform the will to do so, into action; he was spent.

Wood-soled footsteps approached, but Harry didn't lift his head. Fudge said, "I submit that we move onto the second proposed procedure." Harry did raise his head upon hearing this. Fudge went on, "The proposal that Madam Bones refused to allow to come to a vote at the close of the last meeting of this august body."

Bones said, "Cornelius, Mr. Potter passed the test. It was correctly administered, as we all witnessed. As you yourself stated, no dark wizard can pass this test. I move that we dismiss this issue. Everyone but you is satisfied."

Fudge paced before the first tier of seats. "I don't believe that is true. But if it is, you have no reason to hesitate to submit it to a vote."

Bones tossed up her hands. "All right then. All in favor of executing Mr. Fudge's previously defined second procedure."

A number of hands went up. Harry hurriedly tried to count them, but there were too many. Nearby, Ogden crouched on the floor, arranging little bottles inside his small trunk. Fudge wore a crooked grin when he turned back to Harry. Madam Bones stated, "I wish to express that the current state of extreme mistrust, not only of this body but of the wizarding world at large is due in no small part to the inflammatory and one-sided nature of the articles published in our newspapers." She didn't glance at Skeeter as she said this, but many others did. "I have to wonder if you will ever be satisfied, those of you who voted in favor. You have all forgotten how much we owe Mr. Potter and you underestimate the risk involved in ostracizing him, whether he in reality be a good, bad, or medium-evil wizard." She peered straight at Harry. "All right there, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded. He felt saddened more than anything else, even given that he still ached from the physical battering he had just received. The suspicion would never end and this realization depressed him. He found himself better understanding Snape: he too could never convince most people that he was not as they believed; it was simply too much for the average person to overcome. Harry leaned forward, arms wrapped around himself. He felt mummified and half-strangled.

Ogden approached with another dissolving paper, this time stained thoroughly. Arthur Weasley rapidly approached as well.

Mr. Weasley's hand fell on Harry's shoulder. "I think he may need a Healer."

"Nonsense," Ogden said, "He didn't get hit that hard. I was standing close enough to see every spell effect. He said he was all right."

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley prompted.

Harry looked up at his boss. "Nothing is going to change their minds," he said grimly. "I want to get this over with. Then I want to go on a long holiday."

Mr. Weasley patted his shoulder and retreated back to the side opposite the press. Harry glanced the other way and found his pensive guardian standing a few feet in front of the press, as though he had started to approach but then held off. Harry considered that he himself could slip away anytime, into the floor and far away, where ever he wished. He could go to Finland and never come back. But he did not want to do that. Too many people were relying on him and he would miss his friends.

Harry let Ogden put the torn and folded paper on his tongue. A cloud of indifference crowded out the world. Someone was speaking to him and a voice sounding very much like his own was replying. The mummified feeling intensified. Harry could not have moved his arms had he wished to. What bothered him most was that his wings were immobilized. He hoped he did not need to fly anywhere.

Fudge had been asking Harry a series of standard background questions, but now he asked, "Have you ever willfully injured another – not a criminal wanted by the Ministry – or attempted to do so?"

Harry nodded and in response to the question of who, replied, "Draco Malfoy and some other of the Slytherin Quidditch team."

"Ah, the incident deemed serious enough to ban you from the sport, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"And other times that you hurt others?"

"I'm sure I tried to hit Malfoy and other Slytherins many times."

"Any other people since you have left school?" Fudge asked, getting impatient. Harry shook his head and Fudge frowned. "Are you currently breaking or have you ever broken any Ministry rules?"

Harry's ascent was interrupted by Bones, who said, "Cornelius that is a ridiculously general question. I broke a rule just an hour ago, carrying my cup of tea down here in the lift. Keep the questions specific, otherwise I shall call a halt to this."

While Bones was speaking, Mr. Weasley had approached Harry and bent close to him. "Harry," he asked in a whisper, "are you breaking any other rules besides the one involving fraternizing with a fellow Auror?"

Some recessed part of Harry's willful mind groggily wondered that Mr. Weasley knew that. Harry shook his head.

"Not a single other rule?" Mr. Weasley asked more loudly.

Harry shook his head. Mr. Weasley straightened. "This is an administrative matter, Madam Minister; one that we are already aware of." Mr. Weasley moved off with a dismissive attitude.

"Move on, Mr. Fudge," Bones said. "And keep the questions specific to things you already have reasonable suspicion of or I will float a proposal that we subject you to the same treatment. I, for one, have questions still about the favors you gave to wizards such as Mr. Malfoy when you were in power."

Fudge smiled weakly, looking to need cover for a case of nerves. "Of course, Madam," he replied with false politeness. Fudge turned to Harry. "Do you regularly practice Dark Magic in order to perfect it?"

Harry again indicated "no" with a kind of lolling of his head from side to side, his will too weak to do more. He wished he could breathe. He wished he could move. "Dark Magic is horrible," Harry slowly stated. "Dark things reach through to our Plane and feed upon it, sucking your soul away."

Harry spoke this with such grave seriousness that Fudge stared mutely at him rather than continuing his interrogation. Percy approached and whispered something to him. Fudge started and asked, "Er, yes. Have you ever performed a surreptitious spell on someone that you later regretted?"

Harry nodded just as a small shudder passed through him. With his awkward pose of keeping his arms wrapped around himself, the shudder appeared very odd.

"Upon whom?"

"Severus Snape," Harry replied.

The room's attention shifted. Snape, arms crossed, wiped the startled look off his face, took a half-step forward and said, "I waive my right to redress."

Bones nodded and made a note. "Move on, Mr. Fudge," she said casually.

"What?" Fudge blurted.

"You have no victim," Bones gently informed him. "Therefore the line of questioning is dropped." She sounded as though she were enjoying herself a just a trifle.

Fudge sputtered and stalked over the Snape. "You press me, Snape, and so help me, we'll have a session just about you."

Snape rose up so he stood over Fudge. "Go right ahead. I would prefer it to this. The Ministry itself gave me responsibility for Harry's well-being and just in the last quarter hour, you have repeatedly caused him pain and have overdosed him with a powerful potion. You have caused him far more harm than he has ever inflicted upon any innocent party."

Fudge spun away. The foreign reporters near Snape all stared at him as though keenly interested in dissecting him. Bones said, "Given that Mr. Potter practices no dark magic, harms no one, and is clearly suffering the worst effects of Veritaserum, I call a halt to this proceeding. Arthur if you will see to him while we discuss the results and take a vote. Also, the guards should see that the reporters are escorted to the Atrium."

Snape made it to Harry at the same time as Mr. Weasley. "The antidote," he snapped to Ogden. Snape tipped Harry's head back and prepared to tip the bottle into his mouth. Harry's uneasy eyes turned grateful upon recognizing him. "I'm sorry," Harry said.

"Swallow this; we'll discuss it later."

Snape pocketed the empty bottle, guided Harry to his feet and, with Mr. Weasley assisting, led him out. In the corridor Harry said, "I want to hear the result," and forced them all to a halt with a clumsy backing up of his feet. He shook the two of them off and leaned against the wall beside the heavy door just as it swung closed. The booming noise of it rattled his raw nerves. His legs were wobbly, however, and he still could not peel his arms away from his body. He slid to the clammy stone floor to rest.

Mr. Weasley said, "I think he needs a few more minutes to recover."

Snape said, "He was overdosed; it will require a little longer than that." When Harry weakly leaned his head back against the wall, Snape crouched beside him, dark robes flowing around his feet. He pushed Harry's fringe back and rested a palm on his forehead. "All right?"

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

"What is he apologizing for?" Mr. Weasley asked, bending low.

"I actually do not know," Snape replied. "But it is no matter."

The heavy door opened and McGonagall stepped out. "How is he?"

"He will eventually be all right," Snape stated darkly.

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"You held up admirably, Harry," McGonagall said.

"I almost failed. I almost struck back," Harry admitted.

"So did I," Snape breathed.

McGonagall allowed the door to finish closing and said. "I think Cornelius' actions garnered quite a bit of sympathy for Harry, so the vote should not be a problem."

Groggy and perhaps still under the influence of Veritaserum, Harry said, "That means I don't have to go work for the French."

"Were you going to?" Mr. Weasley asked in surprise.

Harry nodded, "I was going to take Tonks and Kerry Ann with me."

Sharply, Mr. Weasley exclaimed, "You were going to raid my department?"

Snape waved Mr. Weasley to silence and asked Harry, "Even if the vote is in your favor, will it have been worth it?"

Harry dropped his gaze. "I still have things to do and I need the Ministry's help with them. I don't want to handle Merton alone, even if I thought I could."

Mr. Weasley patted Harry's knee. "Growing up a bit there, Harry," he said.

Harry threw him a narrow, challenging look, but gave up on it quickly. He still couldn't breathe freely and was still compelled to keep his arms wrapped around himself. Snape reached over and peeled Harry's hand away from his side. His intensely curious gaze shifted quickly to knowing. "Let's get you somewhere you can rest, Harry."

"I want to hear the vote," Harry countered.

"I insist," Snape commanded. "Come." He stood Harry up and put one of his oddly rigid arms over his shoulder to support him.

Mr. Weasley said. "I'll go back in and owl you when the debate finishes and they finally call for a vote. You'll be at Ms. Granger's, correct?"

Harry nodded and Mr. Weasley slipped inside the heavy door just as Snape Apparated them away.

Hermione jumped up and helped guide Harry to the couch. Snape sat beside and again peeled Harry's arm away from his abdomen. "Certain you are feeling all right?"

"I can't really breathe," Harry admitted.

Softly, Snape said, "Yes, of course," as though expecting that. "Ms. Granger, would you do Harry the immense favor of fetching his pet from Hagrid's cabin?"

"Uh, sure." Hermione straightened from bending over Harry and took up her empty owl cage. "Need anything else from Hogwarts?"

"No, that will suffice," Snape answered easily. He raised a knowing brow at Harry and said, "Your pet is bundled up, remember?"

Harry gaped at his guardian. He shifted his shoulders as though testing that theory and said, "Severus, that's why I couldn't strike back. I really wanted to."

"And Percy would have deserved it," Snape stated drolly.

"But, I didn't mean to cheat," Harry insisted, arms jerking as he fought the invisible sense of being bound.

"You did not cheat," Snape insisted. "You simply had a bit of help from your friends."

Harry sighed and leaned back. "I really wanted to strike back but I couldn't move my arm. Maybe I could have stopped myself anyway, but Percy was saying things about Belinda."

"Then I would propose that he was the one cheating."

Harry fell silent, wondering how he would have fared without the extra help. Maybe he would have done all right. Harry kind of wished he knew for certain, though. He glanced at Snape, who was studying him closely. "You bailed me out, too. So did Mr. Weasley."

"You deserve the help, Harry. Always." Snape crossed his arms and lifted his chin. "The Ministry treated your capture of eleven more of Voldemort's associates as just another day for you."

Crookshanks sauntered over and bumped Harry's shins. "They didn't like how I did it."

"They have no cause for complaint," Snape insisted.

"They didn't complain, just stared at me all worried-like. Like everyone always does."

"Give them time to adjust. They do not know you as well as your friends, who trust you implicitly."

"That will be forever," Harry asserted. "I can Legilimize people just as well as you. I know what they're thinking." He crossed his arms for real now, feeling peeved just

discussing this. "You haven't asked me what I did to you," he went on in a sullen manner.

"I assumed that we would discuss it when you were recovered."

Hermione returned and handed over the cage. Within it, Kali was preening her wings fastidiously. "Was the Chimrian like that when you arrived?" Snape asked, sharply concerned.

"No. Hagrid unwrapped her before giving her to me. Said to keep her in the cage so she doesn't use her wings." Hermione plunked down beside Harry. "How was the vote?"

Harry complained, "I don't know yet. Someone dragged me away before I could find out."

Snape peered at Kali before setting the cage aside. "It was critical that no one find out exactly what was happening to you," he pointed out.

Harry stretched his arms out straight. "I do feel better, except . . ." he trailed off and shook his head. "I am sorry."

"Ms. Granger," Snape said, "I fully realize that this is your flat, but would you mind terribly? There is something I need to discuss with Harry."

"Oh. Sure. I'll take Crookshanks for a walk. He hasn't had one in ages." The cat gave an unhappy squawk as he was hauled up under his front legs and toted to the door.

Snape said, "I do wish I had a home of my own to take you to. I feel a bit remiss that I do not."

Harry shook his head. "Your faith in me is my home, really," he said quietly.

"You cannot lose that," Snape stated.

Harry did not speak; he was balancing between pained gratitude and the weight of too many concerns.

Snape folded his hands before him and respected Harry's silence a minute before saying, "Given your predilection for letting guilt gnaw at you – a truer sign than any other that you are firmly stuck on the side of light," he added almost disparagingly. "I thought I should give you a chance to get this out into the open." When Harry still did not speak, Snape said, "If you are fearing my reaction, there is no need to. Anyone who can throw around old, forgotten spells of Salazar's I tend to give extra consideration to, if only out of an interest for self-preservation."

Harry could not help a small laugh escaping his lips. "I'm not sure what I did to you," he admitted. He reluctantly met Snape's gaze and looked away again.

"You are not certain what you did . . ." Snape tonelessly repeated.

Harry shrugged, pleased with having enough freedom of movement to do so. "See, when I pushed the Cruciatus curse out of you . . ." Harry stalled for a lack of words. He held his hands out before him and moved his fingers as he remembered the feel of sorting between Radiance and curse. "It's hard to explain. I used the Staunching skill that Per showed me I had. Blood is very Radiant, you know; so is the core spirit of someone. That's what the Crucio messes up. But since I can feel cursed things too, I just pushed the two apart until the curse was gone. And unraveled the damage at the same time, but that was the easy part." He glanced at Snape and away again because he did not like to think of him that way: injured and surrounded by little hope.

Harry went on: "But I think I did more than I was trying to. I didn't know what I was doing; I only tried to help because everyone was giving up and I . . . Anyway, you seem . . . different now."

"Do I?" Snape asked challengingly, which Harry realized was the tone he had been dreading when he started explaining. "And you believe that was solely your doing?"

"Severus, you . . . you're getting married, of all things. You and my trainer are almost friends. And you . . . couldn't . . ." Harry stopped again. In a quieter voice he went on, "When I asked you to help me practice the Darkness Test, you couldn't do it. You've never backed down before."

Snape's hands, no longer tightly folded, spasmed as though that comment had struck a nerve. Visibly, he recovered himself and more calmly said, "You do not think it was because of my experiences just before?" He paused to let that sink in. "Harry, I thought that I had cheated fate. Voldemort believed me to be his most loyal servant, safe to have living in the very den of his most powerful and reviled enemy, safe to share his concerns about the prophecy, which above all things, indicated that he was fallible. He did not dare share that knowledge with any other of his followers, nor did he take the knowledge away from me, which he could have easily. He needed to consult with me, trusted that I had only his interests in mind. But I was not his most loyal servant . . . I was his least loyal servant. Voldemort died in the Entrance Hall battle without ever learning that.

"But there I was, faced with his wrath after all those years of facing him down in person and fooling him, and after a year of being safely ensconced in the belief of

succeeding, to the absolute end, in that treacherous role. Worse yet, he was being egged on by Malfoy, of all people, although that was not going to last long." Snape sat back on the couch as well and tilted his head back to stare off into memory. "Voldemort's personality was tenuous, but it was solidifying rapidly. I have no doubt that he would have returned to his former power given enough time. You took him down just in time, Harry; the task would only have grown more difficult."

"I was mostly rescuing you," Harry pointed out. "Not that I didn't want to get rid of him. He was making me crazy and . . . evil."

"You seem to have recovered from that well enough." Snape put his elbow up on the back of the couch and rested his chin on his knuckles. "Assuming I have changed – which I am not admitting to – you believe that your unrefined spell . . . not these significant events . . . are to blame?"

Harry's face twisted thoughtfully. "You aren't usually influenced by events that much," he pointed out.

Snape's lips twitched into a smile. "As I prefer it to be." He fell silent and studied Harry, who waited for what felt like a verdict of some kind. Snape said, "Why would it bother you so to believe you were responsible, given that these changes would be considered positive by any ordinary standard?"

With more than a hint of passion, Harry replied, "Because it wouldn't be fair to you." Snape's doubtful expression made Harry hesitate, but he plowed on with: "You're your own person. You're allowed to be whomever you wish to be, Severus. I don't have the right to . . . to just hit you with a spell and change you. I hate the thought that I might have, and I'm very sorry if I did."

Snape stared at his charge with an expression Harry had not seen in a long time: uncertain and slightly surprised. Nearly a minute passed before Snape spoke again. "That has to be the single most considerate and benevolent thing anyone has ever said to me. I had never considered the power of that before, but . . . I believe, now that I think about it, that has been your attitude all along, has it not?"

Harry blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

Snape rested his chin on his knuckles and muttered, "See, you don't even understand the question." He sighed and smiled faintly. "Harry, do not concern yourself. I do not think it was your actions but my cheating fate and death yet again that effected a change . . . if indeed I have changed." His eyes narrowed as he added, "But I appreciate your sentiment."

"You wouldn't have said that before; you know," Harry pointed out.

Snape's hand flung out from under his chin to whack Harry on the arm. "Stop that," he commanded. He stood with purpose and turned to stare down at Harry. "You are looking for differences now and are seeing them where it is unwarranted."

"I think your perception has changed and so you can't tell you've changed," Harry argued.

Snape spread his hands like a preacher might and replied smoothly, "Then it truly is no matter to me."

"But I'm still sorry," Harry argued.

"I heard you the previous . . . uncountable . . . times you have said that," Snape retorted. "If you are truly going to be an evil wizard then you must stop apologizing so much . . . it ruins the effect."

Harry smiled despite himself.

Snape went on, "Evil wizards do not apologize. They do not unconditionally accept those around them for who they are. They mock, taunt, abuse and manipulate those around them." The two of them stared at each other. "Say it," Snape commanded in a low voice. "I can see it in your eyes . . . you are not Occluding your mind well enough to hide it."

Harry took a breath. "That's how you used to be," he said, with clear reluctance. He even drew in his lips to try to recapture the words.

"Then I apologize," Snape said with a tiny bow of his head.

"You've already made up for it," Harry said. "I've told you that before." He stood as well, rubbing his collarbone which was still smarting from Percy's spells. As he stared at Snape, he felt nothing of his past emotions, only affection. He still wasn't Occluding his mind, and assumed Snape could see it.

Snape turned away as though uneasy with what he saw. As a distraction, Harry said, "So when's the big day?"

"I don't actually know," Snape admitted, still facing away.

"Soon? A year from now?" Harry went on, finding this an excellent topic to recover from the previous one.

"I . . . don't know," Snape said. "You will have to ask her that." He rotated back toward Harry. "You do not mind?"

"No, not at all."

"Strangely, neither do I," Snape muttered.

An owl appeared at the window. Harry fetched it inside, his heart speeding up despite not wanting to care so much about the outcome. The note had been dashed off hurriedly, but it said: Thirty-eight votes in your favor to thirteen against. Rogan is up next.

"I'm all right," Harry said, unable to hold back a broad smile. "Maybe we should go out and celebrate."

"Maybe you should owl your friends with the news and then rest because you are on duty first thing tomorrow."

Disappointed, Harry lowered the note and said, "You're sounding parental."

Snape drew himself up and said, "I should think."

Snape eventually departed and Harry fell back on the couch with a groan. More minor injuries were making themselves known. Harry rubbed a tender spot on his arm and tried not to sink into black hatred for Percy; he settled for strong annoyance, but it was a struggle to do so.

A knock came on the door and Tonks let herself in before Harry could lever himself onto his feet. His whole outlook changed upon seeing her. She dropped her cloak and wand at the table and came over to him. "How are you? Rodgers said you really got knocked around." Her concerned tone made him feel vaguely melty.

"Rodgers said that?" Harry asked. "Percy's treatment wasn't that different from what Rodgers doles out in training some days."

She sat beside him, close by, and brushed his hair back from his ear. Harry decided that the whole rest of the day really did not matter at all. "Don't tell him that," Tonks said. "He sounded like he felt pretty sorry for you."

"Rodgers did?" Harry asked. "You're certain were talking about the same person here?"

Tonks laughed and rested her head on his shoulder, filling his nostrils with the scent of her hair. Harry's battered spirit inflated painlessly as he put his arms around her.

Minutes later, Harry pulled out of a kiss and said, "Hermione will back soon."

"No, she won't," Tonks said, still working slowly at the buttons of Harry's shirt. "I saw her down the block and asked if we could have an hour."

"Tonks, this is her place," Harry pointed out.

"She didn't mind. Said she'd visit her parents, which she needed to do."

"We can go to your place," Harry said, but he quickly forgot that suggestion. Minutes later a larger concern jolted him to push her away. "I forgot to tell you," Harry said. "Mr. Weasley knows about us."

Tonks stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm not sure how he found out." Harry explained about Mr. Weasley bailing him out during his questioning.

"That was really nice of him," Tonks said. She stroked Harry's arm and fell thoughtful. "But, you know, I care less than I would have thought about what Arthur may think. Everything is really bolloxed up right now at the Ministry. Nothing good is happening. We've lost so many in the department . . ." She fell quiet and sad.

Harry tightened his arms around her slender shoulders. "I know what you mean."

Tonks' head again rested on Harry's shoulder. "I hung onto that stupid plank door in that bloomin' freezing water thinking what the hell was I worried about the darn rules all the time for? I promised myself I'd act out how I felt about you if I managed to get back, to survive. You're not a kid at all anymore, Harry. No reason to . . ." She faded out. "But it's the way I am. I need help breaking the rules." Harry turned her over onto his lap, encompassing her. "We can deal with Arthur later," she insisted breathily.

Author's Notes:
2 weeks again, at least. I think we are down to three chapters remaining. Maybe two if they are long ones. I mean, long even for me.

Chapter 38.

Blood and Water

In a sprawling but decrepit flat, at a rough table that looked to have been nicked from a run-down pub, Maurdant Merton sat fidgeting with a small pile of charmed bracelets. He had a stained, old book open in front of him. He had not turned the page of the book in over an hour. His truculent expression did not ease when his cohort entered carrying supplies. Debjit gave Merton a worried glance and stashed his wand away from having unlocked the door.

"Go see how things are progressing," Merton grunted.

"I'm sure it will be the same as this morning," Debjit quietly pointed out. He ignored Merton slapping the table with the flat of his beefy hand. "I am uncertain what the hurry is," Debjit pointed out with care.

Merton pushed himself to his feet. "The hurry is that the Ministry is wounded, but will not be for long." He gestured at the photographs on the cover of the Daily Prophet showing workers moving about the atrium reception area making repairs.

Debjit placed the grocery sacks on the counter, scaring up a variety of insects. He placed one black sack with the label Clipper & Clydewhistle closer to Merton. "The special order you asked for."

"Took you long enough to return with them. I could have run the errands that fast myself." He pulled out the objects: two necklaces and a beaded glove and studied them each by holding them in the light. He scoffed as though pleased but then said sourly, "Go and see to things. I am losing patience."

Debjit meandered through the teetering piles crowding the peeling vinyl floor until he reached the back room where Svaha sat contemplating a crate of ceramic vessels in the manner of a connoisseur. She held one aloft and stared at it, paying no mind to her husband's entrance.

"He asks the same question as before," Debjit said, generating no reply. "He grows more impatient," Debjit then pointed out. Head bent, he circled the room, pausing at a crate with broken vessels visible within. Not all underneath were broken. "You could placate him by offering some of these."

This statement attracted Svaha's full attention. Her suspicious gaze fell upon Debjit. "Do you wish me to offer those to him?" she challenged.

Debjit's shoulders moved uneasily in independent circles. "No," he replied in a whisper.

She raised high the vessel in her hand. "This one will keep Master happy for a while."

"It is more powerful?" Debjit leapt in to ask. "That has been his concern since we lost our guest," he quickly added to explain.

"Not more powerful, no, but it does not need to be. It is far more . . . efficient, shall we say. It does not waste any energies unnecessarily. It is aware, you might say. It is attracted to movement, and it will wait for its chance."

Debjit also contemplated the uplifted vessel. "That should please Mr. Merton, yes."

"Merton wishes to . . . make a point," Svaha said. "But the chaos itself is so much more satisfying." She fell silent, but finally added, "Perhaps a little less precision would be better. Randomness, entropy, they create such lovely fear. Hm, yes . . ."

Bright and early Monday the four second-year apprentices were shuttled to the training room by Rodgers. "We are going to try for some normalcy today, although . . ." Here he glanced at his watch with a pained expression. "Just for an hour . . . at most. Thursday, this room is being used for the applicant's examinations, so no training then either." The four of them took their seats as Rodgers flipped through a ragged stack of parchments. "Somewhere there's a schedule of what we are supposed to be doing."

Aaron raised his hand.

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"Yes, Mr. Wickem? My, such formality . . . yes, what is it?"

"Can Tonks be scheduled to do some additional sessions of Animorphus spells?"

"We hadn't planned on any, why?"

Aaron put his hand down, clasped them together before him in the mode of a schoolboy, and said, "Well, if Harry is going to go around disguised as me, I want to be able to go around disguised as him." He shot Harry an overdone smile.

Rodgers replied, "I don't think that is going to be a regular occurrence." He put the parchments down with a huff. "Blast, I forgot a memo I need to send. Why don't you start with your drills and we'll go from there." He rushed out.

They paired up, Harry with Vineet, and began their old drills. For someone who seemed a continent away, Vineet sure could put a lot behind an attacking spell. Harry, out of habit, held back on his own attacks. Vineet waved them to a stop and said with strange dull anger, "You are patronizing me."

"No," Harry replied, immediately annoyed. "Really, I'm not. This is just drills. If Rodgers announces that we are doing . . . I don't know, knock your drill partner into the wall drills, I'll oblige," Harry explained, waving his arm and going for a satisfying sarcasm. He held off on pointing out that Vineet himself apparently thought that was the drill instruction.

"What's going on?" Kerry Ann asked. The two of them had halted as well.

"I don't know," Harry said, rubbing his hair nervously. Vineet appeared even more stoic, which Harry suspected masked that he was approaching some kind of breaking point. This made him realize that he was close to one too. "Look," Harry said, more gently, forcefully calming himself. "I would never patronize you. Why in the world would I do that?" They were arguing about nothing, Harry was certain. Vineet was bothered by something remote from his complaint and, apparently, Harry was too.

Vineet lowered his wand and his head and turned away. A minute later he turned back and bowed faintly. "We were instructed to do drills, I believe."

Harry sighed. "Yeah." Before he could ask if Vineet really wanted him to pour more power into his spells, Vineet said, "It is your prerogative, certainly, how to make your spells go."

Aaron and Kerry Ann resumed their own drills. Harry hesitated, wanting to say more, but having no clue how to say it. He had pretty good idea what was irking his fellow, but discussing it would have to wait until they were alone.

Harry dodged Mr. Weasley the entire day, finding it too difficult in the light of day to wish for their inevitable encounter. He and Tonks only crossed paths once and did not even manage a word, just a smile, but she appeared far too busy for any meetings with the boss, so Harry hoped she'd avoided him too.

Late that afternoon, they were gathered in the office and Rodgers informed everyone that Rogan was to be allowed back on part-time duty. During the Wizengamot meeting, Rogan had passed a test similar to Harry's truth serum one and due to the shortage of Aurors, the Ministry were willing to give him light, supervised duty. Harry found this news a little uplifting, even if Rodgers sounded grudging and annoyed as he explained it to the apprentices. That announcement dispensed with, Rodgers dug around on his desk and pulled out a roll of thick vellum. "And this too, a new wanted poster for Merton." He pinned it up on the board by the door over the top of a notice regarding revised rules for magical pet licensing.

"That's an even older picture than the last one," Kerry Ann commented.

Indeed, Merton appeared to be in his late thirties with a thin mustache. He was standing outside the Quidditch World Cup stadium, smiling and holding an armful of recently purchased memorabilia.

"Seventy-six, we think, based on the banners that sometimes fly by on broomstick over the stadium," Rodgers explained.

Kerry Ann joined Harry in leaning over to peer closely at the picture. "Wears a lot of jewelry, doesn't he?" Kerry Ann observed.

Harry would not have noticed that; especially not through the binocular straps, the miniature Quidditch players dangling on cords, and the many overloaded bags of other sparkling sports-related goodies. But it was true; Merton wore three necklaces, multiple bracelets on each arm, and several tie pins, even.

"Maybe he's a puff," Aaron suggested.

"It's not that kind of jewelry," Kerry Ann stated authoritatively.

Harry remained staring at the poster longer than the others. It struck him as off that this seemingly innocent, childish even, wizard had created so much trouble and was prophecy bound to create more. Harry could not imagine pulling his wand on the man in this particular picture. This differed greatly from remembering facing a younger version of Voldemort; Harry could clearly imagine pulling a wand on Tom Riddle, Hogwarts student. Maurdant Merton, Quidditch fan, did not seem to warrant any offensive spells.

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On the way out in the evening, Harry tugged Vineet aside. "I want to talk to you, come out somewhere . . . to a pub." In a fit of defiance, Harry suggested the Leaky Cauldron. In the past simply being around frequently in public had worked to reduce the attention he attracted. He hoped it would work again and what better strategy than to start with a companion who would accept the attention.

Harry led the way to a corner table but felt observed there, even though there was only a hag and a table of chatting witches on the other side of the room and an old wizard by the door. Harry ignored his bad sense and asked his fellow, "What's going on with you?"

Vineet responded only after the old man with a long staff had finished his slow journey to the back door and the door had swung closed again. "Nandi has left to live with my mother."

"Vineet, that's . . . your mother? Why your mother?"

"She left her family when she married me," Vineet pointed out as though it were obvious.

"Oh, sure, right . . . Look, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't make more trouble coming over that day. If you want me to write her a long letter explaining that you really weren't that much help at Malfoy Manor and kept giving me disapproving looks the whole time, I can do that."

Vineet stared off at the front door as he spoke. "Deception would not improve the situation. She was already upset at finding out my magic was strong."

"It would be true, not deceiving. But why didn't you tell her about your magic?"

Vineet leaned back against the dusty wood wall, scaring a spider out of a nearby web. "She seemed . . . happy . . . to have more magical utility than myself. I thought it pleasing to her to believe it, and it seemed a harmless belief. Everything is still as clear to her, you see, as it was to me in the beginning, so she was not pleased to learn of my deception."

Tom the bartender put two mugs of mead on the bar and nodded at Harry to come pick them up. "Maybe it would have been harmless if other things had not happened," Harry said, mostly just to say something.

"Perhaps, but I remember now that all deception is bad." He crossed his arms and, perhaps in the spirit of his last statement, said, "I have lost track of why I came here at all. It has grown most confused from such clarity at the beginning."

"I feel that way sometimes too," Harry admitted. He excused himself to pick up the drinks. Tom would not let him pay, but Harry dropped coins on the bar anyway.

When he returned to his seat, Vineet said, "But you have the prophecy to fulfill. I have heard mentioned that you are now supposed to destroy Merton; that prophecy says this is true."

"That doesn't make a purpose any easier to find," Harry argued. "It just limits my freedom." Vineet puzzled that and did not appear to believe it. Harry said, "Trust me on that. It isn't a path; it's bondage." He sipped his mead. "I'm sorry about Nandi."

Vineet shook his head. "We grew apart, I think. She cannot understand that I have a different outlook now – an indistinct one. It was very clear before." He peered into his mug. "I miss that calm state." He took a rather large swig and said, "On the other hand, I comprehend much more now. Perhaps I should return to own-Dharma," he mysteriously said, sounding as though the mead had already taken hold.

"What's that, or where's that?" Harry prodded, glad his friend was talking at all, even if Harry could not follow all of it.

"Every caste and sub-caste once had its own morality. So a merchant was not the same as a priest was not the same as a knight. A knight was allowed to do violence without violating his Dharma because it is necessary to his role, essential, in fact. I refused to understand this before, and Nandi still refuses."

Harry scratched his head. "You came here to become an Auror, thinking you could avoid violence?"

"I came here because I thought I needed to. I was magically weak then, or so I believed. I could not do much harm."

"I did need you," Harry pointed out. Vineet nodded deeply once, like a bow.

Vineet worked his way down through his mead, eventually stopping to say, "Valmiki may have been right. He told extensively about Rakshasas."

"Did he?" Harry asked with interest. "Where can I read him?"

"Everywhere," Vineet said, waving his arm. "He is . . . similar to your Homer."

"I've never heard of him," Harry admitted.

Vineet pondered this. "You who command Rakshasas," he muttered. "Do you have a monkey army too?"

Harry felt he was being baited, but took it easily. "No, not that I know of," he answered gently.

Vineet put his mug down, unfinished, as though done drinking. "I feel I am in the right place, but I am most confused. You should rather have monkeys. You are upside down."

"You think about things too hard," Harry said. "That's your problem."

Vineet sat in contemplation of that assertion, while Harry shook his head and made his way through his own drink, withholding an overly willful observation about how similar he was to Hermione. Tom gestured from the bar to ask if they wanted a second round. Harry shook his head.

The door from the alleyway creaked open and Draco Malfoy appeared, eyes sliding keenly around the room as he walked. He came to a stop upon seeing Harry.

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry said in greeting. Malfoy tipped his head sideways in acknowledgment before going to the bar and sliding upon a stool. He slouched there without removing his high-collared cloak, even though the room was warm.

"Ready?" Harry asked Vineet.

"I should return home," Vineet intoned as they both stood. Harry thought it a little sad to realize that his friend was going home to an empty flat. He gave Vineet a pat on the arm just before he disappeared.

Harry sauntered over to Draco. People were beginning to arrive for the dinner hour and both doors were opening and closing. One group hesitated upon seeing Harry, but shuffled to a remote table with lots of backward glances.

Harry slid onto the stool beside Draco who asked, "How's it feel to be one of the disdained?"

Harry shrugged. Draco was turning his small drink glass around and around in the fingers of one hand. It was empty already.

"Another mead, Harry?" Tom asked.

Harry nodded. Draco said in a grudging tone, "My former head of house is faring all right, I hear."

"He's fine."

"Surprising," Draco said. "Your luck must be rubbing off on him." He flicked his glass across the bar and Tom scooped it up before it could hit the floor and refilled

it, all in one motion. This let Harry's unattended mead mug overflow and it left a large puddle when it was plunked down on the bar. Draco sipped this time, but his posture continued to curl wretchedly.

When Tom went into the back room, Harry asked, "Anything I can do for you, Draco?"

Draco snarled quietly, "Why would I want anything from you?"

Patiently, Harry replied, "It was just an innocent offer, Draco."

Draco turned back to his glass and began rolling it between his palms. "'Innocent offer'," he mocked. "We got what we deserved, you mean."

"I didn't say that," Harry stated flatly.

"The Ministry did."

Harry did not want to get into that. It was certainly true that the Malfoys were keeping bad company, but the issue of just desserts was too thorny a topic. Harry wanted to ask more about Merton, in case Draco knew something more, or had heard something more. After all, the Death Eaters had raided Merton's weapons stash, so they must have known where it was. Harry fell thoughtful, wondering how much his department knew that he did not. As to asking Draco anything, Harry followed the lead of the Auror's he had shadowed for a year, that of building good will before asking for any big favors.

Patrons came to the bar to order and the ones that recognized Draco glanced in confusion at the two of them sitting there. Harry gave each of them a pleasant nod, no matter what their reaction. Most people nodded back automatically, no matter how befuddled they were.

Harry's second drink went down faster than expected and he thought he should stop. He placed some coins on the bar and slid to his feet. Draco did not react and, given his dejected state, Harry felt a stab of something in the vicinity of sympathy. "It must be quieter at your place now, at least," he said, trying to connect.

Draco shook his head. "You don't know anything, Potter," he said.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But the offer's always open." He walked away.

At the door leading out to the Muggle street, he encountered Ron, red-faced as though exerting himself. "I've been looking for you. Come to the Burrow with me," his friend insisted.

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"Er, how about . . ." Harry turned as though to suggest a drink, before remembering that he had decided he was done with that for now.

"Mum wants to see you. Come on . . ." Ron took his arm and they Disapparated.

Harry resisted being pulled forward from behind the shed where they had arrived. "Is your dad home?" Harry asked.

"Nah, he'll be at work for a while yet."

Harry stopped resisting and as they walked, asked, "Do you know if Ginny is allowed out for the examinations? The Auror exams, that is?"

"Yeah, she'll be there. McGonagall wouldn't listen to Dad, turns out."

Inside the kitchen, Harry received a grand hug from Mrs. Weasley. She kept one arm around him and led him into the sitting area. Harry's feet failed him when he came face to face with Percy and he was glad for the clutching arm that kept him from tripping.

The awkward silence was ended by Ron explaining, "Mum insisted he apologize." Ron crossed his arms and glared disgustedly at his brother as though he were a Skrewt. "The rest of us had a very different idea about how to handle things and most of them would have involved his NOT being able to speak again let alone-"

"That's enough of that," Mrs. Weasley interrupted. "You remember what Dumbledore always said."

"Oh," Ron suggested with too much innocence, "something about preferring Muggle sweets because the flavor was always the same?"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Mrs. Weasley countered.

Ron did not give any ground and the delay gave Harry much needed time to gather his wits. He was surprised by how affected he was to be in Percy's presence. It was more than anger or hatred, he felt ill and uneasy, and given an open choice would take escape over a battle, which surprised him to realize.

Mrs. Weasley was saying, "He always gave people a second chance."

"SECOND," Ron said, long neck stretched toward his mother. "Not HUNDREDS."

During all of this, Percy stared at the walls, the floor, anywhere but at the others in the room.

"Percy," Mrs. Weasley prompted when Ron hit a lull in his snark.

Percy appeared to screw himself up for some great task. Harry decided that Percy disliked being there as much as he and Ron disliked Percy being there, and that made him feel a little better; mutual hatred was so much cleaner.

Percy's Adam's apple bobbed a few times. "Sorry," he finally said with bare meaning, still avoiding anyone's gaze.

Harry could feel the air rush out of Mrs. Weasley as she sighed. She patted Harry's arm. "Harry?" she then prompted.

"What?" Harry sharply asked, reacting strongly to what he construed to be some kind of expectation from him.

"Do you accept Percy's apology?" she asked.

Harry mutely stared at her. His insides were churning as though the creatures from the Dark Plane were emerging inside of him. The very notion of forgiving Percy made his limbs cycle between tingly and numb and for a blazing instant he was dead grateful to have been an orphan if it had spared him being asked such ridiculous questions.

Ron's appalled expression anchored Harry, but Mrs. Weasley's pure-hearted question would not let him answer "no" even though his very fiber screamed to do so, as well as add a long list of choice words beyond that. "I . . . I'll have to work on that." You have no idea what happened, Harry bit his tongue on adding, mostly because he did not feel like recounting everything.

His disgust seemed to disappoint her, but it also warned her off, because she released him with another quick pat on the arm. With one short glance at Percy, that later upon review, Harry wished he had studied further, Harry headed for the door, Ron on his heels.

Outside beyond the shed, short of the field used for Quidditch, Harry stopped, confused by Percy's last facial expression. He had finally met Harry's gaze, or perhaps just had lacked warning to look away. Harry had a fleeting impression that Percy was deeply befuddled. Not defiant, as expected, but confused.

"Don't want to stay for dinner, eh?" Ron asked.

Harry turned to his friend. "Well . . ." Harry hesitated, curious about Percy, even though he wanted to forget everything and go home. "Trouble is, I'm avoiding your dad."

"You are?" Ron asked, sounding slightly hurt.

"Yeah. He found out about Tonks and me . . . I don't know really how he did . . . and I'm not in the mood to be told quite yet to cut it off, or else." Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. "I haven't decided what I'm going to say if he insists."

Ron gave him a sympathetic crooked frown. "Tough decision."

"Yeah, I jumped into the file room twice today to avoid him, too," Harry admitted.

Ron laughed. "You could stay for dinner if you disguise yourself as our long lost cousin, Alfred Flimnap, whom no one has seen in three decades."

Harry said, "Inventing stories all evening would be harder than simply talking to him."

More soberly, Ron said, "Threatening to quit would put Dad in a very bad position."

"Sure about that? Half the Wizengamot wishes I were gone."

"What do you mean? The vote wasn't that bad," Ron retorted sharply enough that Harry realized his exaggeration could be a dangerous sign of self-pity.

"Yeah, you're right. But I should go, anyway. Have a good night. Don't kill your brother . . . you're mum would never forgive you, even though I might."

Over the next days, Harry avoided encountering Mr. Weasley as best as possible, but knew he could not manage it forever, nor should he really be trying to. Mornings they had a little training and afternoons, he was assigned to go on patrol with Rogan, who had been allowed out on low-risk patrol duty. He had asked to be paired with Harry, who did not mind, really.

They strolled the busy streets of one of several large cities, mostly in the Muggle parts of them. Occasionally they encountered magical people, who were easy enough to spot by their cloaks or just the home-spun look to their clothing. Harry, who could identify them even without these clues, found that he rarely encountered any magical people who could completely pass for Muggle. Once you looked closely enough, some clue would give them away.

They were strolling along a relatively quiet street of offices when Harry sensed that the blonde woman approaching must be a witch. She carried a course sack from the greengrocers in her arms and wore an intent expression, as though thinking far ahead. Upon spotting the two of them, also intentionally quite identifiable in their cloaks,

her steps faltered. She caught Harry's gaze and her brows knitted in consternation. With a hazardously quick glance for traffic, she put her head down and crossed to the pavement on the other side of the road. Harry, who did not wish to increase her alarm, kept himself from following her too long with his gaze. Rogan was studying the map of their assigned route and had not noticed her at all.

Harry sighed and let his eyes stray over the brass solicitor's plaque on the nearby brick wall they were passing. The witch's actions were causing a slow, inexorable sink in his mood, one he could not find any means of arresting. Patrol ground slowly on and by the time they returned to the Ministry, Harry found himself in a dark mood and needing action as a distraction, followed his trainer, Rodgers, to the file room after offering to help carry the stacks that had accumulated in baskets on the floor beside the door. In the quiet dimness of the file room, Harry said, "Can I find out what's happening with the Merton investigation?"

Rodgers finished sliding two thick files back into their proper place before replying. "We don't have any new leads."

"But what about the interrogations of the D.E.? They should have turned up Merton's hideout, or how else did they get their hands on his stuff?"

Rodgers slapped the file he held down on top of a cabinet and leaned heavily against it. "You have the right kind of mind for this type of work, I'll admit." He stared at Harry before saying, "We did find his hideout, or one of his old ones. It had been abandoned. They hadn't had time to take the kiln, so we've been tracking all purchases of new ones."

"Can I see the place?" Harry asked.

Rodgers shrugged. "Not much to see." He returned to straightening files by knocking each of their edges repeatedly against the cabinet top. The cabinets sometimes knocked back if you got the rhythm right.

"I can probably tell if its the place they were in most recently," Harry said.

"Could you?" Rodgers asked, sounding doubtfully disdainful.

Harry took a deep breath. "I was seeing the place out of Voldemort's eyes while he was there."

"Good point," Rodgers conceded, and proceeded to empty the basket of files. Harry slowly worked on filing another basket-full, waiting for a response. It came eventually. "I can take you down there." Rodgers glanced at the clock. "We can go now if you like."

"I would, sir," Harry replied in his most polite manner.

Rodgers verified that Blackpool was able to cover the office before he took Harry away. They arrived in a large open space lit by high windows with billows of dust dancing in front of them. Harry immediately began exploring. In a small side room he stopped dead. The piles of discarded objects stacked precariously along one wall gave him a terrible bout of déjã vu. He stood stock still, breathing in the dust until he could identify the matching moment. It was during his one-year review examination when he was trying to remember the filing rules and had let himself drift to visualize the list he knew was posted on the file room wall. This vision had invaded instead.

"This is the place," Harry said to Rodgers, who had come up behind him. Harry resumed investigating. The dust was disturbed in some areas more than others, indicating occupancy. A crate, reinforced with wire fencing, sat in the corner of another very familiar room. "This is where they kept Lockhart when he started to get difficult to handle." He pointed at a cleared spot on the floor. "They wrapped him up with a torq here, away from Nagini's cage. The scene was crystal clear to Harry, just as though it were his own memory.

Rodgers didn't reply, just followed Harry around. Harry glanced back and found his trainer's expression difficult to read. Harry went on with the tour, ending up in the pottery area where discarded vessels littered the floor. "The kiln's gone," Harry said.

"We took it," Rodgers said. "No sign that they tried to come back, but we weren't taking any chances."

"Looks like it was occupied by several people," Harry said.

"Would you recognize them if you saw them?" Rodgers asked, suddenly animated as he looked around. "Interrogations turned up only pseudonyms that didn't match any of our files."

"I never saw any faces," Harry said. He reviewed his memories from that time. The only face he had seen at all had been an outline reflection in the windows of the Dursley house. The fire had been burning inside of Lockhart's mind, Harry realized, that's why it showed only in the dream reflection.

They returned to the ground floor. A shadow fell across the floor as a silhouetted head moved before one of the small dusty windows. Rodgers raised his wand and Harry put up a hand to halt him, even though he was too far away to reach. Harry whispered harshly, "Muggle!"

The shadow ducked and scuttled away. Rodgers lowered his wand. The both stepped over to the window, which was embedded in the large delivery door with its rusted

and dangling machinery for hoisting goods inside. There was no sign of movement on the road outside.

"Convenient skill, Potter," Rodgers commented.

Harry thought again of the witch who had avoided him on the road and kind of wished he did not have it. He could have excused her actions away, if he could have assumed she was a Muggle. He turned away from the window, focusing on more important things, and said, "I don't know how I'm supposed to destroy Merton. I don't even know how to find him." He fell thoughtful and added, "I hope I didn't miss my opportunity when he had Voldemort with him. I may have had a chance then of locating them . . . had I understood." Harry's voice dropped to nearly inaudible at the end of this admission.

"We'll find him," Rodgers said. "Hopefully before he re-arms and comes after us again . . . which I fully expect he will do." Rodgers coughed. "Let's go, Potter," he said, sounding fully the mentor, which eased Harry's renewed worry.

Pamela Evans answered the knock on her door and found a familiar, cloak-draped, willowy figure waiting on the doorstep.

"Pardon the unannounced arrival," Snape said, "But I am in need of your assistance with Remus."

Pamela reached for her handbag. "Sure. What's–?" she began, but had Snape stepped inside and he Apparated her away before she could finish the question. They arrived in the back of a small, smokey pub. "Where are we?"

"Dungruddy. There is a Floo Node here that we can use. But I must speak with you first." He steered her towards a chair at a broken table. Worn out dart boards and more obscure games crowded the walls and no other tables were set up nearby.

"What's happened to Remus?" Pamela asked in concern.

Snape sat back and could not help lifting his chin. "He is being obstinate; that is the primary problem. He does not know I am here. If Harry were not on duty today, he would be a better choice for this errand, but alas it is me instead." Pamela propped her chin on her palm and waited for him to continue. He said, "Remus has a most annoying penchant for enriched self-pity. It is a habit he has always had."

"I've never noticed that," Pamela countered, sounding defensive.

"Fortunate for you that he suppresses it in your presence then," Snape dryly stated. He huffed and rubbed his forehead which then necessitated shaking out the wide sleeve of his robe. "It is like this: Remus was attacked again by the same werewolf who attacked him as a child."

"What!" Pamela started to stand in alarm and had to be grabbed by the arm and urged back to her chair.

"I didn't do that properly, I see," Snape said. "He sustained only minor injury, but he is slightly altered."

"What?" she asked again, less alarmed but still hyperactive.

"Well, I see he does matter greatly to you . . ."

"Of course he does. So what do you mean he's altered?"

Snape sat back, which dangerously rocked the old chair he was in. "Greyback, the werewolf who bit Remus, enjoys being a werewolf. He has cultivated in himself anti-cycle Lyncontropic features. What that means," Snape explained, "is that he is partially werewolf all of the time. When he bit Remus again recently, he passed on some of that, although quick application of a toxin-wicking potion reduced the end effect considerably. Nevertheless he is behaving as badly as expected: wallowing in self-pity and refusing to go out or even consider visitors."

"What . . . can I see him?" she asked.

"Yes, of course. Just be aware that I'm certain he assumes you will reject him." Snape stood and shook his robes straight. "He is remarkably thickheaded," he added with a mutter.

"And you're not?" Pamela added sarcastically, garnering a very dark look. "Save it for a Muggle who's easily intimidated," she said. After Snape continued to glare at her, she asked, "Can we go?" She then relented, "Please?"

Snape shook his head and led the way to the hearth in the large, little-used kitchen. A plump woman sat on a stool tapping a keg and arranging colorful hosepipes that led through a gap in the wall. She nodded at them and went back to her task. Snape added a log to the glowing coals, brushed off his hand, and poured a few ounces of Floo powder out into Pamela's cupped palms.

"What are we doing?" she asked.

"You have not traveled thusly, I see," he stated. "Simply toss the powder onto the flames, announce Hogwarts, and step into the hearth. Do remember to duck . . . this one is a little low."

She stared at him, at the course granules in her hands, at the fire quickly growing to tall, hot flames on the bark of the new log. She stared at her hands again, closed them around the powder, and with an expression of determination, did as she had been instructed.

Pamela wandered into the center of the Great Hall, bumping into benches and tables because her eyes were raised to the ceiling and did not want to waver. Snape arrived in a burst of flame and stood beside the hearth until she had finished ogling.

"So this is Hogwarts," she marveled. "I wanted to see this place since the first time Harry mentioned it. Amazing." She joined him, slowed by taking in the medieval wall decor and the banners as she walked. "You won't get into trouble bringing me here, will you, because I'm a Muggle?"

"Thanks to Harry, you have the same status as our recently departed caretaker. So, no, I won't. Come along."

By the time they arrived at the third floor, Pamela was thoroughly enthralled. "Geez, I wish I were magical. Oh, what a grand place."

"You would not have liked it Sunday night quite so much, I assure you." He rapped on Lupin's door. Lupin's response was slow in coming and difficult to hear. Snape opened the door and gestured for Pamela to enter. "Someone to see you," Snape stated. He received only the shortest glimpse of Lupin's distressed expression before he snapped the door closed again, shutting them in together. Glad to have that dispensed with, he returned to his own office to finish recreating some missing examination notes.

"Hey, Remus," Pamela said. She ignored his trepidation but could not help letting her eyes roam over his heavy brow and furred ears.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, clearly stressed.

"I wanted to see you. See that you were all right. You didn't owl me and tell me you were hurt or anything. It's been three days, I'm told. You didn't think I'd want to know?"

Lupin glanced at the closed door where Snape had just disappeared. "I wasn't . . . ready to see you."

"Why not?" she asked, being intentionally obtuse.

He snorted a mirthless laugh. "You're kidding, right?" he asked, hurt anger coming through now.

"You think I care about your looks?" she asked, coming up hard against the other side of the desk.

Lupin dropped his gaze and let it wander over the objects in the room. "I'm hideous. I was hideous inside before, but I learned to cope with that. Now I'm hideous on the outside as well. Nothing more than an animal."

"Remus, be reasonable," she argued.

"I'm a regulated creature, you know that? Our Ministry has a department just for things like me."

"Wow," Pamela snapped sharply. "You are proving Severus Snape absolutely right; you know. He said you were wallowing in self-pity."

Lupin's anger grew hotter. He stood and said, "And why shouldn't I?"

Pamela leaned forward over the desk. "'Why should you?' is the real question. Do any of your friends here care what you look like? Does Professor Snape care? He came and fetched me to talk to you."

Lupin's shoulders hunched and in a wounded voice, he said, "He would have no business caring about such a thing. Being an ex-Death Eater leaves precious little room to be criticizing others about much of anything."

Pamela froze. "What did you say?"

Lupin bit his lip, which showed his vaguely pointed teeth. "Never mind. I don't think they wanted you to know." He deflated then and paced to the window.

Pamela laughed nervously. "Didn't want us to know? Wait just a minute . . . you're not seriously suggesting Severus Snape was one of those ones . . . helping Voldemort?"

Lupin scratched his ear and the long hairs that stood off the top edge of them now. "I spoke out of turn. Please don't say anything. I don't want to use a Memory Charm on you."

She took a step back from the desk. "You'd do that?"

"No. I wouldn't; that's why I'm asking you not to say anything. Just forget about it."

"But, you're saying–"

"Forget it," Lupin repeated, running his triangular nails noisily over the stone sill.

Pamela put her hands on her head, partially because of the noise. "I can't understand any of you people," she complained bitterly. "Why in heaven's name would Harry-"

"Pamela, drop it," Lupin snapped. He had control of himself now and came around the desk. "That was a bad mistake of mine, although you probably would have found out eventually . . . it's common knowledge now." He fidgeted. "But, I cannot imagine you don't mind what I have become."

"I don't care. You haven't changed inside."

Lupin held up his hand and studied its rough knuckles and dark nails trying hard to be claws. "I loath myself. I cannot pretend with this constant reminder."

"Pretend what? You're the sweetest bloke I've ever met who isn't also a pansy. The night you were guarding Harry at the pub without letting him know . . . that was really touching, and I realized what a keen sense of duty you have. I like that. Most men I know don't have any of that."

"You don't mind not getting out?"

"We can go out," she insisted. "We . . . have to select the clubs carefully, but I know some where you would look pretty mild."

He turned his hand over, back and forth. "I could mask some of this, too," he said sadly.

"It just hurts to have to do it," she said, speaking for him and taking his hand. "I understand."

Lupin smiled painfully. "Severus really brought you here, on his own?"

"Yup, but had I known . . ." she shivered.

"I can't figure him out," Lupin said. "Harry's really changed him."

"Explain this to me," she said. "Why in the world is Harry now his son?"

Lupin added his other hand to her two. "I can't explain that. Bad histories run deep around here, insurmountably deep most of the time. I guess they saw strengths in the other that each needed and had the courage to take a chance."

She grasped his hands tighter, ignoring the sharp points. "I'm willing to do that too, you know."

He bowed his head, appearing to be trying to accept that.

She said, "I'm not sure I want to be fetched by Professor Snape next time, however . . ."

Lupin laughed lightly. "You're safer with him than you are with me."

She dropped her hands and propped them on her hips. "Really?"

"Yes. He's always the same, unlike me, who becomes a monster."

She rubbed her arms and squared her shoulders. "Can I see this monster?"

"You will leave after you do," Lupin stated softly, emptily.

Pamela frowned. "I understand you've been hurt before, but it hurts me when you don't give me any credit." She let that sink in. "When's the next full moon?"

"Twenty-eighth, Monday. But I am not ready for you to see."

"Well, it'd be nice if you'd let me see, then you'll know for certain that I don't care."

Lupin closed his eyes, found his chair with his hand and sat down.

"You all right?" Pamela asked.

Lupin nodded sharply. "Yes. Fine." He waved her off as though wanting to preserve his pride.

"Dinner tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"In, I assume?"

"We can go out if you like."

Lupin shook his head before studying his hands yet again. "I can work on a disguising spell for these . . . but it will take some time. Perhaps in would be better."

"I can't deny that would make it easier, but I want to have dinner with you either way." He didn't respond, so she said, "Seven, then?"

Harry sat on Hermione's couch with his feet propped up on the low table, Kali draped beside him. He had readings again, something he had grown to appreciate not having during the recent chaos. He snapped the book closed after five pages dense with the

historical timeline of wizarding criminal law in Northern Europe. He felt a twinge doing so, as though he owed his recently deceased fellow Aurors more effort.

"That looks like a good book," Hermione said from where she sat eating crisps at the small table in the kitchen area. "Can I borrow it when you're done?"

"You can have it now," Harry said.

"You're finished already?"

"I'm done for now," Harry announced.

She laughed. "That sounds like the Harry I remember." She came over to take the book.

"I got used to not studying," Harry said, trying to patch over her implied criticism. "You know; while I was trying to stay alive and save the world and everything."

Harry settled into one of his old books on advanced blocking, and quiet descended on the flat until a knock came upon the door. Hermione let Headmistress McGonagall into the flat. She had to bow to fit her tall hat inside the door and immediately doffed it. Hermione took it and her cloak and quickly hung them up. "Would you like tea?"

"I would indeed, my dear. How are you, Harry?"

Harry had stood to greet her, and now said, "I'm fine, ma'am."

She smiled. "You're a resilient young man, Harry, for which we are all terribly grateful."

"Do you need to speak to Harry alone?" Hermione asked from the sink where she was heating a teapot with her wand.

"I am here to speak to you, young lady."

"Shall I . . . ?" Harry asked, gesturing at the door.

"No, please remain, Harry. I didn't intend to chase you out." She spoke with more than her usual graciousness, and with dignity accepted a seat at the flimsy little table.

Hermione poured a round of tea. McGonagall cradled her tea cup in her hands a moment. "Even in the summer, I do so love a nice hot cup of tea. Don't know how the Americans can drink that awful iced stuff." She considered Hermione before glancing at the title of the book lying face down beside Hermione's teacup. "You have become quite the law expert, I hear," McGonagall said.

Hermione shrugged. "This is Harry's book."

The headmistress turned to him. "They are educating you quite broadly, Harry, that is good to know."

Harry shrugged next, having been quickly defeated by that book.

McGonagall sipped her tea and pushed it aside. "I have a proposition for you, Hermione. Don't feel compelled to answer right away. As I was plotting out this visit, it occurred to me that I have not kept in as good of touch with you as I always intend to with our best students. Everyone's lives are so busy, it seems. For instance, I have no idea how happy you are in your current position."

Hermione appeared to search for an answer. Harry jumped in with, "She's been happier. She's not challenged enough."

"That's not exactly true, Harry . . ." Hermione argued. "But it isn't what I expected to be doing. Researching cases for precedent and learning everything about one arcane subject so I can write it up and someone else can take credit for it." She frowned into her teacup. "But it IS challenging."

McGonagall clasped her hands before her. "I wonder if you would be willing to try a bit of a change?" When Hermione blinked at her curiously, McGonagall said, "I was wondering if you would consider taking Professor Flitwick's old job . . . as Charms instructor at Hogwarts?"

Hermione gaped at her. "Who . . . me?"

"But, of course, you, my dear," McGonagall said affectionately. "You were the best student Filius could remember ever having. That alone qualifies you in my mind. The board will take your excellent test scores into due consideration, of course."

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was grinning broadly. "Did you know about this?"

Harry shook his head. "But I think it's a brilliant idea."

McGonagall patted Hermione's hand. "As I said: no rush on an answer."

"I . . . I don't know what to say," Hermione stuttered.

McGonagall stood and said. "Don't say anything at all, then. But please owl me with any questions of any sort." She turned. "And you, Harry, owl if I can do anything at all for you."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said, feeling the weight of her concern.

She smiled more deeply. "Severus was right, I believe, when he said we don't deserve you, Harry."

"Severus told you that?" Harry asked.

She winked. "Perhaps I was imagining things."

When she was gone, Harry sighed. Hermione muttered, "I second that sigh."

"You should take the job."

"I have to think about it," she said, standing to clean up the tea. "It's a big change."

"You aren't happy now, though."

"I'm not happy about a lot of things, Harry."

Harry scratched his head. "That's no reason not to change things to fix some of it."

She hovered the teapot up onto the high shelf above the stove. She then laughed lightly and sadly. "First spell Flitwick taught us, remember?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yup, I remember too that you were the only one who could do it."

She dropped into her chair at the table, wand held out before her. "It was really easy."

"And bloody useful. Honestly Hermione, I think Flitwick would pick you specifically to take his place."

"I'll think about it," she said, slipping her wand back into her pocket.

The following morning Harry went directly to the Auror's office since the training room was set up for the Apprentice testing. Although no test takers had arrived yet, an air of anticipation hung about the whole floor. Shacklebolt was covering calls and Kerry Ann sat on Tonk's desk, reading the newspaper. Harry took the chair of the desk, leaning back to stare above the door where Munz's wand hung from a strand of ribbon. Presumably, Whitley's and Moody's would be there too if they had not been lost. Frowning, Harry's thoughts wandered down the paths that made up the last year. Stretched out, they seemed far longer than twelve short months.

Kerry Ann lowered the paper. "How are you doing, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "You?" he prompted.

She nodded with a sly smile. "I have fewer complaints than usual," she said.

Chapter 38

"Ambroise still around in England?" Harry asked.

"Back and forth. He's been given a temporary diplomatic assignment so he can visit longer."

Harry grinned in return, unable to resist, given her clear glee. "So, have you figured out what's wrong with him yet?"

At this, Shacklebolt turned his chair with a squeak to stare at Harry in curious dismay. Harry defensively pointed out, "I'm only quoting her from before."

"Well . . ." Kerry Ann mused. "He doesn't like beer. Insists on wine."

"Tragic," Harry commented.

"Yeah," Kerry Ann agreed with false sobriety. "I think I can live with it though, with some time to adjust."

Shacklebolt's chair squeaked back into place and his dark head shook for many seconds. After their conversation went on for several more minutes, he said, "Go see what you think of the applicants. You'll have a say in who we accept." As they stood, he added playfully, "Since we lost Nagini, we're thinking of using Harry as a substitute phobia."

Kerry Ann laughed. "They fail that one, they are definitely out."

Harry managed a soft scoff, but the comment stung, even as a jest. It prodded painfully at his memory of the witch going out of her way to avoid him during patrol. Harry followed Kerry Ann down the corridor and composed himself before peaking inside, hopeful of finding Ginny at one of the desks. She wasn't there yet, but five others were, some of whom Harry remembered from last year's exam and some Harry knew from Hogwarts. They all looked up expectantly at the two of them as though presuming something official was about to happen.

Kerry Ann asked one of them, "Study harder this time, Tridant?"

A man in the front row crossed his arms. He had cropped blonde hair and looked more Muggle than the rest. "I was dead sure it would be easier. I've seen how the Ministry operates and couldn't imagine the requirements were so high."

Taken aback, Harry turned to Kerry Ann to see her reaction. She was grinning. "Just you wait," she said.

Harry couldn't shake the notion that Tridant would make a poor team player. He then hoped none of them had been that cocky. If they had, by the time Rodgers had knocked them around for a month, they would have forgotten to be.

Kerry Ann tilted her head to the side and said, "You know, we have a new test this year. You have to beat Harry in a duel."

Harry gazed confidently as the man jerked his head over to him, even though he was six years Harry's senior. "Really?" Tridant asked, dubious.

"Well," Kerry Ann added thoughtfully, "there is consideration that will not allow anyone into the program, so the requirement may be simply surviving three minutes against him."

She sounded very believable, and Harry was glad no one packed up and departed. A few had grown rather glazed expressions. Far less cocky, Tridant said, "I may be able to manage that."

Some newcomers entered, stutter – stepping upon discovering Harry there. They took their seats. Moments later, Ginny entered, hair damp, robes askew, rushing and glancing at the clock.

"Harry!" she said in pleased surprise and gave him a hug that was limited by her bag.

"What are you carrying in that?" Harry asked.

She flipped her sizeable handbag open and said, "Pens, quills, paper . . . I didn't want to run out of anything."

"Nothing from the twins, I hope," Harry said in all seriousness.

She pulled her head back as though insulted. "No, of course not." She moved to one of the desks and dropped her bag over the chair-back. "You know," she said to the room, "I knew Harry when he was fun."

Before Harry could compose a reply, Kerry Ann stepped closer to him and said, "Really? I'd like to have seen that."

"What do you mean?" Harry retorted, glancing between her and Ginny. "I'm not any less fun than I used to be."

Ginny stared at him in disbelief. "You used to not care about the rules . . . broke them all the time. You're too serious now."

"I haven't been sticking to the rules all that much," he pointed out.

Kerry Ann leaned in and told the assemblage. "Only Harry gets away with things. Don't get any ideas."

Several nodded in clear understanding of this. Harry spared a glare for his fellow apprentice too. He decided he should be civil and let the ribbing go, asking Ginny, "How are things at Hogwarts?"

"Good," Ginny replied flatly.

"What, you live there?" the Asian wizard beside her asked.

"Yes," Ginny smartly replied. "Someone has to guard the place."

Harry suppressed a smile and again suspected that him and his fellows were originally closer to this level of independent cockiness than he cared to admit. Someone in the back raised her hand, a small witch who was probably the oldest one in the room. "How many are being accepted this year?"

Harry replied, "There is no set number, but it is usually one or none. They let in more last year due to losses during the war." He did not point out how understaffed they still were; he assumed they knew that and pointing it out could sound like they might be willing to lower the requirements.

More people arrived, followed by Rodgers carrying a stack of examination parchments. "Everything on the floor except the quill you are going to use," he commanded. Everyone obeyed immediately as Harry and Kerry Ann made their departure, Harry with one last wave at Ginny, who was fiercely biting her upper lip as she accepted the thick, rolled parchment. In the back row, Askunk was pulling out quills and ducking her head as though hiding.

As they re-entered the office, Kerry Ann said, "Ah, to think that was us." To Shacklebolt she said, "Aaron and Vineet really that late?"

"I sent them out on assignment, and now I'm sending you two." He handed them a slip of parchment.

Saturday, following instructions in Snape's owl, Harry Apparated to the main hall of the house in Shrewsthorpe. Blue tarpaulin still covered the gap in the roof, but the thick beams had been patched with notched, bright blonde wood and metal plates. Harry checked the progress on the other rooms which felt forlornly empty with most of their possessions packed up and stored elsewhere.

Snape arrived minutes later. He immediately went to check the post and Harry found him sorting it in the drawing room. He halted this as soon as Harry entered, tossing the stack he held down onto the desk. "How are you?" he pointedly asked.

Harry shrugged. "All right, I guess." He had been thinking that he would like to discuss with Snape how after so many Rita Skeeter articles denouncing him as dark,

one witch's actions bothered him so. The topic proved awkward to open up, so he did not try. Instead he said, "Ginny thought she did well on the examinations, especially the blocks."

Snape let this slide by. "The Ministry is treating you all right?"

Harry nodded. He did not want to share his difficulty with avoiding Mr. Weasley, because he did not want Snape to know why he needed to.

Snape's demeanor darkened and narrowed as though sensing his reticence. He said, "My father wishes us for dinner tomorrow. "

"I imagine," Harry said. "I have duty in the morning, but I can probably get away in time." Then glad to cause more distraction, said, "Have you heard from your mum?"

"She sent an owl. The news of Voldemort's return finally arrived at the coven." He leaned hard on the back of the chair, his fingers gripping tightly and said with clear loathing, "Must be nice to live in such an oasis of unreality." He released the chair back and stood straight. "Any changes with regard to the prophecy?"

Harry shook his head, glad to have something to talk freely about. "I'm afraid I may have missed my chance," he confessed. "When I was in Voldemort's head I should have been able to see everything they were doing. But I didn't know. It was all so confusing."

"You were not at your best," Snape agreed.

"You thought I was under an Imperio," Harry pointed out, finding fresh annoyance at that memory.

"I was not so far off. But I also could not see through to the truth." Snape pulled out the chair and took a seat before the stacks of post. "Trapped in my own oasis, perhaps," he muttered.

"How long before the house is fixed up, do you suppose?" Harry asked. He was keen to move home again.

"Quite a while, I think. Weeks, at least, before it will be habitable." His nose was already buried in a letter.

"After that you'll be returning to Hogwarts again anyway," Harry said, feeling disjointed to consider that. He was craving normality as though it were chocolate. In a normal world, people wouldn't fear him. And if the prophecy were not yet fulfilled by the time Hogwarts' term started, he would be dealing with that alone again as well. Well, not alone, but not with help he could trust absolutely.

Snape pondered him before saying, "Do you wish me to ask Minerva if Remus can handle the first few weeks of classes?"

Harry rebelled at being treated as though he were a child, despite all of his concerns of seconds before. "No, it's all right."

"Remus certainly has been throwing himself into work of late, I doubt he would mind."

Harry shook his head again. "I just want to get this prophecy over with . . . and hope there isn't another one," he added glumly.

"Prophecies have their own time and place; you cannot force it."

"Right, Albus," Harry retorted lightly.

Snape sat back and folded his hands together as though Harry's jab had sent him into a revere. "I used to wonder occasionally what Albus would think of certain events. I have not felt the need to do so in a while, I'll admit."

"That's probably a good thing. I don't think he liked being relied on when he was around."

Snape sat forward and moved as though to continue dealing with the post. "I will meet you here tomorrow at six. Owl me if you cannot make it."

Harry returned to Shrewsthorpe the next day as instructed. The weather had turned foul and the tarps covering the holes in the roof snapped viciously. Winky offered Harry tea, but he told her he would not be staying long. He took a seat in the drawing room, the only room that was not completely packed up. Snape was late and Harry had to work to keep his imagination from running wild with potential bad situations.

When Snape did arrive he was as distracted as Harry had ever seen him.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked in concern.

"What? Oh, yes, certainly. We are late, let's go." He led the way to the Floo and held the canister out for Harry. But Harry would not accept any.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded to know.

"Nothing," Snape replied in such an unconvincing manner that Harry wondered that Snape imagined Harry could possibly believe him.

"You're lying," Harry said, wondering at Snape being late without any good guesses as to why.

Snape's glare grew into a more classic version of itself. "We'll discuss it later." He held the Floo powder out even closer to Harry.

"We'll discuss it now," Harry returned calmly. Nothing was going to slide with Harry anymore; too much had happened.

Snape set the canister down on the table. "Are you disobeying me?" he asked, half annoyance, half surprise.

Harry swallowed, "Yes, I guess I am." Silence descended beyond the crackle of the fresh fire. "You're late. You're never late. Something's clearly bothering you." These were all statements, not demands or even questions.

"We'll discuss it later," Snape insisted, again holding out the Floo powder canister.

"Nothing I need know about right now?"

In a very odd and wry tone, Snape said, "Not immediately, no."

They arrived in a modest drawing room that felt drafty even in the warm weather. Shazor gave Harry a close inspection, but Gretta gave him the same hug as always.

"So, the busy young man was able to make it," Shazor said, leading the way to the dining room where Candide was already seated. She appeared flushed and distracted. "Would you like a drink, Harry . . . of course you would," Shazor said, doling out shots of something thick and dark. Candide set hers before her but did not join them in a toast.

The evening dragged on slowly. Harry sat across from Gretta, who happily took care of both ends of a conversation if left to it. The only interesting part of the whole evening was when Severus bothered to mention that he and Candide were engaged. Shazor and Gretta took this with less surprise than Harry had and Candide kept her head down through the ensuing congratulations.

When the question of the date came up, Severus replied, "Soon," with such a annoyed tone that Harry, who had been expecting the same open-ended answer as before, nearly spit out his sherry. He shot Severus a curious glance, but received nothing in return. He did not get a chance to ask later that evening; Severus took Candide back to her flat, leaving Harry to finish his goodbyes with the others.

Chapter 39.

Inheritance

First thing Monday, Harry's luck failed to hold. He stepped out of the lift and immediately had to stop dead to avoid running over Mr. Weasley.

"Good. You are here early," Mr. Weasley said as though he had parked himself there just to catch Harry. "Come with me."

Harry prepared to follow, head down. But Mr. Weasley did not go to his office. Instead he reopened the lift gate and waited for Harry to follow him in.

Harry's heart rate slowed when it was clear they were headed for the Minister's office, which Harry was quite certain would be too serious a venue for such a simple issue as intra-department fraternization.

As they swept through the outer office, Belinda's greeting gave Harry pause. It was a simple "good morning," but she had not said much of anything to him for a long time. Harry stopped at the door to Bones' office to return in kind, spirits lifted by even that small incident.

In the Minister's spacious office, Harry took a seat in a tall, maroon chair with gleaming brass buttons, identical to the one Mr. Weasley had taken.

"Now," Bones said, taking a seat at her shining desk. Her manicured hands began strumming her crossed knees. "I have discussed this with some of the other department heads as well as Minerva, and they are all in agreement, more or less."

Harry glanced between the two of them, lost already. Bones explained, "We have been discussing how to best manage your image, Mr. Potter."

"My image?" Harry returned.

Bones explained with patience, although in a speaking-to-a-child voice, "Your image is the Ministry's image, Harry. You are the most famous wizard in Britain, for certain, if not the world. By keeping you on, we are also taking on your reputation, which unfortunately at the moment is a bit of an ambiguous one. We have decided that it is best to end the second-guessing of the Wizengamot's actions currently filling the papers by demonstrating that we whole-heartedly support you."

Harry, who had been avoiding the papers much of the week, had no comment to add to this.

Bones went on. "Supporting you means supporting your actions, which on the surface are certainly easy to condone. No one would argue that Voldemort should have been allowed to return to his former self, and it is clear in hindsight that would eventually have been the case. The previous prophecy was probably still valid, which is also in your favor with regard to violating direct orders." She frowned as she said that, but then waved her hand as though an insect bothered her. "But that is in the past. For the immediate future we have decided to award you the Merlin service medal." She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out an ornate miniature trunk from which she extracted a golden coin on a ribbon. She put her eyepiece in place and squinted at the back of it. "Ah, yes, Flying Merlin Distinguished Service of Wand is the name of it." She let her monocle fall. "But we have to do it properly, of course."

Harry sat quietly through her description of the award proceedings, hoping as the Minister did, that this would indeed help.

As the meeting concluded, Harry began to dread walking back downstairs with Mr. Weasley, but he was spared doing so by being dismissed early. As he closed the door behind him with no little relief, he thought perhaps getting it over with would save him rather a lot of stress. Belinda was busy taking dictation from one of the Minister's advisors, so Harry only managed a small wave in her direction.

Back down in their department, he wondered suddenly if Belinda had broken up with Percy. He cornered Kerry Ann at the first opportunity, during a break in their readings discussion.

"Not that I know of," Kerry Ann replied to his question.

"Huh," Harry uttered. "She seemed, well, in a better mood."

"I'll ask around," Kerry Ann promised. Harry nodded that he would appreciate that, finding himself in the odd position of desiring more gossip.

Chapter 39

In the afternoon the four of them plus Blackpool were called together in the tea room to discuss the applicant examination results. Blackpool sat with her arms crossed, looking sulky, and she pushed the sheet of scores by her to the next person as though not interested. Harry wondered then with no little jolt whether she and Munz had been closer than he realized, perhaps even against-regulation close. His death had certainly hit her hardest. He stopped himself from intending to ask Kerry Ann this as well.

The list came his way. The range of numbers was broader than expected, some quite low. Ginny had tied for top in spell blocking with Tridant. Askunk was just ahead of Ginny on the written part, and just below her on the blocking. Harry thought that it would be interesting to put them all up against each other. Ginny's written scores were in the high middle, but not stellar, unfortunately. Or perhaps fortunately, if Mr. Weasley's opinion were to be counted.

"What do you think, Potter?" Rodgers prompted, since Harry had been holding onto the list longer than his share of time. Harry passed the list along with a shrug. Vineet held it up and studied it. Rodgers asked, "Arthur's youngest wouldn't normally make the cut, but given her performance during the attack on Hogwarts, I am tempted to allow her to move on to the next stage."

"I think she deserves a chance," Harry said, comfortable with showing more loyalty to his friend than her father. "She only got serious about her book studies this year."

"And we won't have full N.E.W.T. scores this year, to add to her record," Rodgers added. "What about Tridant?"

"He's kind of a jerk," Kerry Ann said.

"Opinions, Ms. Blackpool?" Rodgers prodded.

She shook her head, and said, "We have too many other things to worry about right now to think about next year's apprentices," she darkly pointed out.

Rodgers picked up the list of scores. "We always worry about the future around here. You look like you could use some duty. Take Potter out for half a shift."

Blackpool stood without responding and Harry hurried to follow her to the office, where she scooped up a handful of assignment sheets, tossed each of them down and picked one back up, seemingly at random.

"Mugglebaiting call, Earswick. Let's go." She Disapparated, but fortunately Harry knew where to go.

They appeared in an abandoned stable on a rundown farm. Blackpool started immediately for the wide carriage door which hung crooked on a bent railing, but Harry restrained her, asking, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," she insisted and Harry had a sense he was seeing himself saying of course I'm still fun.

"Something must be the matter," Harry insisted, rubbing his nose. The musty scent of decaying hay made his nose tickle.

She snapped in return, "Potter, everything's the matter, but I can't do anything about any of them."

"We can do something about this call," Harry pointed out.

"It's an old, unclosed one from the weekend. Just some magical folk wandering drunk into the countryside after a night out in York is all."

"You're sure about that?" Harry asked, never wanting to be so certain that he would let his guard down.

"Yes, I'm certain."

"Were you one of them?" he asked, curious more than anything.

She snorted. "Don't I wish. Do you know how badly I need a break?"

"We all need one. If you're that close to losing it, you should ask for one."

"That's impossible. We are completely short-handed. Who's going to cover?"

"The department will manage. If you crack, they'll be short of you anyway."

"I'm not going to crack," she insisted derisively. "I just want to get . . ."

"Get what?" Harry asked when she trailed off. An owl fluttered in the upper part of the building.

Her fist was clenched, but she opened her hand to touch her wand pocket. "Get Merton," she replied as though fatigued but then her demeanor shifting to cold anger. "Him and his bloody weapons. You want to kill someone, you should have the guts to face them with a wand and do the job properly, not send a stupid machine to do it for you."

Harry feared for a moment that she may turn and blame him for not fulfilling the prophecy sooner, but she did not add anything more. She stepped out into the thickly cloudy day with its fresh breeze and Harry followed.

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They strolled along a narrow lane until they came to a gathering of houses. The motorway whined close by. She stepped over a small garden gate and strode to the door through the overgrown footpath. “Let’s see if it’s the same blokes as last time.” She knocked on the door. When it opened, Blackpool said, “We’ve come about a disturbance.”

“What disturbance?” the man rudely asked. He was unshaven and wore only a vest and a half-open robe, despite the hour. It certainly seemed likely that he frequented both mead and the wee hours of the morning. He was gearing up to say more, beginning with, “Don’t you Ministry people have real criminals to catch-” but he spotted Harry standing beyond Blackpool’s shoulder. Harry had been gauging how violent the man’s belligerence may get, so he was surprised when the man stepped back and tucked himself behind the door for protection.

Blackpool sent a sly glance back at Harry. She propped her hands on her hips and chuckled cruelly. Fatigue seemed to blunt her because she said to the man, ”Right, as if that door would help you against him.”

Harry wanted to look away from the man’s alarmed gaze, but he was duty-bound to keep an eye on him.

Blackpool demanded, ”No more late-night excursions. I know it was you and your friends because it’s been you and your friends every other time.” The man’s eyes revealed that this was indeed true. Blackpool went on, ”Things are tough right now all around and every witch and wizard needs to pull more of their own weight to keep magic out of Muggle sight. The crap you guys pull when you get too much drink in you . . . Does. Not. Help.” Her voice sharpened as though focusing all of the frustration of the last few weeks on one relatively hapless wizard. At least the man now seemed to think she was as much a threat as Harry. She jabbed at the door he was peaking around. ”Keep the drinks in line or we’ll be back and we won’t be gentle next time.”

The man glanced again at Harry, whose Legilimency made it clear how very fearfully uncertain he was about how much of a threat Harry represented. As they walked away, Harry wished for someone or something to take his own frustrations out on.

As they strode back to the stables to Disapparate, Blackpool said, ”You’re a good partner to be out with.”

”How’s that?” Harry asked flatly. The dirt two-track they followed provided lots of cover for an ambush, so he was keeping a close eye on the brush.

”You’re quiet and just having you around makes everyone behave themselves. Last time that bloke tried a treacle trap on me. With you there he didn’t even think to try

anything." After a quarter mile of silence, she prodded, "What's the matter, don't like playing the bad cop, eh?"

"I'm not used to . . . I don't know . . . people being afraid of me."

They reached the broken stable door and slipped inside. A few whole sticks of straw still floated atop the rotted wood floor, getting swept around by their cloaks. "It's respect. You're misreading it."

"It's not respect," Harry insisted.

"I'd kill for that kind of respect," she went on, fully in the mode of venting now. "People see I'm a witch and think they can mess with me. Munz was small; he never got much respect either."

Harry turned to face her once he was out of view of the open door. "I'm sorry what happened to him. I was there and I've replayed it a hundred times in my head, but there's nothing different that could have been done."

She stood in the ripe air, breathing heavily. "I wasn't blaming you," she said with concern. She tossed her head back and stared upward at the open sky visible through the rotting boards. "It's supposed to get easier, but it doesn't seem to be. It doesn't help that this threat hangs over us, that it could descend at any time to tear everything apart again. Stupid mindless machines of death." She shook herself. "Rodgers is right. Let's get another assignment; I need to feel useful."

Harry thought she needed a few weeks holiday instead, but he followed her back to the Ministry without argument.

Harry didn't return to Hermione's flat until well into the evening. There, he found a note from his friend explaining that she needed to return to work for a few hours. There wasn't much to eat, and Harry prowled the kitchenette restlessly, poking into the same cabinets and drawers repeatedly, hoping to find something substantial that did not require much effort. The wizard's alarmed face from that afternoon overlaid on many others, dogging him. He dumped crisps into a bowl and took them to the small table to eat them as though they constituted a decent meal. Harry licked his fingers between bites, trying to relish what he was eating. The pipes pinged from the upstairs neighbor running the tap. A knock sounded, quiet as though it came from a

different door. Harry stood and checked their door, wand out of view in case it was one of the Muggle neighbors.

Harry opened the door wider when he saw who was there. "Mrs. Granger," Harry uttered in surprise.

"Harry, dear," she said in soft greeting. She clutched her pink leather handbag against her pink coat as though not certain she would be invited inside.

Stepping back to let her come in, Harry said, "Hermione's not here."

With true motherly tones, she said, "I received an owl from her just an hour ago, said I should check on you while I'm in the city visiting my sister." She slipped off her long coat and hung it up on the hook beside the door.

"She shouldn't have done that," Harry said, stashing his wand in his back pocket. "I'm fine," he argued.

"I hope that isn't your dinner, dear," Mrs. Granger criticized as soon as she espied the table.

Harry sighed. "It probably is." He took the salty bowl to the sink and balanced it on the other unwashed dishes.

"You don't look all right to me, Harry," Mrs. Granger said, her voice shifting rather startlingly to stern.

"The last few weeks've been rough," he admitted, feeling good to be able to tell that to someone new. He considered washing the dishes, but stared at them instead.

Mrs. Granger stepped closer and turned his chin to her. "Why don't you tell me about it, Harry?" she asked kindly.

Harry laughed and stepped away. "I can't tell you about much of any of it, Mrs. Granger," he said as he dropped into a chair.

"Let me make you some tea," she said as she began moving about the small counter and its two cabinets. She used the burner to heat water and a few minutes later, set a cup before Harry. She didn't sit, though. "Rather startling those eyes of yours."

"So, I'm told," Harry replied while he blew across the hot cup. At least Hermione's mother wasn't afraid of him, he thought. Others' fearful faces haunted him just then at that thought with a tenacity that in itself bothered him.

"Very startling," she uttered with queer thoughtfulness.

Harry put the cup down without sipping.

"Not thirsty for tea, dear?" Mrs. Granger asked, sounding the most motherly yet. "Would you like something else?"

Harry ran their conversation so far through his head again. "No, this is fine. Just letting it cool," he explained to buy time to figure out why his sense of things felt so wrong. Mrs. Granger tapped her finger impatiently on the chair-back before turning to attack the dishes in the sink. "Don't do those, Mrs. Granger," Harry chastised and reached for the milk, thinking to cool his tea.

"Do you want sugar with that too?" she asked without turning her head from where it bowed over the sink.

Harry aborted lifting the milk and reached for his wand, which was not in his back pocket. He pushed the tea cup away. "What's in it?" he demanded.

Mrs. Granger put down a half-washed plate which caused the rest to clatter to an even more disorganized pile. She turned and put her hands on her hips.

Harry, insides in a frozen knot, said, "The only person I know of who sees things without turning around is supposedly dead. What's in the tea . . . Mad Eye?" Harry asked again, the revelation so certain it made his blood rush.

After a brief pause, the image of Mrs. Granger replied, "Veritaserum."

"You don't need that," Harry argued. "You can ask me anything you want; you're an Auror, remember?"

The visage of Mrs. Granger didn't move. "I remember what I am," it grunted. "Do you remember what you are?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

Moody, snorted, an oddly uncouth thing for Mrs. Granger to do. "You have me worried, Potter. Very worried."

Harry ignored that. "Why are you pretending to be dead?" he asked derisively.

Moody shuffled his feet. "I'm finally living my life, believe or not. I can do as please . . . investigate as I please."

Harry cocked his lips. "Finally don't have to live in paranoid fear, eh Mad Eye? No one tries to poison or curse someone who's already dead."

Crossing his arms, Moody commented, "You were always fast on the uptake."

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Harry stood. “I want my wand back.”

“After we chat,” Moody countered.

“We are chatting.”

Gruffer still, Moody, who was starting to appear more as himself, leaned over the table and said, “We’re not finished yet. I’m still not convinced of what you are.” He spoke with such suspicion that it ground on Harry’s nerves, already sore from tolerating the last few incidences of similar suspicion.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I don’t bloody well care if you’re convinced. I want my wand.”

“Tough luck. You’ll get it when I’m through,” Moody countered. His wide, crooked frame had half emerged now from Mrs. Granger’s much primmer one. Moody glanced at his hand, took his trademark silver flask from his pocket, and then put it away again without drinking from it.

When Harry stepped around the table to face him down, Moody aimed his wand at him and said, “That’s a lot of confidence for someone who’s unarmed.”

“Yes, it is,” Harry said, stopping a yard away, fists balled.

In a critical tone Moody said, “You still haven’t learned, have you, Potter.” He raised his wand, “Do you need another lesson like the last I gave you?”

Harry put his fists on his hips and mocked, “Since you’re dead, you’ll have a hard time doing my next six month review, won’t you?”

“We can do it right now . . .” Moody offered darkly, wand steady as he pointed it at Harry. His left eye was sinking backward into his skull and he leaned as though relying more on one leg.

Harry’s eyes narrowed further. ”It was you, wasn’t it? Percy doesn’t have that much in him.”

This shifted Moody’s demeanor. ”You’re too bright on top of too powerful, Potter.” Oddly, this was an even more threatening statement than the last two.

Harry leaned forward, letting anger out through his eyes. ”You still don’t know enough about me?” he demanded. ”You put me through hell, and you’re still sneaking around trying to . . . you’ve been following me around, haven’t you?” Harry asked, thinking of the times he felt watched when there wasn’t anyone there. Harry took a half step forward, wanting Moody simply to go away and leave him alone.

”What are you, Potter?” Moody asked as he solidified his aim so it was directly at Harry’s nose so that Harry stared down the length of the wand straight into Moody’s good eye.

Harry felt around himself with the opening to the Dark Plane just cracked enough to sense what might be near. His anger made opening the gateway trivially easy. "You want to find out what I've become, you just try something." When Moody didn't move, Harry taunted, "Come on. I'm unarmed." He held his hands out to show they were empty. "Try something," he snarled, tired of this, tired of everyone's distrust.

"You're really asking for it, Potter." Moody's hand tightened its grip and he started to speak a spell.

Harry snapped open the gateway for just the instant it took to loose the creature prowling at the interstice. In a blur the old werewolf leapt out of the join between the floor and the wall beside the door and toppled Moody before he could aim his wand at it instead of Harry.

"Back!" Harry shouted and the pathetic creature scrambled away to rear up before the cupboard, hair bristled, teeth bared. "You think I need a wand to defend myself?" Harry mocked the Auror.

Moody swallowed hard and held his wand pointed at the disturbingly distorted half-werewolf, at the exposed ribs and patchy spotted skin starkly obvious and almost clinical in the Muggle lighting. He fumbled in his coat and pulled out his wooden peg leg, which he then brandished in his other hand. The wolf growled.

Harry threatened, "If you hurt him, you'll deal with me."

"Hurt him?" Moody echoed, "What the devil is that thing?"

The werewolf lowered down to four legs to sniff the air just above the floor. Harry went to the fridge to pull out a package of raw chops. "I'm still figuring that out," Harry admitted as he crouched to hold out the meat. The creature whined piteously a second before snatching the package away. As it did, Harry pushed it back through the gateway. He hoped it got its share once he felt all the other things waiting nearby before he blocked the gateway again.

"My wand," Harry demanded before Moody could even decide the room was safe again.

Moody pushed himelf to sit upright, recovering quickly. He put on his leg and got to his feet. With clear determined unwillingness, he pulled out Harry's wand and said, "Do me one favor, Potter: at least try to remember what your dear mother would think before you do something."

Harry countered with, "And you try to remember that I've been through more than she or my dad ever had been."

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Moody shook his head while plucking his bright blue magic eye from the breast pocket of his pink coat. "That doesn't make a whiff of difference." He pressed the eye into the sagging left socket, and looked at Harry with a sour expression before relenting and saying grudgingly, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone you've seen me."

"Whatever," Harry uttered.

Angry again, Moody stepped closer and waved his finger before Harry's nose. "Your mum, Potter. Remember your mum. She didn't like evil much; not the kind old Voldie did and not the kind you are so terribly fond of." With that he was gone, and Harry stood alone in a Muggle kitchen, the air oily, the floor freshly scratched by long claws.

"I need to go," Lupin said, standing in Pamela's small sitting room. With a burst of orange rays, late evening was turning into night beyond the roof of the neighboring house.

"You won't let me see this monster, then?"

"It's not safe," Lupin argued.

"I thought you said Wolfsbane makes you clear-headed during the full moon," she argued.

Lupin frowned. "It does, but not absolutely. And I don't know about this time around after getting bit again." He took her hands and held them between them, but it was more a communication of restraint than understanding. "Others should be there to ensure your safety. We'd have to plan ahead."

"Why didn't you do that?" she asked.

Lupin laughed depreciatingly. "Because I'm not ready. I know I'm making much of this, but . . . it's harder with you."

She smiled lightly. "That's something, anyway."

Lupin bit his lip and glanced anxiously out at the darkening sky. "Really must go," he whispered.

"Come back in the morning," Pamela insisted, catching his hand before he could make it to the door. She explained, "You'll need a good breakfast and a good sleep." Embarrassed, she admitted, "I had Minerva send me a pamphlet on Lycanthropy."

Lupin shook his head as though betrayed, but he appeared to want to be swayed. "I'm only a burden after the change."

"Really, come back anyway. Please. As soon as you can," Pamela insisted.

Lupin's body twitched. "I have to go," he whispered again, pained, and then ran out the door.

Severus Snape finished straightening his office in preparation to return to Candide's flat. As he did so, he thought he heard movement. He waved the lamps higher and turned full circle. A familiar, but very unexpected voice said, "I'd be needing a word with you."

An invisibility cloak was lifted aside to reveal Mad-Eye Moody, whom Snape gazed at in no little surprise. Recovering, Snape snidely asked, "What can I do for you?."

"First off, I wonder if you still consider yourself the father to that boy of Potter's?"

Snape drew himself up and replied, "I certainly do."

"Are you keeping a right close eye on him?" Moody demanded.

"As close as possible given the circumstances. When the house is repaired I shall be keeping an even closer one." He paused and challengingly asked, "Why?"

Moody paced once, his limp pronounced. "He's on the cusp, Snape."

"Your paranoia notwithstanding, what makes you believe that?"

Moody snorted. "A hundred things, Professor, and if you aren't seeing them then you've lost your edge. Been dulled by this role you are playing and by the favors he's done you."

Snape looked away, at the rapidly setting sun outside the tall windows. "Harry is hardly dire. He has improved immensely after taking care of Voldemort."

Moody snorted again. "And you last saw him when?"

"Yesterday. You must not be keeping very good watch yourself if you did not know that."

"I'm keeping watch over a lot of different things," Moody explained airily. "Being dead frees up a lot of time." He stopped and picked up to examine one of the cursed boxes from the desk that were used for neutralization practice.

Annoyance clearer in his voice, Snape said, "Trust that I am keeping in close touch with him. I consider him my primary responsibility, and I would much prefer that you leave him alone."

"You don't worry about the half rotted werewolf he's keeping as a pet."

Snape's brow furrowed and this gave him away.

"Didn't know about that, I suppose," Moody mocked quietly.

"Get out of here, Alastor," Snape stated softly. "I can take care of Harry."

Moody ignored the demand and picked up another box to study it. "See, I don't think you can. You are mostly at your best when keeping men like Voldemort happy, I think."

Snape snapped his wand around and the cursed boxes flew from the desk to the shelf, some of them shattering and smoking. "You are dangerous you understand so little," he snarled. In a treacherously quiet voice, he went on, "Harry's future relies on his being trusted. Wizards like you – especially like you, whom he formerly looked up to – are very, very unsettling to his state of mind. Leave him be. Albus put him in my hands, not yours."

Moody's lip twitched as though he had a retort ready, but he slipped his invisibility cloak over his head and departed.

Snape found Harry sitting on Hermione's couch, petting Kali, who slept in his lap. Crookshanks sat on the couch back nearby, eyeing the Chimrian. Harry looked up at Snape when he arrived in the hearth, but didn't want to disturb his pet by standing.

"Where is Ms. Granger?" Snape asked.

"Had to work late," Harry answered.

Snape eyed Kali a moment. "I had a most interesting visitor just now."

"I'm surprised he risked letting yet another person know he's actually alive," Harry commented. He wished Snape would sit down, but suspected that he would not.

"Harry," Snape said. "Please always trust that I am on your side. But Alastor had one concern that I must inquire about."

"So?" Harry prompted when Snape paused.

"For a wizard of your power the path from dark thoughts to dark deeds is extraordinarily short. I don't want you treading that path. I think it best if you resist interacting with the Dark Plane as much as possible."

Harry straightened his head, prepared to snap something derisive back. But looking at Snape's concerned gaze halted him and his annoyance evaporated. "I mostly don't," Harry insisted.

"What was this Alastor mentioned about a . . . werewolf?"

"Oh," Harry hedged. "It is this creature from the Dark Plane that I've been trying to understand more about."

Snape peered around the room, spotted the new scratches and said, "You let it in here?"

"I let it loose on Mad-Eye," Harry clarified. "He nipped my wand."

Snape stopped. "You let him get your wand," he chastised.

Harry frowned. "Yeah. I won't let that happen again."

"I should hope not." Snape paced once, attracting Crookshanks off the couch to watch. "You did not leave Alastor with a good impression of your state of mind."

Kali took flight from his anger and Harry stood to face Snape at eye-level. "He came in here using Polyjuice to look like Mrs. Granger, did he tell you that?" Harry demanded. When Snape shook his head, Harry went on, "Tried to slip me Veritaserum in a cup of tea. Did he tell you that?" Another head shake. "Turns out he was Percy for my Darkness Test, did you tell you THAT?"

Yet another shake. "Well, you certainly had a right to be annoyed with him."

"He mocked me," Harry complained.

"That you should be capable of withstanding," Snape said, touching Harry on the shoulder for emphasis. "You are bigger than that."

"He told me my mum would be disappointed in me. That after he gave me hell during the Darkness Test. And then there was my last review when he made me look like such a fool," Harry explained, ticking off these complaints on his fingers.

"When he was pointing out your less than comprehensive knowledge of every spell in existence, you mean?" Snape challenged.

Harry put his hands in his back pockets and slumped a bit. “You sure you’re on my side?”

“Always,” Snape stated fiercely. “No matter what.”

Harry dropped his gaze. Crookshanks rubbed against his shins. He asked. “Do you think I’ve let my parents down . . . with my power becoming what it has?”

”No,” Snape said. ”You are a long way from that.” He sighed. ”I wish you had told me about the werewolf, however. I do not appreciate getting tripped up.”

”It wasn’t anything significant,” Harry argued.

”Yes, it is,” Snape returned. ”You may be guilty of what you accused me of: losing perspective.”

Harry said wryly, ”Only in the other direction.”

”Harry, please confide in me. I am always on your side,” Snape said.

”Even if that means nailing me to the wall for doing something stupid?” Harry suggested lightly.

”Sometimes it may mean that, I’ll confess,” Snape replied dryly, but almost smiling.

”Speaking of trouble,” Harry began, ”what was the problem last night? Why were you late . . . and so distracted?”

Snape immediately reacted to this question, stiffening and turning to stride away. He growled lightly and paced back, frowning. Harry in his mind threw all his other concerns and annoyances away, prepared to focus on whatever Snape may need from him.

”I discovered something,” Snape finally explained.

Harry waited. ”Yes?” he prodded when he could hold out no longer.

Snape’s demeanor shifted. His shoulders hunched slightly, his head turned slowly; it was as though he wished to return to his old kind of anger where the target of it was intended to cower. Harry did not do so, of course, but he grew vaguely alarmed at this change.

”Candide is pregnant,” Snape said. He spoke so softly, Harry was not certain he had heard him correctly.

”What?” Harry prompted, but Snape’s return to his disturbed demeanor, confirmed Harry’s hearing. Harry swallowed a laugh.

"You think this is amusing?" Snape challenged.

Harry nodded, lips pressed together to hold in his silly grin. Then after a pause, he said, "Especially after all the things you said to me. It's very unexpected, Severus." He could not resist giving him a ribbing in the form of a sly look.

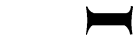
Snape pressed his fingers to his forehead. "I was indisposed after my ordeal," he muttered.

"Not too indisposed, apparently," Harry said, still having far too much fun with this. Snape gave him the narrowest, darkest look Harry had received in years, but Harry continued to grin. "Good thing you were getting married anyway," he went on jovially, thinking Snape's attitude out of line and in need of adjustment. "What's the problem?"

Snape bowed and shook his head, hair falling into his face. "Far more consideration should have gone into it," he grimly stated.

"If that were always true, no one would have children," Harry pointed out, still buoyant, but he fell serious as he said, "Come on, Severus. You're a great father, you know."

This statement produced an awkward silence broken by Kali, flying over to perch on Harry's shoulder. Snape shook his head again, but with slightly less dismay.



At half-past five in the morning, a quiet knock sounded on Pamela's door. She had not gone to bed, but was napping on the couch as best as possible while worrying what it must be like to scramble about in the dark forest all night in a form not one's own. Lupin stood in the chilly, dewy air of the front stoop, bundled crookedly in his worn cloak.

"Come on in," Pamela said, trying not to sound too affected by his state.

She directed him to the couch and moved to dust off and plug in the electric heater to warm the room, given that he was shivering. He sat, hunched dejectedly, nearly doubled over his knees. She went to the kitchen for hot herbed tea and turned the burner on under the pasta she'd made, but had let cool.

"Here, chamomile is supposed to help." She poured a healthy serving into the largest mug in the house and set it on the low table before him, but he did not move. His eyes

were closed and his skin looked pale and almost bluish in the dim light. "Remus?" she prompted. He reached out a hand for the tea, and rested it over the rim. She said, upbeat as possible, "I made you something heavy to eat like the pamphlet said: cheesy noodles . . . if you'd like some?"

He nodded weakly. She fetched him a bowl-full and a fork and sat down beside him. The room was growing overly-warm, but she ignored it. She set the bowl in his lap and folded his fingers around the silver fork.

"Remus, this is terrible. How do you manage?"

"It isn't easy," he replied in a faint voice.

"Eat up. You need to get your strength back."

He clumsily worked the fork into a better grip and stabbed a few sloppy noodles on the tines. Pamela literally sat on her hands to avoiding even the appearance of wanting to help him eat.

After a few bites, already sounding stronger, he said, "I hate having you see me like this."

"I hate the thought that you might have to go through this alone more, I bet," she retorted.

He put the fork down to use both hands on the mug. After he put the mug down, he stared at his hands with their shaggy knuckles and pointed nails. "I keep expecting the change to complete, but it doesn't." He sounded very down.

"Eat. You're a wisp of a thing as it is."

He turned to her with a faint smile. "Takes a lot out of you to change back and forth from a monster."

"How does Harry turn into that bright red bird without showing any after-effects?"

Lupin took up the bowl again and returned to eating. "It's not the same. His change is magical; mine is cellular. I tried to learn that kind of transformation when my friends were . . . when we were all in school. James Potter managed it easily . . . became a most wonderful stag just so he could be safe around me during the full moon. I tried to learn it, but when I realized I would just become the same monster more of the time, it didn't seem worth it."

Light was filling the room from the window in earnest by the time Lupin set down an empty bowl and leaned back lethargically. "Thank you," he said sincerely.

"If making cheesy noodles and chamomile tea is all it takes, you're not asking for much."

The small clock on the mantelpiece quietly chimed six in the morning. "It's not that it takes much to actually do the things . . . it's that you are willing to."

"I bet more people would be willing to . . . if you'd give them a chance," she said, bordering on critical. "Why don't you lie down for a nap and I'll make you second breakfast in a few hours." When he hesitated, she said, "Come on, in for a Knut, in for a Galleon. Isn't that what you say?"

He shook his head. "We don't say that." But he turned to arrange the cushions to better lay flat.

"What do you say?" she asked.

He was settled in to sleep, eyes already closed, when he responded, "Once you've been bitten by the fire newt, you might as well wait around for the enchanted giant crocodile."

Pamela burst out laughing. "That's dumbest thing I've ever heard. That doesn't mean the same thing at all."

He sounded much more relaxed as he replied, "Yes it does. It's a way of saying: you've made one small bad decision, stick around and make a big one too, why don't you?"

"Wizards are nuts," she complained as she headed for her bed.

Later that morning, Harry arrived early and walked straight to the office of the man he had been avoiding all week. Mr. Weasley looked up at him in surprise when Harry opened the door. Harry pushed the visitor's chair into the corridor and closed the door before running a series of spells to check that they were unobserved by any magical devices. A flare of yellow gave away the old crystal ball of the twin's. Mr. Weasley tossed his cloak over it.

"I need to talk to you," Harry explained.

"I see that," Mr. Weasley replied. "Surprising given how little I saw of you last week."

Harry suspected then that Mr. Weasley also wished to avoid dealing with the issue of him and Tonks. Harry scratched his ear and put that other topic aside for the moment. "I just needed to tell you something in confidence, is all. Er . . ." Harry hesitated, wondering how this was going to come across. "Alastor Moody is actually alive."

Mr. Weasley's red brows rose to his hair. "Are you certain? You've seen him, I take it?"

"He's been stalking me, turns out. You didn't know, then?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley rubbed the nearly bare top of his head. "No, Harry, I did not know that."

"Says he prefers being dead because he doesn't have to worry then about anyone trying to kill him."

After a head shake, Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, if anyone but you had come and told me this, I would not believe them." He sighed. "Rather selfish of him to keep to himself that way. Wonder if we can count on him for any help at all."

"He said he was carrying out his own investigations."

"Of the wrong things, I suspect," Mr. Weasley said, adjusting the cloak over the crystal ball to be sure it was completely covered.

"Do you think he's still working for the Department of Mysteries?" Harry suddenly wondered aloud.

Mr. Weasley sighed again. "I don't know, but it isn't impossible. They have little distaste for working with the dead in general. Perhaps you should have asked Alastor. Sounds like you had rather a long conversation with him."

"He doesn't trust me at all. Told me my mum would be disappointed in me."

"Oh, now there he's wrong, Harry. Don't believe that for a minute."

They stared at each other as Harry pondered the unusually stern tone of that assurance. Mr. Weasley looked away and pulled himself closer to his desk. He straightened one of the thicker file folders and said, "I assume you are still breaking departmental rules."

"Yeah," Harry reluctantly replied.

Harry waited, pained, during the lengthy pause before Mr. Weasley went on. "You've put me in a very bad position, Harry."

"I don't mean to, sir," Harry returned, truly meaning it.

"No, I don't suppose you do," he agreed. Without looking up, he went on, "It's already affected your judgment to the point were someone lured you into a trap. You recognize that, correct?"

"Yes sir, I do."

A knock on the door interrupted the next long pause. Shacklebolt was there, needing to speak to Mr. Weasley. Harry made his escape but Mr. Weasley's voice saying, "See that it doesn't happen again," followed him out.

Harry's week went by much faster once he no longer had to carefully guard against running into his boss. Wednesday, his first evening off, he took the Floo to Hogwarts to talk to Ginny before her second round of Auror testing. In the Great Hall where he arrived, Professors Sprout and Vector were having afternoon tea. They greeted Harry warmly and he asked if they knew where Ginny was.

"Helping Mr. Filch in the armory, I believe," Vector replied.

Harry stared at her, at her short black hair that stood up straight from her head, cropped level on top. "With Mr. Filch?" Harry repeated, confused and wondering if he were in the right Hogwarts.

"His name is technically Filch-Plumefeathervane," Vector explained, "but we have simply been referring to him as 'Filch'."

"Minerva hired a new caretaker," Sprout explained, adding milk to a warm-up of her tea.

"Argus Filch's cousin," Vector clarified, the two of them making Harry's head go back and forth.

"Ah," Harry uttered, feeling sort of disappointed by that news. "Is McGonagall here?"

"She may be in her tower. She's been in and out the last few days."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Harry went first to the corridor where he and Hermione had battled the cursed suits of armor. Spread out on the floor like rows of fallen soldiers lay the suits of armor,

their pieces getting matched up to their correct comrades. Ginny stood holding two gauntlets, comparing the filigree on each to that on the helm of the suit lying before her.

"I think this one looks better," she said.

A grunt from Harry's left brought his attention that way. He nearly jumped out of his shoes; the man limping over from the corner window was less Filch's cousin than Quasimodo's. He was twice the width of the old caretaker and twice as bent over and even more alarming, could probably put the crooked, knotty wand in his hand to real use. Harry blinked to clear his eyes: the new Filch's wand had spikes on a metal collar above the handle, just in case one wanted simply use it as a mace or something.

"Who are you?" the vision demanded, squinting challengingly, one eye larger than the other.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, setting down the gauntlets and rushing over.

"Hi," Harry said, taking a welcome step in her direction.

"I see you've met the new Filch," Ginny said, sounding dismayed but unaffected. Loudly and slowly she said to Filch-Plumefeathervane, "This is Harry Potter. He's allowed to be here."

The suspicion didn't fade much. "Don't break nothin'," he growled and returned to polishing and hammering out pieces of armor with a spirit that implied violence was a willing part of his nature.

"No, sir," Harry assured him. Turning to Ginny, but with a backwards glance every few seconds, he said, "Just came to see if you were ready for your test tomorrow."

"Ready?" she asked, confused. "They said there wasn't any way to prepare."

"Well, there isn't. But you should be well-rested. It's rather hellish."

She stared at him. "People have been saying that but I didn't believe them." She picked up the two gauntlets again, setting one of them back down close to where the prone suit's hand would be. The other she carried over to a pile that appeared to represent a random collection of eras and countries of origin. "With you telling me that . . ."

"I think you'll do all right, but since you're here, rather than home, I thought you could use some support."

"Thanks, Harry. I could use some hints, it sounds like."

"Before my test I didn't get any hints or help," he pointed out. He bent down to pick up the highly decorated gorget at his feet. "This is still dented," he said.

Ginny took it from him and held it to the light. "And whose fault would that be?"

"I'm not apologizing for any damage in here. My only regret is that I didn't learn the welding spells you were doing that day in the kitchens."

Her mouth fell open, appalled. "Thank goodness. You know what a mess that would have made?"

"Excuse me. The armor was trying to kill us," Harry pointed out.

Ginny gave the gorget to Filch-Plumefeathervane. She then picked up a greave and looked through a pile of them, presumably for its mate. "So, no hints, eh?"

Harry shrugged even though she wasn't looking at him. From the corner a burst of pounding interrupted Harry's reply. "I'll tell you what Rodgers told me, which he may tell you anyway, but I'll do so in case he doesn't because he's really over-stressed. He said that nothing in the test would harm you and that the only thing that could defeat you is your own demons."

Ginny took this in very thoughtfully. "Good to know," she said around chewing her lip.

"Sort of obvious, now that I think about it," Harry said.

"Good to be reminded of, then." She carried a bent greave over to the repair corner and returned to sorting.

Harry said, "I was thinking of staying for dinner. I could use an elf-cooked meal." Ginny's bright smile indicated that she would love to join him. He said, "I'll meet you downstairs," before heading farther along the corridor, in the direction of the next staircase leading upward.

Harry found the door to the headmistress' tower open as usual. The windows were cracked and a warm breeze floated through, balancing out the heat of the late evening sun.

McGonagall greeted him and said, "Have a seat, Harry. What can I do for you?"

"I, um, just met your new caretaker. And I, uh . . ." Harry was not sure how best to phrase what was on his mind. "I guess I wondered why you hired someone so much like, well, even a cousin to, the previous Filch." Harry was unaware that he was cringing as he said this.

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McGonagall steepled her fingers and leaned back. The flowers stitched in silver thread on her robe collar caught the orange light of the sky. "You don't like my choice," she observed lightly.

"Er, I guess," Harry admitted. "He isn't a Squib, is he?"

"My stars, no. We needed more magical help around here." She rocked back farther. "Would you like some tea?"

"I'd like to stay for dinner, if I could."

"Of course, my dear boy. Severus is not here, you realize?"

Harry snickered. "I figured as much."

She considered him. "I sense there is something you know that I do not."

"Probably," Harry said. "But we weren't discussing Severus."

"No," she ambled mildly on, "we were discussing why I have hired what appears to be a cruel monster as caretaker of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Yeah."

She laughed lightly. "Harry," she said, sounding only fond of him. "The students of this school, given even a short window of opportunity, would disassemble this castle to very last stone, pebble, and beam, and no brick barriers or charmed concrete would stop them. There would not be a single unbroken thing remaining after one year, let alone a thousand years. The caretaker always, always, must frighten the students."

Harry blinked at that. "So Filch wasn't, isn't, what he seems?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, he may very well be. I'll keep an eye on him." She raised an elegant finger and added, "Far easier to keep an eye on one caretaker than hundreds of magically curious, devious, and frightfully inept students."

She sounded so at peace with what she said that Harry had no argument.

"Unfortunate about Argus though," McGonagall added softly and after a minute added, "Life goes on, however, and our current caretaker was just about the only family he had." She stood and gave her robes a smoothing. "Let's head down to dinner, shall we?" As they walked at a leisurely pace, she said, "I plan to make it to the medal ceremony on Friday. Many others of the Wizengamot will be there as well. Good show of support, which you very much deserve."

Harry pondered that, finding something unsettling about the whole thing. Perhaps it was just how very politically orchestrated it was. He did not need or care for another medal.

On the Grand Staircase, McGonagall took Harry's arm. "So," she whispered conspiratorially. "What is it that I don't yet know about Severus?"

"I think I'm going to let him tell you," Harry said, bending his elbow to give her a proper escort into the Great Hall. "I pushed my luck too far just finding amusement in his telling me."

Harry enjoyed dinner with Ginny and the handful of staff who were present. The cooking made it clear that the elves had returned and for the first time in weeks, Harry stuffed himself with thirds.

He looked over at Hagrid, who had brought Willy, his pet pranticore, to the Great Hall with him and was feeding him scraps from a bucket of six-inch slugs and enormous millipedes. No one seemed to mind that he was doing this, despite the frequent escapes from the bucket. Hagrid gave him a wink and said, "I hope they give you the largest medal the Ministry's got, Harry."

"A small one would be fine, too," Harry said. "Are you going to be there?"

"He's on guard duty," Ginny said. "I can't go either." She shot a dark glance around at the teachers at the table. "The twins are banned as well, you know."

Harry looked around more closely too. "Where's Remus?" he asked.

Ginny leaned closer and said, "Monday was the full moon."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Harry said.

McGonagall, overhearing his question, said, "I received a letter from him yesterday saying he will be back on Friday."

Ginny leaned forward over her plate in McGonagall's direction and whispered, "Tell Harry where the owl was addressed from."

McGonagall turned again from her conversation with Sprout. "My dear girl, gossip is not welcome at the staff table."

"It isn't?" Ginny blurted. "That's news."

Harry slyly pointed out, "–Gossip by students is not welcome at the staff table is what she really means."

"Don't you want to know where the letter came from?" Ginny prompted Harry.

"Do I?"

"Godric's Hollow," she returned with a grin.

"That's all right," Harry said.

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Harry waited in the tearoom with Kerry Ann while Rodgers gave Ginny her instructions and closed the door to the room. Others ambled in and leaned forward toward the large crystal ball in the center of the table. The scene inside it showed the inside of the training room where the glow of the single blue fairy light made Ginny resemble a wax figure as she stood and waited, unmoving.

Harry found this task of watching the testers highly and improperly voyeuristic, but recognized how valuable it was in evaluating each candidate. He felt even less comfortable with Ginny than he had with the other candidate that morning.

Ginny reacted well to the claustrophobia test and the blood test, but had an extreme reaction to the spiders. Harry had no idea she had the same difficulty as Ron in that area. At least she did not leap up from the floor, just sucked in her breath loudly, perhaps to swallow a scream. Harry found himself biting his nails as the test went on, something he never normally did.

"Something between you two?" Aaron finally asked, when Harry, jumped when the Ogre's whip cracked.

"No," Harry said, quickly. "Well, she's an old friend. Like a younger sister really."

Aaron chuckled. "That explains you chewing your fingers off over there."

Kerry Ann said, "You're handling this worse than she is, you know."

"How would you feel watching your little brother go through that," Harry asked.

Kerry Ann sat back with a smirk. "He'd deserve it," she quipped.

Harry went back to chewing his thumbnail as the boa constrictor that he himself had instructed, slithered its way into the room. Ginny watched it with little interested, perhaps seeming insulted by such a test.

"Ick," Aaron shuddered. "How can people like snakes?"

"This from a Slytherin," Harry commented. He glanced at Vineet, who had not spoken at all, just sat watching the crystal ball in silence.

"Who's playing evil wizard this time?" Blackpool asked.

"Reggie," Tonks said. "Said I was too easy on Tridant. I think Reggie looks more like a vampire in his disguise than a dark wizard."

"You're too short to be a dark wizard," Aaron said.

"You don't have to be tall to face someone chained to the floor. How can they tell how tall you are?"

"Shhhh," Kerry Ann said, since Ginny had just woken from the Sleeping Fog, unknowingly doped with truth serum.

"I am not in favor of this part," Vineet stated.

Harry silently agreed. Ginny appeared small and helpless huddled there on the floor. Rodgers' disguised appearance seemed to confuse her more than frighten her. She figured out quickly that she was still potioned, even though Rodgers lied when she asked. She actually swore at him, which made Kerry Ann put her hand to her mouth in surprise and to suppress a laugh.

The tiny figure of Ginny was groggily sniping, "Yeah, you think I don't know what every bloody potion concoction known to wizardom feels like, then you don't know Fred and George Weasley very well."

Even Tonks laughed. "I don't think anyone has every told off the dark wizard before. People have tried to trip him, kick him even, but not tell him off."

Rodgers recovered though, and said, "Think you're strong enough to face anything, eh?"

"No, not anything," Ginny returned. "I think I'm still alive when there were a lot of chances not to be. That's all I think. You're only pretending to be dangerous."

He held the second cup of Veritaserum out then, earlier than normal. When she realized what it was, she snorted and said, "You think I'm lying about you looking like a fake dark wizard."

Rodgers had lost most of the tone of his persona, as he simply said, "Trusting us, this department, enough to swallow that, is part of the test. Most teenage girls think they have secrets but they are not real ones, just silly little embarrassments that they fear reliving."

Ginny took the cup in her hand, noisily trailing the chain on her wrist as she did so. She gave Rodgers a dubiously insulting raised eyebrow. "I had Voldemort inside my head for most of a school-year, you know." She did like most testers did and stared into the cup.

"Did you put that on your application?" Rodgers asked.

"You didn't ask it on your application," Ginny said, drinking down the cup.

The amused silence in the tearoom was broken by Tonks saying, "I should have done the dark wizard on this one."

When the test was over, Harry escorted Ginny to Hogwarts, since Mr. Weasley turned out to have been called away to a meeting. Ginny's face was wane, but she was doing better than Harry remembered doing.

At the lift, she shivered. "I can't believe everyone was watching."

"It won't seem so bad later. If you actually get accepted and are apprenticed, you won't have any secrets around here at all."

"I supposed," Ginny said, rubbing her hands over her arms. "I can make it back all right by myself."

"I have to take you. Someone has to take you."

"Take me for a pint, then," she insisted in worn tone. "That's what I really need."

Harry glanced back down the quiet corridor. "A quick one," he said quietly.

Ginny's face pulled into a grin. "Thanks, Harry."

Friday, the current Auror apprentices were nearing the end of their lunch break when Tonks came in to tell Harry that he needed to go down to the Atrium. Harry glanced down at his training suit and rushed to the changing room, Tonks following. Harry pulled out his dress Auror robes and, holding them up under his chin, asked, "These?"

"Yeah, quickly, Harry," Tonks insisted. "Minister thought you'd be down there already."

Harry started to pull his robes over his training suit, when Tonks said, "Wait, you're chains are wrong. You're supposed to have a second chain."

Harry, robes askew and half inside out, leaned one shoulder into the mirror to look at the decoration in question. "Does it matter that much?"

She helped him untangle and stared at his robes in consternation. "We never had an Advancement Ceremony for you four; Voldemort interrupted it. And yes, it matters; you look like a first-year."

Harry found that prospective vision more debasing than expected. The last year had been a hard-earned achievement. "I could wear my regular dress robes. I brought those too."

She was looking through the other lockers, even unspelling some that were locked. "Yeah, why don't you. I can't find another set with the right number. Munz's must have been sent to his family."

"His wouldn't fit anyway," Harry pointed out, feeling very odd about the prospect of wearing his dead fellow apprentice's robes.

"Dress robes then, and let's go."

The other apprentices followed them down, chatting with an ease that had been lacking for weeks. "Harry must have a wardrobe full of medals by now," Kerry Ann teased.

"Not really," Harry insisted. He yet again straightened his robes, hoping they did not need a good cleaning.

"You look fine," Tonks said.

Harry turned to Kerry Ann and then Aaron for confirmation of this, annoying Tonks who accused him of not trusting her opinion. "Come on, Valentino; you're late." She hauled him out of the lift, pulling his robes crooked again.

Minister Bones did not seem to care that Harry was late. She was beaming and looking over the busy crowd, which only had to fill half the Atrium, given that the podium and backdrop had been set up just in front of the fountain.

Harry waited behind the golden cloth backdrop as instructed. His fellows departed after a few last teasing jabs and headed around to the front. Harry was left alone. He felt nervous and wondered at it. Certainly, he was hopeful that being given a medal would make people less alarmed by his presence, but that did not seem to be what was bothering him. Harry tossed his robes straight again and checked for his wand. His other pocket was not empty either, it dropped heavily against his leg.

"Afternoon," Snape said, stepping up to him. At Harry's surprised glance, Snape explained, "I saw the other apprentices joining the audience and assumed you must have arrived as well."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, deep in other thoughts.

"Everything all right?"

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"I kind of wish we weren't doing this," Harry said. That rang true inside of him. He stood on one foot and bounced his other heel impatiently.

"You are in need of this show of support, I think," Snape pointed out.

"I could get by without it," Harry said. He fingered his wand inside his pocket, swung his arms forward and back, and finally stopping all that, gave out a sigh.

Bones came to fetch him. "Ah, Professor Snape," she said. "We are about to begin, if you'll excuse us . . ."

She led Harry before the curtain and up to the podium. The faces of the crowd revealed curiosity more than any other emotion, and Harry had grown accustomed to fascinating people since the first time Hagrid introduced him in the Leaky Cauldron. Some faces, especially Mrs. Weasley's and Hermione's in the front row, were smiling broadly. Harry gave them a smile back and did not have much time to wonder where Mr. Weasley was as he strode out from behind the backdrop at that moment.

Harry glanced around at the other familiar faces of Candide, McGonagall and Ron and Bill Weasley as Minister Bones tapped the podium with her wand and began what she promised would be a short speech.

"We are here this afternoon to honor one of the Ministry of Magic's most dedicated servants for good . . ." She went on in this vein, giving everyone a history lesson that they almost certainly did not need. Harry tried very hard not to fidget as her speech wound on for many minutes. Finally, she gestured off to the side, to where Rodgers stood waiting, prompting him to carry over the small trunk Harry had seen in Bones office. Bones was saying, " . . . by this small token, we today recognize Mr. Potter for his steadfast . . ."

Harry did not hear what came next. A wave of aversion washed through him in parallel with a realization of utter clarity: he did not want this ceremony because it represented such an irresistibly tempting target.

The trunk clattered to the floor as Harry grabbed Bones' robes and shoved her down behind the podium. A blast smacked into the heavy ancient wood, cracking it deafeningly. Harry pulled his wand to put up a block, but Rodgers already had the Minister firmly behind himself and was scooting her to the edge of the curtain. A shot arced out from nowhere in their direction but Rodgers' block held. Bones had her own wand out now, but let Rodgers handle the spells. People were screaming and running for the hearths and the rear corner of the Atrium where Apparition was allowed.

A twisting, ill feeling took over Harry's chest as he looked out over the surging mass of people; he was helpless to do anything. Another arc came from elsewhere and the

crowd heaved in panic from the spot where it struck. More screaming followed as Harry tried to track the movement of his friends, but they were swallowed up. Snape Harry found easily; he had pushed a group toward the hearths beside the raised platform and along with Mrs. Weasley, was trying to provide cover for their escape. A young witch leapt up and ran across the platform. Harry, feeling that warning aversion, caught her with one arm and spelled a block to protect her. When the onslaught ended, he pushed her to keep running. Thinking that her motion drawing the spell may not have been a coincidence, Harry ran to the other rear corner of the platform and yes, he did indeed attract another shot, which knocked him to his knees behind a Titan Block. He could probably keep this one's attention, but the other weapon was still randomly picking off others in the frantic, shifting crowd.

As Harry ran, the thing in his pocket slapped against his thigh. He pulled it out. In the bright Atrium he could better read the writing scratched into the black wax: Monster Mash a simple Alohomora will suffice. Ill helplessness coiled violently around Harry's heart again. "If you ever made magic that was obnoxiously big and disruptive," Harry said to the absent twins, "let this be the time." He dropped the disk, took two quick steps back and hit it with the prescribed spell.

The rush of air nearly knocked Harry flat. Two massive two-legged creatures had surged upward out of the disk until their heads skimmed the ceiling. Harry scrambled back off of the platform and gaped up, as many others did, at the giant green ogres in sequin suits who seemed to be dancing to the sparkles of one small lone mirror ball on the high Atrium ceiling. Harry pushed himself to his feet and joined Snape at the nearest hearth. Snape shot him a glance of sharp confusion and then shouted and pointed behind him to urge the next panicked person to enter the hearth.

But Harry's diversion seemed to be working. The spell arcs now flew high and harmlessly over the crowd's head to pass through the bizarre apparitions, scattering their magic sequins but not much else. Harry moved to the next hearth, where Ron, Hermione, and McGonagall were playing traffic cops. She waved him on that they was all right and next he found two of his fellows, protecting a larger group that was far more unruly. Tonks and Aaron were carrying a fallen wizard to the Apparition corner, shouting to clear a path. Harry rushed their way and ahead of them, clearing a path easily.

By the time the Atrium was emptied of visitors and the two ceramic spelling devices, as well as the disco ogres had spent themselves and crashed to the floor, leaving behind only dust and a few stray silver sequins, Harry himself was spent. He sat heavily on the edge of the platform and let his arms go slack. A hand fell on his shoulder and he looked up at Snape with a wry expression.

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"As long as you are all right," Snape said.

Harry stared at his burned sleeve. "I must have got grazed, but it doesn't hurt."

An argument reached their ears, approaching fast. "If they portkeyed in, there MUST be a record," Bones fumed to the Head of Magical Transportation.

"There is no record; I just double-checked myself," the man said, striding hard to keep up with her, despite not wearing heels.

Bones made a noise of disgust and stopped beside the burned curtain to survey the Atrium. Her eyes made it around to Harry and, loudly so it would carry, she said, "Good to see you survived, Mr. Potter."

"You too, Madam Bones," Harry replied.

After her inspection, she stepped over and held out her hand until Harry held out his. She dropped the medal into his hand, letting the ribbon fall slack, saying, "This is yours, I believe." She started to step away but stopped and asked, "That crazy . . . thing . . . that was a Weezes device of some kind, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Minister," Harry replied, uncertain if she was hoping for that answer or not.

She walked away, but added over the clacking of her heels, "You deserve the medal, Harry, but it is too dangerous to give it to you where anyone else can see."

Harry stared at the profile of Merlin engraved on the medal. He dropped his hand and looked over the scorch marks on the floor. For some reason seeing them make his arm hurt. "Good thing more people weren't here. Good thing Candide got away. Did you hear if more than two died?" he asked.

"I did not," Snape replied.

Harry sat another minute before he pushed himself to his feet. "I'm sure there are things needing to be done." That helpless feeling was still following him and guilt was now competing with it. He hoped to get distracted from all serious emotion.

Snape grabbed hold of his undamaged sleeve, gesturing at the other scorched one. "You are certain that is minor?"

Harry glanced down at his arm and tugged his layered sleeve up. The only part that still held together was where the decorative stitching reinforced the fabric. He tore it free, exposing a row of black marks marring the flesh of his forearm. When he lifted his arm, the same tattered scorching showed on the side of his robes. "I can't feel it."

"You will shortly, I'm sure. To St. Mungo's with you."

"Don't you have a poultice in your potions cabinet for it or something?" Harry asked, not wanting to visit the Wizard hospital if he could avoid it.

Snape lifted Harry's arm gently by the wrist and looked more closely at the equally spaced row of oval burns, arranged as though he had been hit by something that had been waving when it struck. Snape shook his head. "They are deep and worse than you realize." He released Harry and added, "St. Mungo's is a supremely wise idea right now if you have any injury at all."

"How's that? It must be mad there." Harry wondered aloud, now dreading the pain that must be hovering there in his arm, trying to reach his brain.

"Come along; it will become clear later."

Snape sent a silver message through the floor and began leading Harry away across the debris-strewn atrium to the corner where they could depart. Before they made it, running feet sounded by the gate and Tonks came across to them.

"Harry, why didn't say you were hurt?" she asked accusingly, clearly unnerved.

"He did not know," Snape calmly pointed out.

"Do you want me to come along?" she asked.

Harry nodded, but Snape mysteriously said, "You can take the midnight shift."

Tonks straightened but then, looking more official, nodded and gave Harry's shoulder a pat before she ran off again.

Harry's asking, "What's the midnight shift?" was interrupted by Snape Apparating them to hospital.

Chapter 40.

Wounded Future

As they weaved their way through the crowded and shifting waiting room, Harry began to feel quite unwell, and was looking forward to lying down. The world melted into a blur while Snape spoke to the greetingwitch and lifted Harry's arm for her inspection.

Rita Skeeter approached, parting the fog of Harry's mind. "Well," she snorted, "don't tell me you were injured too?"

Harry simply stared at her, unable to comprehend her meaning. He still held his arm out of his torn robe sleeve. Skeeter lifted it with quick confidence and probably meant to rub at one of the black marks, but her thumb broke through into crackling black flesh. A noise of distress escaped Harry as, at her prodding, the pain leapt the gap of his shock. The two of them stared at each other in surprise. Snape pushed himself between them and made a motion as though to go for his wand, but he was hampered by holding Harry up.

Harry was quickly led away, aware only of the daggers seemingly stabbing his arm, not the daggers Snape sent Skeeter's way with his eyes. After a tormenting journey down corridors and up the lift, they eventually arrived at Shankwell's treatment room. Rodgers was sitting on the table, but he leapt down when he saw Harry and helped lead him over to take his place.

"What happened, Potter?"

Harry could not find a response, but Snape said, "Delayed reaction." He moved to the potions cabinet in the corner and pushed bottles around until he found what he

was looking for. He poured a dose into a small crystal tumbler from on top of the cabinet and brought it to Harry.

"Don't you think the Healer . . ." Rodgers began.

Snape explained in unusually rapid speech. "It cannot wait."

Harry drank down the tumbler held up to his mouth and soon nothing at all mattered. His arm still hurt, sort of, but it seemed very unimportant.

Healer Shankwell returned moments later and he easily shifted to working on his new patient.

"Did you give him something?" Shankwell asked as he charmed a tankard of salt water so it would flow more slowly.

"I gave him a swallow of Miseringuish," Snape stated as though very uninterested in arguing. "From your cabinet, there."

Harry lay unmoving, uncaring, as the charred burns were cleaned and salved and wrappings put on them. Snape stood beside the table, assisting as needed since the Healer was alone. Rodgers stood at the head of the table, watching.

Harry spoke but no one could understand him. The Healer leaned very close and then relayed his message, "He says he is glad you two are not fighting."

After that, Harry was out cold. He awoke in a large, dark ward. The floating fairy lights hovered close to the ceiling against the wall, over each bed, only emitting a faint glow. Their slight movements made Harry feel as though he were under water, staring up at buoys floating on the surface.

"Hey, Harry," Tonks whispered from close-by.

Harry's chest tightened at the sound of her voice. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Since midnight," she said with a smile that he could read in the dim shape of her round cheek. "'The midnight shift', remember? Severus didn't want you left unguarded."

Harry moved to sit up, sending a stab of pain through his arm. He ignored it and adjusted his pillow to lean back against it. He studied his arm, which was wrapped in white bandage from the tips of his fingers to his shoulder. "I don't even know when I got hit," he said.

"That happens," she assured him. "Healer came by an hour ago. Said you were going to be healing for a while."

"Great," Harry breathed sarcastically. "At least my wand hand is all right," he said, stretching his right hand out and then clenching it to check that it was working properly. "How long do I have to stay here?"

"Well, you need a lot more treatments, they said, every few hours. They did two while you were sleeping."

Whispering, because the patient on the next bed had snorted in his sleep and rolled over, Harry said, "Tonks, I have things I need to do." She nodded in understanding, and he added, dropping his voice more, "I have to get this bloke." He sighed in frustration and rested his head on the wooden headboard.

"There are chunks missing from your arm, Harry, and a chunk out of your side." She sounded distressed now as she spoke, making Harry relent a little. She leaned over and gave him a kiss, which really made him relent. "Does it hurt . . . your arm?"

"A little, but it's all right," he assured her. "What time does Severus come back?" he asked, leaning forward, hoping for another kiss.

"Seven. A few more hours."

Harry lifted the covers. "You could join me . . ."

"Behave yourself."

"No . . . really." He glanced around the room. "Everyone's asleep."

"You should be too," she said, sitting back and crossing her arms.

He reached a hand out to rub her knee. "We could Apparate away . . ."

"Go to sleep," she whispered. "Next time I am not taking the midnight shift."

Harry gave her a mock frown and gave up on teasing her. Unfortunately, his merriment was the only thing keeping the weight of the attack, the prophecy, and his frustration at bay, so his frown grew into a real one.

"Come on, Harry, keep your chin up," she coaxed. When Harry did not react, she added, "Hey, look on the bright side, only one patient insisted on being moved when you were brought into the ward."

Harry gave her a very dark look.

"I thought that was good. Look, there are twenty-some people in here." She waved her arm along the row behind her.

Harry tipped his head back, making it clunk audibly against the headboard, and returned to staring at the fairy lights.

Defensively, Tonks muttered, "I thought that was good, just one. Oh, and Ron left a note for you. Your friends all stopped by, but the staff would only let them in two at a time."

Harry unfolded the note and squinted at it in the low light before shaking a Lumos from his wand to see better.

Bit of excitement, Harry. Just like old times. Hope you got that medal in the end. Terrible to get cheated out of it, since you definitely earned it. Just receiving it, you earned it, funny enough. Won't be able to stop by again until evening tomorrow – have extended duty at the bank due to a rise in the new security appraisal the Goblins are using here now.

Harry finished the letter and refolded it, grateful his friends were all there to help and that none of them had been hurt.

Early in the morning, Harry was roused from his half-sleep by his fellow visiting. Aaron took a chair from across the room and sat close beside Harry. He glanced at Tonks and said, "How ya' doin? Lucky you're here. Rodgers seemed eager to talk to you this morning."

"He could have talked to me yesterday," Harry said, remembering his trainer here at the hospital at some point.

"He tried. Said you were doped out of your gourd." Aaron watched the doorway. "I expect he'll be here shortly."

"That's fine; I'll talk to him." He glanced at Tonks, who shrugged.

Rodgers did arrive five minutes later, carrying a notebook and looking serious. He started in with a question, "How did you know the illusions would distract the devices?"

Harry replied, "I didn't know. I didn't even know what the disk was." They stared at each other. Harry went on, "I saw the aim of one of those things follow a witch who ran toward the back curtain and then successfully drew its fire onto myself. But I couldn't draw both of them to just shoot at me. I had to try something else."

"Harry gets very lucky with his guesses," Tonks pointed out from where she leaned against the wall after giving up her chair.

Rodgers frowned thoughtfully.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"We don't want it to look too pat; as though you may have been involved."

"What?" Harry asked weakly.

"We're being precautionary here, Potter. Ministry has to tell this story with the right explanations attached is all. I need to understand them to explain them to the Minister." His gaze grew sharper. "I am not accusing you of anything," he pointed out sharply.

"Sorry, sir," Harry said, dropping his gaze.

Rodgers flatly said, "It does help that you're injured. I don't normally say that, believe me." He flipped through his notebook. "Well, we'll see when the papers come out this morning. Minister hoped to steer the stories this morning, but you were unconscious until after they went to press. We'll see how it goes."

Harry's memory teased at him. "I saw Skeeter yesterday, here."

"How'd it go? Did you talk to her?" Rodgers asked.

Harry used his good arm to scratch his head. Across from him a man with four eyes was getting two of them examined while gesturing to the Healer with hands of ten fingers each. Harry shook himself and tried to remember better. "I don't think it went so well. I . . . don't think she believed I was hurt."

Rodgers slapped his notebook closed and stood. "Yup, doesn't surprise me." He nodded to Tonks and departed.

Tonks retook her chair. "You don't remember what Skeeter said?"

"Something sarcastic about my really being hurt." Harry hesitated, eyes darting over the far wall as he tried to piece together spotty memories. "Um, I think Severus tried to pull his wand on her. I don't remember too much."

Aaron and Tonks shared a look of alarm, which Harry did not see as he settled back onto his stack of pillows. "I didn't get any dinner. Do you think breakfast is coming soon?" he plaintively asked.

Harry was finishing breakfast when Snape appeared, newspaper rolled under his arm.

"Is that the Prophet?" Aaron asked.

Snape lay the paper out across Harry's debris-strewn breakfast tray. The headline read: More Chaos within Ministry's Own Spell-Protected Building. And below, the

article's only mention of Harry was that his unorthodox thinking had probably saved quite a few lives.

"Hm," Harry muttered.

"That's excellent," Tonks said, sounding very relieved.

"Why would anyone think I was involved?" Harry asked, annoyed.

"You knew the attack was coming before anyone else did," Tonks replied.

"I could feel it; that's why I knew that," Harry pointed out.

"We all know that Harry, but Curse-Nose is pretty rare."

"Curse-Nose?" Harry echoed.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "My great aunt could smell curses."

"I don't smell them," Harry pointed out smartly, finding annoyance coming on quickly. "I feel them."

Aaron shrugged. "Same thing: you know about them before anyone else does."

Healer Shankwell approached then, guiding a floating tray of tins. "Time to renew the Thewsolve."

Tonks and Aaron departed, leaving Snape at Harry's bedside across from the Healer. He suspiciously eyed the other occupants of the ward a good three rounds until he was satisfied they were harmless, and Harry was glad to have him there, so he did not have to think about anything.

"When can I go home?" Harry asked when the last of the fresh bandage was being tied into a bow under his armpit.

Shankwell appeared doubtful. "A while yet." When Harry groaned, the Healer asked, "Tired of us already?"

Harry nodded.

"If you really feel up to departing, you can return every six hours for treatment. But only if you feel confident enough to Apparate. We can't have you missing any appointments."

Harry glanced around the ward, at the curious faces who looked away when he looked their way. "Yeah, I'm good," he said with forced confidence.

After Harry signed out, Snape took him to Hermione's flat. Harry said, "I can't wait –till the house is fixed." Hermione stepped out of her room as he said this. "No offense, Hermione."

"None taken." She gave him a long hug. "I came to see you twice yesterday, but you probably don't remember."

Harry shook his head and tried not to lean on her. "I think I need to sit down"

Hermione cleared off the couch while Snape went off to fetch a few potions. Harry fell asleep but was startled awake a short time later by Snape touching him on the arm.

"It was a little early to depart the hospital, I think," he said calmly. He poured out a small glass of something. "Arm bothering you?"

Harry nodded and struggled to sit up. Snape helped haul him up by his good arm and handed him the glass. After drinking it, Harry leaned his head forward onto his palm, which was propped on his leg.

"Harry?" Snape prompted in concern.

"I can't take care of the prophecy like this."

Snape's hand brushed Harry's head. "It may still work out for the best."

"What's with the optimism?" Harry accusingly asked. He cocked his head to the side to look up at him. "I count on you to worry about every last little thing in order to guard against it. Don't get all everything-will-work-out on me."

"You are young; you lack understanding in how these things work, Harry. And I rarely have seen you fail."

Harry rolled his eyes and sat back, struggling to come up with an argument when it was clear Snape intended to forcefully instill Harry with faith in himself, even at the cost of his own usual pessimistic viewpoint. Crookshanks leapt up on the corner of the armrest and stared at them. "Really, Severus, I think you haven't been watching closely enough. I failed yesterday to stop the ceremony. I should have known it would attract Merton."

"I do hope you are not nursing yet a new source of guilt."

"They were there for me," Harry said, forgetting himself and gesturing painfully with his injured arm.

"They were there because the Minister of Magic asked them to be."

"Yeah, but because of me. They would not have been there if it had not been for me."

"In the end, everyone takes their own risks in life, Harry."

Harry wanted to argue more, but he was too exhausted to. He closed his eyes but opened them again immediately. "Are you sure you're you?"

Snape's left brow rose dangerously. "I will try not to take that as an insult."

"Yeah, well, you're different," Harry griped as he lay down onto his side to get comfortable for a real nap. "It's confusing." After another pause, Harry challenged, "If you thought I wasn't ready to leave hospital, why'd you let me?"

"I did not want to have to potion you again, just in case," Snape explained. Harry turned his head up to look at him and he clarified. "I was afraid that extreme pain may cause you to open the interstice to the Dark Plane. That is why I gave you such a heavy overdose."

Harry lay his head back down, muttering, "Now that's the Severus I know."

Snape woke Harry six hours later. He found his robes and helped him into them.

"Do not use your left arm," Snape chastised him.

"Yes, Dad," Harry breathed.

Snape's razor sharp tone continued. "Do you not remember the Healer's instructions?"

Harry allowed his cloak to be swung over his shoulders for him, despite his dislike of needing so much help. "It's hard to remember to follow them. It doesn't hurt so much anymore."

"Well, that is something. Let's go."

They waited in the corridor outside of Shankwell's treatment room. People passed by, many gave Harry sympathetic glances. When the corridor was empty briefly, Harry said, "Well, that's a change."

"Best public relations move you could have made, really," Snape dryly observed. "Had you not been injured, I fear what we would be dealing with right this moment."

Harry shook his head in disgust and leaned harder against the wall.

Shankwell re-salved the deep grooves that had just started to fill in with new muscle and then re-bandaged them. The Healer said, "You have to keep that arm out of service. Looks like you haven't been."

"All I did was sleep," Harry argued.

Chapter 40

Back at Hermione's flat, Harry stared down at Crookshanks looking up at him and said, "I should go see what I can do at the Ministry."

"You will stay here and rest," Snape countered.

"How can I do that? We're too shorthanded." He went over to Kali's cage to let her out. She hobbled up his right arm to his shoulder, clearly favoring a leg. "She's hurt."

"Of course she is hurt," Snape said. "You are hurt."

Harry plucked her off of his shoulder, to hold her up for inspection. Snape loudly said, "Uh, uh. Not with that hand."

Harry transfered her to his right hand and pressed his left against his side with the intent of leaving it there. His pet spread her wings and flapped for balance. "Her wings are all right." He carried her to the couch and sat down. "Severus, I can't just sit here for six hours at a time," he complained.

Snape scooped up a stack of four books from the floor before the bookshelf and dropped them on the couch beside Harry. "Those are yours, are they not?" At Harry's nod, he went on, "You must have readings to do."

"I'm about a week behind," Harry admitted, aborting using his left hand to lift the top book. After juggling his pet around, he could use his right hand to open the book and prop it on his legs. He read a few lines and asked, "You aren't going to stay all day; are you?" Harry did not at all want to be baby sat that long.

"I was considering it."

Harry returned to his book, saying, "Candide's all right and everything?"

"She is fine. She believes she is growing accustomed to the unexpected."

Hermione returned, arms full of grocery sacks. "How are you Harry? Professor. Thought we should have some food around for once," she breathlessly explained. "Some owls arrived too, Harry. Did you see them?"

Harry moved to stand, but Snape beat him to it. "Really, Severus, I'm perfectly able to fetch my own post," Harry complained, but he accepted the letters and held one up, resisting using both hands to open it. The return address indicated it was from Suze. Harry tried holding the envelope between his knees and prying at the gummed flap with his right hand. That sort of worked. Snape stood, arms crossed, watching him, which did not help. More rebellion worked its way to the surface of Harry's

mood. "I can get by, Severus. Really. I can make it on my own to my evening appointment."

Snape, unaffected, bowed his head and swung around to look at Hermione meaningfully before Disapparating.

"I'll make some lunch," Hermione said, to break the long silence that followed.

"I'll help," Harry said, levering himself to his feet, while holding his left hand tight to his side.

"You'll not," Hermione countered.

"I can help with a wand," Harry pointed out smartly, not in the mood to be babied by anyone.

"Use it to open your post, then. I can cook."

Before dinner, Harry took himself to St. Mungo's for his next appointment, making a point of maneuvering into his cloak without help. Part of him wondered at his stubbornness about accepting assistance, but he quickly shook off that introspection.

During his visit with the Healer, he received an earful for continuing to use his left hand. Before Harry was allowed to depart, he had to accept having his arm put in a canvas sling. As Harry waited for the lift on the way out, he repeatedly adjusted his collar to get the itchy strap off of his neck. A familiar voice greeted him when the lift doors opened.

"Harry!" It was Elizabeth, his neighbor, using crutches with difficulty, her foot in a large Muggle cast.

Harry stepped back and guided her out from the front, while her mother helped from behind. Harry let the lift doors close without him. Elizabeth's mother greeted Harry and said she would go check in directly with the Healer.

"What happened?" Harry asked Elizabeth.

She shrugged with her crutches and then tucked them back under her arms. "I got stepped on when the crowd in the Atrium got crazy."

"You were there?" Harry asked in surprise. "I didn't see you."

"It was crowded, and we were near the back. I talked my mum into it at the last minute."

Harry rather than release her, moved his hand up to grasp her arm. "I'm glad you weren't hurt worse," he said, feeling an awful weight pressing down on him.

"It not much really." She lifted her casted foot easily. "Just two little bones. Dad insisted on going to the Muggle surgeon's, but after seeing me hobbling around for a day, Mum insisted on getting it taken care of properly." She laughed then. "Mum brought the x-rays and the greetingwitch downstairs couldn't believe what they were."

Harry grinned too; thought about recalling the lift; thought about leading her down to the Healer and decided on that, since her mother had not yet returned. He found himself unexpectedly drawn to Elizabeth. She did not have any makeup on and her abundant brown hair was bundled loosely on the back of her head, so she looked far more approachable. "Come on. I'll take you down to your mum," Harry heard himself say while offering a hand for balance.

As they walked, Elizabeth commented about how unfortunate everything seemed to be lately in the wizarding world, but noted that Harry's house appeared to be getting repaired. "The slate for the roof had been delivered last time I walked by, and the hole in the wall is half re-stoned."

Harry made noises of ascent but in reality was wondering where these feelings were coming from and then feeling bad because he was feeling them for someone other than Tonks.

They arrived in the alcove where Elizabeth's mother waited. Harry left his friend off there, with what turned out to be a curt goodbye. Harry then violated both the advice of his Healer and his adoptive father and Apparated to the alleyway beside the temporary Ministry entrance.

Harry was greeted warmly by all he encountered on the way to the Auror's office. When he arrived, Rodgers said, "You aren't cleared for duty already, are you?" He sounded hopeful that Harry might reply in the affirmative, but Harry shook his head.

Tonks was at her desk. Harry approached and when she looked up at him in question, was relieved to find far more warm feelings for her than the strange tingle he had been getting with Elizabeth.

"You aren't supposed to be here," Tonks said, sounding official, which put a dent in Harry's feelings even though he knew that it should not.

"I wanted see how . . . things were," Harry explained. In reality he thought he had to prove to himself he was not somehow cheating on Tonks. "I can't stay long. I can't let Severus catch me here." In fact, the thought of that gave Harry serious worries.

"How are you healing?" Shacklebolt asked as he came in. He set something down and started to leave again but waited for Harry's reply.

"Fine. Slow."

"You missed the announcement this morning," Rodgers said to Harry after a pause. "We have the partial N.E.W.T. results back for the applicants who were waiting on them."

"How did Ginny do?"

Rodgers frowned.

"Askunk?" Harry then asked.

Rodgers tilted his head. "A little better than Ms. Weasley. Her second round of testing had been delayed. We are probably going to cancel it, invite them both to apply next year. Weasley won't have to redo the second round, but her written scores need to rise."

It was Harry's turn to frown. He had urged Askunk to apply. "Mr. Weasley will be happy to hear that. Is Aaron around?"

"He's out on a call."

Harry stood between the door and Tonk's chair, thinking, for several minutes. "I need to go," he said. He had another letter to write, it seemed.

Harry had to use a sticking charm to get his parchment to lay still on the table so he could write with one hand. But he replied to Suze, who wanted to be sure he was really all right from the incident in the Atrium. And he tried to write a letter to Askunk, but found himself struggling. He finally explained his dilemma to Hermione.

Harry said, "She has a real chip on her shoulder about not getting a fair chance to be an Auror because she sorted into Slytherin."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said, setting a heaping plate of meatballs on the table beside large bowl of noodles that was already steaming there. She seemed to have cooked for six people even though there were only two of them eating.

"I told her that. And Aaron's been writing to her with advice." Harry stared at his nearly blank letter. "Maybe I should just go talk to her."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "You think you need to do that?"

Chapter 40

Harry scrunched the letter into a ball with his right hand and tossed it into the rubbish bin. "This is how we make enemies. We offend people, even if we aren't trying to. Maybe it's worth going out of your way sometimes to avoid it."

Hermione pushed the plate of chops in Harry's direction and sat down across from him.

As Harry ate, he kept glancing around the room. "I keep expecting Severus to just show up, checking on me."

"I doubt he'll do that. You made it pretty clear you didn't want him around."

Harry stared at her. "I didn't. I just didn't want to be babied, that's all. He should be taking care of Candide anyway, with a kid on the way and all."

Hermione's bite of mashed potatoes sprayed far enough that Harry jumped back, jarring his arm.

With exaggerated calm, she asked, "Did I hear you right?"

"Yup," Harry said. "Don't pass it around. I expect he plans to not do that himself."

Hermione laughed. "Boy or girl?"

"I have no idea."

The following day passed slowly in forced idleness. The flat was empty except for Harry and three pets, who stared at him far too much. Harry closed the book he had been half-reading and took his cloak down off the rack. He arranged the cloak so it fell to cover his sling and Disapparated to Diagon Alley.

The alley was quieter than expected, given how warm the day was. Nearly every window was open and more noise floated into the alley from within the buildings than from without. Harry strode toward the Post Office, gathering long looks and turned heads as he went. He mostly ignored everyone, but he did warmly greet the woman exiting the Post Office, who probably had not intended to hold the door for him, but did so by virtue of having frozen in place.

Harry wandered along the long counter to where the battered Wizard Register sat chained. Harry flipped open the heavily creased pages and scanned the As. He noted Askunk's address, confusingly written as Nosehill, Wembley, but Harry had grown

used to translating old Wizard locations into new. The book groaned as he closed it, and seemed to wilt in relief at getting a break from holding itself together.

Half an hour later, after much walking and a bit of hunting for house numbers, Harry used the dragon-shaped knocker on the door of a low house with ubiquitous dark brown paint over the siding, trim, and door.

An unusually long time passed, but Sylvia Askunk opened the door and propped her hand on her hip. She had grown since Harry had last seen her standing up, she may even be taller than him, but three stone lighter for certain.

"What d'ya want?" she asked flatly.

Harry had not really planned out what he was going to say. He said, "Just wanted to tell you I was . . . well, sorry you didn't get into the program this year."

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect to," she muttered. She glanced inside before pulling the door closed behind her and stepping out onto the stoop. She stood crookedly, long arms crossed, red hair blowing in the breeze.

"You weren't that far from getting in. You should re-apply next year," Harry pointed out.

"What, go through all that again?"

"You didn't even get to the worst of it," Harry said.

"Little Ginny Weasley did," Askunk commented.

"Ginny's application got deferred as well, you know. She didn't get accepted either."

This broke Askunk's annoyed expression, although it did not alter her difficult tone. "Really? Darling Gryffindor daughter of the department head didn't get accepted?"

Harry found the edge of his patience. "Look," he said firmly. "Your attitude isn't doing anything except hurting yourself. No one is up against you but you, and the sooner you realize that the sooner you'll get what you want." She stared at him as though surprised by his outburst. Harry went on. "You did well, just not quite good enough. Look at Aaron. He wanted to be an Auror badly enough that he worked at it for five years. This was just your first try. And honestly it doesn't matter what you decide you want to do; this attitude of yours is going to get in the way. It would get in the way of scooping ice creams at Fortescues just as much as becoming an Auror."

Harry backed up a step. He had not meant to come out with such a diatribe and worried that he had done more harm than good. Dropping his gaze, he scuffed his foot on the walk and said, "Well, I should go . . ."

His starting to turn was interrupted by her saying, "You came here on duty just to yell at me?"

"No," Harry insisted, gesturing more widely. "I just wanted to say that I thought you were good enough to get in, but the requirements are really strict. And I'm not on duty; I'm not allowed until my arm heals." His arm, which was starting to ache from his moving it around as he talked. He pushed his cloak aside to show her his sling. "Which reminds me that I should really go."

This time, his departure was halted by her grudgingly saying, "Hope your arm gets better."

"Thanks."

"Hey, maybe if I win next year's dueling tournament."

"That couldn't hurt, but it's the books you need to spend more time with. I know it's boring sometimes, but to be an Auror, you need to be a walking law book and a walking filing manual and on top of that, memorize hundreds of evidence collection protocols and . . ." He made the mistake of waving his arms again.

She apparently ignored what he said. "Are they going to hold the dueling tournament again next year, given that Voldemort isn't really demised?"

Harry had not thought of that. Temporarily befuddled, he said, "I don't know. I'll definitely push to keep the tournament. The picnic can go."

She seemed to have relented somewhat. "Don't like picnics?"

"Not in my honor. Ordinary picnics are fine."

Harry returned to the Leaky Cauldron to use the Floo to get to Hogwarts, figuring if he was going to ignore the health of his arm to talk to a Slytherin he barely knew, he should also console Ginny.

Harry encountered McGonagall in the Entrance Hall. "Ah, Harry, well timed. Ms. Weasley is in the tower, shouting down her father just this minute."

As Harry approached the Fat Lady, he picked up the gist of the conversation drifting out of the tower. Mr. Weasley was unwisely sticking to the argument that this was for the best. Harry's entrance instantly quieted things. Ginny turned her red face away and stalked to the stairs leading to the girls' dormitory.

"Want me to talk to her, sir?" Harry asked his boss.

Mr. Weasley straightened his errant hair. "Yes, please," he said. "And then you go straight home to rest, like you should be," he added before exiting, sounding as though Harry were one of his own children.

Ginny turned after they were alone. "How's the arm?" she asked.

"Getting better. How's the ego?"

She rolled her eyes and sat heavily on the armrest of a ragged overstuffed chair. "Not good. Dad said they accepted that doofus, Tridant."

"Really? I hadn't heard that."

"He was such a weenie, giving everyone pointless advice they didn't want. Yick."

Harry chuckled. "We'll beat that out of him." At her doubtful expression, Harry said, "Really. Rodgers is good at that. It happens to everyone. I'm kind of looking forward to seeing it happen to Tridant, in fact." He grinned faintly.

"What'd they have to beat out of you?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing, as far as I know, but they tried hard to anyway."

"Really?" Ginny cringed as she asked.

"Really. You have to be molded to fit into the team. Most people who are really good don't want to be part of a team; they want to go it alone. And by the way, you did really well on everything but the written. Retake it next year. Work your tail off studying in between."

She huffed and said, "I thought if I passed the second part I was in."

"They gave you a chance to take the second part based on your performance during the battles. But that didn't mean you were in for certain."

She frowned. "Now I have to figure out what I'm going to do with myself."

"I thought you wanted to work for the twins?"

"I don't know," she moodily said.

"It would keep you on your toes. Keep your instinct for survival well tuned . . ." Harry teasingly pointed out.

Ginny laughed, but it faded. "I don't think they want me working for them, really." She stared at Harry thoughtfully. "Maybe I just won't give them a choice."

"That's the spirit."

Chapter 40

At Harry's next appointment, Shankwell threatened to check him back into the hospital ward.

"Do I have to dip that arm in solid plaster of paris to force you to give it a rest?" He facetiously asked Harry.

"I don't use it, really," Harry insisted. His arm was currently resting on a floating platform while Thewsolve was reapplied to the gouges which each time were a little less deep.

Shankwell dabbed his fingers into the salve and spread it onto the next untreated spot. "It's going to scar," he threatened. When Harry failed to respond to this, he added, "It's not going to heal as strong as it was. This is a nasty curse you were hit with and I can tell by the pattern that it leaked through a modulated block. You're lucky to be alive and you're taking healing very casually." He went back to smearing salve. "Though I haven't seen a boy your age who does care properly," he grumbled, "let alone one playing Auror."

"I'm not just playing Auror," Harry retorted, stung.

"Are you a full Auror already then?" Shankwell shot back. He looked poorly slept, which probably explained his short temper, but Harry's temper was even shorter.

"No. Are you really a Healer then?"

Shankwell's left brow rose and he stared at Harry in clear offense. "Excuse me?"

"If you were a real Healer I wouldn't have had to heal my father myself," Harry said, anger taking his caution with it.

Shankwell continued to stare at him, though with more of a keen expression than an offended one. Harry dropped his head and said. "Sorry." He glanced at his arm. "Are we almost done?" he asked in a much more conciliatory tone.

Shankwell finished spreading on salve and wrapped Harry's arm in fresh bandage. "We may not be done. We'd like to know what you did." He set his work tray aside and stood before Harry looking rather immovable.

Harry said, "I didn't want to lose him," as though that explained everything. To Harry it did.

"We certainly understand that," he conceded without conceding in general. Silence fell, Shankwell asked, "The spontaneous partial recovery of Mrs. Longbottom have something to do with this?"

Harry replied, "I needed someone to practice on."

Shankwell's head tilted violently as though appalled.

"I didn't hurt her," Harry insisted.

"You left her in an odd state, don't you think?"

"There's nothing left to do. That's all there is of her now." Harry made the mistake of gesturing with both hands as he spoke. "It's all fused together. I unwove what I could."

Shankwell grabbed Harry's left hand and snapped, "Stop using that." He roughly handed Harry the sling. "You're done." As Harry stood up, Shankwell with hot anger said, "Don't ever touch a patient in this hospital again without permission."

"I just wanted to keep my father around," Harry argued. "I–"

"You're finished. Get out," Shankwell repeated, voice hard.

Harry stared at him before collecting the sling and its straps into a ball and stuffing it into his pocket. This sudden shift in Shankwell's attitude had startled Harry. He almost tried to make his excuse again that he had not hurt anyone, but held back, not wanting to inspire more anger. He put his head down and said, "Thank you," on his way out.

That night, Harry woke from a bad dream just before the alarm went off to remind him of his next treatment. Hermione came to her door and blinked into the lamplight.

"Is something wrong?" she asked in confusion.

"Just my six-hour alarm," Harry said.

Hermione scrubbed at her eyes and sleepily said, "I thought I heard something else."

She must have heard him struggling in his dream. "I have to go," Harry said, finding his robes, which he simply slipped on over his pyjamas.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Hermione asked, sounding more alert.

"No."

At St. Mungo's, Harry hoped Shankwell had relented a little, but it was hard to tell though his hard-nosed attitude. Harry submitted to treatment in silence. He had

been very careful with his arm so there was no reason to reprimand him for that again. At the door, Harry glanced back and wondered if the man ever slept. Harry politely thanked him and departed. As an Auror, Harry was certain to need him again. Harry shuffled down the corridor with his bare feet rubbing inside his shoes, since he had not taken the time to put on socks.

Harry stopped and thought about just leaving from where he stood. It was considered rude to Disapparate from the general areas of the hospital, but the corridor was very quiet right now. Harry waited for the lift anyway, as though wanting to more closely follow the rules. His confrontation with Shankwell gnawed at him fiercely. The Healer was not exactly out of bounds with his anger, either. Harry perhaps should have tried to work with them instead of on his own, but at the time things had felt too overwhelmingly urgent to stop and explain something that he could barely explain even now.

Harry sighed and shook a bit of his disquiet off as he rode in the empty lift. He would repeat what he did again, if he had it to do over. And everything had worked out for the best, even if it did anger some people . . . who were perhaps justified in their anger.

The lift came to a halt at the ground floor, but Harry did not move to open the gate. He was thinking that he was justifying accepting two distinct sets of rules: the set everyone else had and the "Harry" set. This did not feel like a good precedent, especially for someone who was most likely harboring a piece of Voldemort.

Harry continued to turn this over in his head as he returned home, walking from a block away to avoid waking Hermione. It continued to circle his thoughts while he moved carefully around the flat, getting undressed, slipping his sling back on and settling in to sleep. Lying back, he stared at the spots from the streetlights shining on the ceiling. They had always had two sets of rules, he and his friends. Now that Harry could quote from memory a good quarter of the Ministry of Magic's rules, could he have an acceptable excuse for keeping another set on the side?

Harry slept restlessly, waking repeatedly from a dream where he was trying to help someone who kept running away. It was a disjointed dream composed of seemingly unrelated snippets like the witch he was chasing turning into a Snitch, and finding himself wearing skis, unable to move because he was on grass.

"Harry?" Hermoine's voice roused him from pleading with someone who insisted on walking out onto the High Street in Hogsmeade despite Harry being certain that hungry bears lurked there. Harry was lying on his injured arm and it throbbed in

response to this. He rolled over onto his back carefully because he knew it would hurt more initially when he got off of it, and it did.

Hermione moved across the room in the darkness.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked when he could see her silhouette opening Hedwig's cage.

She finished pulling Hedwig out and taking her to the window before replying. "Owling Professor Snape."

"Why?" Harry's tired brain asked.

"Because you're having a nightmare," she replied, sounding stubborn.

Harry sat up, careful to use only his right arm to do it. "It wasn't a bad nightmare or anything. Don't bother."

In a quieter voice, she said, "He said to."

Sharply, Harry said, "Hermione, I'm fine. Don't disturb Severus in the middle of the night. I don't need him." When she slid the sash up, Harry grew angry. "Hermione!"

Hermione waved the oil lamp up that sat beside Harry's bedside. In the low light she looked five years older. She held Hedwig on one forearm and held her wand in the other hand. "Do you remember what you said to me?" she asked as though not expecting an answer, and indeed she did not wait for one. "You said never let your guard down. Don't you remember that?"

"Yeah," Harry breathed, anger gone, replaced by a darker brooding.

Hermione let Hedwig out the window. She closed the sash and stepped to the kitchen. "Besides," she said more brightly, "you may be my oldest friend but he's a potential colleague."

"So you're taking the job?"

"I don't know. Maybe I am since I'm trusting him over you."

Harry rapidly shook his head and then rubbed his face, wondering if he was still dreaming; he didn't feel terribly awake.

Ten minutes later, Snape Apparated in. Hermione immediately took her herbal tea to her room and closed the door. Harry sat with his jaw propped on his hand. "I'm fine," he said.

"That is good," Snape said, pulling a chair over from the table. "How is the arm?"

"Slowly getting better," Harry said. "I get to return to light duty tomorrow."

Snape clasped his hands in his lap and sat watching Harry a while before saying, "And your dream?"

"Nothing important," Harry muttered, setting his chin on his knees. "Didn't need to bother you," he added.

"It isn't a bother," Snape stated easily, almost sounding like Dumbledore.

Harry looked at him. "We need a secret word so I know that you're you."

"What is in your dream?" Snape repeated, ignoring Harry's comment.

"Stupid stuff. Everyone's afraid of me, even people I'm trying to save from something." He straightened the duvet and leaned forward again, half hugging his knees. "I don't want people to be afraid of me."

"Stop doing terribly frightful things then."

"I didn't this time," Harry pointed out.

"Indeed, and look how much better the response was. In fact you did the opposite, you received an injury which proves that you are vulnerable."

"I wasn't trying to get hurt," Harry said. "Healer said it looked like a curse bled through my modulated block."

"That certainly would explain the pattern. It must have been an awfully powerful strike, in that case."

Unbidden, the chaotic scene from the Atrium played through Harry's mind again. Harry set his forehead down on his knees. "I have to get to Merton," he said, stressed.

"Not tonight."

"A lot of people I knew were in that Atrium," Harry said. "Elizabeth got hurt. Did you know that?"

"Seriously?"

"Just broke her foot. I saw her at St. Mungo's getting it healed." The scene played selectively again through Harry's mind's eye. "What does he want? Why does he want to hurt so many people? I don't understand. If I don't understand, how can I stop him?"

"At the risk of sounding like my former mentor again, I will say that I think you need to wait for your time to come. I have observed that you instinctively know when it has arrived."

"I want it over with now. I don't want anything else bad to happen."

Snape stood and rested a hand on Harry's flannel pyjamaed shoulder. "Do be careful, Harry."

"Yup. Always," Harry acknowledged. Snape departed and afterward Harry considered that he had not babied him at all; he had, in fact, done nothing more than prompt him to share his concerns and provide just the right kind of support. Harry relaxed as he sat hugging his knees, feeling comfort in being so well understood.

Harry rose before Hermione did and fixed breakfast one-handed. Hermione apparently had not slept well either, because she did not comment on this, just accepted her plate, ate, and rushed off to work, still dreary eyed.

By the time Harry put the dishes in the sink, after chasing Kali away from finishing Hermione's breakfast, he was late for his next treatment. He vacillated between not wanting to go and hoping Shankwell was there so Harry could talk to him. Harry took his time getting dressed, having to shoo Kali off his shoulder three times.

Shankwell was indeed still on duty, fortunately still straightening up from what must have been a complicated previous patient. Harry sat down and propped his arm up to have the bandages cut as usual. He wished that he had stashed his pet in his pocket, if only for moral support. Harry hesitated until the round-nosed scissors were snipping along his arm to say: "I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"We like things to happen for a reason around here," Shankwell said as he tossed the old dressing into the rubbish.

"They did happen for a reason," Harry pointed out, not understanding.

The hard tone returned, "A reason we understand."

"Is magic a reason?" Harry asked. His wounds were doing much better, but the texture of the new flesh was different, softer and bubbly.

"Of course it is," Shankwell replied, opening the tin of Thewsolve.

"Muggles don't think so," Harry observed. "They mean that events have no explanation if they say they happen by magic."

Shankwell stopped what he was doing. "That would be silly."

Harry just shrugged.

As Shankwell finished with the salve, he said in a manner of criticism, "You're an unknown entity, Mr. Potter."

"I don't mean to be," Harry honestly said, even as a voice inside his head was saying, "You don't know the half of it."

A fresh bandage was being rewound around Harry's arm. "So, what did you do that a trained and experience Healer could not?" Shankwell asked with that difficult tone. Harry began to detect, perhaps not jealousy, but at least suspicious resentment. It made Harry feel better to recognize it.

"I have curse-nose," Harry explained. "I just un-wove the tangles the curse had caused."

"Hedgepeth and Versa can do that well enough," Shankwell pointed out as he started a new wheel of white bandage just above Harry's elbow.

"You have to Staunch the curse's heat at the same time, though, or the tangles will just come back."

Shankwell fell silent until he was finished and had tied the bandage in a petite bow under Harry's arm. "I've heard of Staunching, for bleeding. You know how to do that?"

"Yes. A shaman in Finland showed me."

Shankwell seemed upbeat now, eager. "Can you teach someone else?"

"I can't teach it, exactly," Harry said. "Or, I mean, you can't learn it. You either are a Stauncher or not. That's what the Shaman said. He spends his time going around looking for children who can, so I expect he knows."

"What a strange skill," Shankwell commented, sounding like a Muggle discussing Potions.

"It's not," Harry argued, wanting to be understood rather than resented. He assumed he was finished and stood up. "It's just Radiance. Everything alive is Radiant. You leave Radiance behind on metal things you carry with you frequently. You have two quills in your pocket and I can tell that the birds that gave them are both still alive. They still resonate with life." Shankwell's expression was a little overwhelmed and Harry could not tell if he was going to be understood if he kept going, but went on anyway. "Blood is just very Radiant stuff and all a Stauncher does is pack it tightly with cold to stop it escaping. Versa should be able to do it, I expect."

Shankwell thought in silence before saying, "She has a strange fondness for examining other people's jewelry." He seemed to wake up to the state of things and began putting the tray of tools away. "Can you teach her?"

"You mean, can I show her that she already knows how to do it?" Harry clarified.

"That's really how it works?" Shankwell asked doubtfully.

"It's old magic," Harry said. "Not wand magic, like you're used to. I Staunched Vishnu's wounds while I was sitting in the corner over there when we came in after the pub explosion."

"So, Versa wouldn't even have to touch the patient?"

"She doesn't even have to be in the same city," Harry said.

Shankwell's eyes grew wide with interest at this. His entire mood was now one of excitement and curiosity, making Harry very glad that he had explained better. Perhaps that was the key: eliminating the unknown so people ceased to fear. Harry's own excitement at that realization dampened when he considered that such a conversation about letting in demons from the underworld would not go over nearly as well as healing people's injury.

Harry said, "The entire training I got from the shaman was just what I said, to pack cold around where the Radiance is leaking." Harry thought aloud further, "Healer Versa must feel it leaking out all the time. It would be maddening to not be able to stop it."

Shankwell tilted his head. "She does have a tendency to get rather emotional," he stated wryly.

"If you want me to show her, I can. I'll certainly be back in six hours," he added, gesturing at his arm.

Harry's first day returning to duty, he owled Hermione at work, saying he was going to dinner with Tonks and to not expect him. That evening, instead of going home, Hermione walked along the sunny path of Greenwich park. She found herself there without much of a good reason for it. She was drawn against her better judgment to approach Vineet's flat, but could not take the final step of visiting. What would have made the most sense – speaking to Harry about why his fellow had been so

melancholy – she resisted doing due to Harry's utter dislike of gossip, not to mention his disapproval of Hermione's interest.

So there Hermione was, strolling the lovely rolling park with no particular purpose, not a situation she often found herself in. The pavement forked and she turned toward the shadier route only to stop short at the sight of Vineet walking towards her. The two of them hesitated before Hermione said hello. Vineet gave his signature small bow of his head. Without verbally agreeing to, they began strolling along together. Hermione glanced frequently at her companion and decided that his mood had not improved from last time.

They reached the top of a steep section of path and Hermione stopped to rest in the shade, sitting crosslegged on the grass. Vineet lowered himself down a respectful distance away; the distance a stranger might sit if shade were scarce enough to warrant sharing this particular tree's shadow.

It was Vineet who spoke first. "I have heard that you were offered the job of teaching Charms at Hogwarts."

"Yes," Hermione said.

"Are you accepting this offer?" Vineet asked.

"I'm still thinking about it," Hermione replied. Silence descended beyond the rustle of the leaves above them and the distant shouts of children chasing each other about. Hermione eventually went on: "It's a big change." And after another gap: "I'm not sure I can fill Professor Flitwick's shoes."

Vineet plucked at the grass. "You would have to make it your own . . . your teaching. Leave the shoes of others alone."

That simple, yet deep, statement reminded Hermione of her attraction with a surge. "Yes, definitely," she said as neutrally as possible.

"You were born to Muggles, that makes you more qualified, given the large number of Muggle-born children requiring training in Britain."

Hermione considered him at the same time as she mulled over that observation. He seemed to simply wish to talk, about anything, which felt slightly desperate and made Hermione's heart twist. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Not so many Muggle-born where you come from?"

Vineet shook his head. "Your parents must have been accepting of this fact of your magic."

"Surprisingly so," Hermione replied, thinking back many years now. "Thank God they didn't realize how dangerous most of my years at Hogwarts were. They didn't get the wizard newspapers." She plucked at the grass too. "That made me tougher, I think, not being able to tell them. That meant I couldn't lean on them at all."

Vineet, the usually quiet man, continued with his questions. "When did you learn that you were magical?"

"When I received my letter – the one from Hogwarts – so when I was eleven. I had my whole future planned out before that moment. Serves me right. How about you?"

"I am told I always knew although others did not. My mother told me repeatedly for as long as I could remember. She was so certain, she gave me the dachnam of Vishnu, which implies great power."

"Yeah, I'd say," Hermione concurred. "But you didn't think you had much power until recently."

Vineet nodded soberly. His gaze had shifted from melancholy to intense, which was a kind of improvement. He said, "My mother never gave up insisting that I could achieve greatness, despite this. It was maddening."

"She was that certain?" Hermione asked, trying not to find humor in his observation. He was not an easily shaken personality.

"Near Baripada, a hundred years ago, lived a hermit who was quite revered. He foresaw a great warrior being born from a woman who gave birth to a tiger cub."

Hermione gave him a dubious expression. "And?"

"That is how I was born."

Hermione stared at him. "You were born in your Animagus form?" she exclaimed, nearly toppling over backward into the grass in shock at the thought. "Lucky your mum didn't die of a heart attack. Wow . . ." Hermione contemplated that while staring down at the ribbon of river visible over the trees. The breeze felt chilling as she stiffened and sat straight. "Wait a minute . . . you were born into a prophecy?"

Vineet stared back. "Yes, you could describe it in this way."

"Vishnu, don't you know what that means?" His curious and confused expression answered for him. Hermione hurriedly rocked herself to her feet. "Come on, we have to find Harry."

Vineet caught up to her at the path while she glanced around for a good place to Apparate from. "What is this?" he asked.

"Just come along. I can't believe this," she frantically said. They slipped through the shrubs onto a deserted stretch of grass that did not seem to encounter the cutter as often as the other areas. "Harry's out with Tonks for dinner, they probably went to one of the places near Tonks' flat." She Apparated them both to an alleyway near there and they checked the two pubs along that road, finding their quarry in the back of the second one.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said in bright greeting, then glancing between the two of them after he spotted Vineet.

"We need to talk," Hermione insisted.

"Get a pint and join us," Tonks suggested, sliding over on the bench to make room.

Hermione was too agitated to wait in line at the bar. She took a draught of Harry's mug instead. "Harry, you aren't going to believe this."

"What?"

Hermione patted his shoulder, almost consolingly. "Vishnu, tell Harry what you told me."

"Which part?" Vineet asked.

"The tiger cub part . . . the hermit part," Hermione insisted. But she did not wait for him, she said, "Vishnu was born in his Animagus form. Did you know that?" she asked Harry.

"You were born a tiger cub?" Harry asked, straining to understand.

Vineet nodded. Tonks nearly spit out her beer. She appraised him in a new manner and said, "Hate to be your mum."

"That's not all," Hermione said. "A hermit from a neighboring village foretold of it, though, a hundred years before."

Harry understood the significance before Tonks did. "You aren't thinking . . . ?"

"I am not understanding . . ." Vineet said, sounding kindly hopeful for an explanation.

Harry said, dropping his voice, "You haven't heard the whole prophecy relating to Merton, have you?" When Vineet leaned closer, Harry said, "It ends with only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source." Vineet stared at him, so Harry said, "That's why everyone thinks the prophecy is mine."

"But you are not the only one meeting this criterion," Vineet said.

"Apparently not," Harry concurred, feeling a giddiness almost like the first time he had been on a broomstick. He turned to Tonks, "Were you born into a prophecy?"

Tonks shook her head, making her Mohawk sway. "No."

"You?" Harry then asked Hermione.

"Certainly not."

"Maybe we should have taken a survey around the Ministry," Tonks commented.

Vineet said, "You are saying that the prophecy we are currently trying to complete may be mine, not yours? I do not wish to impinge . . ."

Harry picked up his mug and gestured with it before sipping. "Oh, you can have it," he insisted.

Vineet glanced at Hermione and then at Tonks. Tonks said, "I don't know if you can just give it away, Harry."

"It was 'just given' to me . . ." Harry began and then had to drop his voice because the pub was growing more crowded. "It was just given to me without any consideration. Why can't I give it away?" He sipped his beer. "I'd like to give away at least the possibility of it not being mine." Indeed just that thought lifted the weight off of him. "We need another round to celebrate," Harry insisted.

"I'll get them . . . you can't carry many with your arm like that," Hermione said, sliding off the bench.

"Thanks," Harry said, and slid over into her spot to better face Vineet. "You know what you are getting here, don't you?" he seriously asked. "You've been hinting that you think that having a prophecy is a good thing . . . some kind of life purpose or something." Harry faded out and they simply stared at each other. Vineet appeared a bit on the stunned side. "I feel cruel giving this to you. I don't think you understand."

Vineet shook his blue-black head. "I came here believing in a purpose. I cannot shirk if it rears up, even if it is you telling me I should."

Tonks studied the two of them. "I never gave it a second thought, Harry, that it might not be yours."

"Is there a ceremony of some kind where it is assigned to you?" Vineet asked.

Harry laughed. "No. Everyone just assumes."

Tonks said, "Maybe we should take him down to the prophecy room to see it."

"I don't think it was recorded. Ginny never mentioned it."

Critical, Tonks said, "They are supposed to ALL be. You never know what might happen."

"May I hear the whole prophecy?" Vineet politely asked just as Hermione returned with full mugs for each of them.

Harry quoted, "Few will escape the blood and chaos of darkness bound, sought, and released. They do not understand what they have wrought. They conjure allies they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land. Only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source."

"You're certain that's how it goes?" Tonks asked. At Harry's nod, she said, "We should take you down to the Department of Mysteries and record it."

"Why don't we just complete it instead?" Harry asked. "It's almost over."

"I expect McGonagall recorded it," Hermione pointed out.

After combining his two beers into one nearly overflowing one, Harry said to Vineet, "So, we can go listen to the official version, if you wish."

"I trust that you have it correctly," Vineet stated solemnly. "I should send a letter to Nandi, explaining. Perhaps . . ." He trailed off. Hermione did not look up from her mug.

Tonks pulled out her pocket watch. "I have do some errands I have to do with this my first evening off in about forever. Harry, take Vishnu in and explain to Mr. Weasley if you can find him or Reggie or Kinglsey if you can't."

Harry nodded. Tonks awkwardly stepped over Vineet to depart before the Indian could stand to let her out. Her shoe clapped hard against the floor and a nearby patron helped catch her and said to her departing form, "The 80s ended, you know."

Vineet still appeared befuddled. "Do you really think it is my time?" he asked Harry.

"I don't know, but I can say for certain that I don't know what I'm supposed to do to end all this. I hope you have a better idea."

Vineet fell thoughtful and did not reply. He pushed the remainder of his beer aside.

Chapter 41.

New Paths

At the Ministry, Harry and Vineet located Shacklebolt and Mr. Weasley in the tea room, discussing something in low tones. They fell quiet upon their entrance. Harry had forced Vineet to lead the way in, but then the Indian stood silently.

"Er . . ." Harry began. "We just discovered something." He looked between the three of them, wishing Vineet appeared less like he was six miles inside himself. "Vishnu was also born into a prophecy."

Brows lowered. Mr. Weasley scratched his thin hair and stuffed the small parchment roll into his pocket. "Were you?" he asked Vineet. "Hm," he muttered, sounding unconvinced. "We'll see, I suppose." He looked back and forth between them, leaving Harry with the impression that he preferred to still consider it Harry's prophecy. Not that Harry didn't appreciate the implication of confidence, but he wanted to assume Mr. Weasley was wrong.

Harry's introspective fellow apprentice accompanied him up to the Atrium, where he bowed and Disapparated away. As Harry approached the hearths, he turned in a circle, looking up at the charred gold leaf, the darkened and cracked magical windows, and the new damage to the just recently repaired fountain, which was dry again, awaiting yet another patch. The scene left him aching and unhopeful.

On Diagon Alley he took the stairs two at a time up to the rooms above the Apothecary. Inside Candide's flat, the scene of Snape sitting on the bed across a small table from Candide, playing cards, brought a curl to Harry's lips.

"Good to see you smiling," Snape said. "Come in," he invited.

Harry approached and sat on the bed beside Snape, since not only was there not another chair, there was not space for one. "You won't believe this," Harry said with clear anticipation of telling. Giddiness had filled him again.

Snape stared at him before saying, "Hard to imagine what could make you so buoyant, so quickly." He put down an eight of diamonds and Candide shook herself away from Harry's storytelling and drew from the deck.

Harry said, "The prophecy might not be mine."

Snape reacted less than expected. Same as Mr. Weasley, he became contemplative. "What leads you to believe that?"

"Vishnu was born into prophecy as well." Harry added, "And he believes he's here for a reason. He wants the prophecy, even." When Snape made a thoughtful noise in response, Harry said, "You sound like Mr. Weasley. Don't you think it's possible?"

"Most certainly," Snape conceded. "The prophecy does not mention you by name."

"It doesn't mention Voldemort, either," Harry pointed out, noticing Candide flinch ever so slightly.

Snape drew a card. "I do hope it is true for your sake. For the rest of our sake, I am more trusting of you, however." He gestured at the stove where a large black cauldron sat with dried stew dripped down the side of it. "Did you eat dinner with all of this excitement?"

"Yes," Harry assured him. "I went out with Tonks."

Snape started to put down the three of clubs, but his gaze came over to Harry instead. "Not on a date, I assume. . ."

Harry started to bite his lip, then stopped himself. It had not been formally called one, but Harry had certainly thought of it as a date. "Maybe," he hedged. It amazed him how fast Snape's gaze could go from neutral to laser-sharp. Harry defensively said, "You're the one who gave her the 'midnight shift'."

Snape retorted, voice as cutting as his gaze, "Because I wished to have someone there I and you both trusted. It was not license for anything else."

Harry held his breath in trepidation about what may come next. He did not know what he would do if Snape outrightly forbid him to continue with their relationship.

Snape turned back to his hand and changed what he was going to discard. "You disappoint me Harry; we discussed this."

Harry dropped his head, searching for rational arguments that would work with this man. They were in short supply, so he did not speak. Candide gave him a reassuringly sympathetic look. Snape followed this look back to Harry and said with some regret, "I did not intend to remove the only smile you've had for a month." He reached out a hesitant hand that clenched and unclenched once as it approached, but when it grabbed Harry's shoulder it was firm. "I am going to assume that you are old enough to make your own mistakes in this area. And this is a mistake, Harry, which you will undoubtedly discover on your own."

"Optimistic as always," Candide teased. "Are you going to lay down a card?"

"It is your turn."

"Is it?"

Snape turned back to Harry. "I am disappointed in Ms. Tonks, as well."

The card game played out for a while. Harry wanted to say some things but not in front of anyone but Snape. Finally, he decided that since they were all a family, he should just say what was on his mind. "I don't otherwise really have anything for myself," he said, hoping to be understood.

"A future is not enough for you all of a sudden?" Snape sharply asked.

Harry frowned. Snape glanced his way and then looked to regret his tone. He said, "Try as I might I cannot protect you from dark wizards and certainly not from prophecy, but I thought I could protect you from yourself with a bit of guidance." He paused to study his hand to see if he should keep the card he had drawn. He tossed it down instead. "So be it if you wish to step into such a difficulty." He pointed a finger at Harry's nose. "See to it that you don't come to harm as a result."

"I came to harm getting a medal," Harry pointed out, gesturing with his slinged elbow. Softly, in dire need of confirmation, he said, "As long as you're not forbidding me to see her or anything."

"That would not succeed; I suspect – your temper and your stubbornness being what they are."

"You would know," Harry pointed out, with no rancor.

"Yes, I would," Snape said with a hint of an understanding smile. "I am here as always to catch you when you fall."

"That's rather poetic for you," Candide supplied.

Chapter 41

"You really think I'm making that big of a mistake?" Harry asked.

"Yes. If only because it clouds your judgement, which is perhaps your weakest quality." Snape laid down his hand, indicating that he had won. With a slap, Candide folded her hand into a small stack.

Harry said, "Glad you have such confidence in me."

Snape sat back while Candide shuffled the deck. "I have enormous confidence in you, just not in the manner you are thinking. I have complete confidence that you will always do what you think is right. But like the time when the log was changed and you headed straight into a trap, your judgement about what is "right" is not always reliable."

Harry sighed. "Mr. Weasley pointed that out too."

Snape accepted the new hand he was dealt. "Be careful, Harry. That is all I ask."

"Did you want to be dealt into this hand?" Candide asked, holding the deck out.

"No," Harry replied. "I should go. Make it an early night."

At Hermione's apartment, Harry found his friend cross-legged on the floor, organizing the books that had migrated from the shelves to stacks all around the flat.

"So what do you think . . . take the Charms position?" she asked without even turning around.

"I think you should." Harry tossed his cloak off onto a chair back, but then picked it up and put it on a hook instead.

"I'm starting to think I should too," Hermione said. "Getting away from London would be good for me." She moved about with purpose, putting every last book in place and then shuffling some of them around into better places.

"You're still hopeful about getting a chance with Vishnu, aren't you?" Harry asked. She did not reply, just kept examining book spines and reorganizing. Harry went on, "I don't ask that to be cruel. I'm trying to be a friend."

"He wants to patch things up with his wife," Hermione stated in a queerly flat voice.

"Of course he does," Harry said. "He always wants to do the right thing." It was not until those words were out that Harry heard them as an echo of Snape's observation about himself. Harry thought Vineet a much better fit for that description.

She pulled a tassled bookmark out of reach of Crookshanks' claws and stuffed it into the closest book. "Yes, of course he does. That's what I like the best about him, that

he wants to do the right thing. What horrible quandary" She laughed painfully. "It can never work; can it?"

Harry sat down on the floor beside her. "We need to get you out meeting more people."

She gave him the sad smile of someone who really did not want to do that, who would only find that frustrating and disappointing. "Sure," she said unconvincingly.

"Aaron, my other fellow apprentice, is available. Don't you like him?"

Hermione laughed, truly amused. "He's like the Great Gatsby, Harry. Not my type. Cute though. Fun probably. But not my type."

Harry looked over the shelves surrounding them. "True. He hates books."

The next day, they had an abbreviated morning training session, during which Harry was forced to sit out drills, despite protesting that his blocks would hold just fine. He sat in the corner, re-reading a chapter in a Muggle book on evidence collection that Hermione had bought him. Rodgers thought the book a bit silly given that it did not assume one had a wand to use. Harry thought that not having a wand made the investigator think a bit harder about what mattered.

After lunch the uncovered assignments began to pile up and they were sent out on duty, even Harry, who was sent out with Blackpool again on yet another Mugglebaiting call. Someone had charmed the traffic signals to go green in all directions and the maintenance crew could not seem to fix them, bollixing up rather a large section of London. Harry's job was to set up a distraction, while Blackpool performed the necessary spell neutralization. In one case Harry made the horn on a bus stick for a minute, doubly loud, which made people turn and cover their ears. In another he caused a lorry to drop its delivery ramp, which caused quite a clamor and made everyone jump. In all cases he had to also fog the plastic covers of the surveillance cameras which were constantly recording the scene and wondered if the perpetrators had done the same.

As they walked away from their third site, Harry said, "Someone else is going to check the police video?"

"The CCTV?" she asked. "I doubt the Muggles will check it. They'll just assume their technology is broken. But Reversal usually does that, when needed."

Chapter 41

"You don't think the wizards who did it will be on the videos?" Harry asked.

"Only if they are extremely stupid," she said derisively. "The kind of blokes that play with things more complicated than sewers, tend to cover their tracks."

"I wish Merton was stupid enough to get caught," Harry muttered. They walked along the pavement to check the next signal, which had a crew working at it, but from a distance seemed to be functioning. Harry was unable to fully adjust his thinking to not having responsibility for Merton. Worry still gnawed at him while he walked along with nothing else to think about. Harry considered that if the prophecy were really Vineet's, then his fellow must have some special quality that Harry did not.

Harry scuffed his shoe as he came to a sudden stop. Blackpool turned and looked questioningly back at him.

"I just thought of something," Harry said. Muggles flowed by on the pavement, ignoring them.

"About Muggle traffic signals?"

"No. About Merton."

Blackpool's attitude changed instantly. "What about him?"

Harry rubbed his head, mussing his hair. "What was the name?" he asked rhetorically. "There was a name that was oddly familiar. It was an Indian name." He dropped his arm, feeling a rush toward abandoning their current task. "Do you think we're done here?"

She glanced back at the signal they had been approaching. It was red, currently. "If you think you know something about Merton, we are very done."

They hurried into the back of a busy dress shop and piled into the small changing room to Disapparate before anyone could ask what they were up to. At the Ministry, Harry walked with purpose, struggling with his memories from when his magic had gone black. In the file room, he stared at the imposingly large cabinets. He could not go through them all in hopes of jarring his memory.

"Rogan," Harry breathed. "Where's Rogan?"

Blackpool frowned at the sound of the disgraced Auror's name. "Writing memos for Mr. Weasley."

Harry swept back out and down the corridor to a desk propped against the wall at the very end beyond Mr. Weasley's door.

"Rogan," Harry said, "do you remember, when I was helping you with the filing . . . there was a file I asked about. I said, 'why is this one in here?' Do you remember that? Do you remember the name on the file?" Harry's desperation was coming through in his voice.

Rogan let the parchment before him roll up and it and a few others fell to the floor, but he aborted stooping to pick them up. "What's going on?"

"I think the name is important," Harry said. I recognized it when I had Voldemort in my head, he thought, but did not want to remind everyone of that.

Rogan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Harry prompted eagerly, "Do you remember the name?"

Rogan frowned. "Traincar or something. Hang on." He stood and rubbed his neck as though he had been sitting in the undersized desk too long.

"Traincar?" Blackpool doubtfully prompted.

"It started with a "T"" Harry agreed.

Rogan led the way down to the file room. "You aren't allowed in there," Blackpool pointed out, sounding petulant.

Rogan held his hand out as though to invite her to lead the way. Annoyed, he said, "With you two keeping an eye on me, I don't think it will be a problem."

"Let him go in," Harry snapped at the senior apprentice.

Rogan went to first long drawer labelled Taalicksonson Teaberg. He scanned the thickly pressed tabs, ignoring the very thick, multipart file for Grisley that filled the end of the drawer, and closed it. Going to Teacakepot Thickneck he stopped halfway down and pulled out a very slim file with only a few sheets of ordinary paper in it.

"This is it."

Harry grabbed the file from him and opened it up. It was the same one all right.

Blackpool read over Harry's shoulder, "Debjit Thanakar. Why is he important?"

"I remember the name . . ." Harry said, feeling lightheaded as though isolated from the world. "I remember it from when I was seeing out of Voldemort's eyes. I think he heard the name. I think he may be with Merton. I think that may be why this is Vishnu's prophecy and not mine."

"That's a lot of 'thinks'," Rogan commented. "And we interrogated Voldemort . . . well as much as we were allowed to given he is now a Muggle."

Chapter 41

"There's an address in Kennington," Harry said, feeling right about what he was thinking.

"Maybe we should go have a look," Blackpool said.

"You should find Arthur," Rogan said, pushing the long file drawer closed the rest of the way.

"We should find Vishnu," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley was just coming up in the lift when they closed the door to the file room. Rogan snuck quickly back to the desk down the side corridor. Harry checked the Auror's office as they passed, finding only Shacklebolt there.

"Tonks is still out," Shacklebolt informed him without prompting.

"With Vishnu?" Harry asked, to which Shacklebolt nodded in confirmation.

Harry tried to explain to Mr. Weasley about the name. His pessimism equalled Rogan's. "You only think you remember this name because Voldemort knew it."

Harry sighed. "I don't know why I know the name," he admitted. "But we should check the address. We don't have any other leads."

"We still don't," Shacklebolt observed dryly.

"No harm in checking," Mr. Weasley admitted. "Why don't you two go?"

"Vishnu has to come along," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley looked him over and then glanced over the log. "He'll be back eventually. Are you that certain, Harry?"

"Remember when you told me to tell you when I think the time has come?"

Mr. Weasley actually appeared slightly amused. "Yes, but you also told me yesterday that you don't think the prophecy is yours."

Harry nearly snarled in frustration.

Mr. Weasley relented. "Why don't you and Blackpool scope out the neighborhood only, ask around the shops and neighbors if anyone has seen him, and we'll send Tonks and Vishnu along when they return. I don't wish to recall them unless it is an emergency."

Blackpool grabbed down the new wanted poster from the board and started out, but Mr. Weasley said, "If you are planning on showing a picture around, you cannot use that one."

Blackpool pulled out her wand and hit the wizard picture with a Stupifying spell, freezing Merton's face with his mouth half open and twisted. "Good enough," Mr. Weasley said.

They Apparated behind a chain link fence overgrown with shrubs that bordered a red-brick estate. Harry, having left his robes behind to appear an ordinary Muggle, un-tucked his shirt to better hide his wand in his back pocket. Blackpool, slipped hers inside her white, buttoned sleeve with the point caught in her palm. She folded the parchment wanted poster so that only the photograph in the center was visible.

They walked the four blocks surrounding the address, asking shopkeepers and anyone loitering on the pavements if they had seen the person in the photograph . . . no one had.

The address was just in the next block when Blackpool called a halt because they had completed a full circuit. She peered down the street on tiptoe, chin high as she studied the distant upper floor windows.

Harry feared she was going to suggest some kind of full-on assault, but before she could decide on anything, Tonks and Vineet approached from behind.

"Any leads?" Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head. Tonks appeared tired as she let her gaze follow along the same course as Blackpool's. "Well, let's find out who's there, shall we?" she said. But then she immediately walked off in the opposite direction.

The rest of them followed curiously. Tonks turned in at a corner chips shop and ordered three boxes of take-away. She gave the shop boy rather a thorough looking over as she waited for the order, raising Harry's hackles.

Tonks was all business as she carried the white-bagged styrofoam boxes out of the shop and down the street to the correct building. Inside, with business-like efficiency, she assumed the logoed polo shirt and pimply-faced appearance of one of the chips shop's employees. Quietly, she said, "Stay out of sight, but not too far out of sight. Understood?"

They all nodded and Tonks led the way up the stairs. All but Tonks waited just before the bend leading to the last flight of steps. Tonks crept along the corridor, lit poorly by one bare bulb whose socket hung on stiff wires from a hole in the ceiling. She went to the end, examining each door before returning to the closest door and using a spell to knock something off of it. She kicked the thing that had fallen to the side and knocked loudly, making the rest of them jump. A rather long time passed

and Tonks knocked again. "Fisherydoo Chips orda'!" she shouted and remarkably, as though it were a spell, the door opened. There was no question what Tonks was carrying, the odor of overused, fish-spoiled oil drifted even to the stairs where the three of them huddled. Harry wished he could see who had come to the door.

"Yer orda'," Tonks said in the blunt tone of an hourly customer service worker while pushing the box through the doorway. The response was unintelligible. "Yer sure? Twelve D it says on the slip. Your "D" fell off." She kicked the thing on the floor. "Oh, tha's a "B" ain' it?" Tonks began to step away, but was called up short by something from inside. Harry's rigid fingers slipped on his sweat-damp wand. "I can' give the order to ya' if'n isna yours," Tonks stated derisively. "I'd havta fetch another an' all . . . I'll jus' take it down ta' yer neighbors." More discussion from inside and the door closed. Harry breathed out in relief.

Tonks pulled her wand, but she only used it to Banish the now very wrinkled and oil-soaked sack. She stepped down to them and started through them.

"Is he there?" Harry whispered.

"Yes," Tonks replied as she started down the next flight of steps. "Let's wait for back-up."

Harry glanced back, but began to follow, saying, "Someone should stand guard, right? What if . . ." But he was cut off by Blackpool dashing up the stairs in the other direction. Harry caught a corner of her robe, but it pulled free of his grasp. He and Vineet followed first – Harry shucking his sling as he ran – but by the time they had reached the landing, Blackpool had already blasted the door open.

No one shouted; no one said anything; they simply piled in behind her as she dashed inside. Harry's blood warmed to the chase, preferring this to waiting. Inside, others were shouting. Movement came from the rooms off to the right, but Blackpool ran around the corner to the left. Harry followed that way, and found her holding a wand on someone who certainly resembled the photograph on the wanted poster. Blackpool was yelling at him, seeming unaware of his fumbling in his pocket with just his fingertips, as though wishing his movements to go unnoticed. Pounding footsteps indicated that Tonks and Vineet had gone the other way into the unexpectedly large flat.

"So help me, I'll blast you one if you don't hold still," Blackpool threatened. "Put your hands up!"

Harry moved without thought since Merton looked to be un-interested in obeying. His shaking hand had unhooked the buttoned pocket on his waistcoat. "Don't!" Harry

shouted at Blackpool, panicked that she may do something rash. He put himself between the two of them. "He's a Muggle."

Blackpool stared at him uncomprehendingly. "What? But he's reaching for his-"

Harry turned and yanked Merton's hand out of his pocket. A locket was knocked free, striking the wall before clattering to the dusty floor. Merton dove for it and Harry tried to hold onto him, but some force repelled his hand. Harry leapt for the locket as well, his reaction time beating out the older man. Harry clenched his hand around the locket, rolled to his feet and shouted. "Get his jewelry off of him. It must be charmed."

Blackpool used a Summoning charm so forceful that it jerked Merton's arms toward her because of his many bracelets and tore holes where items had been stashed in his pockets. He stepped back, glancing around for escape and rubbing his wrist. Blackpool struck him with a binding charm and he toppled to the floor, striking the wall.

Deciding this was in hand, Harry ran through the flat, dodging spilled crates of random junk, some of which sent prickles of disgust through him. In the farthest room he found a standoff. A middle-aged Indian couple were standing before a large smashed out window, ready to leap upon a broomstick. The man, whom Harry assumed to be Debjit, was aiming spells at Vineet, who was getting blocking assistance from Tonks, pressed up beside him. They were not shooting back, and at first Harry wondered why not. But then he saw the net sack of ceramic weapons that were slung to the broomstick. Striking them with the wrong spell would take out the entire block surrounding them.

The man sneered at Harry and lifted the broom handle, causing it to leap out into the air above the road outside. The three of them ran to the window but then cautiously glanced out, fearing a curse may be aimed back at them. But they need not have worried, their quarry was fast becoming a bird-sized speck hovering over the buildings beyond.

Tonks was glancing around for another broomstick. Harry said, "Vishnu and I will follow them. Blackpool has Merton back near the kitchen."

"She does?" Tonks eagerly asked.

"Yeah, but I don't think that's who we really need to get," Harry quickly said. "Vishnu, jump on . . . I'll take us."

Harry transformed into his Animagus shape and flapped his wings to break the startled gaze he was receiving from his fellow.

Chapter 41

"Go on," Tonks urged, tossing an Obsfucation charm at the two of them before running out of the room.

Harry hopped carefully up onto the large smashed window frame – three legged because his front left leg complained fiercely when he leaned upon it. His wings bumped the sides of the frame and Harry hoped he could really get both of them into the air, rather than plummeting to the pavement below. With a powerful shove from his rear legs that crumbled the wall behind him, he jumped into open space and beat mightily. They dipped but Harry quickly regained altitude and leaned his head forward, focusing his keen cat-sight on the fleck of black in the distant sky.

They gained at the chase as the city slid by beneath them. Harry, at the beginning, felt that his burdened range may be too short, but he slowed the pace of his flapping and coasted more between to conserve his strength and now he felt he could fly forever like this. Harry hoped that the Obsfucation charm was holding out, or this particular flying incident was not going to compare at all to the Ford Anglia one, and this time Harry had to write a formal report explaining it.

The dense city gave way to a web of round-edged, planned neighborhoods which melted into pastures, fields and grudging clumps of forest. They flew over the motorway and a wide sand quarry, where Harry finally caught up enough for Vineet to spell a warning shot in the broom's direction. In Harry's mind it seemed better to fight them out here where they could not hold an entire city block hostage, and clearly Vineet thought the same. The figures on the broomstick glanced back at them after the red spell sizzled by them. The broom's flight path faltered badly as though the person steering had been badly startled. Harry swooped over them, reaching down with his good right front leg to snatch at them, but they ducked out of the way, careening dangerously close to a grey, crenelated tower attached to a church.

The broomstick veered right and dropped sharply downward beyond the town, toward a field of swaying barley. Harry had to spiral in behind them, unwilling to risk his wings' braking ability with so much weight. As they neared, the man was struggling to pull one of the orange ceramic things out of the sack. The woman fired a spell at them, which Harry could only attempt to dodge, and was certain they were doomed, but Vineet met the spell with an identical one and the force of both exploded harmlessly in the air between them. His feet on the ground, Harry stood straight and transformed back into himself. He reached for his wand but did not find it in any of his pockets. He glanced around on the ground while stepping to better get behind Vineet for protection.

Another pair of matched spells exploded and then another, the forces equally matched.

"How do you know what she is going to use, or are you just getting lucky?" Harry asked from behind.

"She is following the standard training sequence that I learned in India."

"You know each other?" Harry asked.

"No. Do you know how many people there are in India?" Vineet asked somewhat sharply as another blast was cancelled out.

The man, Debjit, had spelled and released one of the vessels at the woman's command. It disappeared as it floated upward.

"Shit," Harry said. "And I lost my wand."

Debjit reached down to fetch another from the sack. Muggle emergency sirens floated into hearing. "Cover me," Harry whispered, and just as another pair of spells arced between his fellow and the woman, Harry dashed headlong at the man. The woman broke off the attack on Vineet and aimed her wand at Harry just as Harry grabbed the front of Debjit's jacket, making him drop the sack with a worrisome clatter. The next instant they were elsewhere when Debjit Disapparated.

Harry's momentum knocked them both to the gritty floor. His quarry tried to throw Harry off, painfully straining Harry's injured left arm, so without much thought he punched the man with his good hand. Debjit's head hit the hard floor and he tried roll away, but then fell still.

Harry shook his stunned knuckles and looked around the empty dark stone room with its tiny unframed openings which let in the sunlight and a drift of birdsong. He had no idea where they were. The doorway leading in behind him was only half-height. There was no time to be contemplating what this old place was, nor how complicated his eventual report was growing, so he grabbed both Debjit's wand and his wrist in his right hand and Apparated them back.

The battle was still equally matched when Harry arrived. The woman's wide eyes took in Harry's arrival, but her spells did not falter. The ground now had long burn marks that still smoldered. Harry felt that awful, familiar aversion and with an instant of fumbling raised Debjit's wand for a block. They were both knocked back hard, tangling Harry's limbs in the unconscious man's.

The woman shouted, "No!" and reached out a hand in their direction.

"You shouldn't have let the thing loose then!" Harry shouted at her. He dragged Debjit by the arm as he approached Vineet who, given the numerous burn marks at his feet, must have been dodging rather well.

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"Shoot down the thing if you can," Vineet said to Harry. He sounded unusually harried.

Harry glanced around, trying to sense where it had gone since the last blast it had emitted. "It will just explode, then," Harry pointed out.

"Out here in the open that will not be so serious."

Harry pondered the gold-trimmed wand he held out to the sky as he tried to track by feel the deadly thing hovering nearby. He sensed it to the right of where it had been, just as it was about to fire. Harry sent a Blasting curse in that direction and then shouting, "Down!" ducked and spelled a block he hoped would protect him and the man he had rendered unconscious.

The bright sky was blotted out by a yellow flash, but Harry's block held easily.

"Go," Vineet said, standing straight, wand out. "I will finish this."

"What?" Harry blurted. He peered across at the woman; her long hair had fallen out of its braid and floated behind her, disarrayed. She looked like a Muggle vision of a witch now. Her eyes had fallen empty. "Why are you doing this?" Harry yelled to her.

"I like seeing things upset. It is too quiet here. No one here appreciates the peace."

"Right," Harry shouted back. "You haven't been here long, have you?"

"The people appreciate what they have lost now," she stated as though making an announcement. "They are learning."

"Great," Harry muttered. "That's why you were helping Merton?" Harry shouted back. He could see people gathering at the side of the distant road, but at least the police had not yet arrived.

She lifted the sack of weapons closer to herself. "Merton simply wished to destroy British wizardry," the woman replied, "because as a Squib he could not truly belong to it. He is a simple man with no sense of subtlety. But you were an unexpected arrival," she said to Harry. "Flattering to be chased down by the likes of Garuda. It implies we have made trouble even the gods took note of."

"What's she talking about?" Harry asked his fellow.

Vineet did not reply, instead saying to Harry, "Go. One shot will take her out completely. When she goes the knowledge of those things will go with her."

"I'm not leaving you here if you are going to do that," Harry argued.

Impatiently, Vineet said, "This is my destiny, not yours."

"But you don't have to die for it," Harry snarled. He stepped closer and grabbed hold of Vineet's shirt. "Trust me . . . she isn't worth dying over."

"What she knows changes everything. The way a Muggle machine gun changed wars. It makes killing impersonal."

Speaking fast, Harry said, "I admit she's been a lot of trouble. But we can get her without losing you."

Vineet glanced at Harry just for an instant and a shot arced out, which Harry tried to block, but it had rather a lot on it. Harry had to pick himself up from where he had been tossed, ignoring Vineet's pleas to depart.

"No!" Harry shouted.

The woman was removing another vessel from the sack, slowly as though gauging what their reaction was going to be.

"We are running out of time," Vineet said.

Harry felt the earth beneath his feet. It seemed radiant itself, or perhaps it was just the young grains bowing in the wind that gave forth that impression. "She only has five of them, just hit one of them and duck into my block. But duck low, I don't want to need a large block.

Vineet appeared pained, but did not dare glance at Harry again. Harry cajoled, "Come on, you were willing to die a minute ago . . ."

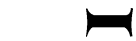
"But not if it means risking you as well-"

The woman was tapping the vessel with her wand and Harry felt a surge of distaste. "Now!" Harry shouted, jerking Vineet down beside him, confident that his strength and dexterity would let him aim properly even when unexpectedly tugged on.

Harry timed it just right. The flare of Vineet's cutting curse just began to ebb when Harry waved a Titan block around them. The world outside their dome of safety ignited blindingly. Harry felt the ground pressing into his knees and, thinking of Snape's lecture about contact with the ground being what a wizard pushed against for a hover charm, imagined himself rooted there in the earth as he poured more power into the block.

The flare died down along with the tail end of a rush of wind. Harry stood straight, or tried to, his left arm complained with a bone-deep ache when he moved. Debjit's

foot had been outside the block and was now a black stump. "That's going to hurt," Harry commented as he stepped over the man and down the lip of the crater that had appeared. Where they had been huddled was merely an island now in a sea of upturned earth. There wasn't much left of the woman, but Harry found a boot and a few feet away a glittering ring, which implied that she could not have Apparated away.



"What do you mean 'he's a Muggle?'" Rodgers demanded of Tonks as he and Blackpool looked over Merton, who was sitting on the floor, alternately cringing and sending sour looks up at them.

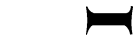
"That's what Harry said," Tonks explained.

Rodgers peered perplexedly down at the man who had been their number one target for at least half of a year. "Are you really?" he asked.

"Never mind that," Tonks said, tugging on Rodgers' arm. "We have to catch up to Harry and Vishnu."

Aaron arrived with a bang! and a message. "There're Muggle calls coming in from Surrey, in Bletchingly. Loud explosions and such."

"Fetch some broomsticks, quickly" Rodgers ordered him.



The smoke and dust were drifting away finally, clearing the view to the road. Harry could not see figures there anymore, although they had been far enough away to remain safe. A figure rose up and stepped over the fence, but immediately fell. Harry started that way, concerned, but was halted by a formation of ten broomsticks sweeping in. Three peeled off and circled wide, knocking the other approaching Muggles unconscious as well.

Mr. Weasley landed beside Harry. "We have to hurry. The tree we toppled to block the road can be bypassed easily enough." He gestured to some wizards from Reversal and directed them to the deepest part of the crater.

Tonks landed and, tossing her broom aside, gave Harry a tight hug that made him flinch, since it pressed on his arm. Mr. Weasley turned from where he gave instructions to two wizards hovering a large rusty and crystalline rock and studied the two of them. Vineet moved to assist with cleaning up the remains.

"Do you need St. Mungo's?" Tonks asked.

Harry had zero interest in that, so he said, "No." But he pulled his sleeve up to look and found that his arm now had brightly colored fur and, farther up, feathers in even stripes as though his injuries had transformed and not transformed back. "Maybe I do," he admitted. The furred spots were quite sensitive and when his sleeve caught on them, extremely painful as if that flesh really did not belong there. "Yeah, I suppose so. But I need to find my wand."

"You lost your wand?" Tonks asked, sounding shocked.

Harry looked around them, even though it was hopeless that it would be at his feet surrounded by such destruction.

"We'll find it. But right now I'll take you in." She shouted to Mr. Weasley, "I'm taking Harry to hospital!"

Mr. Weasley waved them off, but said, "Be careful!"

The wizards from Reversal were arranging their rock rather carefully as though concerned about its artistic appearance. Harry pulled out of Tonk's grasp to continue watching as others used a wind charm and a firetorch charm to add some detail around the rock. The rock began to sizzle as it heated up.

When Harry pulled out of Tonks' grasp a second time, she said, "Meteorites make for another good explanation for Muggles. Gas leaks. Meteorites," she recited as the scene of destruction disappeared and the waiting room at the wizard hospital appeared instead.

"Take a seat, Harry," Tonks said, indicating the bench closest to the greetingwitch's desk.

Harry obeyed, glancing around the quiet half-filled room before dropping his head to stare at his own shoes, which were spattered with wet mud. He felt chilled and wished he still had his cloak.

"Tonks," Harry said, sitting straight.

Tonks turned from where she waited for an old wizard to finish explaining something long and complicated. Harry said, "Can you find Severus?"

"When I get you in to see Shankwell . . ."

"I mean now," Harry insisted, feeling this was extremely important all of a sudden. "He's going to hear half of what happened and he'll be worried."

"Harry-" Tonks began, but she was now at the front of the queue. To the greeting-witch she said bluntly, "Harry here needs to see Shankwell, is he available?"

The middle-aged witch in coarse, dark brown robes leaned back to check an indecipherable chart on the wall. "He's with someone, but its been a while, so I –spect he'll be free soon."

Tonks turned back to Harry, "You can hold out, right?"

Harry nodded. If he held completely still, it did not hurt really that much. When Tonks sat down beside him, Harry said, "Can you fetch Severus?"

Tonks scanned the room. Most people who had taken an interest in Harry's arrival had returned to their Witch Weeklys and Better Burrows and Broomsticks. "If you want me to leave you alone here . . . You don't even have your wand," she criticized.

"I'm fine. This one works well enough," Harry said of the borrowed one in his pocket. "Can you go look for mine at the scene in Kennington?"

Tonks stood but halted and peered down at him. "Which is it? Severus or the wand?" she teased.

"Severus first," Harry said.

Tonks Disapparated and Harry sat, feeling more glum than expected once he was alone. His wait was short, fortunately, and Harry walked carefully down the corridor so as to not jar his arm further.

Shankwell, was using a cleansing charm on his hands when Harry stepped in. "Ah, you again. You're late you know. The Thewsolve really cannot be delay-"

Harry lifted his sleeve and the healer shut up abruptly at the sight. He recovered and said, "Sit on the table, then." He began organizing his tray, saying, "You are trying hard for a chance to get chained to one of our worn but comfortable ward beds, you know."

Harry swallowed hard. He wanted to assure the man that he would behave this time, but found he would not believe himself if their situations were reversed.

"Did you warn me about the Animagus interaction?" Harry sheepishly asked.

"Doesn't come up, usually. What is your form anyway?" he asked, peering curiously at the bright scarlet tufts sticking out of Harry's arm.

Harry glanced around. "It won't fit in here for me to show you."

"It won't fit in here . . ." Shankwell slowly echoed. "Never mind. I don't need to see it." He moved to put some bottles of potion together, sending puffs of grey and purple smoke into the air as he worked. Harry hoped Snape arrived soon.

A knock sounded on the door soon after and Harry's wish came true. Snape stepped in and said, "Ms. Tonks did not exaggerate for once."

"Why, what did she say?" Harry asked, ready to defend her.

"She said you were not really injured."

Harry grimaced at his arm. "Well, no. Not really."

Snape peered at the Healer as he worked and then grew more interested, leading Harry to ask, "What?"

"Bit of painkiller with that, I expect?" Snape asked the Healer.

"It's mixed in, in fact." Shankwell moved in close with a large bowl of purplish grey goo.

Harry, alarmed, said, "What's this?"

"Flesheating poultice. We have start again with growing back your real arm again."

"You can't just fix this?" Harry asked, trying not to grimace.

"That is just fixing it. Unless you wish to stay like that. By the way you are moving, I expect it hurts."

Harry stared at his odd arm. Despite his assurances to Lupin that it did not matter if he appeared more werewolf-like all of the time, Harry had no desire to appear more Gryffylis-like all of the time. "All right, then." He closed his eyes as the stuff was glopped on and then loosely wrapped.

"We'll let that work for a few minutes," Shankwell said in a tone that implied things were looking up, despite Harry's immediate prospects.

Harry looked up at his guardian. "I hope you weren't worried."

"Worried? No, certainly not," Snape stated, clearly sarcastic.

"I sent Tonks to tell you what had happened."

Chapter 41

"Interesting use of a Ministry Auror during a time of crisis."

"It's not a crisis anymore," Harry insisted. His arm felt very odd, making him shudder.

"Does that hurt?" Snape asked.

"Feels really strange," Harry said. Indeed, he almost could believe he was feeling his own Radiance diminishing as his arm did. He set himself to ignore the queasiness the feeling brought on, figuring it would end soon enough. "But it's fine," he insisted. And then changing the topic as a distraction, said, "Everything's taken care of. We have Merton and everything."

Snape bowed his head in appreciation of that.

Harry said, "Did you hear that Merton's a Muggle?"

"I did not hear that," Snape replied, clearly disbelieving and perhaps questioning Harry's mental wellness.

Harry said, "Yeah, turns out he's a Squib who pretended to be a wizard. He was covered in charmed jewelry. Must have needed them to get by in the Wizarding world."

Snape considered that and said, "A Squib, truly. Not simply very weak on magic?"

"Really. But he decided to destroy it all because he really couldn't join in, I suppose."

"Did his parents die recently?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged and then regretted it, his left arm felt far too light and he did not want to think about that. "Don't know, why?"

"Because he would have been cut off from wizardom at that point. I have seen that happen to other middle-aged Squibs and the occasional Muggle spouse. Difficult adjustments are required for some people to lose access to magical power, even if only through a family member."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Shankwell returned and unwound the loose bandage. Harry was very glad his arm had gone numb, because the gaps of missing flesh were even larger than before. Harry stared straight ahead at the wall as his arm was washed and yet again spread with Thewsolve.

"Six hours," Shankwell said as he finished the last few loops of bandage. "Not a minute more." He hooked the sling around Harry's head and for good measure, tied Harry's wrist around his waist so that he truly could not use his arm.

"Do you ever leave St. Mungo's?" Harry asked, a little annoyed with getting bundled up so.

"My wife swears I don't," Shankwell responded. "When it's busy, we can't. Plain and simple."

"Gets that way in the Auror's office too," Harry commiserated.

Shankwell rubbed his hands off on a rag, saying, "We still need to have you in to spend some time explaining Staunching to Healer Versa."

"I'll have more time now," Harry said.

"She won't do it while you're injured. Doesn't want to strain you."

Harry tried not to feel insulted or at least underestimated. He jumped down off of the table. "It's not a problem, really."

"Five hours and fifty-five minutes," he stated firmly. "We'll be seeing you."

They finished Harry's paperwork and Harry said, "I need to go into the Ministry," to cut off what he was certain to be Snape's suggestion that he rest.

"I will take you, then. Go on," Snape gestured toward the waiting room.

Harry came very close to insisting that he could go it alone, but he instead said, "I'm fine, really," and left it at that.

The Ministry was closed again to all but staff, but Snape still had his Evanescent Deputy badge in his pocket and they allowed them both inside. The Atrium was quiet. Harry found the sight less depressing now that he knew that when it was fixed up again, it would remain that way for a while.

At the lifts, Belinda was just coming down. "Minister wants to see you, Harry."

"How did you know I was coming?"

"I didn't. I'm running the Minister's errands." She headed off toward the gate and disappeared.

In the lift, Harry stared at the levers. "Minister's office or Auror's office?" he pondered, feeling slightly dull-witted after a day so crowded with action.

Snape said in the mode of offering important advice, "Always appease the highest ranked first."

Harry selected the highest floor on the panel and snapped the door closed with his good arm, grateful that his injured one was so confined, because he had tried to use it just then.

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Vineet and Mr. Weasley were already in the outer area of the Minister's office suite. Mr. Weasley stepped over and asked Harry pointedly if he were all right.

"Yeah, fine, sir. I'm barred from duty though, until this really does heal."

Mr. Weasley patted him on his good arm. "I think we can arrange that now without difficulty."

Minister Bones marched in from the corridor, trailed by one of the Muggle officials Harry had seen before. Bones was assuring him that everything was under control, but he was not easily convinced.

Upon seeing Harry there, the man stopped and derisively asked, "It worked out in the end, this mad scheme of assigning a great task to such a young man?"

Bones said tiredly, as though having already repeated herself, "We did not 'assign' it. A prophecy did so."

Harry patted his chest with his hand and said, "It wasn't me. It was him." He pointed at Vineet.

Vineet calmly said. "I do believe it was you."

Harry started in surprise. "It was definitely you," he insisted.

"I beg to differ-" Vineet began.

Mr. Weasley stepped in and said to the Muggle in the fine suit, "No matter; you have the perpetrator. It is taken care of."

The man shook his head and took a step toward the door. "At least your meteor was convincing," he muttered before departing.

Mr. Weasley appeared about as relieved as Harry could remember seeing him. For that matter, so did Minister Bones, who said almost happily, "We've got some cleaning up to do. No slacking now."

"What did you mean, Mr. Weasley, that they have the perpetrator?"

Minister Bones replied, "He wasn't magical, so we gave Mr. Merton over to the Muggles to prosecute. He certainly cannot be sent to the French wizard prison."

Harry stared at her. "You didn't . . . do the same with Voldemort, did you?'

Bones laughed, genuinely amused. "Of course not. He fits in just fine at a wizard prison, magical or not."

Harry frowned with his brows, trying to sort that out.

Bones, who had no trouble rationalizing that discrepancy, moved on by saying dismissively to Harry. "Press conference in an hour."

"What about Vishnu?" Harry asked.

Bones evaluated Vineet where he stood beside Mr. Weasley. "You really think he fulfilled the prophecy, not you?"

Harry hesitated starting another argument with his fellow apprentice, so he simply nodded.

"It is simpler to explain it as yours, Harry," Bones stated. "Reassures the public."

Harry bristled at what felt like a slight to his friend. "What reassures them?"

"That the same old heroes are still hard at work, fulfilling their role in keeping the peace."

Harry resisted rolling his eyes. "It wasn't really me, though." He glanced around for support on this. "I couldn't have countered the witch we were fighting. I didn't even have a wand."

"Do you have it back, now?" the minister asked.

"No." Harry pulled from his pocket the colorful blue and green painted wand with gold decoration that he had taken from Debjit. "I'm using one I took from the witch's husband."

"We'll need that for evidence," Mr. Weasley pointed out.

Harry moved to hand it over, but Mr. Weasley said, "Keep it for now. I certainly don't want you going about with no wand at all."

Harry slipped the wand back into his jeans pocket.

The minister said, "I want both of you down in the Atrium on the hour for the press conference then. But I don't want any arguing in front of the press over who is responsible for what. We'll just call it a team effort and leave it at that."

Down in the Auror's office while they waited for the clock to swing around, Vineet stepped close to Harry and said, "You saved my life again. I am becoming too far indebted to you."

"Hey, no prophecy is worth losing your life over," Harry insisted.

"That is easier for you to say," Vineet countered.

Harry grinned at him. "Yep. Easy for me."

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Vineet said, "I am still not understanding why you wished to give the prophecy away."

"Even the chance that the next one might not be mine makes me happy," Harry pointed out.

"I wish to have purpose," Vineet stated after a pause.

Harry thought that he did not need a purpose that badly. He was, in fact, looking forward to living without purpose for at least a week while he healed. Although, there was all of that reading he needed to do.

Rodgers stepped in with a box containing all of the ceramic debris from the scene. He nodded at the two of them, glanced at Snape, and departed again.

Harry asked, "What did the witch mean when she said she was flattered to be chased by Garuda?"

Vineet took a deep breath and replied, "She meant she thought there was great purpose."

"That's not an answer," Harry criticized.

Snape wandered over to them from the log book, where he was almost certainly listening in. "Prophecy is not something anyone should wish to be associated with," he stated and, for an instant, Harry could see – in Snape's bent cloaked shoulders, in his distant gaze – what a toll the last twenty years had taken on him.

"Yes, let's hope there aren't any more," Harry said, pained.

Snape's gaze pulled back around to him and he said, "Not that I expect that to keep you out of trouble, by any means."

Tonks laughed from the doorway. "In trouble again already, Harry?"

Snape swung away and Harry could see him biting back on what he certainly would like to say to her. Harry was grateful that he resisted.

"Did you find my wand?" Harry asked in a hopeful tone.

Tonks shook her head. "That's what took so long. I took a broomstick over what must have been your route, casting Accios the whole way, and . . . nothing. If you dropped it at the scene when you transformed back to yourself, it's truly gone. Otherwise, if you dropped it on the way, a Muggle must have picked it up."

"I'll have to get another one made. Fawkes will give me a tail feather, don't you think?" Harry asked his guardian.

Snape replied, "I understand that you are the only one who has any control over him, so I expect you would know."

Thinking aloud, Harry said, "Or maybe I'll just go down to Ollivander's shop and see if he's got something else."

This garnered close scrutiny from Snape. "Truly hoping for that much change in your life?"

Harry shrugged with just his right shoulder. "Maybe," he replied stubbornly. "I don't know."

He sat down to use the remaining time to write owls to his friends, so they would also know for certain that everything was all right.

Down in the Atrium for the press conference, Vineet stood demurely by while everyone asked Harry questions. The podium had been magically shortened so that – as the Minister explained to Harry in a whisper – the photographs would all include Harry's bandaged arm.

As usual, Skeeter was the toughest questioner, doubting everything Harry told them. She clearly still did not trust him. Harry made certain to be extra patient while he replied to her, which seemed to properly annoy her by the end of it. Unlike the others, she cared less how the Ministry could be having so much trouble with a non-Magical person and wondered why Harry was always so involved in every dark plot that was afoot.

Finally, the Minister stepped in. "Mr. Potter is supposed to be resting, and we are neglecting our duty to him keeping him here so long. So that is all for today. Arthur Weasley will handle any remaining questions. He has been cleared to release an inventory of the charmed devices on Mr. Merton's person, for those interested in that. Suffice to say we will be adjusting our Ministry building and event barriers to prevent in the future such objects from allowing a Muggle or Squib to pass as magical."

She led Harry away to where Snape waited beside the gate. Harry was starting to feel as though he needed either a good meal or a good nap. Without comment, Snape took hold of his unhurt arm and they Apparated to Candide's flat.

Candide turned from where she stood at a small range with only two burners. She hesitated hugging him after seeing the sling, instead, patting him on the arm. "Good to see you're all right, Harry."

"Have a seat," Snape invited, referring to the neatly made bed beside the small table.

Candide gestured to the domed, wooden box on the shelf behind her. "They carried the press conference on Wizard Wireless. You sounded good. You didn't give Rita Skeeter any openings and I think she ended up sounding the monster."

"She doesn't trust me," Harry said, accepting a plate of pork chops, reconstituted mashed potatoes, and tinned French beans. He eyed it hungrily, not caring that the food was not at house-elf level. As Snape settled at the nearest corner of the table and Candide across the table, their plates having to overlap because the table was so small, Harry did not care if dinners never were back to house-elf standards, or the house ever any bigger. If he had to fight as hard as he had been for even this level of normalcy, he would do it willingly, for as long as it took.

Candide said, "This is your plate, Harry," and handed him one where the chop was already cut into bite-size pieces.

Harry stared down at his new plate with a bit of chagrin. But he did not know a spell to cut up food and he really could not have managed on his own, given how leathery the chop looked.

Perhaps because he had not started eating, Snape asked, "Everything all right, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said. Being mothered had brought forth an annoying twinge, but that was all there was to it. No gaping well of pain was revealed. Harry stuck his fork in the nearest tough piece and asked, "I could use a food chopping spell, though, for next time."

"Scriborgo," Snape said, gesturing with his index finger to show the wand movement.

"Thanks," Harry said.

After the meal, Harry stood, saying, "I should get to Hermione's. Her owl said a lot of friends had called and were waiting."

"Be careful, as always," Snape said.

"Thanks for dinner," Harry said to Candide.

"Not much of one," she said, wiping her hands and stacking plates without standing up.

"It was lovely," Harry said, meaning it.

At Hermione's flat, the room was crowded with old friends from Hogwarts and nearly every Weasley. People insisted on making room for Harry on the couch, which he accepted after some urging.

"I'm all right, really," Harry insisted for the hundredth time, even though his arm was throbbing from all of the welcomes that were not so careful.

Hermione came over and handed Harry's pet to him. "Kali is just dying to see you. I thought she'd tear that cage one by the time you came home."

Kali climbed around Harry's neck and then investigated and curled up inside his sling. "Hey," Harry said before Hermione could step away. "Who's Garuda?"

"Wasn't that the Weird Sisters' first drummer?" Lavender suggested from where she sat on the floor between Ron's knees.

"Want a beer, Harry?" one of the twins offered.

"Only one that isn't open yet, if it's you giving it to me," Harry said, half-serious.

The room erupted in laughter and the twin put his hand to his breast, behaving highly offended.

Hermione had gone to a shelf and to pull out a tall book which she held out to Harry. "Garuda's a giant man-bird who helps the God Vishnu. Flies him around on his back and such."

Harry stared at her, not noticing that an unopened bottle of beer was being offered to him. "You're making that up," he accused.

Hermione laughed. "Why would I make that up?" She flipped through the book's shiny pages, and held it out open to a reproduction of a very old painting showing a man riding on the back of bird-headed man with bright red wings.

"He's eating a snake," Ron observed. "Yick."

"I knew it was his prophecy," Harry said, feeling chilled all of a sudden. A beer knocked against his shoulder and he accepted it eagerly. "I'm going to need another, soon after this one," he said to the twin.

The twin bowed and stepped away, iridescent cloak sweeping across the heads of those sitting on the floor. Harry closed the book and handed it to Ron, who had his hands out for it. "It's over and I'm putting it out of my head."

The evening grew late, and the few remaining guests sat around the table at the border to the kitchen. A figure Apparated into their midst.

"Professor," Hermione said, standing.

"I received an owl from St. Mungo's. Harry is overdue for his appointment."

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"Oh, drat," Hermione said, pulling her wand out and approaching the couch. "He fell asleep, so I put a Bubble of Quiet charm around him. He didn't say he needed to go in, but I should have thought of that." She waved the charm away, but Harry did not stir from where he lay, half reclined on a pile of pillows, thoroughly out.

Snape leaned close as Hermione said, "He had a few beers and fell asleep like that." She snapped her fingers. Snape used his toe to push a large book aside from the foot of the couch. Its cover featured a photograph of a burnished statue with twelve arms and six heads. Hermione picked up the book to put it away.

"What is that?" Snape asked.

Hermione held the book up for him to see the cover, saying, "Karttikeya, God of war," before stashing it away in its place.

Snape disregarded the book and reached to shake Harry by the shoulder. Harry's sling moved before he did and his pet stuck her head curiously out to look at Snape. Harry sat up and Kali climbed with a limp up to his shoulder. Hermione scooped her up and took her to her cage. "Enough of that for today," she said.

Snape said, "You are late for your appointment."

Harry rubbed his hair back, trying to flatten it. "I fell asleep." He then rubbed his eyes, urging them to stay open.

"Shall I see if it is possible to bring the Healer here?"

"No, I'll manage." Harry sniffled and pushed himself to his feet.

Harry let himself be Apparated again. As they walked down the quiet 2 a.m. corridors of the wizard hospital, Harry asked, "Can we go on holiday? If we can afford it, that is," he quickly added, thinking that the demands on Snape's finances had become more complicated of late.

"I think that is an acceptable notion. Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know," Harry said, thinking the possibilities too broad to narrow at this time of night.

"Spain? Egypt? Canary Islands?" Snape asked. They had reached Shankwell's treatment room.

"Anywhere would be fine," Harry insisted. "We could go to Finland. You could meet Per. It's nice this time of year," Harry assured him.

"You sound as if you know that firsthand," Snape stated keenly.

Harry hesitated. "What if I did?"

Snape shook his head and opened the door to the room that had grown almost loathsome in its familiarity to discomfort and stress.

Shankwell was not in, but a young wizard who was covering his duties was waiting. He did not realize Harry was late, or did not care; he simply went about the business of cleaning and re-salving Harry's arm. Harry was grateful that he did not have to get yelled at.

They were on their way back out. Snape stopped at the end of the quiet corridor to say, "I expect we can move back home before your birthday." The floating fairy lights congregated above them, circling. They did a poor job of lighting given the dark panelling on the walls.

"I'd like that," Harry replied, adjusting the neck strap of his sling. "So, I can have a big party?"

Snape nodded as though feeling doting. Somewhere in the distance a door closed.

Harry said, "I'm looking forward to it." Snape turned to head down to the lifts, but Harry restrained him by touching his arm. "Thanks for . . . taking care of things, as usual." He moved his bandaged elbow to indicate that he meant bringing him here to the wizard hospital.

"I cannot do otherwise," Snape stated.

As they stared at each other, Harry thought that if this were his real father standing before him, he would be taking him for granted right now. He could not do that with this man. It was impossible. They had far too much history.

"Well, thanks anyway," Harry awkwardly said, wanting to express more, but unable to. He was feeling good, better than he had a very long while. He was certain that if he waved out a spell right now it would not contain any darkness, and he could not imagine needing to worry that it may do so again. Forgiving the distant past had been the right thing to do; it had freed him and his future. He recoiled inside at the thought of where he would be this moment if he had not found the strength for that path.

Harry had struggled long enough, trying to find words, that Snape softly asked, "Ready to go?"

"Yep," Harry said, heading down to the lifts. "I'm going to be really tired of this place by the end of this."

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When they reached the waiting area, Snape Apparated them away. Back at the flat, only Hermione remained, wrapped in a dressing gown and drinking tea at the table.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Good," Harry said. He skipped returning to the couch and joined her at the table. Without asking, she poured him a cup of chamomile.

"Shall I return at 8:00 for you?" Snape asked Harry.

"I'll see that he wakes up," Hermione assured him.

"I can get there on my own," Harry said. "You don't have to come."

Before Snape could depart after nodding, Hermione asked, "Do you think Headmistress McGonagall will be at Hogwarts tomorrow?"

"I suspect not," Snape replied. "Not this far into summer, usually."

"Do you have her home address?" Hermione asked.

Snape nodded and found a quill and paper on a pile beside the couch and brought them back to write at the table. "Any particular reason you wish to correspond?" he asked, sounding highly knowing.

"Yes. I'm going to inform her that I'm accepting the Charms position." She sounded nervous as she spoke, as though a first- or second-year student again.

Snape wrote out and handed the slip of paper over with a nod that could have been a bow.

Harry said, "That will make you Professor Granger, you know."

Hermione stared at the address and said, "Yes, I suppose it would," with a smile. She looked back at Snape and asked, "You're all right with that, correct?"

"Of course," Snape said, but then added, "Meaningless wand waving, anyway."

Hermione laughed lightly. "So, it doesn't matter who's teaching Charms, you are saying?"

"I suppose that isn't quite true. I would prefer the students be challenged by other teachers so when they bring their tiny minds back –round to my class, they are cannot feign surprise at needing to work. In my experience, those who find subjects too easy when they are in school, make their subjects the most challenging for students when they become teachers."

Harry turned back to his friend to see her reaction. Hermione seemed keenly interested in this conversation. "So you expect I'm going to be too hard on the students?"

"By no means." Snape leaned forward over the table conspiratorially. "There is no such thing." He made his good-byes and Disapparated.

Hermione said, "Oh dear," in his wake.

Harry grinned as he sipped his tea. "You'll do fine."

"And how about you?"

"My arm will get better and I can return to training. Maybe I can even catch up on my reading in the meantime." He glanced over at the forlorn pile that seemed to have grown just since yesterday, or maybe some of the guests had rearranged things.

Hermione sighed. "I'm excited about teaching."

"I'm excited about moving back into my house."

She put her hand over his and squeezed it. "That'll be great for you, Harry." She glanced around. "I won't need this flat anymore. That will save some pounds. I can find a place just for the summer. On a lake somewhere. That will be nice." She appeared dreamy as she held her tea cup out before her lips.

Harry pulled the Indian wand out of his back pocket and placed it on the table before him.

Hermione said, "Is your wand going to show up?"

"I don't know," Harry said, fingering the one before him. He felt a bit lost without his original one, but also felt that perhaps losing it was a good sign. "Maybe if I don't have it the prophecies will stop."

Hermione shook her head rapidly in confusion. "How's that?"

"There are lots of things I'd like to start over again, although most of them bother me less than they used to. But getting out from under fate would be the one I'm keenest on right now."

"So you aren't just going to get a new feather from Fawkes?"

Harry held up the wand before him as though checking it for true. "I'm going to see what Ollivander has first. I'm hoping I find something there."

She cradled her cup more firmly and observed. "That's a big change, Harry."

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"These eyes are big change. I still startle myself when I look in the mirror. I'm not the same person Dumbledore arranged that wand for. I don't want to be that person anymore."

Hermione fell silent, but finally said, "It's reassuring when you say it that way. I was afraid you were rejecting what . . . well, what Dumbledore did for you."

"No," Harry said. "I can't do that. But I want a new path now."

She held up her teacup as though for a toast. "Well, I'm finding a new one too. Cheers."

"Cheers," Harry echoed.

- End -

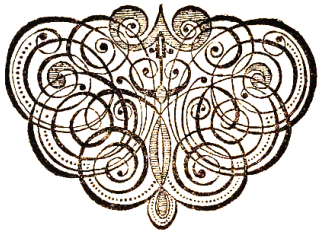
Yes, this is the end of this story. I left some plotlines to pick up in the next story, to be titled Resolution. I'd like to thank everyone who's read Revolution and Resonance, feed me back, and recced it to your friends. It is much appreciated. I learned a lot writing this and having readers makes me up the priority of this practice writing. I also owe my betas a tonne of thanks: Ally in England, Audrey in NYC, Bettina in Finland, Jane in Mich, Nana in Switzerland, Steve fellow Upstater, Verdenia in SanFran. As well as Amy for tolerating my silly last-minute grammar questions that I'm too embarrassed to ask anyone but a best friend. There are two older hp stories of mine posted on my website at darkirony dot com if you want an fix at the expense of recently acquired skill. They are Reconciliation and Rending (yes, there was an odd time when I thought all my stories should start with "R")

I'm going to get all of Resolution in draft form before posting any of it. I want to see if I can solve some problems I had in Revolution if I do that. I'm also hoping everyone will accept the main premise of Resolution, but since you all willingly accepted Harry as master of the underworld, I'm feeling pretty confident on the acceptance front. You all have changed so much since I first started posting Resonance. It really freed me up, I have to say. We dearly owe my betas for bailing me out on many of the mistakes I made before you readers had to see them. I'd rather be smoothing than patching in these cases and if I don't post as I go, I can actually do that. So don't look for anything until April. Everyone should have had a great winter by then (in the northern hem. that is; you Australians and South Americans can fend for yourselves) and I hope to see everyone back here at that time. I intend to get the story fully posted before book 7, which I'm suspecting is slated for summer release (if not precisely on 07/07/07).

Part III

Resolution

Chapter 9.



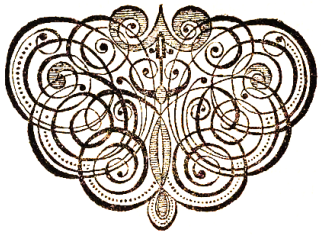
Introduction to Resolution

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

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

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

Chapter 1.



On the Coast

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mad dogs and Englishmen," Snape commented.

At Harry's questioning look, he prompted toward the door, "Go on."

"You two are good together, you know," Harry said as they walked down the narrow staircase of the hotel. A stiff breeze blew in off the Mediterranean, ruffling the

promotional brochures lined up on a side table across from the front desk. Snape dropped the rubber-edged, heavy brass key on the desk as they walked by it. Outside, the wind bullied along the curved, cobblestone street and on the shady side it was almost chilly, but as they reached the quay the heat and light poured on once again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Still growing, I see," she teased him.

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

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

Snape nodded and Harry moved to consolidate her pizza with his on his plate. He ate another piece while the two of them sat comfortably across from one another, sharing

a second beer. Harry felt comfortable with this too and mildly regretted that Ron was arriving the next day because it would disrupt the rhythm the three of them had settled into.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

"Wear the sling in that case."

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at me," Snape said.

Harry did, but his mind was Occluded.

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

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

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

"... the matter, Severus?" Candide asked.

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

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

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

"It isn't his absolute age that matters, it is that his power is far ahead of his maturity."

Their voices were drowned out again. Harry ran his fingers through his salty hair, curled unusually in the humidity. He did not mean to concern Snape so much. He

did not mean to be difficult. He was glad he had given in on the sling so easily and very glad he had not Apparated back home and gone missing. That narrowly missed possibility gave him a spark of panic. That he had even contemplated it supported Snape's assertion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That'll be nice," Harry confirmed.

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

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

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

Harry would have disregarded this comment, previously. He wanted to say something, to reassure his guardian, but did not want to give away that he had overheard

anything. He held up the borrowed wand from the Ministry that he was using. It was short, only 9 inches, and made of ash wood. "This wand is really slowing me down," he commented as a distraction. "Although I like that it is easy to hide."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is understandable."

"But I want one that works as well."

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

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

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

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

"If it happens again, do let me know."

"There isn't anything you can do about it," Harry pointed out.

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

Chapter 1

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

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

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

"That's great, Ron. Congratulations."

Ron shrugged. "It's a long-term track. It may never lead anywhere."

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

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

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

"That's not the point," Ron argued. "They, well . . ." He trailed off.

"They think I'm dangerous," Harry filled in for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2.

Yielding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sheesh, call me Harry."

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

"Sure," she replied, but her eyes sparkled. "How's the arm, Harry?"

"Good." Harry waved his arm. "All healed."

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

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

"Did you get the award?" Tridant asked.

"Minister gave it to me after the battle was over."

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

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

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

"How could they not matter?" Tridant asked, disbelieving.

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

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

"I prefer to be left alone," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tridant stared at Harry. "This is easy?"

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

"You have?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Harry's not to know," Hermione informed him. "He's just to show up, not to worry about anything."

Harry said, "I live here, showing up isn't a problem."

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

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

"You are sufficiently skilled to already know what she is planning," Snape pointed out in a low tone.

"I don't do that," Harry said. "It's cheating."

"Surprising you are still alive," Snape stated airily. "How is your arm, by the way?"

Harry ran it through a range of motion with no pain, just extra tickling sensitivity where the flesh was new. "Great." Just sitting down on one of the couches and not moving a muscle seemed highly appealing. "I need to unpack," he said reluctantly. "I was hoping to stay the night in my own bed for once. Where's Candide?"

"Dinner with her parents," Snape said, domestically adjusting cushions as a distraction, which made Harry have to swallow yet another smile that day.

"You're not there?" Harry prodded.

Snape's shoulders curled and his head angled to the side, but he did not seem angry, just disturbed. Hermione came back down the stairs just then and, being the very intelligent person she was, took in the scene and said, "I'll meet you back at the Burrow, Harry," and disappeared.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked Snape. He wanted this marriage thing to work out, so he was not going to sit idle if warning signs began appearing.

In a disgusted voice, Snape mocked, "Dinner with the parents."

"So? She's been through dinner with your dad."

"My father has far lower expectations."

Harry, thinking of Snape's intensely critical father, said, "Are you joking?"

"I think he is more easily satisfied in matters such as this," Snape restated.

Harry gave in to the siren call of the couch before him and dropped onto it. It absorbed him with a sigh. "Uh oh," Harry muttered, but returned to the topic at hand. "Are you afraid they're not going to accept you, or something?"

A hard tone appeared. "They have no choice."

"So then, what does it matter? Go have dinner and get it over with." He stared at Snape, who was clearly unconvinced. "Severus," Harry criticized.

"I don't like caring," Snape hissed.

"Caring about . . .?" Harry prompted.

"About what people think," Snape clarified, getting angry with Harry now it seemed.

Harry's neck was getting sore. "Sit down," he suggested. "I'm tired of looking up at you. And clearly you need to relax."

Snape looked like he might resist, but moved slowly to sit on the edge of the other couch, set at a right angle to the one Harry sat on. Unfortunately for him, the couch did not allow for uptight sitters and he fell backward into it.

Harry laughed from his fully slouched and comfortable posture. "You shouldn't have bought charmed couches."

Snape fought for a more upright sitting position. "I didn't. They are Muggle furniture, through and through."

Harry closed his eyes, drifted a minute, and said, "If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you of not only caring what they think but fearing they are going to reject you outright." There was no response, so Harry, still staring at the darkness behind his eyelids, added, "But I know better, so that can't be it." Harry tilted his chin to his chest and looked over at his adoptive father, reclining awkwardly with his hand propped under his chin. Quietly, Harry said, "To hell with them, Severus, if they don't accept you."

Snape came back with, "Watch your language," but it lacked force.

"I think you should just get it over with," Harry said after a pause. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Snape shook his head. "I should not use you as a shield, or a distraction, for that matter."

"Do they know about me?"

"Yes, of course."

Harry waited for more, and finally had to ask. "Am I helping? Or . . .?"

Snape snorted lightly. "Your presence in this family does help I am told, yes."

Harry felt more relieved to hear that than he wished to be. With a great heave, Harry pushed himself to sit forward, hands clasped between his knees. The couch felt unstable if one sat on just the edge, as though it might let you slip to the floor without warning. "Let me know, Severus, what you think will help. I'll do whatever you ask."

Snape did not reply so Harry, thinking he was feeling awkward, changed the topic. "We're at last having our advancement ceremony tomorrow. If you wanted to come."

"I most certainly wish to attend," Snape stated.

"It's at 2:00, but I don't think it will be really formal or anything. It's being held in the Aurors' office."

"I shall be there."

"No bells on though, I suppose," Harry teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"I never wear bells," Snape stated with finality. He rocked forward and made it to his feet on the second attempt. "Let's finish moving back in, shall we?" He stretched his neck as though he had strained it and added, "And perhaps return these couches . . ."

The next afternoon in the changing room, Harry donned his Auror dress robes, which felt a little tight across the shoulders. They looked fine in the full length mirror, so he ignored the constricted feeling they gave him. He transferred his borrowed wand to the wand pocket of the robes and joined his fellows in the Aurors' office.

Kerry Ann appeared flushed with excitement as they allowed themselves to be lined up in the narrow space between the cubicles. Aaron by contrast was more subdued, unusually matching Vineet's attitude. They had an impromptu moment of silence for Munz who would have been made a full Auror that day. Kerry Ann lost her bubbly attitude after this and stopped sending bright glances over at Ambroise beside her mother. The Minister was not attending, so Belinda had come bearing the box of new adornments.

Tridant stood off to the side with the other visitors while Mr. Weasley went down the row of them, Belinda on his heel holding the box and seeming distracted. Mr. Weasley shook each of them by the hand and added a chain to their shoulder, starting with Blackpool, who now had two gold and one silver.

While Harry waited his turn he glanced over at Snape and Candide standing in the doorway and for a moment he felt dizzy with the alternative endings to the close calls that could have left either or both of them dead. A deep breath later, he felt less fragile but not as strong as he wished. He was distracted by Mr. Weasley adding a second gold chain to his left shoulder.

"Good job, Harry. Knew you could do it," he said, shaking Harry's hand vigorously.

Chapter 2

Harry fingered the chains, finding that they meant more than expected. Even though they were just a symbol, they provided solid evidence that the last year was over and therefore could be put behind him. Mr. Weasley finished up with Aaron, gave then all one last round of accolades and then chided everyone to return to work. Snape approached, clearing the doorway.

"Loads to be proud of, Harry," Candide said when they reached his side and the tide of people had washed the other way.

Harry wanted to repeat what he had said the day before, that being alive was all that mattered. But he could not say it again now; their pride in him did matter.

"Shall we have a celebratory dinner somewhere nice tonight?" Candide suggested.

Harry had to hold himself from glancing at Tonks, with whom he was planning to have precisely that. "Er," Harry hemmed.

Snape said, "I think Harry's birthday will have to do for the celebratory dinner."

"Oh," Candide said, clearly not understanding.

The room had nearly emptied. Only Tonks hung back, fiddling with papers on her desk. "I have to get back to my training," Harry said to dismiss them. "Thanks for coming, even though it was short."

Snape nodded in acknowledgment. He shot a last level glance at Tonks before turning and departing. Candide squeezed Harry's arm and followed.

When they were alone, Tonks said, "You could have gone out with them tonight instead."

"I'd rather go out with you," Harry said quietly, stepping closer.

She held a hand up. "Rodgers is about to come hunting for you, I'm certain."

Harry dearly wanted to wrap her up in his arms, something he had not had a chance to do in a week and a half. He sighed and departed for the training room, thinking the evening could not come fast enough.

Indeed, their dinner out was delayed because Tonks was late returning from an assignment. After having too much time on his hands during holiday, Harry found himself impatient with things not happening exactly when he wanted them to. He loitered in the corridor after the other apprentices had left for the day, hoping Tonks would make an appearance. When this failed, and various passing people glanced up at him questioningly, Harry decided to give Belinda a visit. Her mood during their

advancement ceremony had declined again, in contrast to most everyone else's around the Ministry.

Before Shacklebolt could pass by a third time with a raised thick eyebrow, Harry headed for the stairwell to go up a level. He reminded himself that Tonks would be a while finishing reports, if she did return before he did.

Belinda sat at her desk, scowling at a sheaf of parchments in her hand. The outer office was a hive of activity; a meeting was going on around the low table and workers were repairing shelves in the corner, so books, crystal balls and gifts from foreign dignitaries were stacked on the floor along the walls.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Hallo," Belinda said dully, making Harry believe that she was upset with him about something, although he had no idea what it might be.

"I, er, didn't get a chance to talk during the ceremony earlier and I realized, well, that we hadn't in a while."

She set the stack of parchments before her and smoothed them, not meeting his gaze. "Congratulations," she said, almost out of the blue.

Harry's awkwardness increased. He could not ask her what the problem was here in the office. "Do you want to go out for coffee sometime? You can sometimes get out for lunch, right?"

"Not a good idea," she said.

"Oh." Harry fidgeted and turned sharply when a nasal voice said, "Problem Potter?" Harry turned to face Percy Weasley, who had one boney elbow propped outward, fist on hip.

"No," Harry replied easily, glad he now understood why Belinda had been giving him such chilly responses. "Just came up to chat."

"It's a bit busy here," Percy pointed out as though Harry were ten years old. A drilling spell from the dismantled corner loudly accented the accusation that Harry may be in the way.

Harry shrugged and said goodbye extra sweetly to Belinda as he departed. The corridor was blissfully peaceful in contrast. Harry shrugged inside his robes, feeling like he needed a shower after simply talking to Percy.

Late in the evening, Tonks and Harry finally made it to a small Muggle restaurant in the West End. It was so dark inside, Harry at first thought it was closed for the

night. But it was not and they were seated at a candlelit table beside a mirrored wall that reflected myriad, cascading candlelit tables and orange-hued faces from the mirror on the opposing wall.

Harry appreciated the darkness as he took hold of Tonks' hand across the table. "I missed you," he said.

Tonks replied, "It felt like more than eight days. More like eighty days. You look gorgeous with that bronzed skin. Makes me jealous."

In the flickering darkness, her usual tall pink hair appeared orangish, or perhaps she had changed it to orange. She wore a form-fitting knitted top that made Harry wish they could just skip dinner and go straight to her flat.

"Next time you and I should go."

She teased, "I didn't have an injury serious enough to keep me from working, unlike some people."

Harry said, "You seem more relaxed, or is it just me assuming you are because I am?"

"No, things quieted down nicely. We've caught up with the worst of the escapees from Azkaban. The Ministry's getting cleaned up." She shrugged. "Let's not talk about the Ministry."

Harry fished in his head for another topic while the warm hum of conversation and the clink of silver surrounded them. "You're coming to my birthday party, right?"

"Late. I'm on duty until 9:00."

Harry frowned. "Which means you probably won't make it until 11:00, at the earliest."

"I'll make it eventually, Harry. I promise." She gave him a smile to seal it.

At her flat, they curled around each other on the couch and Harry silently agreed that it felt like it had been eighty days since they last were together. Despite believing he would take it slow and relish things, it did not work out that way, and too soon they were threaded around each other, spent.

Harry was half asleep, in spite of not being entirely comfortable, when Tonks stirred and said, "I could use a cup of herb tea."

Harry unwound himself to let her rise, then pulled random articles of clothing back on as she made tea.

"Want some?" she asked, standing just outside the kitchen holding a teapot, wearing only an unbuttoned shirt.

"Sure," Harry said, thinking that she could skip the tea and just stand there for a while and that would be fine too.

From the kitchen, she asked, "How's it feel to be a Second-Year?"

"I thought we weren't going to talk about the Ministry."

"I'm not; I'm talking about you." She brought the teapot out and two tea cups, which she proceeded to dry with the loose corner of her shirt.

"It's nice to be reminded I'm making progress." Harry held out a cup for her to fill, then had to move his fingers to the lip when the thin china grew scalding hot.

Tonks said, "Minister Bones held a little meeting with a few people from the department to talk about how we can work on your image."

Harry growled.

"Don't make noises like that while I'm holding a hot cup of tea," she said. "I have a hard enough time with that, normally."

Harry smiled, but then heard himself say, "You're very cold at the Ministry." He may not have said it had he thought ahead.

She stared at her hands cradling her cup. "I have to be, Harry. You should be too, but you keep slipping up."

"I just . . . think it'd be nice to behave, well, normally."

"If we are in a bad spot – which happens not infrequently as Aurors – neither you nor I can take personal feelings into account. It's deadly if we do."

"The Longbottoms managed it. Since they were married before they were Aurors, they could behave normally." Harry was not certain why he continued to argue this, but he needed to get it out in the open more than he needed to be rational.

"Harry, look where they are now. Ask Shacklebolt what happened to them sometime."

"I know what happened to them; Bellatrix happened to them."

"Yeah, but how'd she catch them? They messed up, Harry." She topped up her cup and folded her feet under herself.

"Bellatrix thought Voldemort could be still alive. Turns out she was right. I wonder if she knew about the horcruxes."

"I don't want to talk about it. It was way before my time, so I may not have the story straight." But despite her assertion, she added, "'Course, Reggie messed up with Bellatrix too."

Harry pulled the knitted blanket from the back of the couch over the both of them and leaned closer to her. "What exactly happened with Rodgers?"

"He walked into a trap. But he was at his limit already. At some point after that many hours on duty you are on automatic and can't think suspiciously enough."

"What did Severus have to do with it?"

"He came to the rescue. You didn't hear that?"

"I don't think Rodgers wanted me to know that," Harry said, grinning. "No wonder they're no longer at each other's throat." He took her tea cup away and set it on the floor so she would not spill it when he aggressively moved to kiss the hollow above her collarbone.

Saturday arrived and with it Harry's birthday. Harry slept in till 9:00 a.m. because he had been out field shadowing until 1:00 a.m. the night before. He had shadowed Blackpool, who could now officially take him around, although that had not stopped them being assigned together before when the office was too busy to avoid it.

Most of the evening, Blackpool seemed to have other things on her mind, but at one point she asked Harry to help her reinforce a spell barrier around a wizard bulletin board in Blossom Square that had suffered during the riots. Harry at the best of times found large barriers difficult, but his borrowed wand made it impossible to sustain the right magic to complete the spell. He could only apologize for not being able to do this minor duty. Her pragmatic words of, "Just get a new wand, Potter," still echoed in his head this morning.

Harry snarfed breakfast while Snape and Candide read the newspaper, having long since eaten.

"Off somewhere?" Snape asked, when Harry stood not five minutes after sitting down.

"I have to go to Ollivanders," Harry explained. "The Ministry wand I've been using isn't working well enough for me."

"Do you have sufficient gold for a new one?"

"I think so. I can go to my vault if I don't."

Snape's distracted attention narrowed down at that. "Let me know if you do need anything."

Harry swung his cloak on and prepared to use the Floo. "I need a wand that doesn't have a history."

Snape stood at that and intercepted Harry as he was putting the canister of Floo powder back on the mantelpiece, crystals of powder dribbled out between the fingers of his over-full left hand. "Fighting fate is rarely successful."

"Thanks, Sybill," Harry breathed before tossing in the powder.

Harry took a deep breath and turned the latch of Ollivander's shop door. Bells jingled above his head. A lean shadow crawled across the back wall and the old wizard came into view.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, what can I do for you?"

Glancing around the tightly packed boxes surrounding them, Harry said, "I lost my wand and I need a new one."

Harry could not read Ollivander's piercing, pale-eyed gaze. The older wizard clasped his hands together and fell thoughtful while peering around his stock. "We tried quite a few wands last time, Mr. Potter. But . . . there are a few new ones you could try . . ." He trailed off accommodatingly.

"I've been using this one," Harry said, holding up the borrowed wand from his department.

Ollivander cursorily examined it, asking, "How does it work for you?"

"It works. Mostly. Doesn't do everything quite the way I'm used to."

Ollivander rewove his fingers together. "Lost the old, you say?"

"Fighting Merton, yes. It might have shown up . . . that's why I waited to get a new one. I wasn't certain if it was destroyed or not." This excuse sounded good, even

to Harry, who knew he had put it off because he feared fate would repeat itself yet again with a replica of the old one.

They had reached an impasse; Ollivander broke it by turning to fetch his ladder and some wands from his stock.

"This is an unusual one," Ollivander said, shaking open a long narrow box much the same as the others. He held up a long white wand with a spiral pattern of grain. "Unicorn horn with fairy wing tendon."

Harry took hold of the wand. It felt different, all right. "The Unicorn is still alive?" he asked, knowing the answer, but asking nevertheless. He really was musing on how the wand would behave after the Unicorn had died.

"I would expect."

Harry tried a few spells. The hover came out strangely. The book floating before him visibly vibrated.

"That wand is looking for someone," Ollivander said, almost confessing. "I don't know whom. Does not like charms as well as hexes, in my practice with it at least."

Harry handed it back and another box was lifted off a healthy pile of two dozen still to go. "Coral tipped Palissandre," Ollivander announced as he held out a pastel pink wand streaked with brown. "The core is harpy feather."

This wand did nothing when Harry waved it. He handed it back.

"As expected," the shopkeeper said. "I made that one for the mer-boy the Hogwarts headmistress tells me is getting a letter just about now."

"One of the mer people is attending Hogwarts?" Harry asked in surprise. "How is he going to breathe?"

"A water charm of some kind, I'm sure. Or a diving bell full of water if all else fails."

He handed Harry another wand. "Sandlewood with Mngwa whisker."

Half an hour later, Ollivander informed Harry that he had exhausted his stock of new wand materials since Harry had last shopped there. "The rosewood and glass Cherufe hair performed the best, I believe," Ollivander helpfully said.

"Not good enough. Charms didn't work at all," Harry admitted. He dropped his head and let his eyes flow over the piles of open boxes on the counter. Ollivander began meticulously putting each wand away in its proper box and stacking them in a basket for restocking. Harry did not want to give in, but there seemed no choice.

"If I bring you a feather from Fawkes, can you make me another like my old one?" Harry heard himself ask.

Ollivander nodded.

"I'll do that, then," Harry informed him, feeling dispirited. "I should fetch one now while I have the time."

Harry Disapparated to Tonks' flat, which he knew was empty, and dropped through the Dark Plane to arrive behind Hagrid's hut. Snape did not want Harry traveling though the Dark Plane, especially on so casual an errand, but Harry was feeling disgruntled and unwilling to obey even good advice as a result.

Hagrid was tending his vegetable plot, thinning the small pumpkins down by picking out those that were not of his preferred shape. "That one'll never do," he said, tossing a donut-shaped, beach ball sized pumpkin beyond the garden fence as though it were a trifle. "Oh, hello Harry. Didn't see ya there."

"Can I borrow Fawkes for a minute?" Harry asked. "I need a tail feather from him for a new wand."

Harry almost half-hoped Hagrid would forbid him to have one for some obscure exotic animal care reason. But Hagrid just stood straight, rubbing his great broad back, and said, "We'll, let's see what we can do fer yeh."

Fawkes flapped his wings when they entered. He was in full feather, Harry observed and could not avoid the eerie sense of coincidence. "He looks good," Harry said.

"Aye. He's about to start a month of molting then comes the flames and ashes, and then we start again." He turned to Harry conspiratorially. "That's when I have to move his perch outside or risk losing my thatch." He turned to the bird. "Harry here needs a tail feather. You're going to lose those two you have in a week or three anyhow and by then they'll be ragged as the weeds I dredged out o' the lake last week."

The bird tilted its head to look at Hagrid better and shuffled along its perch away from him. Harry approached and stroked the bird's head and wing. "Believe me, I don't really want to take your lovely feather but I don't have any choice."

Fawkes stepped up onto Harry's hand and pecked at his robes but it did not seem aggressive, more conversational. Hagrid said, "That's all right then." And gave a snapping tug on the longest of Fawkes' tail feathers. He startled Harry and the bird equally when Fawkes gave an ear-splitting squawk! and fluttered once around the cabin before flapping back to the perch and fussing with his remaining good feather.

"Thanks Fawkes," Harry said. The bird ignored him.

Hagrid wrapped the feather in a soft deer hide and handed it to Harry. "There you are."

"Thanks Hagrid. I don't know if I could have . . . yanked it out like that."

"Ach, nothing to it. He was going to burn it to ash shortly enough."

Harry returned to Ollivander's via the Floo in Hogsmeade, uncertain if passing through the Dark Plane may harm the feather's magic. He presented the whole bundle to the old wizard craftsman and put down an eight Galleon deposit.

"I'll push your wand to the top of the list, given your position, the poor match you have with your current wand, and your history of attractiveness to those with evil intent. It should be finished in a week. Call again next Saturday."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, giving the old wizard a small bow because just saying goodbye seemed insufficient.

Harry was still melancholy when he returned home. The house had been decorated in his absence and now black, maroon and green streamers lined the center hall and a pile of presents had been started on a table in the corner. The house was quiet, and Harry stood still there in the center of the big room, captured by his own thoughts.

Snape stepped up beside him, quietly, but not so silent that Harry did not lack all awareness that he was there. Harry shook himself and returned to the here and now.

"How did it go?" Snape asked.

"I fetched Ollivander a feather from Fawkes to use to make another." Try as he might, Harry could not make his voice come out other than annoyed.

Sounding as though he wished to tread carefully, Snape asked, "What is wrong with having a wand that works properly for you?"

"Nothing's wrong with that," Harry said. "It's just that . . . that wand had a role to play and if that wand is always destined to be mine, then the role is also."

"I don't believe I ever expected to have to say this to you, but I believe you are over-analyzing the situation."

Harry plunked himself down on one of the couches and let himself sink backwards. "I don't want to fight Voldemort any longer."

Snape stepped around until he faced Harry, expression narrowed with disbelief. "I do not know what makes you fear that you will need to. He is safely, and helplessly

I might add, ensconced within the French wizard prison. I cannot imagine he will be going anywhere anytime soon."

"True," Harry admitted.

"It is time to focus on your training-"

Harry interrupted with, "It is time to focus on my birthday."

"Yes, well, for today," Snape conceded.

Harry got to his feet and surveyed the tables that had been set up. An empty punch bowl and haphazard stacks of crystal cups sat around it. "Hermione's been busy already."

"I believe she won't be returning until 4:00 or so," Snape informed Harry, sounding cryptic.

"You know something I don't," Harry suggested.

Snape gave a haughty lift of his nose and stepped away.

"Ach," Harry said, resting his head back. "At least I don't feel followed around all the time anymore."

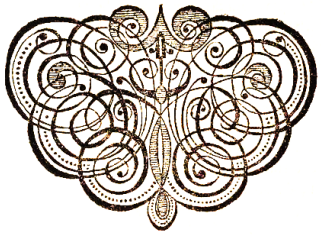
This re-attracted Snape's attention before he could reach the stairs. Harry went on: "Maybe Mad Eye's found something better to do."

"Maybe he decided on a holiday as well," Snape suggested.

"Maybe he's just getting more careful," Harry said, sitting forward. He ran the detection spell for the house, but it fizzled. Harry slapped his own forehead and groaned.

"Good thing you gave in on the wand," Snape said, snapping his wand out and running the spell himself. A thin trail of blue glitter flickered over the walls and then faded, indicated the house was secure. Snape turned and headed up the stairs saying, "Unless you are looking for an exercise in humility, I would recommend declining any invitations to duel at your party tomorrow."

Chapter 3.



Nineteen Years

Partygoers began showing up just before 4:00 and the hall filled with voices and merriment. Old school chums, including Ginny, now released from her detention, Ministry fellows, and neighbors clustered about the room. Harry admonished each new arrival who brought a gift, but despite this, the gift table filled up. Suze released a training Snitch and set it to zipping around the chandelier. Aaron, unusually, arrived dateless and cornered the Slytherin Seeker, intent on learning his old house's upcoming prospects for the cup. The Weasley twins arrived, sporting matching silvery cloaks, and began handing out small sample bags to those willing to swear with a Promissory Spell not to sue them later.

"Ron, are you sure you want to eat that?" Harry asked of the thick transparent jelly-like biscuit his friend held up for inspection. It appeared to have a tiny toy top spinning inside of it. Harry did not hear the answer because Hermione arrived, bearing an unexpected guest.

"Penelope?" Harry uttered in surprise, jumping up to approach them.

Harry gave his old girlfriend a hug. She said in surprise, "You have grown more so!"

Hermione said brightly, "I thought we should have all of your old friends and allies together, Harry. You need all you can get."

"I'll give you that." To Penelope, he said, "It's good to see you," as he led her to an empty seat near people she would know from Hogwarts. "You came all this way for my birthday?"

She giggled. "I have a colloquium in Glasgow next week. I am making a long trip of it."

"Ah. It's nice of you to come."

She leaned close and said, "Even a few people I know say such things about you. Unbelievable. You have not changed except to grow more. I can tell."

They chatted a while, meandering slowly toward a corner. "You remember Neville, right? And Luna, and Lavender." Harry pulled a chair over to join them. "Where's Ron?" he asked Lavender.

"He's had too much punch already. He's on the floor over there."

Harry jumped up and, sure enough, Ron was flat out behind a couch. Harry bent down and shook him. Hermione was just suggesting they take him to St. Mungo's when Ron burst into giggles and spat out the biscuit Harry had seen him with earlier. It rolled away across the floor and stopped, but continued gently rotating on its edge.

One of the twins scooped it up. "He wasn't supposed to eat that." He rolled eyes and said, "Oy! Fred, give me a hand."

The two of them sat the giggling and clumsy Ron up by hoisting his long arms over their shoulders.

"What's that thing?" Harry asked.

"It's a Misplacement Gimcracker. You slip it inside something and then that thing is never where you left it." To Harry's confused look, he went on. "You do it to someone you don't like. You know, put it in their briefcase or handbag, or something."

"You all right, Ron?" Hermione asked him.

Ginny crouched down with them. "Did he choke on something?"

"In a manner of speaking," Hermione said, sounding less sympathetic now.

Ron's giggling slowed and he managed to get himself onto a chair with only light assistance. He shook his head repeatedly as though to clear it. He blinked and looked around. "Is this Harry's birthday party?"

"Yes," several people replied in unison.

"Oh good," Ron said.

Candide came in. Harry would not have noticed her in the crowded room, except she was sneaking over to the presents table. Harry leaned his head to the side to better watch her slip a gift onto it from behind her back.

Harry intercepted her on her way back to the dining room, truly surprising her with his admonishing expression. She said, "I can't believe you caught me at that. There must be a hundred people in here. I had trouble thinking of a good gift until this afternoon. That was the first chance I had to get it on the table."

"I'm quite certain the invitations stated, no gifts," he said, mostly teasing.

She pulled herself straight and said, "I didn't receive an invitation. So there." She tugged Harry toward the dining room. "Your cousin wants to say hello."

Harry joined the real adults around the far quieter dining room table. Snape sat back with his hand hooked around a small tumbler of something. Candide returned to sitting across from him and sipped her tea. Pamela sat holding the hand of Lupin, who appeared excessively withered.

"How are you, Remus?" Harry asked.

Pamela patted the hairy hand she held. "Only three days since the full moon, but I convinced him come to your party, I'm afraid."

"'s good to get out," Lupin said.

Harry was not given much time to talk before being dragged back into the hall to open his gifts. The punch had been spiked twice by then and the voices had grown louder and less sensical as it was consumed. Harry accepted each gift with some trepidation that he did not need so many things. But by the time he opened the fourth highly practical gift–in this case a set of orange curtains from Ron with cannon balls flying around on them–he turned to Hermione questioningly.

She leaned forward to pat Harry on the knee, saying tipsily, "Of course I told everyone exactly what to get you. After the fire, you needed some things."

"Thanks. And thanks, Ron."

"My mum sewed them for you, I expect." Ron sounded like he wished he remembered for certain. He pulled a corner of one close and said, "Hope you don't mind that it probably was a duvet cover of Charlie's before this."

"I don't mind at all." He held them up. "They look the right size too."

Hermione said, "I gave Ron exact measurements, but he doesn't remember my doing that."

"I do," Ron argued unconvincingly.

Many of the boxes contained silver gift coins. Harry made a careful stack of the ones to Cloak Couture, one of the new shops in the Diagon Alley expansion. He did need a new cloak.

When there were no more un-opened boxes, Harry said, "Thanks, everyone." He found Candide in the crowd with his eyes. "Especially for the collapsible pet cage."

Tonks arrived after the party returned to its former boisterous conversation. She gave Harry a chummy hug.

"How did shift go?" Harry asked, drawing her aside into the corner so he could be relatively alone with her.

"Swimmingly. It was quiet enough we went ex-prisoner hunting."

"Catch anyone?" Harry asked.

"Two ones," she replied between bites of cold, scattered tidbits from the table nearby. "They were silly enough to return to England after initially running off to Belgium to hide." She licked her fingers. "Happy Birthday, Harry. I didn't tell you that yet, did I?"

"No, but thanks. It almost isn't anymore."

"Just in time, then," she said with a wink. Harry would have accepted her good wishes two or three hours late with no difficulty.

The party wound down as they talked, which Harry was only vaguely aware of until Ginny came over, sheepish about interrupting. "We have to go soon."

"Oh," Harry said, glancing around the much thinned crowd. He spied Ron, playing with a wooden game Harry had received where you tilted it to get a metal ball through a maze. If you went down the wrong hole, it squirted ink in your face. Ron had streaks of grey around his ear and a stained hanky in his hand. Harry pulled Ginny closer. "Better tell your mum what happened to your brother."

Ginny's whole demeanor shifted. "She's going to lay into the twins if I do."

"Ron may need a Healer though. I offered to take him, but he doesn't remember what happened, so it's tough to convince him. Your mum could get him to go if he doesn't get better."

Ginny sighed. "Yeah. You're right. He's not really bad, but I don't think that thing did him any good." She glanced between the two of them, with a hint of jealousy, but it turned out to have a different origin than expected. "How's your training, now that you're back into it?"

Harry relaxed, not realizing he'd tensed. "It's good. Apply again next year, Ginny."

He expected the same noncommittal response as last time, but she said, "Of course. Your fellow apprentice, Aaron, said he'd send me his reading list and some of his books, which he's highlighted all to death with the critical things."

Chapter 3

"That was nice of him."

Ginny's gaze slid over to where Aaron stood talking with Vineet, Hermione and a few others. "Yeah, he is nice," she said, sounding far away.

"Ginny," Harry snapped. "You can't get involved . . ." he started, but had to close his mouth. He was standing there next to Tonks after all. His face heated up.

Ginny broke out laughing. "I don't even know if I'll ever get into the program for it to matter," she argued when she had the chance. She had the grace to not state the obvious, but she kept giggling periodically and shaking her head in amusement. "I have to take Ron home, like you said, tell mum. See what she wants to do with him. See if she thinks he's not quite himself."

"Let me know if you need anything," Harry said to her departing back. She waved over her shoulder in acknowledgment.

"Ron looks the same as always to me," Tonks said. "Well, the same as always if he's been attacked by a squid."

"Once we're done here, we should go to your place," Harry said suggestively.

Tonks stood more alert. "I'll go on ahead and clean up. I was crawling around in shrubbery this evening."

Harry wanted to give her a kiss before she departed, but decided it would be a bad habit to break, once started.

The hall gradually emptied, leaving only Snape lounging on one of the couches, perusing a book Harry had received on disguise spells entitled Shrouded Aspect. Harry dropped onto the opposing couch and peered around the littered room. The clock showed ten past one. It had been a good birthday. Harry should stop worrying about his wand situation. As Snape said, Voldemort was unlikely to cause trouble from his current position.

Snape closed the book and set it on a pile of boxes. He nodded when Harry asked if Candide had gone to bed.

"I hope we weren't keeping her awake," Harry said, suddenly thinking of this.

"Silencing charms work wonders in such situations."

Harry stood, thinking he would head to Tonks' flat. He picked up a few boxes, sorting out the gifts, not wanting to leave all of this for Winky to do. When he finished with a quick reorganization he noticed that Snape had not moved. Concerned that it may generate another lecture he nonetheless said, "I'm going to go stay with Tonks."

Snape waved his hand dismissively and picked up his tumbler from the floor. He glanced around and waved the nearly empty bottle from the dining room to refill it.

This jarred Harry out of his immediate thoughts of Tonks waiting for him. "Aren't you going to bed?"

"Eventually. Go on." The tone had gone dismissive, hard even. He resembled Lupin that evening in his posture, as though overly tired.

Harry looked around the room, picking up and discarding possibilities. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Snape stated, adding annoyance into the mix.

"Something wrong with Candide?" Harry asked, plowing in because, not in spite of, the danger signs.

"Candide is fine," Snape stated, and indeed his tone softened as he said this, indicating it was the truth.

Harry sat back down across from Snape, pouring over recent memories. He had been spending little time at home now that they had returned. "You look like you could use a good night's sleep," Harry said, hoping worry over him was not the reason Snape looked less than well rested. "Why don't you take one of your own potions and go to bed?"

Harry hung there, waiting for a response. He was certain Snape teetered between snapping at him and giving in. "Do you want me skip going to Tonks' place tonight?" Harry asked. "I know you don't approve . . ."

"It is your birthday; you should go," Snape stated flatly. He stood and sighed. "I perhaps will follow your advice."

Harry followed him down to the toilet and leaned against the doorframe as Snape searched through the cabinets.

"I certainly do not need your assistance with mixing a potion."

"I know that," Harry said. He wanted to press more to get Snape to talk, but he also did not want to to have it confirmed that Harry himself was keeping him up at night.

Snape toweled out a tall glass he had found and heated it with his wand until the water droplets in the sink under it hissed into steam. "When will your new wand be finished?"

"Next Saturday," Harry replied, determined not to be distracted.

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Snape poured a bit of clear, thick liquid into the glass. It immediately began boiling. His hair now obscured his face. "That is fast."

"He made it a rush order because I tend to attract evil."

"True enough." Snape bent to add a grey powder to the glass with precise taps on the container. He stirred the mixture with a glass rod and said after several minutes. "You are still here."

Harry could not deny that. "I want to know you're all right." A thought occurred to Harry then. "The Crutiatus curse isn't coming back is it?" Harry half hoped it was that, because that he could help with.

"No, it is not," Snape replied tiredly.

"Do you want me to check?"

Snape shook his head decisively and crouched to add drops of something blue to the glass just until it turned glittery inside as though the liquid had frozen over all of a sudden.

"What are you making?"

"Something of my own concocting."

"I've never seen it before."

"You have. I concocted it for you when you were in the Dark Lord's grips and dared not sleep."

Harry remembered that horrible day with great reluctance. But after a cursory review of compacted memories, considered that even if the Crucios were no longer bothering Snape physically that did not mean they were leaving his dreams alone. Snape lifted the glass and held it up where it could catch the light of the lamp. The crystalline frost inside slowly dissolved toward transparent.

"Are you going to be all right?" Harry asked.

With more typical grumbling spirit, Snape said, "I do not want you worrying about me."

"Why not?"

"I believe your ladyfriend is awaiting you," Snape said.

Harry laughed lightly. "She keeps me waiting all the time. You didn't answer the question."

Snape rotated the glass, tilting it as though to urge it along. "If you are worrying about me, I am failing at this role."

Silence descended until the glass was completely clear and Snape moved to pour it into an empty bottle for which he could actually locate its matching stopper. He slipped the bottle into his robe pocket and began putting away the ingredients. That, done, he used a rag to slowly wipe up the sink.

"You're very far from failing, Severus," Harry said. But he bit his lip as he remembered the pain of discovering that it had been Snape who had told Voldemort about the prophecy. But it should not be buried where it could fester, so he said, "You were very patient with me while I worked things out about the prophecy that killed my parents."

A shiver passed through Snape as he stood holding the edges of the sink and listening to Harry while staring at nothing in particular.

Harry insisted, "Say something."

"It is all very tenuous."

"What is?"

Snape huffed. "Life."

Harry scoffed and criticized, "Now you are getting philosophical as a distraction."

Snape moved with purpose to finish closing cabinets and then turned the lamps down to a tiny amber halo.

"Severus?" Harry prompted as he followed him out into the hall.

Snape turned slowly back to him but did not speak. His gaze was indiscernible in the low light.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"No," Snape replied with finality and started to walk away again.

"I'm going to keep worrying about you, then," Harry threatened.

Snape paused but kept his back to Harry. "Fine."

Harry watched the black robed figure go up the stairs and into the first bedroom. Harry did not feel that things were tenuous. Thoughtful and distracted, he Apparated to Tonks' flat to find her soundly asleep. He shucked his clothes and slipped in beside her without waking her.

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Harry returned for breakfast the next morning, leaving Tonks to sleep in.

"Harry! Didn't expect to see you here so early," Candide said brightly when he arrived.

"I could use a good breakfast," Harry explained, which was the truth. Breakfasts at Tonks' usually consisted of a stale scone or Danish at best.

"Came to collect your gifts, I see," Snape stated when he came in and found Harry at the table.

Harry smiled at his negative and accusatory tone. "Yep. You got me."

Candide glanced between the two of them in befuddlement. "You two have endless codes. Just when I think I've figured it out, it changes."

Candide merely picked at her small breakfast. "Feeling all right?" Harry asked.

"I am not so hungry this morning," she admitted, sounding queasy. "And I have brunch with my parents."

"You going?" Harry pointed asked Snape.

Snape shook his head, which shifted his hair forward to obscure his face. Candide was frowning as she sipped her coffee. She tapped her spoon methodically against the table a moment and then stood. "Well, I'd better go."

After she came back in, clearly dolled up more than before and disappeared in the Floo, Snape said accusingly, "Whatever you were going say, go ahead."

"I was going to say 'just as well'."

"I will second that," Snape stated as his plate disappeared. "If you had not been here, there may have been a row over that."

Harry poured more sugar into his coffee, feeling he needed the treat. "You're going to meet them at the wedding in a month in any event." He kept stirring, waiting for the gritty sound to decrease. "It isn't like you to play the victim." But as Harry said this, and he saw Snape's chin move slightly sideways as though he had been struck, a clearer picture was forming for him.

While he fished around for what to say next, Snape cut him off with, "I am all right, Harry. I've just had a few bad nights is all. Too much on my mind."

"I hope I'm not one of the things worrying you," Harry said.

"At the moment, no," Snape replied smoothly.

Harry, who knew better because of what he had overheard, said, "You lie too well."

Snape put down his coffee without sipping it. Tangible tension rose between them as though part of the table, but Harry was glad this was out; it bothered him and he wanted it dealt with.

Harry went on, stating each word with certainty so that Snape could not dodge it, "You're worried about me, about what I could become with this power."

"Yes," Snape agreed, calm now, keen alertness overwhelming any fatigue or annoyance he had shown moments before. "It is less a reflection on you than it may appear. As Alastor has pointed out to me, I have lengthy experience managing powerful wizards. I have instincts born of that time that I cannot relinquish." He carefully watched Harry's face for a reaction.

Harry for his part was feeling relieved. Relieved to be talked to as an adult and relieved that Snape trusted that he could handle his concerns.

Snape, after thinking lengthily, said, "I cannot ignore the fact that were you to turn dark, you would be unstoppable. Voldemort would be a distant happy memory for wizardom in comparison."

Harry held back his gut response to consider it, but in the end said it anyway, "I'm not going to go dark, Severus." It hurt to have Snape even believe it a possibility, but he did not want to show that because he wanted to have this conversation.

"I agree that on the face of it, it is unlikely. You are conscientious to a fault. You are not afraid of emotion. And you are, as I am well aware, capable of great forgiveness." He sipped his coffee before continuing, speaking carefully as though picking each word specifically. "All this does reassure me. But at the same time you toy with things that are monstrously larger than you, and I do not feel you give them proper apprehension."

"I assume you're talking about the Dark Plane," Harry said.

"Yes. It is an unknown that I cannot discount as a danger."

Harry thought that over, not wanting to speak any less carefully than Snape was. But he was slow responding and Snape went on, "You treat it too casually for my comfort."

"That's just it, though," Harry was compelled to say. "You don't understand; that's exactly what gives me power over it: believing I'm stronger than it. I had trouble with it only before I knew that."

It was Snape's turn to fall thoughtfully silent. When he next spoke, he said, "And you disposed of Voldemort's magic there. Does that not represent some added danger? Is he not there now in some form?"

"I hear this odd howling now that I didn't previously," Harry said with a shrug. "It might be him." Harry realized something important just then: that thinking something and saying it aloud could be two very different things. He had only idly considered his suspicion that Voldemort's magic was still intact as an entity or force in the Dark Plane, but saying it aloud to Snape and watching his brow furrow, was a very different thing. "I'm stronger than him, though," Harry persisted, knowing Snape would recognize his own quote.

Snape did not speak and left his coffee to go cold. Harry said, "I'm not reassuring you, am I?"

Snape rubbed his chin. "If I thought you were avoiding the Dark Plane, I would be somewhat reassured. When were you last there?"

Harry, given the truths being bared here, could not lie. "Yesterday."

Snape to his credit did not react. "I did not think I could influence you on this point, anymore than I could influence you on the point of Ms. Tonks."

"I don't mean to be trouble," Harry said, finding a younger version of himself speaking out, one who was accustomed to being classed as trouble by guardians who were not shy about letting him hear about it. He tried to squash it, but it refused to be. He sighed, trying to think more adult-like. "I don't want to keep you up at night."

"You aren't," Snape insisted.

Harry wanted to believe him. And normally he would not dream of prying so, but he needed to know. "You're having nightmares about being Voldemort's prisoner?"

Snape nodded faintly. "It will pass. It takes time. Quite a bit of it sometimes, in my experience."

Harry did not like feeling helpless. "If you think the Cruciatus is coming back again, let me know."

"If it has not by now, it will not do so. But I will inform you, be assured. I am not fond of pain, even if the occasional student insists otherwise."

Harry laughed lightly.

Snape returned to serious. "I do not want you to take my concerns as a loss of faith in you. You are doing very well, I can tell even without taking advantage of your

letting your Occlusion slip. Your wand seems to be the only thing distressing you right now."

Harry said, "I don't know why I let it bother me so much. I think I'm over it now, but I expect when I get the new one I'll be so happy to have a wand that works again, I'll ignore that it is so tied to my fate."

"All good wands are tied to a wizard's fate."

"Yeah, I got a better sense of that at Ollivander's this time. He gets some strange inspirations about wand materials and then has to wait and wonder who is going to show up for it." Harry pulled out the short pale wand he was currently using. "Yeah, I'll be happy to get a good one again."

Snape pushed his empty cup away and it sparkled into the ether. "And perhaps this week sometime . . . dinner with the Breakstones."

"Do you want me to come along?"

"As tempting as that offer is, I should manage on my own."

Harry smiled. "Let me know, but I'd be happy to go along, Severus."

"Have you attempted an Animagus transformation since the treatments have stopped?" Shankwell asked when he released Harry's arm during his final appointment.

Harry shook his head.

"And you said before that your form is too big to fit in here . . ." Shankwell began but faded. At Harry's nod, he suggested, "Why don't you Apparate off somewhere more fitting to try a full transformation cycle and then come back. If that fails to produce any species distortion in the newly grown flesh, we'll declare you fully healed."

Harry leapt down off the examination table and Disapparated to the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds. It was early morning and no one was about. The few banners left up between matches snapped in the wind over the VIP box high above him. Harry walked to the main gate and peered between the decoratively curled bars at the grass oval of the pitch. No one was around inside either. Harry took a few steps back to get out from under the overhang of the stands looming above him, and transformed into a Scarlet Gryffylis. Once he did so, he could not resist flapping to feel the gravity lessen until his claws lost contact with the earth.

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As much as he would relish circling the pitch in flight a few times to feel the freedom of it, he dropped until his claws dug into the turf and transformed back into himself.

Back in Shankwell's room, Harry pulled up his still unbuttoned sleeve to reveal that no harm had come from transforming.

"Looks healed, finally," the Healer said, addressing his notepad, rather than Harry. Harry pulled his robes back on and tossed them straight. Shankwell said, "Versa is still interested in learning Staunching from you. She is probably in the ward if you have the time right now."

"I'm due at training," Harry said, glancing at his pocket watch. "I can come back at 4:00, after training."

"I'll ensure Versa is here. Come to the staff room."

An owl was waiting for Harry when he reached the Ministry. Harry read the letter from Ron as he took his seat in the training room. Ron complained that his mum had taken him to the Healer twice and now blamed the twins for every small instruction Ron forgot while helping her around the house while on sick leave from work. Like I normally would remember which rows in the garden were potatoes and which mug Percy prefers for cocoa! Ron wrote, making Harry chuckle.

Upon his return that afternoon to the wizard hospital, Harry reported to the greetingwitch and was led away by a small old orderly. Harry followed the man's downy white hair and mole studded ears to the staff break room. The boisterous conversation stopped when Harry entered.

Versa rose gracefully, spirit-like, from the couch, trailing her long hair. "Mr. Potter."

"Call me Harry," he said, looking far down to meet her gaze.

As the other Healers and assistants looked on in curiosity, she faintly said, "Let's go to an empty office, shall we?"

The office was small but neatly ordered due to judicious use of shrinking charms. An entire wall-full of files had been reduced to a foot square set of dollhouse shelves. A giant magnifying glass bounced on an armature before it.

Versa gracefully held her hair to the side as she took one of the two chairs, reminiscent of Penelope. "Mulvie tells me-"

"Mulvie?"

"Healer Shankwell, that is, told me a few things but I'd prefer you explain from the beginning, if you would, how this skill works."

Harry clasped his fingers in his lap, feeling vaguely nervous. "The shaman I learned it from in Finland says that it cannot be taught; one either is a Stauncher or they're not. I think though, from my own, er, observations, that it is tied to having a sense of Radiance in general. You know about that right?"

"That's where you can feel an object's owner in something metal," she said. "I know about that."

"Can you do it?" Harry asked. At her nod, he felt relieved that this would be easy. "Blood to me feels like a stronger kind of the same thing. When it's flowing freely, it is taking life away with it. I'm maybe not explaining this well," he said, but then noticed his companion had drifted away, eyes distant. Harry, remembering Munz dying, thought that working here in the hospital, constantly sensing all that radiance leaching away, would be difficult and wearing.

"Do you have a knife?" Harry asked, trying to sound brighter.

Versa, still distant, searched around in the desk and pulled out a shiny metal rod with a triangular blade screwed into the end of it. When she held it out to him, Harry said, "If you don't mind nicking yourself, I can Staunch it and you can see what it feels like."

She held her lithe, pale hand out and turned it one way and then the other as though thinking where best to make a cut. Making a fist she pressed the blade to slice into her thumbprint.

Harry unfocused his thoughts until the leaching radiance was clear. Around him, the building itself felt dank, saturated with a stale, sickly echo of the same thing. Harry gently pressed on the radiance with imaginary snow and the bleeding stopped.

"It feels cold," Versa commented. "Did you just release it?" she asked, intensely interested.

"Yes. Want me to do it again?"

"I will try it." She reached for the blade to reopen the new wound. "It will work on myself, correct?"

Harry scratched his cheek. "I think so. But you can try on me."

She dismissively said, "You're a patient."

Blood trailed thinly into her palm as she stared at the new wound, having no effect on it.

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"Don't try too hard," Harry said. "It's instinctive. I imagine packing snow around the wound and pressing on it, as tight as I can if its a big wound."

She sighed, closed her eyes, stretched her shoulders, and in the end the bleeding stopped on its own.

"I think it would be easier to try it on me," Harry said, trying to sound more authoritative than he felt. He took up the blade. Versa used her wand to heal her thumb and winced faintly when Harry cut into his. A few seconds later, Harry could feel an invisible pressure on the cut. "You're getting it."

Two re-cuts later, she had it down easily. "I had to imagine an ice sculpture over your hand to make it feel cold to you."

"Well, it worked," Harry said.

With a ghostly, yet irresistible, touch, she pulled his hand over to heal it with a tap of her wand. She released his hand slowly because she had again drifted far away. "We certainly cannot practice with a Crucio, so I will have to make do when the next patient of that sort comes in."

"I think you'll do all right. You seem very sensitive."

She smiled, amused, "It is usually an insult when I hear that."

"I didn't mean it to be," Harry quickly said, which she accepted with a broader smile.

Immediately growing serious again, she said, "May I ask you a question?" At Harry's shrug, she went on, "I was not certain I wanted to have you come and teach me this. Mulvihill set it up today without informing me."

"Oh," Harry said.

"I did not imagine that someone who had killed so many could have any sense of such things."

Harry did not know what to say in his defense. She went on, "I remembered you caring for your father, whom it seems you healed rather than Hedgepeth." She waited for Harry's nod before continuing. "I wonder how you function as an Auror given that the harm you do to others must be immediately clear via this other Radiant sense."

Harry countered, "I wondered how you functioned here in this hospital without knowing how to Staunch."

She fell far away again. She probably would have let her question go, but Harry wanted to hear his answer too. "Aside from Voldemort I've never really killed anyone

outright. I've killed accidentally in the heat of a spell battle. I've set demons on my enemies at a distance. Perhaps it isn't really different, because the result is the same, but . . . I couldn't just kill someone, one-on-one, if there was any kind of choice." With bloody vividness, Harry remembered resisting doing so with Avery despite believing that the man had just torn his world apart. That devastating internal struggle was the last thing he remembered before his mind had shut off.

Versa stroked her hair nervously, distracting Harry from his memories. "Delegating to demons . . ." she said, trying to take it in. "I would expect them to just come after you."

"They can't if one believes they can't." Realizing he made her nervous, Harry stood. "I'm due at home," he said to back out gracefully. "If you have any questions, you can owl me. I'm willing to help too, if you have a bad Cruciatus patient."

She nodded and Harry departed. On the way down the corridor he considered that given how uncertain Versa felt about him, she must be either brave or foolhardy to have agreed to be in a room alone with him. He wished everyone trusted him the way they did when he was smaller. But given the copious articles about his powers, that was unlikely to ever happen again. At least Tonks treated him the same as she always did. That thought alone made his heart lighter and put it in anticipation of seeing her at the Ministry.

The week crawled by while Harry counted off the days until he would have his own wand back again. He already thought of the brand new wand as his own because he fully expected it to perform exactly as his old one did. Drills frustrated him all week, and when Rodgers paired him with Tridant, he could barely match their newest apprentice for spell power. Harry expected Tridant to point this out, but the man had fallen silently focussed rather than brash.

After drills, Harry sighed as he stuffed his wand away into his pocket. Vineet, whom Harry had not noticed step closer, said, "I understand this frustration."

Harry shook himself out of his own concerns. "Yeah. Saturday my new wand is ready. I can barely wait."

The room emptied for lunch and Harry noticed Tridant slowing rearranging his books as though to stall or just because his mind was far away and he was unaware of what

he was doing. Harry hung back. It was not that he preferred his new associate's original demeanor, but the change concerned him.

"How's it going?" Harry casually asked, expecting to easily draw the other out.

Tridant shrugged his broad shoulders. His lip twitched.

Harry stepped to the side, to physically get in the way of getting to the doorway. "Something wrong?"

Tridant shrugged again and did not meet Harry's gaze. He seemed to decide that Harry was not going to get out of the way unless he answered. "This is hard, it turns out."

"Er . . ." Harry hesitated, trying to find his way. "But you're doing fine."

A third shrug.

Harry scratched his ear, thinking. "Rodgers is hard on people when they are first starting out."

Tridant's voice dropped. "It's like he wants me to quit. He isn't so hard on the rest of you."

Harry did not believe that to be true. Reassuringly, he offered, "He already beat us to a pulp over the last year and doesn't think he needs to do that so much anymore."

Tridant scoffed. "Yeah, it's like he wants me to quit," he repeated, gesturing toward the door. "Didn't you hear him harping on my Titan again today."

"He may seem like that, but it's because he doesn't want to send anyone out unprepared. See, if one of us dies because we were unequipped, then he'd have to blame himself," Harry heard himself saying without forethought. "He doesn't want you to give up getting better."

"I had thought that block was easy," Tridant said, sounding more argumentative. "Do you know how long I've known that one. I used to show it off as a Fourth-Year at Hogwarts."

"Maybe you're too used to things being easy," Harry said, still just speaking thoughts as they popped into his head.

Tridant said sulkily, "This DID all use to be easy. I'm going to get booted I'm doing so terribly. I'd rather quit first."

Harry held back a smile because things were now clear. It was apparently possible for incoming apprentices to be too cocky. "He can't boot you until your first review, which is months away. You have tons of time to work on things."

"And to think I used to look forward to examinations. I'm going to be the bottom score." He appeared horrified at the thought.

"You're alone in your year. You will also have the top score. Out of our year, Aaron or I will be on the bottom," Harry assured him.

"Yeah, but you can't get booted."

Harry's brows went up. "Oh, don't bet on that," he said vehemently, thinking of recent suspicion of him. He sighed and said, "Look. You're taking Rodgers' exacting teaching too personally. He just doesn't want anyone ever slacking. Everyone here is as good as you are. You're not going to be the best anymore without a ton of work."

"Nicely spoken," a voice said from the doorway. Tonks stood there, leaning jauntily on the doorframe, arms crossed, looking very cute.

Grumbling, head down, Tridant asked, "How long you been standing there?"

Tonks laughed. "Long enough. Harry was doing fine and I didn't want to interrupt."

Tridant headed for the door, head still low. Tonks moved her foot to let him pass. To Harry she said, "You free this evening?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"I'll see you after second shift, then. Your place."

Harry sat alone in the hall, the house settling into night around him, books stacked on the floor at his feet. Snape and Candide, returning from dinner with her parents, were a welcome distraction. Snape's dismayed expression made Harry hold off on asking questions until Candide had claimed exhaustion and gone to their room.

"How'd it go?" Harry quietly asked, wary of the answer.

Snape tilted his head noncommittally and, after a hesitation, stepped to the couch to sit across from Harry.

"Did you survive, at least?" Harry asked.

"Their expectations were not clear from the outset, and they remain obscure."

Parroting, Harry said, "You should have sufficient skills to-"

Snape cut him off with a slash of his hand. "I do not wish to be quoted at."

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"Sorry."

Harry held back, but finally had to ask, "Wedding still on?"

"Yes."

Harry waited for more, but was disappointed. "They were hoping for something different?" he prompted.

"That is an understatement."

Trying to help, Harry said, "They don't know the real you."

"They do not wish to know the real me," Snape pointed out darkly.

"True," Harry conceded. He still had the Manual of Uniform Ministry of Magic Report Scribing open in his lap. He closed it and set it aside. "Maybe I should have gone along."

Snape nodded, black eyes far away. "Things would have gone better, but it would have been a sham." He sat back farther and sank into the cushions, his formal robes flowing around him like a wrinkle on the flat, black suede. "As flattered as I have been in the past by your willingness to take up the role of my personal shield, I cannot tolerate it when it is not necessary to retain my liberty. I need to muddle through this myself, even if it means stooping to pretending to be something I am not to smooth the way."

Harry sighed. One of the candles sparked and sputtered as it leaked a river of wax down over the brass holder, which quickly turned opaque. Harry reached in and pinched out the flame before the wick burned up completely. He shook his burned fingers, then touched them to his tongue.

Snape shook his head, amused. "If I took you along, they would later swear you were not truly magical."

Harry ignored the dig. "I'm always willing to be your shield."

"I would rather follow your previous advice and cease to care. I abhor this position of being forced to give a damn."

"Did it really go that badly?" Harry asked.

"Oh, it was perfectly polite," Snape said sounding nauseated. He stretched an arm out forward to more easily sit up. He struggled with that as he said, "But I am fully aware of what they were thinking. They even had moments of doubting the story about you."

Harry laughed lightly. "Then I insist on coming along next time."

Snape stood. "Next time will be the wedding," he said with finality.

"Well, you got it over with, anyhow," Harry offered, wishing Snape felt better.

"And Candide believes it went swimmingly."

"Then you are set."

Snape made a dubious noise of assent and departed up the stairs.

Hours later, candles gutting, air chilled, Harry still sat reading his assigned books. He did not want to look at the clock yet again because it would force him to decide if perhaps Tonks' had forgotten or if she had been hurt or was even now under duress.

When Tonks did appear in the dark hall, Harry greeted her with, "You're very late." It was after 1:00. Just a single candle remained, wick nearly drowned. He had been napping lightly, books stacked out of the way on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "Something came up." The couch tilted as she sat down beside him. She let out a long sigh and he relented on his annoyance and put his arm around her.

"Is it something you can tell me about?" Harry asked.

"It's Debjit Thanakar; something odd happened," she sounded far away as though still trying to puzzle something out. Harry could hear her breathing more clearly than he could see her.

"What happened?"

"He's been at St. Mungo's, growing a new foot and recovering from his other wounds. They finally gave us permission this week to move him back to the Ministry for interrogation. He seemed fine when Kingsley and I fetched him to the dungeon but when we went to move him to one of the interrogation rooms, he was completely out of it. Disoriented and confused like he'd been potioned. We spent the last three hours trying various antidotes to no effect."

"Do you want Severus' help?"

"We decided that it isn't a potion."

"Memory charm?"

"No evidence of one. Or a Confusion charm or anything related." She groaned and tossed her head back.

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Harry wanted to help figure out what had happened, but the scent of her, even after a long stressful day, wasn't something he could ignore. "Why don't we go up to my room? Your silencing charm is pretty good."

She chuckled in a way that made the center of Harry go liquid like the core of the remaining candle.

> Author's Notes: Writing is going well. Should have 4 posted next weekend again. we get into the main plot arc.
> If you have trouble getting the chapter notifications you can send me an email requesting to be added to my personal list. You can find my email by clicking on the profile link somewhere on this page.

Chapter 4.

Battle in Darkness

Friday night, Harry reported for his field shadowing. Ever since Mr. Weasley had learned about him and Tonks, Harry rarely got paired with her, and this evening was no exception. In the Aurors' office he found Blackpool sitting at Tonks' desk, waiting for him. Rogan and Shacklebolt were hard at work at their own desks, Shacklebolt with two open files hovering beside him to avoid cluttering his desk.

"Should we pick out an assignment?" Blackpool asked Harry. She seemed in better spirits than previous shifts so Harry eagerly assented.

Her face twisted amusingly as she fingered each assignment slip beside the log book. "Mysterious lights not over swamp, nah . . . domestic dispute elevated out of Obliviatorobliviator squad . . . hm, that one should have been closed by now . . ."

"It has been," Shacklebolt said from where he sat at his desk, battered quill in hand. "That is the closed pile."

Blackpool glanced up from the slip she had just picked up. "Oh, how did Repeat odd report intercepted from Muggle police in Burnipsbie turn out?" Harry glanced at the slip, wondering why she thought it interesting.

"I closed it, don't worry about it," Shacklebolt snapped, startling Blackpool and bringing Rogan's head up out of his own quill-work.

When Blackpool simply stared at him in surprise, he waved the slip out of her grasp to his own, and bundled it up in his palm before turning back to his research. Blackpool

shrugged after a second and pulled out a slip from the pile on the other side of the log book.

"Probable magical trickster loose in Loch Ness . . . Oh boy."

"That one keeps floating to the top," Rogan said, grin clear in his voice. "No one seems to want it."

"We'll take it," Harry said, taking away the slip. "We'll need the brooms," he said grabbing up the two nicest ones propped beside the door and grabbing Blackpool by the arm to Disapparate to an empty overgrown field far from any significant city.

"I didn't want that one, Potter," Blackpool grumbled.

"Nor do I," Harry said, handing her a broom. "I want to see what is up in Burnipsbie."

"Oh. Did you get the road and number?"

Harry nodded, considering where he could closest Apparate into. "Er, except you're in charge," he said, sounding suddenly uncertain.

"Well, yeah, but I'd like to check that out too." She pulled out a pair of flying gloves and began pulling them on. "Not like Mr. Shacklebolt to lose his stiff calm like that. Odd."

"That's what I thought."

She propped her broom on its twigs and adjusted her grip on it as though to stretch out her gloves. "So, I can get us about ten miles off from Burnipsbie."

"Do you think we should go to Loch Ness first, as cover?"

"Let's go after. I don't think Shacklebolt will check up on us right away."

Harry worried otherwise, but she was in charge.

Blackpool said, "I like your suspicious way of thinking."

"I can't help it at this point."

Blackpool laughed and took hold of Harry's arm.

After a pleasant evening flight accompanied by the orange glory of the setting sun, they circled over the village of Burnipsbie, a stain of lights on the darkened earth as though the snaking necklace of the motorway had leaked into the rolling sheep fields.

They landed at the edge of the houses and Blackpool left her broom with Harry and walked into a pizza takeaway to ask for directions to Pollen Gate. With a jangle of

the bell on the door, she soon came back out and around to the dark side of the building where Harry waited.

"Said the road is five over and that he hoped dearly that I did not want number sixty-four because everyone living there is right insane. 'Creepy' he said. They play rock-paper-scissors to see who gets stuck delivering there, and they order frequently."

"Hm," Harry said, hoping for more clues. "Did he say anything else?"

"They always order quadruple meat and spinach on their pizza. Apparently the steak house doesn't deliver."

They stood, each in their own thoughts, until a car pulled up in the last space on the end, illuminating their dark corner. Blackpool smoothly slipped the brooms behind her back, out of view.

"Well, let's go," she said soberly.

As they walked, Harry said, "Shacklebolt didn't seem to be under an Imperio, did he?"

Blackpool shook her head as she strode with purpose. "He seemed the opposite of far away and slow to me. His pupils weren't dilated."

They soon reached the correct street and stood by silent agreement behind two large tree trunks in the empty lot opposite. Sixty-four was the last house on the road. It stood forlorn, darker than the sky behind it, with only dim lights showing in a few windows as though candles were in use. The remaining windows were endlessly black. The shutters hung crooked and the slate roof had jagged rows of missing shingles like open wounds. Harry shivered.

"Magical household?" he asked of the candlelight as a swarm of swifts dodged by, seeming to avoid the house opposite in their dance.

"Wasn't color coded as such on the slip."

Silence fell again. "How about we come back during the day?" Harry proposed. "Say, around about noontime."

Blackpool laughed. "Some Aurors we are." She laughed more. Growing serious again, she said, "Kingsley got away unscathed. Let's get a closer look."

"Shacklebolt had something going on," Harry pointed out as they stepped onto the cracked Tarmac, Harry felt a wave of aversion and he instinctively grabbed for Blackpool. His ungainly grab came up with the shoulder of her sleeve, which slipped free of his grasp.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Harry waved for her to slide sideways, but there was no cover on either side of the house, just flat dry ground interspersed with ragged patches of dead grass, as though the occupants desired to see who approached. She gestured for them to go back to the relative security of the trees where they had started.

"Potter?" Blackpool prompted. "You're spooked and that can't be good."

"I feel the, uh, I feel evil when I get too close to that house."

"This your curse-nose going off?" she asked, wand held at read, aimed at the doorway across from them.

"Worse. It's like the underworld leaking through." He breathed in and it did smell too earthy. "Can you smell it?"

"Smells like the country to me."

"Would you be willing to let me approach the house alone? I get an early warning and know when to back off."

She rubbed her chin, considering him and the house alternately. Twilight was passing into real night, and now the sky glowed only from the city lights, miles off. A large black bird or a bat flapped around the chimneys before fluttering off.

"If you stay in view, sure. I can cover you from here. If you leave my sight, I'm coming after you," she threatened.

Harry jogged across the road and up beside the steps where he could peek in the front window. He rolled his wand in his fingers, wishing it were his new one. The aversion had eased somewhat, so Harry canceled the Obsfucation charm, waited for the cold fingers of it to subside, and knocked on the door.

A long, empty time passed. A car roared by on the crossing road, pulling the hum of the motorway closer. Harry was about to knock again when he heard movement inside, shifting back and forth behind the door as though the source of it rocked side to side, uncertain.

The door clicked and swung open, creaking of course. An alabaster face appeared in the opening, a young woman, expressionless except for her wide eyes.

"Hi," Harry said. "I, uh, I wonder if I could have a word with you?"

The person did not respond. The face glanced back behind itself, then again at Harry, long black hair swishing. Harry decided that he needed a bit of Legilimency here,

and since the young woman was staring openly at him, he had lots of time. The resulting sense of terror nearly made him drop his wand. He gripped it tighter, eyes also wide now. Her face gave away none of the extreme battle going on inside her head. A battle of wills raged behind her grey eyes as though two personalities wanted to dominate fully and would not give ground for even the smallest action until utterly winning out. She continued to stare.

Harry pushed the door gently inward. This tore her gaze to the door, and she released it, hand frozen in space as though she still held the edge of it. She stood stock still in a two-story hall in a grey nightie with torn frills, wholly Muggle. Harry gave an okay sign behind his back, hoping in the dim light that Blackpool could read it.

A shrill voice grated on Harry's suppressed memories of the Dursley's as an older woman stalked into the hall. "What is this, Margaret?" she asked, eyes also wide as she glared down her nose at Harry. She was taller than him and wore a ragged but ancient dress with a hoop skirt. She pushed the outside door closed, concentrating the musty odor. The dim light sucked all the color out of her dress so, combined with her pale skin, she seemed a ghost.

Harry, having nothing to lose, said, "I'm an old friend of Maggie's from school."

"Margaret is not allowed visitors. You should go." She pointed a boney finger at the door she had just closed.

Thin fingers tugged on Harry's arm from Margaret's side. Thinking quickly, Harry said, "I just haven't seen Maggie around in so long . . ." That seemed a pretty safe bet. The old woman grew calculating. Harry Legilimized her too, wondering at her strangely increasing calm. He had rather a major struggle not to react to visions of someone mentally auditioning various means of killing him. The vision cycled from kitchen knives and stabbing to hatchets and blood to ropes and blue faces.

"Of course," the woman said calmly as the vision wound back to thoughts of long knives. "Why don't you take him up to your room, Margaret, dear."

Harry held his expression utterly flat, which was the best he could do, and assumed he looked just like the daughter. The woman turned away, dragging the ragged edge of her gown as she glided off, probably to the kitchen. The thin fingers tugged plaintively on Harry's arm again and he let himself be led to the far end of the hall. At the end, the stairwell wrapped around, heading upward back toward the door. Harry turned and stepped up and just before it went out of view, saw the door silently opening again.

Knowing that Blackpool followed, Harry held fast to his small wand and plodded up each step, senses fully alert. At the top another ghostly figure darted out of a

side room. "Is it pizza?" a small boy frantically asked. Harry lowered his wand, sputtering faintly with the blasting curse he had nearly used.

"No," the sister simply answered. The first she had spoken.

The boy swallowed, looked about to cry, and ran back into his room.

Harry pushed down the thoughts of why Shacklebolt thought this sufficient to let alone because he could not spare the attention. He and Margaret stepped along a thick runner and halfway along went into a girl's bedroom. A candle shed welcome warm light around the high-ceilinged room. The curtains, canopy and various frills still powerfully exuded their quaintness, but they drooped, leeched of color by dust and time. The girl sat on the bed and clasped her hands between her knees. The battle still went on, Harry assumed. Even in the orange light, her skin stretched translucent and colorless over her features.

Harry, wand still firmly in hand, knelt before her. "Margaret?" he prompted gently. "What is going on?"

The battle raged harder and she shook her head. The door moved silently and Harry had to squint to see even a prismatic outline of the Obsfucated Blackpool taking a position beside the door.

Relaxing just faintly, Harry took one icy hand and wondered with a start of his already active nerves if she could be an Inferae. No, he could feel a pulse. He bit his lip to try another deeper round of Legilimency but Margaret looked away, at the window. Harry turned that way as well, and stood instinctively with a jerk of surprise. Previously, darkness and a few lights had shown outside but now dense glowing fog pressed tight to the glass.

Harry stepped back and raised his wand. He felt sleepy and violently shook his head. A strange sound of delight came from beside the door, presumably from Blackpool. Harry found himself bending to drop his wand on the floor, and this frightened him enough that he fell to his knees to take it up again while forcefully Occluding his mind. His thoughts cleared and the room stabilized. Something fleshy collapsed to the floor behind him and Margaret now lay back on the bed, tugging her nightie away from her neck as though suffering from heat stroke. One of her hands stretched out as though to greet someone at the window.

Harry, holding his mind Occluded, stepped back farther as the fog leaked in through the cracks in the old window and began to coalesce. The aversion returned, making him hunch to fight running. The glowing mist gathered densely, darkened and became

a tall man in a cloak. He did not turn to look at Harry, but approached the bed and its hypnotized occupant. Before reaching the bed, he spun away and stalked toward the door, eliciting a groan of dismay from the vicinity of the bed.

The figure rotated its head, mouth wide as though tasting the air. The vampire's long teeth were quite apparent as it did this. Harry held his breath, wanting to see enough evidence so that there would no argument later that this vampire was fully rogue and had therefore lost its rights.

The man-creature pawed around on the floor in search of Blackpool, frantic as though hungry for what must smell far healthier than the other victim in the room. The candle flickered as though in a breeze, white teeth flashed as the vampire moved to bite down on what he had found by feel and Harry blasted him against the dresser in the far corner.

Vampires were indestructible, and what would have knocked out anyone else did not phase this man. He rose up inside his cloak and swelled even taller as his gaze burned red with anger. Harry felt his Occlusion slipping due to his own anger and the vampire's head tilted as though interested in Harry's ability to resist him.

"It's over," Harry said.

The man laughed. "Oh, is it? How quaint."

"You're coming with me. You've gone rogue and that's against the rules."

"The Rules," the vampire mocked. "Whose rules are we onto now? Do you know how old I am?"

"Old enough that you should have been dead long ago; I'll give you that," Harry said.

The man laughed again, more mocking. "You have no idea how to catch a vampire, let alone the king of vampires. Look at you."

It was true that Harry did not have the kind of trap he had once seen a coven use. "You have no power over me," Harry pointed out.

"True. That is rare, I'll grant you that."

Harry shot a binding curse at the man, but he flapped out of it as a bat. Harry put a prison box around him but he slithered out of it as a mist, laughing.

"Oh, such games used to amuse me no end. But you are a puny mortal wizard. A mere insect, existing for just a flicker of time."

Harry thought fiercely. "I'm still stronger than you," Harry mocked, hoping to delay him. "There are rules, Ministry of Magic rules, that you are required to follow as a controlled magical creature."

The man snorted, his smooth, ordinary face wrinkling in disgust. "I was around when your Isles were one continent connected to rest of Europe; that is how long I have been alive. Do not insult me." He did sound angry, which suited Harry just fine, since he needed to buy time and hoped that meant he would keep arguing.

The vampire flicked his cloak tightly around him as though thinking of departing. "This place has been drained of the life that does more than sustain me. I have delayed finding a new home too long. If I want to truly live, I need flesh fresher than this." He glanced covetously at the heap on the floor where Blackpool was reappearing as hazy arcs of black robe.

"You're not going anywhere," Harry said.

"Bah!" The vampire mocked. "Goodbye pathetic wizard," he said and dropped through the floor.

Harry felt the interstice to the Dark Plane crack open and close again. He followed, heart racing. He had a hold of the vampire by the wrist before he could stride more than two steps away across the greyness of the Dark Plane. The Vampire gaped at Harry. Around them creatures scuttled closer, curious.

It was Harry's turn to laugh. "I told you you weren't going anywhere."

Harry's quarry recovered from his surprise and scooped his hand toward himself. The disgusting creatures closed in, obeying the command. Harry faced the nearest ones down and they hesitated but others climbing over the first, snarling, clapping their jaws together. Their oily breath reeked of rot and death.

Harry Disapparated to the area of the Dark Plane opposite the Ministry, taking the Vampire with him. Temporarily, they left the creatures behind. Vampires could not Disapparate, so Harry hoped this one was disoriented. He did glance around in consternation before glaring at Harry, who tightened the grip on his arm and pulled his wand.

The vampire's eyes pulsed red at the sight of the wand and he fell, dragging Harry with him. Harry felt flattened, curled up, and towed through a row of cracks by his arm, but they arrived exactly where he wanted to be: in the Ministry dungeon. Seeming frantic, the vampire tried to shake his arm loose from Harry's grasp. Harry twisted the arm behind his quarry's back and threw him up against the damp stone wall. He pressed his wand into the back of his ribs, wishing dearly that it was his own wand so he did not have to make any empty threats.

"I suspect that if I carve your heart out, it will at least slow you down," he hissed into the man's ear. "It takes you three seconds to get to mist form; it only takes me half a one to spell a cutting curse."

"Hey, whatcha got?" Horace, the squat wizard who managed the dungeon, sauntered up and asked. "I didn't see you come in," he then said in alarm, glancing back in the direction of the heavy door and scratching his head.

"He slipped us in," Harry said, hoping that covered it.

"Oh, yeah, they're like that." He pulled a narrow, battered log book out of a belt pouch. "Name?"

The vampire didn't reply, so Harry pressed the wand harder into his flesh. It had to hurt. "Fueago."

"Last name, first name?"

"That is my name. It is as old as time you imbecile-"

"I need to get him somewhere secure," Harry interrupted to say.

"Oh, yeah." Horace drew a necklace out of his pouch and draped it over Harry's head. "Isle Mayfay has a facility for him." He used his wand to tap the fleur de lis charm on the necklace and the dungeon twisted away. Harry barely kept hold of his prisoner as they flew and rotated a long time, landing hard on what turned out to be a pier.

Waves slapped against the sides of the neat straight stones. A dark fog hung over the water, obscuring anything farther than ten feet off. Flood lights illuminated the scene from behind and Harry torqued his head around to look up at the fortress that was L'île de Cachot Méfait, the French wizard prison. He dragged the vampire to his feet and, maintaining his wand point between his ribs, pushed him in the direction of the great doors.

Salt crystals blossoming in the dips of the stone crunched underfoot as they went. Harry did not see a knocker so he was glad when the right-hand door turned open on a central pivot as they approached.

A Frenchman about Harry's height, and carrying a crystal-tipped pike, approached as they entered the vast entry hall. Harry said, "I have a prisoner," but the guard simply stared at him.

Fueago rattled off a long string of haute French that raised the guard's eyebrow. The guard began to study Harry with suspicion.

"What are you saying?" Harry demanded angrily, which only bolstered the narrowing gaze of the guard.

Chapter 4

The vampire said, "You are a typically stupid Englishman. I told him I am bringing you into the prison, but you overpowered me outside."

Harry tightened his hold on the vampire and the guard set down his pike and put up his hands placatingly, at which point Harry realized that his only negotiating power at the moment was that he appeared to be holding someone hostage.

"I'm from the Ministry of Magic. I'm bringing this rogue vampire in . . ." But he was drowned out by a longer exchange of incomprehensible French.

"Shut up," Harry said to the vampire, and began dragging him farther inside. The guard thought this an acceptable direction, so, leaving his pike behind, he followed over the smooth stone. They passed over a narrow causeway where the sea slapped at the bottom of long trenches on either side. Beyond, the floor changed to black slate. The Vampire struggled with him at the most vulnerable point, so Harry shoved him to the stone, wand in the center of his back.

"I'll do it," Harry threatened. "You've certainly lived long enough for one man." In that instant, his curse sense went off and he ducked as a spell from the guard sizzled overhead. "What are you doing?" Harry yelled at the man.

The vampire, far stronger than expected, tossed Harry aside as though he were a doll and got to his feet. He pointed at Harry, who was occupied for a desperate breath with pulling his leg out of the waves and climbing to safety. The vampire continued to give the guard instructions in French. The pike leveled at Harry, who did not want to strike back, but had a counter in mind once he got his wand at ready. Running feet delayed the guard's actions. Harry, sensing that the vampire did not want to cross to the slate floor, leapt to grab his wrist and tossed him there, using all of his strength. Both of them tumbled onto the damp, slippery stone.

The lead man of the new guards, identifiable by the ribbons on his silver tunic, stepped in front of Fueago before he could crawl back to the brown stone causeway. Fueago began demanding things in French. The guard almost lifted a hand down to help him up and then glanced at Harry. "Ah, Harry Potter, what a pleasant surprise." He reacted quickly, pointing at the vampire, saying, "Is 'e with you?"

"My prisoner," Harry said, relieved enough his knees went vaguely wobbly.

The leader withdrew his hand and signaled for the guards just as the vampire changed into mist. Harry raised his wand but a barrier kept the mist on the black slate side of the causeway.

"Eet is all right," the guard assured Harry, and the mist, after shifting frantically back and forth, became a man again.

The vampire began arguing in French again while trying to step back over the line. Harry approached, helping to box him in.

"Eh, so you say," the head guard said mockingly, gesturing for him to be lead deeper into the prison.

Harry took the vampire's elbow when he hesitated moving, saying with a smirk, "You may be ancient, but I'm famous."

At the lift, which was just a solid stone platform with no sides, the guards took over management of the prisoner. The head guard did not stop talking to Harry the whole way, but Harry did not mind at all.

"I 'ave always wanted to meet you, Mr. Potter. The warden will be thrilled too, I know because he has your picture on his wall, right between Meester Paul-Marie Verlaine and Meester Zherri Lew-es. Perhaps you could sign it for him . . . if it is not so much trouble?"

"Of course," Harry assured him.

Down, down they went into the bowels of the rock. It was hot down here and Harry hoped they had not gone so deep that the core of the earth was making things warmer. They stopped finally and had to duck exiting the lift into a narrow corridor cut into the rock. In a small office where the tables, shelves and even the chairs were carved directly in the rock, Harry was instructed to sit at a desk.

"Just some papers-work and we will take care of this animal for you."

Parchments Harry could not read were placed before him. "Can you summarize these?"

"Oh, yes. This is the Assignment of Overseeing, which means that you cannot have 'eem back without some other papers signing. This is the Statement of Ill Deed, which you can fill in English, no? Since only another Englishman will need to read eet."

Harry began filling things in, finding it hard to cast his mind back to the horrors of the house. It occurred to him now with a jolt that he had left Blackpool behind, unconscious with the murderous lady of the house. He swallowed hard and wrote faster.

The vampire was slouched on rock chair in the corner, looking desolate and harmless. "I just remembered something I should have done," Harry said, handing the parchments back and standing up.

Chapter 4

"There are a few more papers and the photograph for the warden . . ." the guard said.

"I'll come back," Harry insisted. "I really have to check on my partner." He fingered the portkey on the necklace, close to panic so much adrenaline flowed in his veins.

"I will activate it for you, but it will not work here. Up above, only." He pointed, sounding like he wished to calm Harry.

"Thanks."

On the lift ride up, Harry thought about the procedures that he had not had the opportunity to work within. He should have told the guard in the Ministry dungeon to inform the Auror's office. That's what he should have done. Miserable, Harry rode upward as floors and side tunnels came and went, sliding below their smooth quiet platform.

Beyond the causeway, the head guard said, "We can finish the papers-work, but the warden will be sorrowful to not have met you."

"I'll come back as soon as I can," Harry insisted. "I would like a tour."

The man brightened considerably, eyes glittering with pride. "I would be honored to give you one."

The portkey returned Harry to the Ministry Dungeon. Running, he passed Horace, who was back at his tiny desk, hunched over something small. Harry dropped the key beside an elaborate origami of a ball and chain that was in progress, and made his way to the atrium, from which he could Apparate away.

Harry arrived, wand out, back in the candlelit bedroom, which was empty. He scrambled down to the dark lower floor, where voices could be heard. He found Blackpool filling out interview sheets with the family around the kitchen table. The scent of pizza filled the air.

"You're all right," Harry breathed out, choking on the words in his relief.

"Yeah, Potter. I figured you must have been green enough to give chase to a vampire."

Harry's foremost concern was the older woman's demeanor and whether it had improved above murderous. The woman sat, arms crossed, looking cold and aloof, tea untouched. She just seemed aggrieved now.

Blackpool said to the woman, "You really should see a surgeon. Get a transfusion."

"We will handle things our way," the woman said.

Margaret sat, nibbling on a pizza crust, saying nothing. Her brother was sleeping on his arm draped over the table. Harry stepped closer and bent down to ask the girl, "You all right?" After a very long pause, she nodded. To Blackpool, Harry said, "We need the Obliviator squad."

"After the interviews."

"Or, we need them for the trial, don't we?"

"We'll never catch him, Harry."

"Who, the vampire?" The room jerked as though Harry had said the name Voldemort three years ago. "I dropped him at the prison just now. In fact, I need to go back and finish the paperwork."

Blackpool set the quill down as well as the crust of pizza in her other hand. "You captured that bastard? Single handed?"

"Yeah, why not? I didn't want him to get away."

"Harry, Vampires can slip through a crack in the floor, barrier or not. If you can't find their sleeping place and get them warded all to hell with garlic without so much as making a sound or giving yourself away to one of the creepy companion creatures guarding them, you can forget it."

"I dropped him at the French prison just now."

"You put him in prison?" Margaret's faint voice asked from the end of the table.

"Yes," Harry assured her, wanting badly to reach through her terror. "He won't be coming back."

Blackpool picked the quill back up and flicked it around. "Well, in that case, yes, we need them for the trial. Or at least one of them. The others we can wipe." She glanced around the three of them, sitting still as though simply waiting to be victims again. "We'll keep the girl, I think." Blackpool stared additionally at Harry. "You really got him?"

"Yes," Harry insisted, not insulted because she sounded truly amazed.

"Well, go and fetch Reggie, Tonks or Mr. Weasley. With the vamp gone we can more easily deal with the issue of Kingsley."

"I forgot about Kings- . . . Shacklebolt," Harry said, struggling to keep up with events. "I'll get someone."

Chapter 4

Back at the Ministry, Harry found Shacklebolt at his desk, reviewing files and looking stern, but mostly himself. Harry had no idea how complete the psychic control of a vampire was. It had not been covered in their training, perhaps because it occurred only rarely. He gave Shacklebolt a nod and started to back out of the room.

"Find anything in Loch Ness?" Shacklebolt asked, eyes intent when they turned upon Harry.

"No," Harry said, and slipped away before a followup question could get asked.

Mr. Weasley sat in his office, dictating a letter to someone in the Goblin Liaison Office. He held up his hand until he finished the sentence and grabbed hold of the dictation quill, which twitched as Harry said, "I need to talk to you and we need someone at the scene." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Shacklebolt approaching, looking determined about his destination, which was clearly Harry. Harry slipped his wand into his hand in a way that the Auror could not see, but Mr. Weasley had full view of.

"Harry?" he questioned, sounding concerned.

Harry stepped back into the corridor and to the wall, needing the space to defend himself, if necessary.

"Harry, put that away," Mr. Weasley cautioned, sounding fatherly.

Harry faintly shook his head. Shacklebolt looked between them but Harry had his conveniently small wand completely inside his sleeve now. Harry was not certain what to do. There were code words for this situation, both Auror ones and Order ones, but Shacklebolt would know all of them. Pained, Harry quickly tried to think of something. In a battle of trust between him and Shacklebolt there was no question who would win and already, Mr. Weasley looked doubting of Harry's rightmindedness.

"Maybe I'll speak to you later, sir," Harry firmly said, hoping his boss would catch the hint.

Mr. Weasley stood and said, "If you need someone on-site, Rodgers will be returning shortly. That way Kingsley can cover the office."

"I thought you didn't find anything," Shacklebolt said, sounding gravely suspicious.

"Well, it's hard to explain," Harry hedged, wishing he were trusted more and having no good ideas for how to proceed. If he simply attacked Shacklebolt, he was going to end up fighting him and Mr. Weasley.

Footsteps approached and Rodgers came into view. Harry could not have been more pleased to see him. "Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked, not liking how pleading he sounded.

Rodgers pulled his head back in surprise, but he then gestured gamely back down the corridor.

In the training room, Harry frustratingly said, "I don't know the procedure for this. And I just found out how little Mr. Weasley trusts me still."

Annoyance overwhelmed Harry's temper before Rodgers dryly asked, "Is Arthur what you wish to discuss? I'm not certain there is a protocol for increased trust within a department of the Ministry."

Harry gave him a cock-eyed glance and said, "You sound like Severus, you know. No, that isn't what I wish to discuss. Shacklebolt is compromised and I don't know what the procedure is for that."

Rodgers grew serious and asked, "Compromised in what way?"

Harry explained about the vampire and Shacklebolt's behavior. "The vampire is in the French prison now, so he is no risk."

"You and Blackpool caught him by yourselves? Fueago is an old timer who comes in and out of the country but we've never been able to catch him."

Harry now realized that he had perhaps given too much away through his actions, but there had been no choice. "Yeah, we did. The family's in bad shape. Blackpool is still interviewing them, but after that we need an Obliviator squad."

Rodgers stepped toward the door. "Let's go take a look at the scene first to choose one to keep their memories for now."

"We did already."

Rodgers stopped and appeared more affectionate than Harry had ever seen. "You kids are coming along."

Rodgers' hand was on the door before Harry could remind him with: "Shacklebolt?" which he had to swallow because the Auror was behind the door when it opened. Harry raised his wand and the spells cancelled out between them, knocking Rodgers aside with the spell wash.

Shacklebolt's brown eyes were dark and unreadable as spells lashed out again and Harry had to resort to his best attenuated block, which did not quite hold with his badly matched wand. Pain sizzled over Harry's skin. Frantic that he could not defend himself, Harry squirmed when he felt a curse, nasty and rancid rising up as though from the floor, out of the earth itself. His mind flashed back two years to his torment by Crabbe and Goyle. He could smell the dark earth then too, along with the rot of

leaves and twigs on the Forbidden Forest floor where he had writhed. Harry squashed this curse as he had done the one that day, by forcing it back down into the ground, where the only outlet it could find was the caster himself. Shacklebolt flickered and doubled over, but he recovered quickly, eyes blazing.

Rodgers pulled himself to his feet and shouted, "Kingsley, stop it!"

Footsteps approached in the corridor. The next curse, which had far less on it, Harry blocked normally, because it did not feel the same as the one he had squashed. His counter wavered worrisomely despite not having to withstand much. He tried to roll behind a desk for the next one; the desk was blasted aside, forcing Harry to cover his head with his arms. The room fell silent long enough for Harry to risk raising his eyes. Shacklebolt was in a binding curse on the floor with Rodgers bent over him, looking murderous which was normal hard anger for him.

"What the devil?" Mr. Weasley demanded. Other offices had emptied and come down to gawk.

Harry was working on sitting up when Rodgers asked, "Potter?"

"Yeah," Harry said, not sure whether to respond positively or negatively because he had not yet decided what exactly had hit him. Using a desk, Harry got to his feet while Rodgers explained the situation. Harry could only return a helpless look when Mr. Weasley turned an expression his way that implied Harry should have handled things differently.

Mr. Weasley instructed Rodgers, "Put him in interrogation until we can get an exorcist in here." He stalked off past a stunned Rogan, who slid inside to help.

Harry moved slowly until he could sit at the desk he was leaning on. He sat there, breathing, until he remembered that he had to get back to Burnipsbie. "Damn," he muttered, standing up and mustering the will to Apparate.

"What happened to you?" Blackpool asked when Harry stepped into the kitchen.

"Tangled with Shacklebolt."

"I'd have thought you could take him."

Harry gratefully took a seat at the table. "I will be able to tomorrow when I get my new wand. Stop me if I try."

"Excuses, excuses," she pleasantly said. "And the Obliviators?"

Harry stared at her, running recent conversations through his mind. "I'm not sure. I'll go check." It required great will to push himself to his feet, but he managed. "Things were a little crazy as you might imagine."

Later, at the debriefing when everything was straight and they all had returned to the Ministry, Harry felt sulky and used that as cover to give only scant details of his capturing the vampire. No one here knew he could slip into the Dark Plane and Snape had been adamant that he not let it be known.

When the comments came back around to marveling at Harry's feat, he said, "I need to return to the wizard prison. There's more paperwork. I told them I'd come back as soon as I could."

"Someone should go with you," Mr. Weasley said, glancing around. "I guess I will on my way home."

Harry held in his frown and stood slowly, still stiff from getting hit.

"Do you need a Healer, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked solicitously, which set Harry off more.

He stubbornly replied, "No."

They fetched a prison portkey from the dungeon and arrived at the dark pier, surrounded by a now still ocean hugged by low, dense fog. Floodlights flicked on as they turned.

On the way to the doors, Harry wanted to say something along the lines of: "It's hard to function at the Ministry if no one trusts me." But he did not want to sound whiny, so he stewed instead. The guard escorted them inside without speaking and down into the core of the island. The warden's office erupted in a hearty welcome for Harry. It seemed the whole shift had awaited his return and perhaps others had come specially. The office was wall-to-wall with French prison guards all wearing smiles, some sheepish.

"Mr. Potter, please, please, 'ave a seat," the warden said. "Your papers are here, but you have been promised a tour, no?"

Harry, soothed by the fawning that Mr. Weasley had been forced to witness, said, "It's been a long day, I'm afraid. I think I will enjoy it more another time."

"Ah," the warden said in great dismay, hanging his head to the side. "Well, next time, then. I'm sure we will be seeing you often, no?" He rocked back in his own grand, leather swivel-chair and winked. He twirled his curled mustache while Harry finished the paperwork from earlier.

The warden spoke to Mr. Weasley instead while Harry wrote. "You are very lucky to 'ave this young man, eh?"

"Yes, yes, we are," Mr. Weasley said, dropping his hand on Harry's bent shoulder. "I'm not certain Harry is feeling so happy to have us, today."

Harry stared at the line where a translation had been added reading Place of Capture. He tried to hold his anger from draining away; he had been enjoying the just desserts of it, it turned out, and was not keen on losing it just yet. It leaked away nevertheless as Harry wrote out the village and address where he had first begun battling the vampire.

The warden was saying, "Brought thees monster in on 'ees own. Even we 'ave found records of this Fueago in our files going back eight-hundred years. We 'ave a medal in our Defense Division for such single-handed deeds. You 'ave one to give 'im, of course?"

"I don't need another medal," Harry said, turning the page over to fill in the Perpetrator Physiognomy section.

The guard let his mustache spring back to a spiral. "Ah, you are weighted down by too many already, I am sure."

Paperwork done, photo carefully lifted from a picture rail that ran along the ceiling and signed, they were led back to the lift by a guard who spoke no English. Harry sighed, his previous grudge building again as they rose up through the solid rock.

Mr. Weasley said, "I think it would be better if you said something, Harry."

"I wish you trusted me," Harry said, finding more sting in speaking than in stewing.

"We'll have to work on that," Mr. Weasley said amiably, forcing Harry to have to hold back on rolling his eyes.

It was three in the morning before Harry returned home. As he fell into bed, limbs stiff and painful, he wondered if he did indeed need a Healer. He stared into the darkness, thinking that he could wake Snape to take him to hospital. That sounded right awful, but lying there suffering was not terribly pleasant or rational either.

With a groan Harry rolled out of bed and, foregoing the dressing gown, padded down the corridor to knock on Snape's door.

"Sorry," Harry said when the door opened. "I hope you have a potion for . . . whatever it was I got hit with." He rubbed his forehead as he tried to remember.

"Are you hurt?" Snape asked.

"Well, not badly. I just want something so I can sleep."

Snape took Harry by the elbow and led him downstairs to the toilet where the potions were kept. The lamps in the small room stung Harry's eyes as he took a seat on the closed toilet.

"What did you get hit with?"

Harry was grateful that Snape was not angry at being woken. "Something Voltage class, I'm not exactly sure what."

"Not usually terribly harmful, just painful," Snape said. "Sure it was that?"

"Yeah. It had a lot on it. Came right through my counter. I cannot wait to get my wand tomorrow."

"That's a switch," Snape commented. "Who hit you?"

"Shacklebolt."

Snape peered at him over the top of a bottle. "What did you say to deserve that?"

"Long story. Suffice to say, no one trusts me."

Snape set the bottle down and pulled the step-stool over to sit upon it facing Harry. He considered his words before saying: "Trust is thin and fragile but requires great time and effort to construct, nevertheless."

"I know that. It's just hard to function without in the meantime."

"Drink this," Snape said, holding out a small glass of something rust colored.

Harry sipped the potion. "I'm sorry I had to wake you."

"Do not be," Snape stated firmly. "This is precisely the situation where I want you to do so. If I can TRUST that you will always do so I will quite frankly sleep better, which will far and away make up for any necessary interruptions."

Harry handed the glass back. "Thanks. I feel better already."

"You may have another half-dose in the morning if you need it."

"We don't have that potion at the Ministry. What is it?"

"Restricted," Snape said with a smirk.

"We have restricted potions, believe me," Harry pointed out with a grin.

"More restricted even than that," Snape insisted with a smug lift of his nose.

Chapter 4

One benefit of Harry's difficult shift the night before was his resistance to having a wand identical to his old one had evaporated utterly. The chime of Ollivander's shop door rang a jolt of eager expectation through Harry; he wanted dearly to be properly armed again.

"I'll be with you directly!" a wavering elderly voice came from the far aisles of the shop's stock area.

Harry gazed around the work space in search of his wand and spied a long holly-wood wand on a rack above the workbench. The rack consisted of spaced pairs of brass lizard feet that gripped each wand. A fat poplar wand was held only by the points of the claws, making Harry wonder if the finish was drying on it.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Ollivander intoned with clear affection. He had approached silently, startling Harry.

"Is that mine there?" Harry asked. "It looks long."

Ollivander gave each brass claw a flick of his finger and they opened with a spasm before stretching themselves as though to work out the kinks. Ollivander lifted the wand and held it out. "Fifteen and a half inches. That was the length of the feather you brought me to use."

Harry took hold of the wand and felt a rush of tingles through his arm. "It is long," he said, giving it a wave. The tip bent even more than the old one as it moved. "It's great, though," Harry breathed, giving it a try by making the window shade neatly retract. "It's just right." His vaguely aching joints made him regret not having it sooner.

Harry paid the balance and tried to find a pocket to fit the wand. "I need larger wand pockets," he said, dismayed.

Ollivander closed the till and placed his long hands on the counter between them to study Harry's problem. "Many wizards with wands of that size utilize a scabbard pocket, here, at the waist." He mimicked drawing a sword. "Or a pocket down the back." Here he lifted his age-stained hand over his head. "If you are adept at getting the wand to jump into your hand with a charm."

Harry practiced that motion and the other one. "One or the other will work, I'm sure." He stashed the wand in his sleeve, point caught in the hem like he often stored his old one. He could not bend is arm with it that way. "I'll have to do something." He flicked the wand back into his hand and caught it.

"Longer sleeves, perhaps," Ollivander suggested.

"Yeah," Harry said. "All of mine have grown a tad short, I think." But he liked the long wand. It exuded its own confidence as it swished through the air. Its weight made it feel stable and trustworthy, which overcame its inconvenience. "Thanks again," Harry said, slipping the wand back into his pocket and holding it in place with his hand.

Back at home, Harry showed off his wand. Held out over the worn, thickly revarnished dining room table, the wand gleamed with newness, unmarred by being dropped or bumped or other mishap.

"Very nice," Snape said, handing it back and returning to the brittle-paged tome open before him. It was all in hand-scrawled latin with no diagrams, so Harry could not make out the subject of it.

"It feels right," Harry said of his wand, but then tried to put it in his pocket, forgetting it would not fit. He set it out on the table as he sat down. "I'm not used to such a long wand." He picked the wand back up to fetch his books from the library. They zipped to him in record speed, slowing with exquisite control and resting flat without a sound.

"At least you are behaving like a wizard now," Snape observed dryly.

Harry feigned insult.

Snape said, "I'll be at Hogwarts tomorrow, now that you are properly armed. I have much to do there to prepare for the upcoming year." He turned a vellum page and leaned over the book, squinting at the small writing.

"What are you reading?" Harry asked, hoping Winky would bring a snack or tea or something if he sat there long enough.

"Something."

Harry frowned at him but did not press. His idle mind returned to what had happened the day before, with his blocking Shacklebolt's curse without using his wand. It felt like a tenuous way to block curses, but same as the last time it had happened, he was grateful it had worked.

Harry mused, "I wonder how Shacklebolt's exorcism went."

This raised Snape's nose out of his book. "What?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you . . ."

"NO . . . you did not," Snape said, laying a strip of linen in his book to mark his place and pushing it to the side.

Chapter 4

Tea appeared. Harry took time pouring some out. He was reluctant to recount how he had nearly revealed his secret skills to the Ministry.

"What happened?" Snape asked, sounding determined not to be denied.

"There was a vampire preying on a Muggle family, and well, let me go back to the beginning." Harry explained how his evening went, trying to sound remorseful about needing the Dark Plane to catch the vampire. He tied his story up with: "But I avoided saying exactly how I caught him. Hopefully at the trial, Fueago won't mention it. He didn't know who I was, so maybe he won't think he can get back at me that way."

Snape said, "He will not be brought back for the trial. It will be judged too risky. Take that offered tour of the prison and you will see how he is being kept. I expect in addition to the special wards around his cell block, he will be potioned nonsensical. A rather miserable way to spend eternity."

Harry exhaled. "So I'm safe?"

"I expect. As long as you continue to tell your story judiciously."

"What will the Ministry do if they find out?"

"I honestly do not know. It would depend upon your standing at the time. Best not to establish exactly the hard way." Snape set his tea cup down and pulled his book back before him. After a minute, he put his hand down hard and sat straight to say sternly, "I understand that you needed to capture the vampire. But do try to be more careful." He again returned to his book only briefly, then asked, "Does this werewolf Alastor mentioned move in and out of the underworld at will?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I have to let him come into this world."

The Floo surged with verdant flame, heralding Candide's return. Snape said, "That is something anyway."

The topic was dropped after that.

> Author's Notes: Life (mostly working on my house and an art project) may get in the way of five coming out next weekend, but I'll try. Otherwise, look on Wednesday.

Chapter 5.

Personal Peril

Sunday, Harry headed to the Burrow for lunch. When he arrived on the lawn, Ginny and Ron were dodging about on broomstick, playing catch with a Quaffle. The sun sliced through the dense clouds in bursts of yellow beams as though teasing about coming out for real.

Upon seeing Harry, Ron gestured at the shed where Harry could find a broomstick. Mrs. Weasley shouted from the door that they should instead all come inside. On the way to the door, Ron nudged Harry in the ribs and said, "Ginny wanted to invite Aaron."

Ginny shot a deadly glance at her brother.

Harry asked, "You didn't, though?"

Ron replied for his sister, "She couldn't get the nerve up to owl him."

They stepped into the cozy and worn Weasley household. They plonked themselves down upon the ragged orange and green couches where the twins sat, unusually subdued.

Harry gazed around the rough, abused decor and wondered what Aaron would think of it. His thoughts were paralleled by Ginny asking, "So, would he have accepted an invitation?"

"I don't know. He grew up in decent wealth . . ." Harry trailed off, trying to take care.

"Oh," Ginny said. "He was dressed nice. Not many men dress nice . . . unless they're gay."

Harry said, "I shouldn't speak. I don't know if he'd care." The others were engaged in their own conversation, so he felt free to say, "It's possible that you'd care more than he would."

Ginny chewed her nail and glanced at her brothers' red heads all clustered together, talking low. She said, "You think he'd go out on a date with me?"

"I think Aaron would go on a date with anyone."

Ginny laughed. "Well, that's promising . . . and not so promising. I guess I should try. What kind of women does he like?"

"He likes to have fun, as far as I can tell."

"He sounds perfect." She stared off into the distance. "For a while . . ."

Other Weasleys arrived and the room grew louder. Harry glanced up each time, dreading to find Percy, but did not have the displeasure.

"Looking for someone?" Ginny asked.

Harry leaned forward and so did she. More privately, Harry said, "I'm kind of hoping Percy isn't coming."

"Mum didn't say he was and she usually makes a big fat deal out of it. Like we're all so much better off all together, even if that means tolerating him."

"Well," Harry thought better, "he IS family."

"Don't remind me."

She started to pull back. But Harry motioned her forward again. "Is he still dating Belinda? I thought maybe they'd broken it off."

"Thinking of hitching back up with her?" Ginny asked.

"No, just seemed like she was happier around the time I had heard that."

"I think they're still an item," she said consolingly.

Harry replayed the scene in the Minister's office. "Yeah. Seems likely." Harry reclined again, thinking back on the little coincidences with Percy at the Ministry, like his reviewing the Department of Magical Transportation's procedures just before the Floo network started always dropping him in the wrong place. Worst yet, around the

time they stopped detecting illicit portkeys. Harry mulled over these old suspicions until Ginny handed him one of the two butterbeers she had gone and fetched.

He gestured for her to sit beside him. "What's Percy doing these days?"

She swallowed a mouthful of beverage. "The usual. Whatever Fudge tells him to. Sometimes I fantasize he might order him to drain the Thames or something impossible like that so we won't see him for a long time."

Even though she clearly disliked her brother, Harry found it hard to express his worst suspicions to her. "Maybe I'll stop in to see Belinda more often," Harry said. "Percy was there last time I did."

Ginny chuckled. "That would right irk him. He was so proud he had your former girlfriend. Paraded her around the Burrow here so bad the first time she didn't want to come back."

They sat down to a heaping meal at a long, crowded table. Harry passed along a plate of jacket potatoes brimming with butter to Ron and glanced at his boss, Mr. Weasley. He was the one Harry really should talk to about Percy. But Mr. Weasley, not two minutes later, raised his fork and said, "Well, unfortunate that we couldn't all be together this Sunday."

"Yeah, too bad," one of the twins muttered in a passable imitation of regret.

The Weasley parents bobbed their heads in sad agreement. Harry sighed and accepted a giant bowl of green peas.

A ruckus broke out at the end of the table, and Bill appeared dismayed by something. "You two just don't know when to give it up," he said.

"What?" Fred asked.

Bill held up his bread knife, which was welded to his spoon.

"Oh, right, that looks like something WE'D do," George offered. "Try your sister."

Ginny had held her face innocent, but now she grinned. Bill stood up and used his long arms to trade utensils with her. "You can have them."

Ginny pulled out her wand, but was interrupted by her mother scolding, "I do hope you haven't ruined that knife and spoon, dear."

"No, mum," Ginny insisted calmly. She waved a complicated spell at the utensil pair and a burning orange beam separated the two. She used her robe sleeve to hold onto the spoon without burning her fingers while she cleaned up the edge.

Chapter 5

"Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked.

She demonstrated again to take the flash off the knife handle. Harry tried it a few times and managed to shorten his own butter knife by an inch. The cut off tip burned away to ash as it fell to the table.

"Okay, that I can't fix for you," Ginny said.

"That's all right, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "They're old anyway."

Harry shrugged at Ginny, who rolled her eyes. He awkwardly stretched his arms apart to work the spell until he at least cleaned up the foreshortened round end.

"That your new wand?" Ginny asked.

"Yup. It works great. I don't know if it's just the time without it, but it responds more naturally than I expect it to. Like it know what I'm thinking."

"It's a long one."

"It is. I'm still getting used to that. As you probably noticed." He spread his arms exaggeratedly to make the point, making Ginny and many others laugh.

"You, of all people, should have a good wand, Harry," Fred said.

"That's what Ollivander said when he put it on rush order."

"We love that guy," George said.

Fred followed with, "Yeah, we've never played any kind of prank on him . . . we must really love him."

When Harry came home from the Burrow, Harry faced the stack of his books still sitting out on the table where he had left them earlier in the hopes that he would get to them after breakfast. He settled in and propped the top one open before him. Again, Sunday early evening was upon him and his reading list had not shortened since Friday. It was as though a hex had been applied to it.

Dulcet voices filtered down from upstairs, distracting him. Halfway through the second chapter of a book entitled Paranormal Prankster Pop Psychology, footsteps trouped down the stairs and the voices grew clearer.

"Let's see the swatches in better light."

"You're right, the light isn't any better down here."

Harry's brow knotted up slightly. He stood and slipped silently to the doorway where he peeked around to observe the figures hunched around one of the small windows, discussing the merits of beads versus sequins. The couches were strewn with stretches of fabric in various shades of off white and what appeared to be tiaras. Harry rubbed his eyes but they still resembled tiaras.

Harry decided with a growing sense of bemusement that this was some kind of ritual wedding preparation so he ducked fully back into the dining room. Candide saying, "Harry will be home soon, so we should straighten things up a bit," slowed him returning to the table. As if he would care. He could not imagine she believed him orderly. He shook his head.

"Who's this?" a voice asked.

A third voice, sounding like Candide with a bad cold, said knowingly, "Candide is inheriting a son, didn't she tell you?"

"Ruthie, really, not exactly," Candide said, speaking to her sister, Harry now knew from the name.

The second voice was shrill as it said, "He's expecting you to take care of his brat?"

Harry ducked his head, face scrunched in amusement. He stayed put, near the doorway, wanting to hear how Candide handled that.

"Hardly. He's nineteen."

"Worse! Still at home at that age? Must be a regular dosser."

Fabric rustled as though being gathered together with care to keep it flat. "You should tell her who it is," Ruthie said with a grin in her voice.

"Your mum said his father couldn't seem to find the time to pay a call."

"Severus works very hard," Candide said with patience.

"I had a year of Potions with him at Hogwarts," the grating voice said. "I quickly decided I'd stick to using cauldrons strictly for cooking. You remember him, don't you, Ruthie? Used to slither around the dungeon during class. We thought he must hang himself up like a vampire bat in some dark corner to sleep at night."

Harry, who very well knew how evil a vampire was, bristled at this.

"Karol, if you don't want to be in the wedding, you don't-"

Chapter 5

"NO, NO, I love weddings. It's men I can't stand."

Harry scratched the back of his head, thinking he may have missed his opportunity for an unembarrassing entrance, from Candide's perspective anyhow. If he were Dudley, he could pretend to have been wearing headphones of some kind all this time. Instead, Harry Disapparated to a spot two feet from where he stood, hoping it made only one noise, given the short distance. He sat at the table and pulled the teapot over, and made other noises with his books.

Footsteps shuffled over and Candide said, "Hello, Harry."

Harry lifted his head as though surprised. A second figure and then a third came into view. Ruthie was a heavyset, rougher skinned version of Candide. She wore glowing red lipstick and her eyelashes were unnaturally long. The other woman, in contrast, had a sunken-cheeked face and a sour mouth, and at the moment, it hung open.

"This is my sister, Ruthie," Candide said, indicating the wide-robed figure on her right.

Harry stood to shake hands. Ruthie had a glint in her eye as though thrilled to meet him.

"And this is Karolyn, a childhood friend, and also a third cousin."

Harry nodded at her because she did not have the sense to lift her hand. He did not bother Legilimizing her, because he would rather not know. He retook his seat where his books provided a wall to bunker behind. Ruthie placed her beefy hands on the table and leaned toward him. She moved like someone accustomed to using her size to seem immovable or unstoppable, depending.

"You didn't come to meet mum and dad at The Dinner."

Harry found he instinctively wanted to be careful what he said to her. "I didn't want to be in the way."

This answer struck her as odd and funny, or so her face indicated. "'In the way?' That wouldn't be a problem."

"You, uh . . ." Karolyn began. She turned to Candide. "You, uh, live with Harry Potter?"

Candide laughed and said, "Well, yes."

"Don't, uh . . ." She glanced painfully at Harry. "Don't, uh, bad things tend to happen . . ."

Ruthie broke in, laughing too. "Didn't you see all the new repairs to the house there?"

Candide fell serious. "Sometimes bad things happen. But they're handled well." She shifted her arms uncomfortably, indicating to Harry that recent events had not let her go yet, even if she hid it most of the time.

Ruthie put her hand upon her generous breast and said, "Oh, you have a knight in shining armor. How sweet."

Candide looked straight at Harry and said, "I have two, actually." She glanced around. "Let's leave Harry to his studies. Come on." As they re-entered the hall with last glances back, Candide said, "Taffeta, silk, velvet, lace, hell, felt even; it really doesn't matter."

Later, after her companions disappeared in the Floo, Candide sat down across from Harry, clutching her hands momentarily. "Sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right," he assured her.

"My cousin is a little . . . uptight. But she loves weddings, knows all the latest . . . styles. What's in. What's out." Candide sounded regretful. Harry remained silent. She went on, "So much to do to get ready. You don't know."

Harry flicked his quill around in his fingers. "No, fortunately I don't know."

Candide put her hands in her lap and sat vaguely hunched. "I always wanted to get married. It always looked like so much fun . . . get to be the center of attention for a day . . . everything just the way you want it." She slumped a little more. "Now I just want the day to come and be over with."

Harry's lips twitched impishly as he said, "You want to just wave a magic wand and make it so, you mean?"

She refused to be baited, sounding stressed as she said, "You have a spell that conjures a florist, a hairdresser, a jewelry, a candlemaker, a cupbearer, a dressmaker, a decorator, a makeup artist, a Supreme Mugwort . . . and a string quartet?"

"Nope. I would conjure them all for you if I could, though."

She relented. "I appreciate that."

Harry rubbed his stomach which complained faintly of being empty. "What time did Severus say he'd be back from Hogwarts?"

Candide jumped up. "Oh, I forgot. He told me to owl when we were through." She rushed to the other room for a pen and parchment.

Harry muttered to himself, "Smart man."

Chapter 5

Monday first thing at training, Rodgers appeared and told Harry that he was wanted in the office. Harry mused about what he may be in trouble for until he found a contrite Shacklebolt speaking with Mr. Weasley, who appeared chipper, especially in comparison to the man beside him.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said after the Auror remained quiet, "Kingsley wishes to apologize." He stepped closer to Harry and leaned down as though sharing something confidential. "You realize that the hold a vampire has over his victim is stronger than an Imperio in some ways because it does not require the master to stay in the vicinity of or remain aware of the person they are controlling?"

"Er, we haven't covered it yet, but I understand." Harry remembered tossing his wand down before Occluding his mind. It gave him shivers, even here where he was safe. "I can imagine it, sir. Fueago put a fog around the house and I lost Blackpool to him and almost lost myself."

Mr. Weasley patted him on the back. "It's fortunate for us that you didn't. Severus' lessons held you in good stead."

"That and lots of experience with Voldemort," Harry agreed. At this, Shacklebolt raised his head slightly. "It's all right, sir," he reassured the Auror.

"I really was trying to get at you, Potter." He rubbed his upper arm, ash still marked the back of his hands and his forehead, as though the exorcism had just ended that morning and he had not gathered the sense to wipe it off. "I remember doing that, but I couldn't stop myself." He sounded truly horrified.

Upbeat, Harry said, "Now that I have the right wand, it would be all right."

"It would not be all right," Shacklebolt insisted. "I tried to throw an Imperius Curse at you-"

"You what?" Mr. Weasley blurted.

Still clutching his arm, Shacklebolt gestured clumsily at Harry. "He blocked it somehow. I don't know how." Harry was not accustomed to seeing him so uncertain and just wished he would return to himself and stop worrying so.

"I just squashed it," Harry said. "Since I couldn't block it."

Shacklebolt stared at him, taking that in. He said. "But you're all right now?" he asked, oddly needing reassurance.

Harry still ached in various random places, but he said, "Yeah. 'S Fine."

"Well, Harry, back to your training," Mr. Weasley said. He steered Harry out with a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad that's taken care of," he confessed. "Kingsley will be a few days returning to his old self. Feels rather guilty, I think."

They had arrived at the training room. "Sorry I delayed Harry," Mr. Weasley told Rodgers. Harry's fellows were already well into their drills. Rodgers gestured for Harry to take over opposite Tridant. Their newest member had a much shorter sequence, which Harry was happy to stick to while he grew accustomed to the nuanced responsiveness of his new wand. Tridant seemed less defeated today. Harry figured he was sick of constant advice, so he kept quiet as they exchanged spells and counters, back and forth.

At lunchtime, Harry headed up to the Minister's office. Belinda was sneaking bites of a sandwich out of the bottom drawer of her desk. She gave him a dull hello without meeting his eyes.

Harry glanced around, frowning to find Percy glaring at him from where the workmen were affixing the hand-carved flowery edges to the new shelves in the corner. The room smelled pervasively of shellac.

"I was going to see if you wanted to go out for lunch," Harry said sweetly to Belinda. "But I see you're already eating."

She jerked strangely as he spoke, making Harry turn to see if Percy had made some kind of move.

"I can't go to lunch," she said dully.

Harry noticed that her robes were not as neatly pressed as expected. Percy and his obnoxious ways may be making her depressed and that made Harry's skin prickle. He leaned closer, feeling that he really should talk to her alone. "Coffee later?" Someone, most likely Percy, stepped up beside him and Harry's skin prickled more, his robes felt dank against his flesh as though in dire need of being washed.

Harry stood straight and spun on Percy. The feeling faded slightly; Harry now was merely nauseated by the sourest Weasley's presence.

"You have no business up here, Potter," Percy said, spitting faintly on Harry's name.

Harry wiped his cheek. "I have business wherever I want to have it." He tried to Legilimize Percy, who was glaring at him as though inviting him to do so, but Harry received no impressions. "What business do you have here?" he asked, hoping to

jar some impression loose. His temper was getting the better of him, so Harry asked mockingly, "Messing up another department, are you? Why is that every time you are assigned somewhere, strange things start happening? You know, like the Portkey detection going all haywire around the time the Ministry is getting attacked by devices coming in as illicit Portkeys."

Percy's hard gaze did not waver. "The Portkey detection has always been hit and miss. I didn't have anything to do with that." More mocking, he went on, "They can't seem to ever fix it properly; it just didn't matter so much before. I was assigned there for a review BECAUSE they were incompetent." He turned to check on the workmen behind him. When he turned back he stood on his toes, leaning over Harry. Nasally, he said, "Get lost, Potter, what do you want, anyway?"

Harry, who beat Percy for physical bulk, but not height, stood his ground. "I want to talk to Belinda, what's it to you?"

Percy's face grew ugly. "You're an idiot; it's everything to me. Get lost or I'll call security."

Harry propped his hands on his hips. "Oh, I'd like to see that."

Smugly, Percy said, "Have you forgotten how many times this year we've needed to call security because you were in here?"

Percy found the mark with that one. Harry backed off and with a sweet goodbye to Belinda, departed, feeling ill tempered.

Tonks did not return before Harry's stomach growled for dinner, so Harry remained out of sorts as he headed home. In the dining room Candide sat alone, reading the papers.

Harry took a seat, stomach rumbling. Plates appeared, but just two of them.

"Where's Severus?"

"He's started working on something today."

"He's at Hogwarts?"

"No, upstairs. But he insisted he not be bothered."

Harry ignored this and headed up.

The door to the spare room used for storage was closed but a whiff of something metallic and hot emanated from under it. Harry knocked and waited, not wanting to barge in and disturb anything fragile.

The door opened just six inches. "I am working on something," Snape said dismissively. "And you are interrupting."

"Oh. I was just . . . wondering why you weren't at dinner."

"I'm at a critical juncture, then I can let it steep. I will eat later."

The door closed with a click.

Downstairs, Candide asked, "Does he throw himself this completely into his work often?"

"Occasionally." Harry tried not to display his befuddlement and Candide returned to reading that oddly peach-colored Muggle newspaper.

Harry sighed and tried to answer his post. He found himself not in the mood for correspondence and tossed it aside, half-unopened. His books did not hold his attention well either. When the door-knocker sounded, Harry's heart leapt at the distraction.

Outside, Elizabeth stood in the gathering gloom of the garden. "Hope you don't mind if I call. I owled from my instructor's house, but didn't get a reply before my lesson ended."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't open my post yet. I don't mind at all, come in."

"We didn't get a chance to talk at your party. There were so many people and I couldn't stay long." She removed her cloak and fastidiously straightened it before handing it to Harry to hang up.

"How are your studies?" Harry asked.

She laughed. "I have a long break, so I've been learning new pieces on the piano mostly." In the hall she said, "The repairs are marvelous, by the way. I didn't get a chance to tell you that."

She seemed a tad nervous as he sat her down across from Candide and poured her some tea. Elizabeth sniffed the tea cup dubiously, sleeves pulled down, halfway covering her hands.

Harry supplied, "Oh, that smell is not the tea. Severus is brewing something."

"Oh, my mum used to do that. Now my dad says it's ridiculous to stink a nice house up when the chemists is just around the corner." This statement led to a fade out of her expression.

Harry was just thinking that this was the second time today he needed to be alone to talk to someone. Candide folded her newspapers and set them aside. Harry thought she was going to leave, but she topped up her teacup.

Chapter 5

"Your dad isn't magical?" Candide asked in a highly conversational tone.

"No," Elizabeth shook her head. She wiggled her hands so they stayed inside her sleeves which were stretched taught where they emerged from her pullover.

Harry remembered her father quite clearly as he nearly threw him out of the house after a small tiff sparked solely by Harry's presence. Harry had been interested in Elizabeth before then and after had put her off in deference to not causing trouble.

Candide went on, "Did your dad know your mum was a witch before they married?"

"Yes, of course," Elizabeth laughed lightly, but it faded quickly. "You know, I should probably go. I was on my way home from my lesson. It ended early, and-"

"You don't need to go just yet," Candide said. "Have some more tea."

Elizabeth accepted the cup and drank from it as though the task require a great deal of concentration. "I'm glad I came to your party the other night," she stated out of the blue, almost like a pledge.

Harry's brow furrowed. "I should have another smaller one so I can actually talk to people."

Candide teased, "You would have had more time had you not stood in the corner all night with Ms. Tonks."

Harry blushed. Elizabeth ducked her head. "I really should go." She sounded breathless now and would not be convinced to stay longer. Harry helped her on with her cloak and said goodbye. She glanced back and waved before fading into the wet night.

"Huh," Harry uttered as he sat back down across from Candide.

"You have that skill Severus does to see into people's heads. Didn't you use it?"

Harry shook his head. "Think I should have? I don't like to unless I'm in danger."

Candide unfolded the next unread newspaper and said, "People have odd ways of asking for help."

"Are you referring to Elizabeth?" Harry asked sharply

"Yes." Candide turned the large page and flattened the section with a snap before folding it backwards to read the bottom portion. "Just a sense I had . . ."

"You thought she was asking for help?" Harry asked, mystified.

She tilted her head. "Maybe she's not getting on with her father, or maybe she just had a bad piano lesson. I don't know her well enough to know."

"She was a little off."

"Then it probably isn't the lesson."

Harry pushed his teaspoon around. "Think I should go over to her house?"

"Have you met her family?"

"Yeah, her father hates me."

"That probably would not make things better in that case. Really, truly hates you?" she prompted doubtfully.

"Well, said I wasn't fit for his daughter. Threw me out."

"Really?" Candide tried to swallow a grin. "A whole wizarding world full of fathers who would dream of having you dating their daughter and you find the single one who wouldn't."

"You know; they think that until I actually show up for the date," Harry said, thinking of Tara's parents. "Then they start to have second and third thoughts. And verify that we aren't planning on marriage."

"No wonder you're dating an Auror. Have you met Tonks' parents?"

Harry puzzled that. "No, I haven't. I assume that means we're not planning on marriage."

"Not soon, in any event," Candide commented. "Tonks and you get along well?"

Harry considered that question. "I can be myself around her. I don't have to worry about anything. She can take care of herself." Harry's insides twinged happily thinking of her.

Candide said, "Unlike the rest of us, who are all damsels in distress waiting to happen?"

"I didn't say that," Harry insisted. "It just lets me relax. She tells me what she thinks. Everyone else I've dated is always holding something back." He then added, "And she's cute."

"Well, that's all that matters," Candide stated, still teasing. "And she can look like most anyone, right?"

Harry shrugged. "I like her as herself."

Candide, sly grin in place, said, "Do you even know what that is?"

"Yes, of course," Harry insisted. "I think."

"You've never asked her to look a certain way? Or implied that you prefer one hair color over another?"

Candide seemed to be leading somewhere, but Harry could not see where. "No."

"That may be why she likes you too. I expect she gets a lot of that."

"She's a metamorphmagus, why would she care? It's so easy for her to change."

Candide paused before she said, "But that doesn't mean she wants to."

Harry frowned, not considering that likely. "She used to joke around with us all the time. Making her nose big, making herself old."

"I think that supports my point," Candide said.

"How?"

"She was removing it as an issue by making fun of it." She waved her hand dismissively as desserts arrived in a sparkle. "But it's no matter. More a matter seems to be that you aren't supposed to be dating her."

Harry rubbed his head, mussing his hair more. "No. We're breaking Ministry rules."

"And getting away with it because you're Harry Potter."

Harry stared off into the dim main hall. "Something I swore I wouldn't ever let them do."

"Your own moral code is always the first to go," Candide quipped. Harry stared at her, prompting her to add, "I didn't mean that so seriously. Besides, if anyone deserves to break the rules, it's you."

"That doesn't help." He flipped through one of his books, not reading it. "What do you think I should do about Elizabeth?"

"Take her out somewhere and get her to talk. Use that creepy skill you learned from Severus on her."

"That's cold."

She buried her nose in the paper again. "Depends on what's going on."

Snape finally came downstairs, trailing an aura of metallic acridity.

"What are you working on?" Harry asked as a full plate materialized before his guardian.

"Something," Snape replied rudely.

Harry and Candide shrugged at each other.

Personal Peril

Harry did not have a good idea what to do about Elizabeth until Thursday. When he came home from training he found his friend Hermione at the table across from Snape, who sat far back in his chair, cross-armed, hair half concealing his face.

"Hi, Harry," his friend greeted him brightly. She turned the page of a large grid-lined book in front of her. "So, names along here, in order. Marks here . . ." Harry leaned over her shoulder to peer at the blank grade book.

Snape said, "And you need a Fixitive charm. And an Fouralarm if you truly wish it to be permanent."

"I know those," Hermione stated. "And the red boxes and the purple boxes get repeated in the Grand Grades book in Professor McGonagall's office?" She ran her fingers over the intervening black column lines. "How do I choose which are important enough? There will be a lot of assignments."

Snape said, "That is up to you. The purple, obviously are the cumulative examinations you are expected to hold periodically. Some, like Vector, place a weighted mean of the preceding grades in the red columns. Some, like myself, tweak the grades based on the student's house."

Hermione gaped at him. "Do you really?"

Snape gave her a challenging look in return.

From her position bent over the grade book, Hermione said, "Harry, yell at him for me."

Harry laughed instead. "I've heard him say that he works hard to reduce his advanced class to just Slytherins and Ravenclaws. That must be how he does it."

Hermione shook her head disbelievingly. Harry took the seat beside her and opened his post. The one he had sent to Elizabeth was in the pile as though Hedwig had brought it back undelivered.

Hermione said, "I'll be out of the way shortly. McGonagall sent me a box-load of stuff and suggested I get Professor Snape to answer any questions."

Airily, Snape said, "And here I thought she and I were getting along better."

Hermione leaned closer to Harry, "I'm not taking him seriously. Is that the best course?"

"Yes. Especially since it'll make him nuts." Harry gave his guardian a smile to buffer that. To Hermione, Harry said, "Can you do me a favor before you go?"

"Sure, Harry."

"When you're done. Don't rush."

"I don't have much time to get ready for first term." She sounded panicky. "I put in my notice at work so I can have the next few weeks, full time." She pulled out a battered booklet entitled Rulers & Rules and flipped to the first note she had taped inside. "Now, about this policy on reasonable detention . . . I happen to remember you violated it on at least ten occasions that I know of."

They both waited for Snape's reaction, which was not forthcoming. "And your point is?" he finally prompted easily.

Hermione went on, "So, does that mean I can violate it? Or is it only Heads of House or only YOU?"

Later, Harry led his friend out the door. The evening was warm and comfortable and he wondered why he did not find more time for walks. He stopped suddenly, thinking that Kali would like to come out as well. He could feel her claustrophobia and her desire for fresh air and open space. "Just a second," Harry said, going to fetch her.

They resumed their walk down to the train station, Kali flapping along beside and around them while Harry explained. "You remember Elizabeth, right? Something is . . . I don't know how to say it . . . well, suffice to say, I'd like to talk to her, but her father wouldn't let me if he sees me, I expect. I'm wondering if you can lure her out to a coffee shop or to a pub so I can chat with her."

Hermione puzzled this. "Sure, Harry."

Kali flitted by. Harry urged her to fly to the approaching white house, thinking to make her look in the windows.

"Where's she going?" Hermione asked in concern. Kali had been sticking close until then.

"I'm sending her ahead to scout. I'm trying to use her as a mobile extendible eye." Harry stopped and closed his eyes but he could only get disconnected, fleeting impressions from his pet. Last time she had been in pain when he saw through her eyes. Without that strong sensation, she was difficult to locate in his mind. He shook his head, giving up.

"Not working?"

"It has before, but it's hard. I should practice that; it'd be useful." He urged Kali back to him and stopped on the pavement behind the large shrubs bordering the Peterson house. "I'll wait here."

"If I'm talking loudly when I return, the father's with me."

"Got it. Thanks."

Harry listened to her shoes clunk up the drive. The porch projected her voice faintly to the street as she spoke with someone at the door. Harry held Kali facing that way and tried to hear through her more sensitive ears. Sometimes he could manage, but it faded in and out.

" . . . yes, Hermione. I'm a friend from Oxford . . . I'm studying law there . . . yes. Just happen to have taken the train into town. I'm staying with a friend and remembered that Elizabeth lives here. "

Things went on in this vein, like an interrogation.

"We're in Magdalen together."

Harry grinned in affection for his old friend. She could bluff anything because she knew enough about any topic to do so and remembered everything anyone ever told her.

"Well, when she comes in tonight, please tell her I stopped by."

Hermione came back down the walk.

"He's a tough customer," she muttered.

"You got Mr. Peterson?"

"I assume."

They reached Harry's house a short, silent walk later.

"Something about Mr. Peterson I don't like. Oh, hello, Candide," Hermione said, when they were greeted at the door.

Harry explained, "We were just trying to wade through the Mr. Peterson moat to see Elizabeth."

"Did you?"

"He said she wasn't home."

"Was he lying?" Candide asked, something Harry had not considered.

Hermione thought that over. "I'm not sure. Sometimes I can tell, but not with that guy. He's the same no matter what he is talking about."

Chapter 5

Saturday afternoon, Harry had field shadowing again. He stashed his new wand in his newly extended pocket, glad to have it. In the office he found Rogan waiting for him.

"Well, Potter, ready to go?"

"Yes."

Rogan's step was lighter than usual as they strolled the East End on patrol. Harry wondered at his change in mood.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Harry asked, wondering if the weather explained it.

"What? Oh, yes."

Harry decided that he needed to understand things better, so he dived in with, "This is the first time in a long while that they've let you do routine patrol, isn't it?"

Rogan frowned, which his rounded face did not allow to be to grim. "Yup. They'll let me out with a full Auror or you."

"Or me?" Harry asked. "They have a lot of faith in me, don't they? In some ways."

"Things were better this week," Rogan said. "Kingsley's lost his superior attitude." With mock dreaminess, he added, "Wonder why?" Minutes later he said, "At least I didn't attack a trainee while compromised."

Harry now understood why Rogan felt better. "He did seem less smug this week."

"I'm lucky we're shorthanded. I'd still be on full probation, writing endless memos, otherwise."

They returned in the wee hours after a long and uneventful shift. The lamps in the Auror's offices were at half wick, bathing everything in misleading warm light. Harry sat down on the bench to remove each of his shoes and rubbed his feet.

Rogan gave him a grin as Harry sat there with his socks exposed. "Need new shoes?"

"They are new; that's the problem." Fortunately there was a salve at home for just this situation, so Harry reluctantly slipped his lace-ups back on and skipped tying them when his feet protested the very thought.

Buried in distracted thoughts of future relief, Harry grabbed up his cloak and turned to go. Instinct made him drop the cloak, mid-swing to put it on, when a wave of

aversion struck. If his wand had been shorter and had not been sticking inches out of his pocket, he would not have drawn it in time.

Harry managed half a rubber block before something dark exploded, filling his vision with four-foot hairy razor points. Rogan dived off the side of the bench, having drawn his wand immediately after Harry did. He threw a blasting curse that tossed the dissipating rubber block and the giant spiked object into the corner where it began to deflate with a musical squeaking sound. Fresh gouges in the wall haloed it.

Harry stared at his cloak, draped over something the size of a beach ball with a hundred spikes stuck through it. The spines tipped slowly flat to the floor as the ball lost volume.

"What is that?" Harry asked after taking a breath.

Rogan stood up and stepped over beside him to watch the thing in the corner, wand aimed at it. "I've never seen anything like it." He jerked to look Harry up and down. "Did you get cut?"

"I don't think so," Harry dully said.

"I don't want to hear "think" Potter. It could be poison tipped."

Harry gestured at it. "Something that big and nasty would not need to be poisoned as well, would it?"

"Go fetch Tonks or whoever is on duty." Rogan kept his gaze and his wand on the thing as Harry obeyed.

Half a minute later, Tonks was saying, "Something jumped out of your cloak? A regulated creature?"

Harry led the way into the changing room and gestured.

"Merlin the White, what the heck is that?" She leaned her long neck out to better examine it without stepping closer. "Better get Mysteries up here." She dashed off, saying behind her. "Cover the office, Rogan. Harry can guard that thing."

Rogan dashed out the door in the other direction from the one Tonks had taken. Harry held his wand out but doubted he would need it again; the thing sat sunken, unmoving. Harry's right shin stung and when he shook it, his trouser leg stuck to his skin. Harry backed up to the wall, so he could put enough distance between himself and the spiked thing to lift his robe and check his leg. His black trousers made it hard to see how bloody it really was, but there was a rent in the fabric. Harry awkwardly covered the wound with his left hand, then remembered he could Staunch it. He

stood straight and imagined his leg packed to the knee with snow. The pain faded to a dull throb. He waited.

The door opened and Harry gestured with his blood-smeared hand that Mr. Weasley should keep to the left. The department head's red brow furrowed as he came over to Harry, while keeping his gaze fixed in the corner.

"Tristan sent me an owl by Floo saying something had attacked the changing room. What is that?"

"Don't know."

"Where'd it come from?"

"It was in my cloak."

This made Mr. Weasley turn his head to Harry. "You hurt?" He grabbed up Harry's wrist to better see his bloodied hand.

"I got cut on the shin. I dropped the cloak but didn't quite get out of the way of it." Harry played that half a second over in his mind. "Rogan blasted it into the corner before my block failed."

"Is it poisonous?" Mr. Weasley sharply asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

Led by Tonks, a crew came in from Mysteries, wearing padded robes and masks, so Harry could not recognize them. They hovered the thing into a massive solid titanium trunk and hovered that off.

Harry said to Mr. Weasley and Tonks, "All I know is I'm glad I have my new wand." Without it, the spikes would have been through him instead of his cloak. "Drat," Harry breathed. "That was my new cloak."

Mr. Weasley patted Harry on the arm and went to the wall where several of the spikes had broken off in the panelling. He used a hankie to pry the longest one free. "Tonks, take this to the potions room and check it for poison." He turned to Harry. "Come along, Harry. We have to keep a watch on you until we know you're clear."

Harry sat on a stool in the corner of what was actually a glorified cupboard. It was as though someone had put a shrinking charm on Snape's old office, leaving only six feet of floor space to stand in. The shelves were deeper than the open floor was wide.

Harry moved to heal the wound on his leg, but Tonks said, "We need a photo of it." She called out into the corridor for Rogan.

Harry rolled his eyes, but sat quietly through what he knew was a required evidence procedure. Rogan worked quickly, then departed, noisily winding the evidence camera film up.

Propping his heel on a shelf and stretching his back and neck, Harry could just get a good look at the wound. It was dark with rapidly clotting blood but it otherwise appeared normal. He pulled out his wand.

Tonks, both hands holding bottles of irritating liquids, scrubbed at her nose on her sleeve. "Why don't you let me do that. You're liable to leave a scar if you don't aim the spell properly."

"Because you're busy. Another scar isn't going to matter," Harry said, bristling at being babied.

"I don't want your lovely leg scarred," she insisted, voice taking on a sexy tone.

Mr. Weasley choose that moment to step into the doorway. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, of course not. No sign of poison so far," Tonks said, putting drops of something milky onto a glass dish and touching it with the end of the spike. "You're a wiz at healing spells, Arthur. Take care of Harry will you?"

Mr. Weasley crouched beside Harry and peeled his soaked trouser leg up farther. He frowned. "Good thing it didn't get more of you, Harry. Dangerous thing."

"Yeah," Harry had to agree. He held tight to his next thought by biting his lip. That thing seemed like something the twins might have invented. Harry decided he could check into that himself.

Mr. Weasley cast several spells at his leg, then he spit into his hankie and rubbed Harry's leg briskly to remove the dried blood. "Looks good. It would have been deeper, but it hit bone."

"Spoken like a man with six sons," Tonks teased.

Even Harry smiled at that.

Some time later, with Mr. Weasley assisting because Tonks spilled the second to last bottle of Prismatic Revelation, Tonks declared, "I don't see any sign of poison."

Harry figured it must be around 3:00 in the morning because his eyelids felt made of lead. "Can I go?"

"Why don't you escort him, Tonks?"

Chapter 5

"I don't need an escort," Harry sharply insisted, before thinking better that it would be Tonks and that would actually be quite to his advantage. "Sorry," he said to her. "I'm all right though. It was just a scratch."

Tonks put a stopper in the last open bottle and said, sounding fully professional, "It was just someone trying to kill you, Harry."

Harry frowned and huffed since it was difficult to argue otherwise.

At Harry's house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry pleaded with Tonks not to wake Snape.

"Really, it's all right," Harry whispered. "I woke him up last weekend too after shift."

"Why?"

"I got hit kind of hard by Shacklebolt and couldn't sleep," Harry admitted, kicking himself for that slip-up. He went on, "I don't need anything. It's a scratch and it's healed."

"It's a higher alert level . . . for your protection," Tonks argued, also whispering.

"This house is already warded to the maximum it could be," Harry countered.

The sound of a throat clearing floated in through the door to the dining room. Snape stepped in, holding Kali. "She was making a bit of a racket an hour ago."

"Sorry," Harry said. "Didn't mean to wake you."

As he passed them, Snape inspected each of them before letting Kali crawl onto Harry's shoulder. Harry petted her head which she rested it on his collar, tired. "I need to get to sleep," Harry said.

"Bad shift?" Snape asked.

"No exactly," Tonks replied for him. "Someone slipped something deadly into Harry's cupboard."

"I lost another cloak," Harry said. "This must be a record."

"The cloak is no matter," Snape chided him, crossing his arms and confronting Tonks. "What was this thing?"

"We don't know. We sent it down to the Department of Mysteries."

"Where you will be lucky to hear anything of it again," Snape finished for her.

Harry said, "It was cursed. I felt it in time before putting the cloak on."

"So it must have been slipped into the cupboard. You're certain it wasn't in the cloak when you bought it?" Tonks asked.

"I didn't feel it before."

"It could have been masked, though," Tonks suggested.

"That does not fool Harry," Snape provided.

"Okay . . ." Tonks mused, hair shifting to brown. "Our traitor is still skulking around, apparently."

Harry held his tongue on his suspicions for the moment. If it was Percy, Harry felt a bit like handling it himself.

Tonks departed after breaking her work mode long enough to give Harry a hug.

"I'm tired," Harry said, to cut off whatever Snape opened his mouth to say.

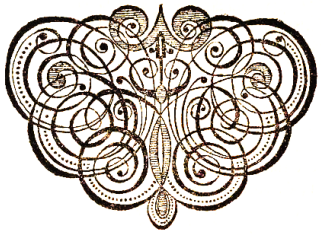
"I was going to suggest that you rest. But more importantly, I wished to know if that is your blood on your hand . . ."

"Yeah, I need to clean up." He headed for the toilet, forcing Kali to hang on tightly as he broke into stride, calling over his shoulder, "It's all healed, don't worry about it."

The door to the toilet closed in the distance and Snape said to the empty hall, "No, of course I shan't worry."

Author's Notes: Sorry didn't get this up at a decent hour. 10 hour drive took up most of my productive day.

Chapter 6.



Rabbit Hole

Sunday, Harry woke and while still in bed, penned a quick letter, careful not to get any droplets of ink on the bedding as he brought the quill from the inkwell to the parchment and back again. Still in his pyjamas, he sat on the trunk under his bedroom window and released Hedwig after giving her very specific instructions to deliver his missive directly to Elizabeth's room. The letter invited her out to the pub that afternoon and suggested that she not tell her father whom she was to meet.

When Hedwig returned while Harry buttoned his shirt, bearing the same unopened letter, he frowned at his owl. "What happened, you couldn't find her?" he asked. It wasn't terribly early, so she should be awake.

Harry tugged on his right sock while Hedwig flapped up to sit on his wardrobe. He padded over, pulled Kali from her cage and stared at her tiny fox-like face haloed by her purple body fur. She sniffed the air, then chewed on his finger. The prickly pain gave him a fleeting impression of a salty, poultry taste that must be from her. He let her out the window and urged her to fly to the Peterson house. She flew to the roof of the train station instead, where the pigeons made slow, chubby prey.

Harry willed her back through his window, which was not easy, mid-stalk like she was with her wings arched high and back. He held her up before his face again. "You aren't cooperating," he criticized her. He pulled on his slippers and took the rejected letter downstairs where he found Candide in the drawing room, glossy magazines spread out before her, pages filled with all manner of brides, posed against a ubiquitous brown background as though standing inside a giant, well-lit paper sack. Clearly the back

of the dress was considered more critical than the front, given the prevalence of that angle.

"Would you do me a favor?" Harry asked her. "I mean, if you're not busy."

"Sure, if you do me one." She turned a ten pound, three-inch thick magazine across the desk in his direction. "Do you like this dress?"

Harry stared at the picture. The dress was form-fitting, except for the oversized sleeves, and it had scroll-like beadwork sewn into the waist and down the back in a point. The overall shape was reminiscent of an upside-down tulip, down to the texture. But, to a first approximation, it was a dress.

"It's nice," Harry said, trying to sound like he meant it.

"You don't think it's too princess gown?"

"Too what?"

"You know, like Cinderella, or Snow White. Don't you know Snow White?"

"Wasn't she poisoned by a witch?" Harry asked, wondering how they had wandered into this topic out of dresses.

"She married Prince Charming; that's the key point," Candide supplied. "Oh, that's right, I took you to your first film when you were young. 'Course you haven't seen Snow White." She pulled the magazine back. "How could I forget?"

Harry stood, holding Kali, who sniffed with interest at the perfumes that permeated the magazine pile. He really had lost track of the conversation. "Oh," he said, remembering suddenly that he had indeed briefly rendered himself half his normal age. "What'd we see?"

"Tarzan."

Harry felt a bit left out by this revelation. "Did I like it?"

"Um." She tapped her finger on a page bearing an adorable furry mutt carrying a flower basket and sporting a pink ribbon on the top of its head. "You seemed disturbed by it, honestly."

Harry mulled that, while Candide flipped through twenty pages. She stopped at a dress worn by a woman clearly well along in her pregnancy. It lacked the sparkly effects most the others had and the fabric hue was reminiscent of old parchment rather than a fancy tablecloth like the others. "Good thing we're getting married

soon enough not to need THAT dress," she commented. She flipped back to the dress marked with a folded over strip of spellotape.

Harry said, "I was wondering if you could go talk to Elizabeth."

"Not that I'd mind doing so, but she walks by here everyday, doesn't she?"

"That's right," Harry said. "She has lessons. I forgot. Maybe that's why Hedwig didn't find her." Harry leaned over Candide's shoulder to examine the page again, saying, "Maybe the puffy sleeves make it look like Snow White."

Greatly alarmed, Candide asked, "You don't like the puffy sleeves?"

With immense care, as though he had disturbed a nest of asps or perhaps a sleeping horntail, Harry levelly and calmly said, "I didn't say that. I just suggested . . . that's perhaps where the . . . look of it gets its . . . well, Snow White . . . thing." Harry decided that he should not express an opinion if he could help it. "I like them all, really."

He did not expect this to pass muster, but Candide turned a pained eye back to the magazine and flipped idly through the pages she had just gone through a moment before. "They're all very nice. Well, there are few I don't like at all, but, yeah, they are mostly quite nice."

Harry closed his eyes in a moment's relief before excusing himself, saying he needed to do his readings right then so they were finished before Lupin and Harry's cousin arrived for dinner, even though it was only morning. Snape was not in the library or the dining room, and Harry caught a caustic scent in the air, which implied he was bunkered inside the spare room, brewing. Harry hoped he did not come out until the gown shopping was put away for the day.

Harry took his books outside into the front garden to read, the better to see his friend walk by. The burst of summer growth had pushed the ivy over the bench, so Harry had to urge it behind and sweep the dead leaves away with his hand before settling in. The sun was just reaching the ragged top edge of the wall beside him, so soon he would be out of the shade and the morning chill clinging to the surrounding stone would pass. Harry blew on his fingers and found the place where he had left off on the manual of evidence collection.

Two chapters in, reading grew tedious and Harry's mind drifted to the back garden of the house where Sirius' bike had sat idle for months. Once he had this vision in his head, he could not leave it be, even after he told himself he would read one more section before even going to take a look at the motorbike.

Giving in, Harry closed the books, and tossed them onto a table in the library on his way through to the back garden. Repeated trimming spells were required to remove the tangled dead and green ivy, but after that, the cover pulled away easily. The bike underneath gleamed as brightly as it did when Hagrid had delivered it; more so, because of the sunlight.

Harry, more easily than the last time he had maneuvered it, rolled it away from the wall into the small open space. The bike felt closer to the right size as he mounted it, his arms less splayed ungainly wide while holding the handlebars. Harry kicked the bike to life and it roared appreciatively.

Harry heard a shout and looked around and up to find Snape at the window of the spare room. Harry spun the Roar knob down till it fell silent.

"A bit of warning next time before you start up that infernal thing," Snape demanded.

Harry waved. "Forgot how loud it was," he admitted.

"That is not possible to forget," Snape said. "And if you are going far, do be careful."

"How's the brewing going?" Harry asked to end the conversation.

And indeed, Snape hmfed and pulled his head back inside. Grinning, Harry flew the bike as low as possible over the back wall and rode it along the rutted field path bordering the gardens and out to the road. In the daylight, he decided to just keep it on the ground. He adjusted the Roar knob up again to make a reasonable noise and cruised off to the right to search the streets in that direction for Elizabeth's piano teacher.

Harry cruised slowly along rows of well-kept old houses. He was about to turn back onto the main road, when he heard a shout. With effort, he turned the bike around on the narrow tarmac and stopped before a grey house dominated by a large bay window. Elizabeth stood on the porch chatting with an attractive brown-haired woman in smart clothes. She waved, said goodbye to her teacher and came jogging, despite her heels, over to greet Harry.

"I wasn't sure where your teacher's house was," Harry admitted.

Elizabeth was looking over the bike, but she jerked her head to look at him as she said, "You were looking for me?"

"Yeah, let's get an ice cream. Hop on."

She laughed. "You have a helmet for me? You aren't even wearing one."

"Oh," Harry said. "There's a pair in the pannier; hang on." Harry put on the brake, flipped down the stand and swung off, finding his legs already complaining about being stretched by the wide seat. From the closer pannier, he produced a pair of sparkly white helmets. Harry suspected they were magical, given their leather interiors and handmade look. He gave the smaller one to her.

"Do you even have a license?" she asked as she used her colored fingernails and teeth to tighten the stiff strap. "Or a number plate?"

"No," Harry said. "I mostly fly on it anyhow, and the Muggles don't have a license for that."

She got on behind Harry and scooted close, still adjusting her chin strap. "Well, they do, but not for motorbikes, that's for certain."

When she put her arms around him, Harry released the brake and gently accelerated to the main road and waited for an unusual string of traffic to clear.

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked as he turned left.

"No," Harry shouted because he did not want to turn his head far. "I only know my way around from in the air."

They rode for a while on the main road as it wound through field and forest. Sunlight played on the rutted roadway, filtering through the trees. Two villages over, they stopped before a small shop with a cracked giant plastic ice cream cone out front.

As usual, the great bike attracted everyone's attention. Harry, not wanting to embarrassingly deflect questions he could not answer, urged Elizabeth quickly to a bright pink table and went to the window to order.

Seated at the table, Harry took two bites of his treat and said, "So, how are you?"

Her mood shifted instantly, face darkening.

Using clues from Candide, Harry said, "Everything all right at home?"

She swallowed the large bite she had in her mouth and licked her lips before replying. "My dad has always been . . . has always sort of disliked magic. Well, maybe he didn't always dislike it, but when I was young he started dissuading my mum from using it. Except at Christmas and sometimes at the lake camp when the place really needed a good cleaning, or we wanted a fire, but otherwise, I always had the impression he didn't like it." She faded out, expression pinned on the cars driving by. "He's become a lot stricter about it. He gets angry immediately when the topic

comes up, and ever since what happened at your place, my mum doesn't argue with him any longer. Takes his side."

She frowned and spooned up the liquid pooling around the mound in her bowl. "I've been difficult too; doing more magic, even when I'm not good at it, just to irk him more."

"I understand," Harry said. "The aunt and uncle I lived with for seventeen years despised magic. I think because they feared it."

"I don't think my dad fears it. I just think he hates losing . . ." She faded out.

"Losing what?"

Harry at first thought she would not answer. "Losing control. He likes to be in charge. Really likes to be in charge. Since I've been away at school, I can't take it anymore. When I was his little girl, I didn't mind so much, for some reason."

Harry thought he understood that too. Snape could be terribly strict as well, but Harry took it to mean that he cared, and Harry surprisingly found he preferred to please him as not, although he had been slipping on that. He pondered that during the subsequent silence. Snape's admission that he had not even attempted to enforce any rules about his dating or the Dark Plane meant that something fundamental had changed between them.

Elizabeth had faded out, and did not notice that Harry had as well. Harry returned to the present and said, "You have to put up with your dad for a while longer."

Her face fell sadder. "Yep. We had a real row the other night. I just couldn't take his silly rules anymore." Her voice dropped, "He took my wand when I threatened to use it. I think he burned it."

Falling into Auror interview mode, Harry asked factually, "What happened to instigate that?"

The tone worked; she said, "He threatened to slap me for something I said. I probably deserved it. But I pulled my wand on him." She laughed dully. "Like I could do anything to him. Like I know any dangerous spells."

"No one deserves to be slapped for mere words," Harry stated, disliking immensely that she had said that. "Do you have friends you can stay with?"

"I could go visit some friends from school."

"Why don't you do that? Getting some space would help a lot."

"Space is what made me realize what a domineering control freak he is. It would give me an opportunity to get a new wand. But my mum . . . well, she'd be unhappy if I did."

They chatted for a while longer, until Harry's uncompleted studies began to nag at him. He said, "I have to get home. We have friends coming for dinner and I have readings to finish." They stood and Harry cleaned up their spots. "I can get you another wand. What kind did you have before?"

"Would you do that? I had birch and unicorn before."

"I'll take you to Ollivanders if you want. Or I can pick you up a wand since that combination sounds easy. Whichever you prefer."

She glanced at her watch. "I need to get home too. Maybe you can fetch one for me." She reached into her clutch and handed him several twenty-pound notes while sheepishly explaining: "Wands are expensive. I don't have any Galleons . . ."

Harry pocketed the money, pulled out the helmets and slipped his on. "I'll fetch you one tomorrow when Ollivanders is open."

She laughed. "Thanks, Harry."

He swung his leg over the bike. "No problem. Hop on."

When visitors' voices sounded from the dining room, Harry put down his books and eagerly went to greet them. The sconces had been extinguished and tall candles lit the table. Candide urged Lupin and Pamela to choose seats. Lupin appeared far healthier than last time he had visited; in fact he seemed to be bordering on chubby, which softened the canine edge to his visage.

They greeted Harry, who, despite not finishing his readings, decided to join them that instant.

"Severus still locked away?" Candide asked Harry.

"I think so."

"What's this?" Lupin asked.

"Severus is working on something," Harry explained. "He won't say what it is, but he spends hours brewing upstairs."

Lupin shook his head. "He's always had an odd, anti-social side." When Pamela swatted him lightly on the arm, he added, "I take that back. As long as he brews Wolfsbane for me, he can be as odd as he likes."

Butterbeers appeared and they fell into warm conversation.

Pamela immediately brought up the one topic Harry hoped they would avoid, at least until later. "How is the wedding coming?"

Candide groaned. "It's coming along. I was hoping for help from my cousin, but her tastes and mine are completely different. And she seems to think it's insulting to allow there to be a budget for such a thing. But I did pick out a dress."

"Did you?" Pamela asked with relish.

"Do you want to see the advert for it?"

The two of them leapt up and departed. Harry sipped his butterbeer and enjoyed the silence.

"How are things with you, Harry?" Lupin asked. He sounded solicitous, which made Harry think he was doing fairly well himself.

"Pretty good," Harry said. "Skeeter has been mostly ignoring me. Training is going well."

He smiled and asked, "No dark wizards haunting you?"

Harry frowned, thinking of the strange thing in his cloak. "Something odd happened the other day, but it might have just been a prank that went poorly. I'm going to investigate tomorrow with the twins. See if they know anything."

Despite Harry's assurances, Lupin's heavy brow lowered and remained there. "Don't make any assumptions Harry. Don't hesitate to let us know if you need the Order revitalized again."

Harry laughed lightly. "I don't need the Order," he said dismissively, feeling Lupin still thought him a child.

"I don't like to see that overconfidence, Harry."

"You sound like Mad-Eye," Harry criticized between sips of butterbeer. "He always says that right before he bowls me over with a spell I don't know."

"You talk like he's still alive," Lupin said quietly.

Harry headed for safety. "No one ever found his body," he pointed out. "Maybe I'll go prod Severus. Do you mind if I leave you alone?"

A fresh butterbeer sparkled in to replace Lupin's empty one. "Not at all. The service here is wonderful."

Harry dashed upstairs and in passing glanced into Snape's bedroom where piles of thick, square magazines had been hastily spread out.

"Your mum said what?" Pamela was saying. Candide glanced up at Harry in apparent consternation at being overheard and he accidentally saw in her eyes a vision of her mum arguing that she should call off the wedding.

"I was just seeing if I can drag Severus from his brewing," Harry said.

"Good idea," Candide said, sounding as pat as he did.

Harry walked around and slipped inside the storage room without knocking. The setup inside was unlike any he had ever seen. Intricate glass tubes connected glass bottles and cauldrons in a three-dimensional rack that filled the center of the room. Portable fires hovered under the suspended bottles propelling swirling liquids through the tubes. Crystal bowls full of colorful grains were lined up on the old door, again propped up as a worktable.

"What are you making?" Harry asked.

Snape sat bent over a stone board, using an obsidian knife to split a pile of course grains. He did not reply.

Harry said, "I take it you're going to be a little while longer?"

Snape nodded.

Harry took a deep breath. "I don't mean to be difficult, but it is probably not the best time to dive into an obsessive brewing session, especially so secretively."

Snape continued to split miniscule grains and push them aside into an indentation in the granite board. His hair hid his face except for his intent brow. Moldy books, heavily bookmarked, sat open nearby in a tall stack, their pages so yellowed they had gone all the way to rust colored.

Harry said, "I didn't realize Candide's mother was trying to stop the wedding."

This brought the glassy black blade to a halt. Snape stretched his neck back and said, "Did Candide tell you that?"

"Not directly." At Snape's sharp look, Harry added, "I didn't mean to pry. It was an accident. Emotion makes it much easier to read people, doesn't it?"

"Very much so. Emotion is a weakness for nearly everyone," Snape said, returning to his chopping. "I will be ten minutes more."

"Invite her parents over," Harry said. "I can work on them a bit."

Harry expected him to decline, but from out the veil of hair came: "Suggest it to Candide."

Harry joined the women as they returned downstairs. Candide was saying, "Headmistress has insisted that Severus delay starting at Hogwarts for a week. Most kind of her."

Pamela resumed her seat and took up Lupin's hand. "Remus doesn't mind at all covering for a while."

Lupin said, "Minerva has gone far out of her way to defend my being at Hogwarts. It's the least I can do."

Harry waited until the conversation about the wedding wore down before he suggested to Candide, "Why don't you have your parents over for dinner here."

"If they'll come," Lupin joked a little tipsily, making Harry wonder if butterbeer had the same effect on a werewolf that it did on an elf.

Candide said, "I expect they'll come. I'll see if Severus minds."

Snape stepped in just then and brusquely asked, "Minds what?"

Candide reached out a hand in his direction and said, "Minds if I invite my parents over for another pre-wedding getting-to-know-each-other?"

Snape sat stiffly and said, "I believe I could survive that." He glanced at Harry and let the topic drop.

Harry stared into his glass and asked, "What about your mum?"

"She'll get an invitation," Snape dryly pointed out.

Lupin broke into laughter. Snape explained, "We are NOT going through this taxing and fraught process with yet another meddlesome party."

Candide had a faint smile as she gamely assured those present: "She's on the invite list."

Lupin continued to chuckle. Snape said, "It was her choice to take herself away from the world. We simply are catering to that."

Chapter 6

During lunchtime at the Ministry, Harry rushed about trying to get his errands all finished. At Gringotts, the queue for the exchange – headed by a gaggle of foreign witches, straw-like hair standing in all directions as they hunched over a sack from which they counted out individual triangular copper coins – was too long to make it through in several lunch hours, let alone one, so Harry instead asked the floor Goblin to fetch Ron to take him to his vault.

Ron gamely did so, chatting all the while about the Cannons as the mine car rolled and surged over the sparsely braced, randomly coursing, splitting, and recombining rails. Ron controlled their transport with flicks of his foot on the levers as though it required almost no attention despite the breakneck pace.

With his pocket weighted down with enough gold for yet another wand, Harry stepped back out into the bustling Diagon Alley. Ron followed, also blinking rapidly to ward off the brightness of daylight. Harry weaved through the shoppers and paused outside the window of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Beyond the rain-streaked glass, stacks of brightly colored boxes, some with thick brass straps holding them closed, sat beneath mobiles replicating various Quidditch teams. The tiny figures at the farthest orbit of each set swerved and strained at their wires in an attempt to get at the opposing-colored players.

"I need to ask your brothers something," Harry said.

A set of bells chimed out the Lyke Wake Dirge when Harry pushed the door open. Ron elbowed him, saying, "You have a pocket full of gold. You just can't resist."

Harry did not bother to correct him on this mistaken point. In the back of the cluttered shop Harry found one of the twins stocking things behind the counter. When Harry leaned over the stained and burned surface and gestured, George crawled closer, forcing Harry to crouch too in order to speak with him in confidence. George peered at Harry around Verity's pink robes. She gave George a playful kick as she gave change to a customer.

Before Harry could formulate his question, the George whispered, "How's Ron doing?"

"Oh, er, seems fine."

"Good. Mum's been giving us hell, I'll tell you. You'd think we'd never done anything to him before or something." He sighed. "What'dya need?"

"I wanted to know if you ever sold or . . . made anything like a giant black inflatable spiked ball."

George placed the brown-paper wrapped boxes onto the counter and stood. Harry gratefully followed suit. "You're looking for one?"

Harry waited for the young customer, who was giving him a silly grin, to slowly wander off before continuing with, "No, I saw one and guessed it was your handiwork."

George pondered that, finally asking, "We in trouble?" He sounded surprisingly serious for a Weasley twin.

"No, I'm trying to track something down is all. This is just me asking." Harry was glad he could be honest about that; it reinforced his asking around on his own.

George relaxed. "We had something . . ." He moved to the dimmest corner of the shop, shaded by tall full racks from the light of the windows, and began searching through the lowest shelves. "Hey, Verity?" he shouted, then thought better and went over to her to whisper to her privately.

He returned and continued to pull the lowest front items off and stack them on the floor, revealing different, older boxes packed behind, thoroughly haphazard. He pulled out a box and handed it up to Harry and returned to searching. "That's the Giant Birds of Prey Pack. We had a Giant Ocean-Bottom Pack too, but I don't see it now." Harry stared at the crudely painted pictures of raptors, vultures, and even a pterodactyl on the box lid. George went on, "They were right popular for theme parties for a while there. Then like all great ideas, they became passé like that." He snapped his fingers.

Harry turned the box over. A warning had been inked in red along the margin as an afterthought: Stand far back from minibirds before using expansion spell. And on the other margin: For best results expand only in very very large room with high ceiling. The "verys" were triple underlined.

"There was a sea urchin in the Ocean Pack?" When George nodded, Harry asked, "How big did it get?"

George held his arms out wide. "Originally, it would roll around the party following the fish as they "swam" but too many people complained of torn robes and rugs and drapery, so we left them stupid and static instead." He started putting the newer boxes back in front of the older faded ones. "Which is no fun, really. I spent a lot of time getting the rolling just right. It was tough, it actually had to walk on its spikes. Which sounds simple, but really isn't." He shook his head sadly. "We now have to

only come up with things that seem dangerous, but really aren't. That's tough." He craned his neck like a periscope to check that Ron was nowhere near. "Even then people do dumb stuff with things we think are completely safe."

Harry tried to hand the box back, but he was waved off. "Give it to Ginny if you don't want it. She begged me for a set, but at the time, we couldn't make them fast enough."

Harry tucked the box under his arm. As George squeezed by Harry in the narrow aisle, he said, "Oh, and realize that they are only aloft for about an hour, in case you decide to make your house-elf ride one. Had trouble with that once." He scooped the boxes back off the counter and ducked out of sight.

Harry searched the narrow aisles and found Ron selecting colorful sweets from a wall-full of bins. He held a struggling licorice tarantula between his fingers and he gazed at it suspiciously. "Ah," Ron said accusingly, gesturing with the spider at the box under Harry's arm. "Knew you couldn't resist." He dropped the spider back in the bin and wiped his fingers on his trousers. Peering into the paper sack he held, he said, "Guess that will make lunch."

Harry panicked, having forgotten the time. He pulled out his watch and found it was only three minutes until his training resumed. "I've got to run. See you later," he said, patting his friend on the arm to be certain he heard before he Disapparated.

Running, Harry just had time to stash the box of Giant Birds and his spare gold in his locker, seal it with the best spell he knew, and skid into the training room, out of breath. Rodgers gave him a depreciating look, but withheld comment.

Harry's stomach growled through the afternoon and by the time they were finished, he was keenly focused on getting home for a snack. But he needed to go back to Diagon Alley for a wand. He left the Giant Birds Pack balanced awkwardly beside his spare jacket and pulled out the sack of gold.

Tonks strode into the changing room as Harry's fellows departed. As though speaking for his hollow stomach, she said, "I have half an hour before my shift if you want to find an early bite."

"Sounds great," Harry said, weighing the sack in his hand before slipping it into his pocket. "I need to go Diagon Alley anyway. I told Elizabeth I'd buy her a new wand."

By unstated agreement, they Apparated into the Leaky Cauldron. On the way through the wall in back, Tonks asked, "Why doesn't Elizabeth get her own wand?"

"It's a long story," Harry said, thinking stressfully of his friend stuck at home with an overbearing Muggle father. "Her father burned her old one. He's getting difficult

about magic." The alley was sparser with shoppers than lunchtime so Harry's sigh was quite audible. Elizabeth's situation disproportionately irritated him, so he was not paying attention to what he said. "It'd be good if she moved out, from what I could get out of her. I took her for a ride on my bike; other than her lessons, I wonder if she's been allowed out."

"You what?" Tonks asked. Harry heard the warning tone this time and realized belatedly that he should have heard it in her previous question too. They were stopped before Ollivanders, but Harry did not reach for the door handle.

His hesitation did not help. Tonks said, "You've never taken me for a ride on Sirius' old motorbike."

It was odd. Tonks, when angry, normally put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. She did not do that now; her arms hung slack, head craning forward. Harry sensed a crumbling cliff edge before him and had no idea how to avoid skidding over it. "We can go anytime you like," he stated. He held off on adding anything about her never having the time, certain it would compound the looming confrontation.

Now, she more familiarly propped her hands on her hips, and let her body kink into a zig-zag topped in spikes of pink. "So, what else did you do?"

Harry could not help it. He knew better, but did not have time to analyze his own quick anger. "Tonks, this is stupid," he said of her getting upset.

"Oh, right . . . silly me."

"It is silly. You sound like it matters if I take a friend out for ice creams."

Tonks colored slightly. Harry was not sure, but her hair appeared to edge more to the red too. "When she's . . . a cute . . . thing in distress, of course it matters."

Harry felt dropped in the middle of a maze and had to stop and try to take stock of his position. Passing shoppers slowed at Tonks' tone and Harry tried not to care what they heard, nor fear that Skeeter may appear any second, quill already blazing.

"Look," Harry said, thinking he'd feel more certain about how to handle a vampire than a jealous girlfriend, "I need to get a wand real quick and then we can get some dinner."

"I don't think I really have time for both of those," she snipped and Disapparated.

Harry swore, garnering disapproving looks from a pair of approaching witches burdened with packages. He took a deep breath and stubbornly continued his errand rather than chase Tonks immediately.

Chapter 6

Inside the store, the quiet clashed with his disturbed emotions and klaxon-loud thoughts. Ollivander wandered to the front, hands clasped before him as though to exude calm.

Harry said, "Good day again. I need a birch wand with a unicorn hair core . . . for a friend."

Ollivander turned away with a small bow, pausing to ask, "Do you know what length, perchance?"

Thinking it should be easy to hide, Harry said, "Shortest you have, please."

Ollivander waved his sliding ladder over and climbed it to fetch a small grey box which he returned to Harry. Inside it was an eight-inch wand, looking petite and innocuous. Harry began counting out the same thirty Galleons his own wand had cost. Ollivander waved off the last ten.

"Tell your friend if the wand does not fit, it can be exchanged."

Harry's thoughts were already flying ahead. He reined them back in and said, "Thanks, I will."

Ollivander froze him in place by asking, "And you are how, Mr. Potter?" He sounded more than conversational. He sounded as though he felt it a duty to keep track of Harry.

Harry pulled his attention completely back to the dusty old shop where he stood. "In a hurry I'm afraid, otherwise, quite well."

This even-headed, though rushed, answer, drew a reassured smile from Ollivander, who nodded him out.

Pocketing the small, bright blond wand, Harry stepped out of the shop and Disapparated for the Ministry before he could be overrun by an teetering cart stacked with noisy animal cages.

At the Ministry, Harry slipped into the office and not finding Tonks, proceeded to check the rest of the Department. He located her in the break room, nibbling on a stale Danish and looking dangerously peeved. Her lips pursed when her gaze came up to Harry's.

Harry realized that he should have prepared what to say because he found he only wanted to repeat himself. "I don't know what's wrong," Harry said.

This apparently deserved a dubious raised pink eyebrow. Harry worked very hard to not get angry again. Rogan's voice interrupted, calling down the corridor: "Call's come in!"

Tonks dropped the pastry heel on the table and slipped by Harry without touching him, which wasn't easy given that he was blocking the doorway. Harry followed her down to the offices where she picked her teeth with a long pinky nail while reading a slip. "Yeah, I'll take it. Call Kingsley in too." She Disapparated.

Harry picked up the slip because it was only Rogan manning the office and Harry expected he would not criticize him for doing so. Harry knew where Upminster was and knew the most likely Apparition area Tonks would use. He carefully set the slip back on the pile. He should not go. He would be in the way. It would be best to wait till later to talk. Harry knew all of these things, but he Disapparated anyhow.

Harry arrived in the shadow of a windmill. Tonks was there but it took Harry a moment to recognize her in the disguise of a pensioner wearing a long grey cardigan. She clearly expected Harry to be someone else.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

Harry ducked slightly like she was and glanced around for danger. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Not now," she hissed, clearly disturbed.

Harry plowed on because he had just then put his finger on the problem, "I don't understand why you don't trust me."

Tonks had her wand out already; she angled it at Harry. "I'm seconds from hitting you with a Mummy Curse and sending you back to the Ministry. Get out of here."

She truly sounded like she meant it. A low bang! sounded nearby. Tonks ducked under a strut to glance around the side of the windmill. "Kingsley's coming," she whispered, but Harry was gone. Tonks glance around. She'd only heard one Apparition noise and wondered if Harry had pulled an invisibility cloak over his head. Shacklebolt's approach, in the khaki guise of a parks worker, aborted Tonks' wondering about Harry's quiet exit.

Harry sighed into the grey gloom of the Dark Plane. Something scuffled over the ground in the distance and then silence permeated the dank, earthy air. Harry felt intermittently empty and annoyed. He wished to not care at all because there was no chance for an argument to hash things out, so he might as well ignore it. But the will to do so was not sufficient to make it happen.

Delaying returning to the world of sunshine, Harry strolled in a random direction. He walked hunched, hands in pockets, thoughts far away. He wondered what time

Tonks would return from the assignment, then told himself not to care. Did she really trust him so little to display such jealousy? It was true that she had also behaved badly when she learned about him dating Belinda. Perhaps he should have seen this coming.

Harry's thoughts circled on in this vein as he trod on the fine grey dust. He perhaps should have been more attentive to where he was going, but he felt more secure here than most anywhere else. So, he was quite startled when a loop of rusted wire caught his ankle and he tripped. Clumsily, he tried to tug his hands free of his robe pockets to stop himself from crashing down into the mass of abrasive metal looming before him. He could not catch himself in time and he would painfully, if not fatally, be entangled. Instinctively, he fell through the ground short of striking it.

In that instant, Harry's body was flattened and pressed as though to squeeze it through the crack between the great unyielding doors of Hogwarts castle. A blast of absolute zero grazed him at the narrowest point of his passage, but he was helpless to reverse course. The excruciating crushing and drawing out as though he were mere clay made him certain this was the end. But the deadly pressure released just as the cold began to numb him and he was ejected out of the ground on the other side, only dimly aware of tumbling into tall, saw-edged grass before he lost consciousness.

Harry rose to consciousness slowly, chilled to the core, but with the sunlight blessedly warming his flesh because of his dark robe. A cord in his neck screamed when he moved his face away from the sun. Ants were crawling up his nose and thick grass stems stabbed him behind the ear.

When he could, Harry rose up and stood on cold-creaky limbs and looked about. Half fallen trees lined a dip where a creek ran. He stumbled over hidden ruts in the grass, too weak to catch himself without severe straining that only increased his misery. Half decayed, bleached, and sagging wood houses came into view through the ragged forest, matching the half-dead and bleached trees surrounding them. A whiff of curse attracted his gaze to one house in particular. It was the only house with smoke coming out of the chimney. A spell masked the smoke, making it visible only if one looked beyond it at just the right angle.

Harry stretched his neck side to side, pulled his shoulders back and took out his wand. He felt vaguely confident he could reverse his accidental arrival but did not want to face the Dark Plane again until he was strong and clearheaded. While he recuperated and finished warming his bones, he moved to satisfy his curiosity about where he had ended up.

The occupied house was spelled in layered and subtle ways. Harry stepped in an ungainly manner over and around the cursed zones on the ground – laid out in an

invisible maze – until he finally reached the door. Like at the house where the Vampire had taken over, Harry simply knocked, wand at his side, obscured by his robe sleeve. The man who jerked open the door startled Harry severely, but he hid it quickly. Snape gazed with equal alarm back at Harry. Harry blinked and felt a chill permeating him again, but this time from the ice in Snape's eyes. Snape's hair was astoundingly disheveled and his eyes showed wrinkles at the corners that Harry had not noticed before.

Snape gazed intensely at Harry and harshly whispered, "Potter . . ." But his eyes then took in Harry's own with close scrutiny, then narrowed in further confusion as though they were unexpected.

Harry, for lack of anything else to say, said, "Hello, Severus," and stood on tip-toe to peer inquisitively beyond at the small room. It was full of books, which gave Harry some reassurance.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Snape demanded in a low voice.

"Good question," Harry answered amiably despite his racing brain. "I'm not sure." Snape had stepped back as though to verify something in the room. Harry used the opening to stride inside. He felt and heard, rather than saw, Snape's jerk of surprise as he passed. The small room was clearly well lived in but in need of a good cleaning. Maybe the cold had addled his brains, but they refused to piece things together.

Harry finished his short circuit and looked about himself. It felt Snape-like in every way except wholly unfamiliar. Where was he? Harry wondered. What was Snape doing here, and what had transpired to change him so?

"What happened to your eyes?" Snape asked warily, voice demanding an answer.

Harry laughed lightly in a kind of weird relief that this could not be the man he knew. Gamely, he answered honestly, "Playing with too-powerful magicks. Or . . . I am told that's what caused it." He again considered Snape, who was holding his wand just shy of ready. Harry continued to expect that at any moment this was going to make some sense.

Snape said slowly, "Must have been . . . rather powerful. Your Occlumency certainly has improved." He sounded disappointed and annoyed.

Harry grinned to himself, finding light amusement in that compliment. "Can't get by without it. You don't need your wand," he said, holding his hands up, empty, wand caught on his sleeve hem, easy to retrieve.

Snape lowered his wand only an inch. "You will forgive me given that the last three times we have met, you have tried to kill me."

"Oh," Harry said, glomming fully onto the notion that if there were an unfamiliar Snape that there was an unfamiliar Harry Potter as well. He scratched behind his ear and pondered that, but felt only additional unease. He gave the room closer scrutiny in hopes of a clue.

"You should not be here," Snape hissed.

Harry was examining a trinket on a crude shelf without touching it, it was a locket that looked vaguely familiar. "That I know, believe me. I should have just left, but I was curious." He moved on to study a shelf packed so tight with books that they were stuffed in on top and curled to fit in every available gap. Harry asked, "So satisfy my curiosity: why are you here rather than Shrewsthorpe?"

There was a palpably uncomfortable gap before Snape retorted, "What?"

Harry shrugged. "I mean, this isn't really much of a holiday cottage. What's wrong with your house?"

Snape sounded oddly disturbed as he cautiously answered, "It is much easier to layer barriers here than in the middle of an occupied village. How did you get through them by the way?"

Harry ignored the question. A creaking bookshelf swinging inward drew his attention that way and Harry flicked his wand into his hand as Peter Pettigrew came into view, ducking low to see into the ground floor from a hidden staircase. Poisonous anger filled Harry. "Get out of my sight," Harry snarled, aiming his wand and gripping it as though to crush the wood of it. "Go!" he insisted when Pettigrew merely froze in shock. "Or I'll finish the job I stupidly stopped Sirius from doing and it will be long and excruciating as befitting a bloody traitor like you!" Harry's anger surprised himself and Pettigrew, apparently sensing his unbalancing of Harry, retreated back up the stairs with a squeak of fear.

The hidden door swung closed with a thud. Harry lowered his wand and paced, thinking fiercely. Where is this where Pettigrew is still alive? Reluctantly, he closed his eyes on the current sight of the ghostly etched glass of the potion bottles crammed tight on the shelf before him and let himself drift. The dark stain of evil that reached its fingers under his lowered guard made him jerk. Voldemort. Great effing Merlin, Harry thought. It's him. Not a pale shadow of him, but full force, followers free, will-not-die him. Harry opened his eyes and turned to his unexpected host, who was giving him a penetrating stare in return. "Well," Harry breathed, sounding stunned.

"Problem?" Snape sneered.

"Pretend I know nothing and catch me up with what's been happening."

Snape managed to appear even more annoyed, which was no small trick. "Were you Obliviated, Potter? Or knocked silly?"

"In a sense," Harry said, recovering his earlier amiable manner mostly because it alarmed this Snape so thoroughly and he was willing to grasp for any shield under the circumstances.

"You truly wish me to fill you in?" Snape asked, disgust lining his words.

"Yeah, what is happening with Voldemort?" Harry asked and heard Snape flinch since it rustled his robes.

"DO NOT use his name in my presence. If you are foolish enough to use it around your little friends, that is your own stupidity. But. Not. Here." He looked as though he wanted to raise his wand but instead it vibrated at his side.

Harry shrugged and asked calmly, "All right, what is happening with the Dark Lord?"

"Suffice to say he is gaining in power, nearly unchecked at this point. It is unclear how he will be brought down given how much he has survived to date."

Harry considered that. "Haven't all the Horcruxes been found?" he asked, thinking that might explain things. Perhaps they were more powerful here.

Snape's head drifted downwards as though he might collapse before he turned and paced the very short distance to the grimy window. "That explains enormous amounts," he whispered. "Bloody hell."

Harry considered that his Snape hadn't known that either. "Why aren't you at Hogwarts?" he asked.

Snape turned such a disbelieving glare on him before raising his wand; although he didn't appear to have a spell prepared. "What the devil are you on about, Potter? You are at least aware Dumbledore is dead, correct?" he mocked. "You were certainly there when he died."

"Yeah," Harry retorted, losing his calm. "He went when he wanted to go. What's that got to do with it?"

Snape nearly dropped his wand his hand fell so fast. "You've finally figured that out?" he snidely asked.

Harry was thinking that perhaps he did not have it figured out at all. He held in a response. Instead he asked another question, "Why is Wormtail here with you?"

This really bothered him, more than mysterious differences about Dumbledore and almost more than Voldemort himself.

"I was assigned to look after him, an assignment that has lasted far too long. Lasts any longer and I'll kill him myself."

Harry laughed, which brought Snape's wand up to his point at his throat. "Who are you?" he demanded, voice low, head tilted predatorily.

Calmly, lifting his chin to keep the wand from hurting the soft flesh of his throat when he talked, Harry replied, "Harry Potter isn't the answer you're looking for, I assume."

Harry's scar throbbed and then seared. He closed his eyes to avoid giving this away and found seven more shadows hovering very, very close. "Were you expecting company?" Harry asked.

"Not you, certainly," Snape replied smoothly, greasily.

"No, I mean other Death Eaters. Seven of them, besides the two of you, just arrived in the village."

Snape's alarm was clear, even as it bounced between Harry's strange knowledge and the prospect that he was correct. Snape paced the floor, tossing a barrier status spell in each direction. A knock sounded on the door. Harry backed into the corner beside the door, wand at ready.

"Who is it?" Snape asked.

"Bella, Severus dear."

Harry gagged at the honey-covered tone. The door was opened with the queer fake gallantry Snape employed when he truly disliked the visitor. "And to what do I owe this visit?" he asked with impressive casualness as he moved to the far side of the room. "Tea?"

"No, I think not." She held her wand up, aimed at him.

Snape turned from the tea set and considered her. "And this is for?" he asked with an innocent lilt.

"Being a traitor, Severus," she said with disturbed pleasure. "Our Lord has gifted me with the honor of making you pay dearly."

"Don't be ridiculous. The Dark Lord would never-" But his words were cut off as he grabbed his arm as though his mark burned. He recovered his composure with

effort, clearly suffering. He did not release his arm but clung to it as though it were deadwood and he a drowning man.

Bellatrix spoke before him. “I just finished with Mungdungus, Severus. He was a weak soul, so not equal to my skills.“ She purred, ”You are.”

Snape was suddenly on his knees and Harry at first believed Bellatrix had hit him with something but she said, “We altered your barriers, Severus. You aren’t going anywhere except your own personal hell.”

Harry, scar searing as he had never remembered it doing, leapt across the room just as the door, rickety as it was, dissolved in a sparkling spell and a whoosh. Harry jumped a low table and landed in a crouch at Snape’s side. Snape was just putting his foot flat to stand again. Harry took him by the wrist, looked over his shoulder into the red, fiery eyes of Voldemort – who in that instant stood fixed by surprise in the doorway – and dropped both of them through the floor. If the vampire had not dragged Harry along through the interstice, Harry would not have been prepared for how much force it took to pull another along. He may have tragically let go, assuming he would have killed his companion on the way.

Harry did not have a destination in mind so when they landed in the grey dirt of the underworld, he paused to regroup. Instantly, creatures scrambled over the rough ground in their direction. Harry still had Snape’s wrist in hand and Snape, who looked about himself in consternation, did not seem to notice.

“Where is this?” he asked quietly, forced to shirk away from the snapping maw of a half giant ant, half weasel.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Harry said. “I just have to figure out where we are go-”

He was interrupted by the old werewolf charging at them from around a large hillock. Harry leaned toward the monster and stared him down, making him bay and grovel between snarls. Snape tried to retreat the other way, tugging on Harry’s grip. Harry turned and snarled in his direction, “Don’t fight me! They’ll eat you alive.”

Snape froze and glared at Harry before glancing around them at the myriad distorted creatures clambering over one another, salivating at him. He stopped resisting with a fatalistic drop of his shoulders. Harry thought of where he could take them and Apparated them both to another spot inside the Dark Plane before dropping them both through the ground and, after a long struggle for Harry to get his companion through, into the green-meadowed sunlight. Harry released his hold on Snape and

immediately closed his eyes. He was relieved this time to find Voldemort and many, many shadows hovering in the middle distance of his mind. That meant he had not mistakenly transported this Snape back to where Harry himself belonged.

Snape was shaking his robes out. "This is an improvement. Where are we now?" he asked in a tone that conveyed an almost subservient attitude.

"The reserve about twenty miles north of Shrewsthorpe," Harry explained. He had settled on arriving in the area the witches used because it was open and he didn't want to arrive into a trap, and given the witches regular use of devices here, he expected it connected well to the Dark Plane. He looked the worn Snape up and down. His hair was indescribably filthy, and his face were sunken as though from long term stress and poor eating.

"We should get you some dinner," Harry suggested, eliciting a look of disbelief. It didn't fade right away, so Harry added, "And I can try to explain."

While Snape stared into the distance as though plotting, Harry considered that unlike a time turner, he could not damage things here; he had not moved through time, only through possibility. Somewhere in the past there had been a forking of events and this place was the alternative outcome. He hoped to Merlin that he COULD get home again.

"I know an Inn in Wolverbury. It is just a little north," Snape said. And when Harry willingly offered an arm, Snape shook his head and grasped it. They arrived between a tall old car grill and a brick wall. A rusty abandoned car faced them down, tilted on its broken suspension. They walked around it and inside where only one customer sat hunched at the bar. The barman gave them a narrow-eyed look, especially Snape.

"Which o'ya is payin'?" he asked doubtfully.

Harry reached into his robe pocket and held up the twenty pound notes, which spurred the man to gesture at a table. He and Snape sat to face each other beside a cracked and taped stained glass window.

"Beers?" the barman shouted. Harry shook his head, but Snape gestured that he would have one.

"What do you want to eat?" Harry asked. "I'm buying."

Snape shook his head lightly and appeared to consider Disapparating. When the drink was plunked onto the bar, Harry picked it up and ordered a plowman's platter. With another distasteful glance at the two of them, the barman stalked into the back without a word.

Snape sucked down the top quarter of his beer as though it were the elixir of life. Harry began, "I'm not in the right place."

"I was beginning to suspect that," Snape said. "You are too gently confident, for one thing, rather than obnoxiously heedless, and you have rather unexpected powers." He turned his mug around once, leaving wet rings on the rough wood of the table. "So, where do you belong?"

"Somewhere else," Harry stated vaguely.

"Somewhere where you do not try to kill me on sight," Snape said with forced pleasantness.

"Correct," Harry said. Banging from the kitchen gave him a chance to think. "I'm not sure what to do. Just go home . . . I've interfered already. But I don't think it matters." At Snape's odd expression, Harry quickly amended with: "Well, it matters that I saved your life, but you may have managed to get away on your own if I hadn't been distracting you."

Snape rubbed his forearm and flinched as though suffering a strong stab of pain on top of unending agony. Harry felt badly for him but did not express this, knowing it would not be accepted.

It wasn't until the platter was empty that Snape spoke again. "That place you took us to get us out of Weaver's End . . . I have read about such a place. Perrodrick, an insane wizard in the six hundreds, claimed there was a magical pathway to the underworld."

"The Dark Plane," Harry clarified. "I've never taken anyone through it before. Got dragged through it myself recently. But I didn't see any choice but to try. It was risky. I'm glad you came through all right."

Snidely, Snape asked, "Do you go there often?"

"It gets me under barriers, as you saw."

Snape's brows rose at the possibilities of that. He sipped at the last inch of his beer as though to drag it out. "Dark Lord gone where you come from?"

"Not exactly. But neutralized."

"Are you the one who did the neutralizing?"

Harry nodded.

Snape fell thoughtful and brushed his hair back, which was hopeless given its condition. "And you are one of the Horcruxes?"

"Yes. That's why the Dark Lord is still around. I can't bring myself to really finish the job."

Snape snorted lightly and tilted his beer to better examine it. "Understandable."

He looked utterly worn down and on the verge of self-destruction. Harry pulled out and pushed the folded stack of pounds over to him. "Take it."

Snape left it in the middle of the table. "It only delays the inevitable. Everything is doom."

"No," Harry snapped sharply. "You of all people cannot give up. Not after all this time."

Snape rubbed his eyes and held his fingers pressed over his face. "I believe I am hallucinating you."

Harry jerked one of Snape's hands down when they remained for more than a minute. "I can tell you what needs to happen. Believe me, I know."

Snape put his hands down flat on the table and stared at Harry. "Go ahead. Hallucination or not, this may be helpful."

"You have to get your Harry Potter to forgive you. Volde- The Dark Lord owns him until you do."

Snape's face twisted downward into a kind of mad tragic humor. "Impossible."

"No, it's not," Harry insisted. "You're the key to all of this and all you've been doing is hiding out."

Snape grew angry, which gave Harry hope. "That is not 'all I have been doing'. I have been passing messages in secret to the Order through the one person who still trusted me."

"Mundungus?"

Snape nodded grimly.

Harry pushed the money closer to him. "Take it. I'd give you more if I had it."

Snape raised a slim, almost skeletal hand and did so. "And as for you . . . you are just going to pop on home?" he sarcastically asked.

Harry grew uncertain. "I'm going to give it a good try. It was an accident coming here, one I'll have to reverse." Harry stood, prepared to depart if only to relieve his

own chest-clenching fear about whether he was trapped here. He said firmly, "He's capable of forgiving you. You just have to be patient."

"That is the one thing I possess zero of with him."

"Try, Severus," Harry heard himself pleading, caring even though he did not wish to. "It's the only way."

When Harry moved to leave, Snape restrained him with a claw-like grip on his arm. "Prove you are not a hallucination by telling me what magic changed your eyes so."

Harry relaxed his arm against the bones crushing it. "I turned the Dark Lord into a Muggle. I carved his magic out of him so he'd be harmless."

Snape's grip did not ease. "I don't think the Potter I know can do that."

"He'll think of something else," Harry assured him. "He's clever under pressure." Snape's grip released suddenly and he turned back to his empty mug as though expecting Harry to depart. Harry added in a low voice, "If he feels hatred when he faces the Dark Lord, he is doomed."

Snape's gaze did not come back to him, so Harry departed.

Back in the Dark Plane, Harry walked a bit, paying far more attention than before to what was around him. When he was back to the familiar area opposing his house, he stopped, certain if he inverted he would not find home. He did so anyway and indeed he arrived in a dusty grim house where the smashed windows were boarded up and the burned balcony had not been repaired but had been left to rot and dangle halfway to the ground floor. The hall floor rug underfoot had been chewed by mice down to a ragged triangle. Harry's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he let them follow up the stairs and around to where his room was, or would be if he were in another place.

Harry had to get to that other place or die trying.

Returning to the even mustier Dark Plane, Harry rehearsed what had happened last time. He had a gut feeling that it was not the interaction with the metal, but the falling sideways that had done it.

Harry dropped his shoulders and bolstered himself. The house was below him, above him. His house. It was there, waiting. The thought of never returning brought his heart rate up and keened his senses nearly to overload.

Harry chewed his lip and remembered long ago when Snape had tested him by standing him in an active pentagram device. It was dark magic because it thinned the

barrier between the living world and the underworld. Harry had envisioned a hundred successive floors and ground in that spot. Snape had suggested that Harry was seeing temporally, but Harry now realized it was dimensionally. If he could see it that easily, he should be able to find his way. This thought calmed him considerably.

Harry stepped back and looked around himself. Dragging his foot in the grey dust, he drew a pentagram as tall as himself and then stood staring at it. The grass on a nearby hillock rustled as something crawled by. There was no howling in the distance. A deathly silence ruled after the furtive creature moved on.

Harry had to get home but he had no knowledge of pentagrams and the magic surrounding them. If he could activate this one, maybe it would be easier, he thought, but he knew nothing about how to do that. It made him recognize the gaping hole in his knowledge, one he had preferred until this moment.

"Some dark wizard hunter I am," Harry wryly muttered. "I don't even know how the most basic dark wizardry works."

He stepped into the center of the dry pentagram but felt no vibration of power. He imagined what he had felt that day in the storage room and tried to impose it on this one. He closed his eyes and imagined home. He imagined the opposite of the house he had just visited: one bright with light, freshly redecorated, with voices, movement, and grave concern for him should he never return. Home.

With that place, that plane, firmly fixed in his mind, Harry toppled sideways and at the last second fell through ground.

The excruciating slip between planes was the same as last time. Harry was flattened between icy walls that crushed absolute cold into his body. He was folded and mangled until he was certain the life had been wrung from heart and his bones reduced to rubble.

Harry landed hard on a freshly polished wood floor, shaking violently with cold. Adrenalin propelled his unwilling limbs to seek heat. It was a grey rainy day here and the crackle of a fire drew him like a moth to the drawing room. Scrambling clumsily on senseless hands and knees, Harry approached the salvation of the fire, and fell, striking his head on the andiron inside the hearth.

NEXT: Chapter 7

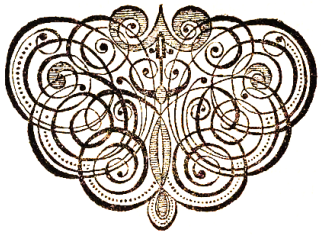
Harry raised his head and found Snape's concerned gaze. "What happened?" Harry asked him.

"That's what I was going to ask you," Snape said, sounding angry with a hint of distraught.

"Oh," Harry said, again restrained from rubbing the bump on his head and this time the Healer added an admonishing slap on the hand. Harry insisted upon sitting up and no one stopped him from doing so. The drawing room was not the location he thought he should be in, but that did not mean he knew where he expected to be.

Author's Notes: Most likely ten days again before chapter 7. Life is crazy.

Chapter 7.



Edge of a Dream

Candide came running when called and found Snape unceremoniously tugging an unconscious Harry to the center of the drawing room floor.

"Get a Healer, quickly," he said, spritzing Harry's head with a water charm. The noxious scent of burned hair tainted the room.

Candide closed her mouth on the question she was about to ask and ran out. When she returned, Snape was gripping each of Harry's hands in turn.

"He is frozen nearly stiff, what the devil was he doing?" Snape aimed a heating charm at Harry's chest, but the yellow-orange spell wavered with a buzzing sound and burst before it could reach him.

"What was that?" Candide asked breathlessly.

Snape rubbed his hair back, long fingers clenching. "I do not know. Get a blanket. A heavy one. We'll charm that instead to warm or he will likely freeze to death."

Harry roused to wakefulness from deep within a cocoon of heavenly warm, but scratchy, blanket. The first sight he had was of an out-of-context familiar face in pale blue robes.

"Didn't you used to play Beater?" Harry asked the Healerwitch.

"Yup. That's why I know that someone thought your head was a Bludger."

Harry tried to rub his aching head but was stopped from doing so. "That why it hurts so bad?"

"He'll be fine. His core temp is normal now," the witch said to someone else in the room.

Harry raised his head and found Snape's concerned gaze. "What happened?" Harry asked him.

"That's what I was going to ask you," Snape said, sounding angry with a hint of distraught.

"Oh," Harry said, again restrained from rubbing the bump on his head and this time the Healer added an admonishing slap on the hand. Harry insisted upon sitting up and no one stopped him from doing so, but his head tried. The drawing room was not the location he thought he should be in, but that did not mean he did know where he expected to be.

The Healer departed after final instructions were given and Harry finally got to feel how bad the bump was. It felt like his skull was trying to grow a spike out of it, or a horn. "Ow."

Snape leaned close and looked him hard in the eyes. "You do not remember what happened? You were nearly frozen when you crawled in here. What spell were you attempting?"

Harry rubbed the rest of his head as he thought about that, glad to find it unharmed otherwise. "I wasn't doing any spells. I don't know what happened."

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed in disgust.

"Sorry," Harry said, wincing as his head pounded momentarily, in rhythm with his heartbeat.

Harry was kept home from training the next day, and he wandered the house like a caged animal. He still had not talked to Tonks, but today he felt embarrassed about having followed her while she was on duty and very grateful that she had not told anyone. Well, he expected that he would have received a visit and a good talking to by Rodgers or an owl from Mr. Weasley had they been informed. Harry wandered into the drawing room, badly in need of a distraction and wishing he were at the Ministry.

Candide, before rushing to the office, had delivered Elizabeth's wand, the now-vaguely-dreaded object that had started his argument with Tonks, so Harry had nothing to do.

Chapter 7

"I thought you had things to take care of at Hogwarts?" Harry asked his guardian.

Snape looked up from the musty old book he had open and said, "Remus offered to do them."

"You're staying home to babysit me," Harry accused grumpily.

"If you wish to drop the façade, then yes," Snape stated.

Harry rolled his eyes and tapped his toe against the doorframe in frustration. "Want to practice some spells with me?"

"No."

"I'm not hurt really. Why not?"

"My ego cannot take the hit at this time," Snape stated, returning to his reading.

"Hmf," Harry muttered, inclined to belief because of the unlikelihood that Snape would offer that as a diversionary excuse. Harry dropped into one of the other chairs in the room and propped his chin on his palms. His bored mind flittered from one thing to another restlessly, but it kept coming back around to an incongruous vision of Snape answering the door to let Bellatrix Lestrange in. No meaning could be attached to this memory.

"I had the strangest dream last night," Harry said, excusing the vision the only way he could. Snape was not one to prompt and he did not do so now. Harry went on, "I was trying to protect you from Bellatrix . . . and Voldemort too." Harry rubbed his eyes and tightened his shoulders at the memory of Voldemort's poisonous and unyielding power snaking into his inner vision. He wished his dreams would not chose to torment him so; he had had more than enough of the evil wizard and dearly wished to be left alone by memories or imaginings of him.

"I assume they are both still incarcerated," Snape said levelly as though to reassure Harry.

"It wasn't Lockhart. It was the real thing."

Snape sat straight and steepled his hands over the book. "You think this dream means something more than that you still have stressful events involving him that you need to recover from."

"I don't know," Harry said. "I certainly don't feel Voldemort now. I could in the dream."

"Was there anything in your dream not reminiscent of recent events?"

Harry sat back and said, "You were in this strange house and . . . you didn't know who I was. Well, that's not quite true. You kept expecting me to try and attack you. And you said something about Dumbledore and how long it took me to understand that he had died when he wanted to." Harry shook his head and let those thoughts repeat themselves. "I've accepted that," he added, slightly defensive.

Snape paused before suggesting, "Maybe you have not truly."

Harry sighed. "I still miss him. Maybe I haven't completely accepted it."

Snape moved as though to return to his reading. "Dreams are just the subconscious working things out when the conscious is out of the way and cannot prevent it from doing so."

Harry smiled lightly. "So what does it mean that I found you living in a hovel in a half-abandoned town. Interpret that for me," he challenged, teasing. "You called it 'Weaver's End'."

Snape froze. "What?"

"What does it mean-"

"I heard you the first time," he snapped.

Harry shut up while Snape stood and paced once, disturbing the rug as he passed the corner of it. Impatient, Harry finally asked, "There is such a place?"

"Yes. I have an old hideout there."

Harry's stomach clenched faintly. "You do?"

Snape considered Harry. "I have not been there in rather a long time." After thinking longer, he gestured for Harry to stand, Accioed their cloaks, and said, "Come, let's pay a visit and see if it is the place you dreamed. We can then add clairvoyant to your already long list of skills."

Harry hooked on his cloak but held back on raising his arm to be Apparated. "I don't want to be clairvoyant."

"Wise young man. Take out your wand, just in case. And give me your arm."

Before Harry could protest further, they arrived at the edge of a ramshackle village. An old mill works leaned above the trees, ready to fall into a heap of bleached wood and rotting mortar. Snape led the way, tossing detection spells to each side every now and then.

Chapter 7

Harry swished to a stop in the long grass when the familiar little house came into view.

Snape turned when he realized Harry no longer followed. "This is the place?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "It was in slightly better shape," he observed of the tenuously leaning walls and nearly hammock-like, sagging roof. "Not tough for that to be true."

Snape circled the house once before pushing open the door. Harry, gut heavy, followed. The bookshelves were empty and the furniture had been consumed by rodents, but it was the same.

Harry pointed and said, "The bookshelf there is a secret passage up," making Snape spin on his heel to stare at him again.

Snape strode that way and had to forcibly pry the hidden doorway open. Harry said, "Peter Pettigrew came down that way."

"Pettigrew?" Snape confirmed. "Hm, I was sometimes put in charge of him since he feared me enough to behave for a few hours at a time."

Harry's teeth tightened together as thought about his dad's old 'friend'. He stepped around the small house, finding no evidence of a major fight. "Maybe it wasn't a dream," Harry said, wanting to understand. "Voldemort vaporized the door, but it's intact. One of the few things that is."

"I am at a loss to explain," Snape said. "I am certain I have never mentioned this place to you or anyone in the Order. Anything else from the dream that you remember?"

Harry shook his head, but then said, "I think I took you to a pub for something to eat. You were in really poor shape." After looking Snape over, Harry said, "In contrast, you are getting a tad plump, there, Severus; I now notice."

Snape feigned insult. Harry shook his head again and winced when he forgot about the bump before rubbing it. "So, if I am clairvoyant then I would be seeing the future, but that doesn't make any sense. You would know me better than you did in the dream." Harry steered his thoughts away from an incident just recently when he threatened to attack Snape over the revelation about the prophecy that killed his parents. He could not bear to imagine the level of betrayal necessary for him to reach that state permanently.

"I don't know what to say, Harry. Perhaps you unknowingly captured memories of this place from me using Legilimency."

Harry grabbed hold of that, feeling great relief at a rational explanation. His voice came out slightly desperate. "That could be it. I hope that's it."

Snape approached and said, "You seem to be in need of a chocolate ice cream."

Harry was not finished, though and said, "I don't want to be clairvoyant. I don't want any more prophecies. I certainly don't want to be making them, let alone living them."

"Like I said," Snape said, taking Harry's upper arm with authority. "Chocolate ice cream is definitely in order."

Minutes later they were sitting in a small shop with Harry facing an opposing bowl containing three oversized and gloopy scoops, armed only with a spoon. His eating slowed periodically as his thoughts wandered.

"You are dwelling. Stop it," Snape admonished.

Harry laughed lightly. "I was thinking that the dream was my subconscious reminding me how far we've come."

"Hm," was Snape's only reply.

"I certainly wouldn't want that version of you around the house, jumpy, wand out all the time." Harry ended up grinning.

"Finish your ice cream."

The next day, Harry was relieved to return to training, until the third time he had to explain what had happened to necessitate a day off. Lamely, Harry replied, this time to Rogan, "I'm not certain. I hit my head and I don't remember exactly."

Even Rogan, the lowest-ranking Auror and on probation to boot, gave him a doubtful noise in reply to this. Harry wondered what the response would be if he failed to edit his explanation to include the hallucinatory Scrying. The only upbeat part of his day came at lunchtime when Tonks pulled him aside. She appeared chastised, which made Harry hopeful.

"What'd you do to yourself?" she asked, concerned.

Harry tugged off his glasses to rub his eyes. "I wish I could answer that. I don't know. I was angry at . . . angry that I couldn't argue with you properly."

Her next question knocked him back a bit. "You carry an invisibility cloak with you all the time?"

Harry hesitated answering, not understanding why she asked that. She went on. "I mean, I know you own one, but I never saw you using it around the Ministry before now. I'm sure Rodgers told you it's preferred that you not use one as a trainee. Makes you sloppy. You need to practice and re-practice your other stealth techniques."

For lack of a better response, Harry said, "I don't use it for field work."

"That's fine then," she said, patting him on the arm. "You disappeared on me, and it wasn't clear how."

Harry understood then. He had unwisely slipped away from her without a sound and she had come up with the best possible explanation for that. Harry felt worn down by his necessary deceptions with her. But there were more important things to work out. "Do you have time to talk this evening?"

Equally stilted and nervous as he, she said, "Yeah. I'll come over to your place when I'm through here."

Harry felt formal around her all of a sudden. "I have to scare up lunch," he said, gesturing in the direction of the break room.

"Go on," she said, sounding friendly but also formally stiff.

That evening when Tonks appeared with a bang! Harry stood from the table where they had been lingering after the meal and excused himself. He expected a piercing glance from Snape, but Snape remained fixated on the drink he held in his fingers as Harry passed him.

"Let's go out for a walk," Harry said, collecting his cloak with the expectation that Tonks would follow, and she did.

They stepped out into the late evening light that barely reached over the wall of the garden. Tonks asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry said.

"I heard that Severus brought in a Healer for you."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry repeated, bristling at her concern, even as another part of his mind told him it was a good sign.

On the road, Harry immediately said the thing he most dearly wanted to get off his chest. "I'm sorry I followed you. Thanks for not reporting it."

Voice normal and chummy all of a sudden, Tonks said, "I figure you won't do it again, so there's no reason to get Arthur or Reggie involved."

"I wasn't . . . I shouldn't have done it," Harry said, face flushing. The low light hid this, he assumed with relief. He sighed, feeling pained all over again. "I just couldn't believe you didn't trust me."

Tonks hesitated responding. Their fast pace brought them to the edge of the village where they stopped. Harry sat on the top rail of a stout gate that led to a fenced field, which had been left to grow waist-high, ungrazed. The last of the orange sunlight just brushed the tops of the dark green plants. Tonks sat on the other half of the gate and swung it back and forth.

"It's not that I don't trust you, it just hurts to think other women get to do things with you that I don't. Really, it's other women I don't trust. You're famous and everyone wants to be with you."

Harry puzzled that. "But that still means you must not trust me."

"Well . . . maybe, but I wasn't thinking of it that way."

Harry swung his side of the gate, making the hinge rumble. "I didn't mean to make you jealous. You're on duty all of the time. I'd take you out on the motorbike whenever you wanted . . ."

"Yeah," Tonks dully acknowledged. She sighed into the evening air. A breeze rustled the leaves of the trees and made the tall grass bow around their feet. "That's the way it goes every time," she said quietly. "I don't have enough time and they find someone else who does."

Harry frowned, feeling for her. "I'd like to think I wouldn't do that to you."

Still dull sounding, she said, "I'd like to think that too, but it always happens."

"I don't plan to have it happen. I understand why you're always busy." Harry wished he could confess his other powers to her, just to square things with his own conscience, but he held back. "Want to go for a ride right now?"

She smiled and laughed lightly. "I have a broomstick if I feel like flying around. It wasn't really the ride, per se." She sighed again. "Just that you weren't giving rides to someone cute and in need of rescue."

Chapter 7

Harry stood as a car roared by, much too fast for the small road. He stepped over to Tonks, gave her a hand standing up, and immediately pulled her close. Lights came on in the house adjacent to the field. A door banged and young voices could be heard calling out playfully.

Tonks felt lithe within his arms against his front, but he knew her seemingly delicate body held magic sufficient for an Auror and skills a chameleon could only dream of. Harry said, "What I like about you is that you don't need rescue. The one time I tried to come rescue you, I needed to be rescued. I've learned my lesson about that."

Sounding professionally concerned, she said, "You don't remember what you did two days ago, between leaving me and going home?"

Harry shook his head and tightened his hold on her. "I had an odd dream." He laughed lightly at admitting that was possibly what had done him in.

"It didn't involve Voldemort, did it?"

"Well, yes," Harry reluctantly replied. "I think I was just reliving recent events. In the dream I was trying to save Severus from him. I don't think it means anything."

She huffed worrisomely. "I hope you're right that it's nothing. I don't like worrying something bad happened to you that you don't remember." Harry felt her paw around in her pocket suddenly and knew what that meant. He let her go. She used a Lumos to read the slate board. "I haveta run."

"Any chance you need me?" Harry had to ask.

It was her turn to laugh lightly. "I'll be certain to let you know if we do." Then she was gone.

Harry waited for a string of cars to roll by. They accelerated one by one out of the nearby turn. The village fell placidly quiet with their passing. Harry took a step towards home and stopped. That old familiar tingle of being watched had returned.

Harry bit his lip and glanced to each side, but saw nothing. "You again?" he asked aloud and with grave confidence that he was correct.

After a moment, a figure emerged from under a cloak and Alastor Moody was eyeing Harry with grudging appreciation. In the dim light, his scarred face had an unusual swarthiness and he moved with unusual speed as he approached.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked. "The Canaries?"

Moody snorted. "Somewhere no one would know me, so farther away than that." He hobbled faintly over to Harry. "Getting along all right without me, I see."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Harry asked, trying not to sound rude just yet.

Moody strode in a circle around Harry, footsteps crunching in the gravel. "You don't think you owe me?"

Harry crossed his arms, trying for haughty. "For what, pray tell?"

"You still think you managed a block with a borrowed wand good enough for an explosion that took out half a click of earth?"

Harry froze, remembering the panicked moments when Vineet struck the spelling vessels to destroy Merton's cohort, Svaha. "You were there?" Harry asked.

Moody snorted again.

"Well . . . thanks," Harry said, not ungrateful.

"I'd give you a two out of five for how you handled that situation with the Indian husband and wife team," Moody grumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes and noticed for the first time that Moody's footsteps sounded oddly even. He no longer wore a peg leg. "Whose leg did you steal?" Harry asked.

The footsteps stopped. "I did a few favors for a Vodou priest in Haiti and he arranged the leg in return." Moody stared down at his foot while lifting it for examination in the gathering twilight. "Don't know whose leg it was before . . ."

Harry stared at him and decided to change the subject. "So, are you going to be following me around again?" he demanded.

"Miss me, Potter?"

"Hardly."

"I'll be around," Moody ambiguously replied. "I have other things to keep an eye on," he replied grimly. "Seems you've been behaving yourself. Keep it up and you'll see less of me."

Suspicious, Harry asked, "Know anything about a giant sea urchin?"

"Why, didya lose one?"

He did not sound to Harry as though he were deflecting the question dishonestly. "No. I was given one unexpectedly."

Moody strode away, saying over his shoulder before flipping his invisibility cloak back on, which made less difference in the gloom, "I never went in the water at the beach; I don't know anything about sea life."

Harry mostly believed him, although his trust in the man was limited. Harry found a parting insult on his tongue, but taunting the old Auror was not wise if he wanted to be left alone.

When he reached the house, Harry found the energy he had stoppered up to keep his calm around Moody now demanded release and doing his readings would not suffice to burn it up. Snape still sat at the dining room table across from Candide. Harry pleaded, "Would you do some drills with me?"

Snape asked, "You do not get enough practice at the Ministry?" But he stood directly after speaking. "Drills I can handle," he said to Harry's questioning face.

"Oh, good."

Candide strolled in while the furniture hovered a foot off the floor during its journey to the wall. Harry lowered his wand from moving the lamps to the corner, remembering the sagging balcony in his dream with a spasm of distress.

"What is the matter?" Snape asked.

Harry did not want to explain in front of Candide, so he shook his head and raised his wand for drilling.

They did several sequences of Hogwarts-level spells and Candide, losing interest in the repetition, wandered back to the dining room before Harry said, "I want to try something. Can you use a nastier curse like a . . . er, something that won't hurt too bad . . . "

"Something that won't hurt you too badly?" Snape asked, lowering his wand.

"No, you. How about a Sponge Knees?"

Harry held his wand at his side and waited. Despite appearing doubtful, Snape raised his wand. Harry felt the prickles from the curse as it generated, but he could not squash it like he had with Shacklebolt, and his knees went soft and he toppled to the floor.

"Drat!" Harry said, trying to push himself up, despite it being impossible to put his legs under himself.

Snape strode over and neutralized the curse. Harry got to his feet and untwisted his robes. "Huh, it didn't work."

"What did not work?"

"You remember that I . . . that when Goyle tried to use a Killing Curse on me, I was able to block it from forming and it exploded inside of him instead of casting.

Well, that worked the other day again when Shacklebolt cursed me and I only had the Ministry wand and I could feel this awful curse coming. I crushed it back into the earth and it hit him instead."

Snape tapped his wand against his robes. "What was the curse?"

"An Imperious."

"You can feel any curse, correct? But you cannot block them all."

"Shacklebolt's felt worse than ordinary."

"Of course it did, it was an Unforgiveable."

Harry raised his chin to stare at him in surprise. "It only works with Unforgiveables you think? Can you try tossing one at me?"

Snape stared back at him. The wand in his hand had fallen still. "There is only one I can use on you." He turned and took a few steps away but it did not raise his wand. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Something intangible passed between them, an unspoken acknowledgment of trust. Harry relaxed, but said, "Cast it slowly so I have a chance to feel it."

Snape nodded and raised his wand. Harry felt the spell, odious and tainted, as it ballooned from the floor. He had lots of time to notice that black, sickly tendrils hovered at the periphery.

"Stop," Harry commanded. He could squash the magic, he was certain and did not want it to strike Snape, nor did he want him to attracting those things. The spell faded and the room returned to its normal vaguely cheery self. Thoughtfully, Harry said, "Those spells really are different. I thought they were Unforgivable because of the effect they had, but the source of energy they draw on is inherently evil."

Snape stepped closer, studying Harry as he considered this revelation. When Harry remained silent, Snape offered, "One can make most any ordinary spell into an evil one through creative use. Just as one can use a knife for chopping stewing vegetables or stabbing someone in the heart. Unforgivable Curses have always been considered distinct and perhaps you are able to sense precisely why."

Harry said, "You're opening a conduit to the Dark Plane when you use one of those spells. That would make you very vulnerable if you didn't know how to protect yourself."

"It makes you vulnerable even if you do believe you know how to protect yourself," Snape stated sternly.

Harry heard a parental correction in that. "I don't plan on making it a habit to use them, if that is what you mean."

"That is what I mean."

"They feel terrible," Harry said. "Sickly, rancid . . . I don't know how to describe it."

"Like death?" Snape suggested, with lightness used perhaps as a shield.

Harry shook his head and stashed his wand away. "No. Death is neutral." Harry remembered feeling Munz slip away as he asserted this. "This is something else. Something worse than death."

Snape dropped his voice. "One of the reasons I would much prefer if you left the Dark Plane alone."

Harry said, "Once you're there, it isn't so bad." To Snape's dubious brow, Harry explained, "It's as though the mixing of our world and the Plane is the actual trouble. Although the creatures there are not so pleasant; it's true. But they behave."

Snape shook his head but gave up the immediate debate.

The next day Harry came home from training and found Candide alone in the dining room. For once she did not have some kind of fabric, parchment, flower, or scent samples piled around her. Instead, a scrolled list of names bordered by Xs and naughts occupied her placesetting accompanied by a stack of open letters. Harry settled into answering his own post, only taking stock of Snape's absence when this was completed.

"Severus working on his brewing again?" Harry asked.

Candide nodded. Harry could not detect if she was growing dismayed or intolerant of this behavior. If she wasn't, then Snape had chosen remarkably wisely. His own troubles with Tonks solved, Harry felt quite good about things in general, even looking forward to meeting Candide's parents.

Owl claws grated on the glass before slipping inside the open window and over to Harry's hand. Harry recognized the Peterson owl and eagerly took the letter it held. He told the owl to wait, but it took off again without so much as hoot and Harry assumed that Elizabeth told it to return quickly so its absence could go unnoticed.

Harry read the letter, relieved that Elizabeth sounded upbeat about keeping out of her father's path and avoiding provoking him. She expressed gratitude for the wand and hoped that she had given Harry enough money for it. Harry's blood went from pleasantly warm flowing to painfully icy upon reading that femininely cursived sentence. He had not seen the money she had given him in several days.

Shaking slightly, Harry went through his robe pockets, once, twice and then more carefully a third time.

"What did you lose?" Candide asked after watching him do this.

"A bit of money," Harry said, distressed.

"Do you need more spending money?" she asked pointedly. "You don't have to go without anything. Severus told me you were used to doing that . . ."

Harry stood, thinking to check his other robes upstairs, even though he was quite certain he currently wore the robes he had on in Gringotts the other day. He mentally walked through rushing back to the Ministry after going to his vault, but he was certain he had left the money in his pocket. The only other memory he had of it was sliding it across a sticky pub table to the rather shabby Snape in his dream. Maybe a pickpocket had taken it, Harry thought, with queer hope, although he thought it unlikely given how much cheek that would require of someone.

Candide's concern ratcheted up as she asked, "Harry, what's the matter? Was it a great deal of money?"

"No," Harry said, trying to dismiss her worry, but failing. "It's more complicated." He considered interrupting Snape's brewing to tell him about this, but sat down instead, not wanting to run to him until his thoughts calmed. Sighing, he finished reading Elizabeth's letter without really taking it in.

Candide prompted him again, and Harry distracted her by asking about the invitation list she was working at. She huffed a laugh as though not wanting to let go so easily. She said, "It's going well. Looks like around seventy people." She considered Harry before asking, "Severus asked if you would be Superlatus Wizard, right?"

"No. What's that?"

"Hasn't got around to it yet, apparently." She shook her head as she rolled up the invitation list. "Muggles refer to it as 'best man'."

"I'd like to be that," Harry said.

"I'm positive he wants you to. Just doesn't want to ask." She absentmindedly straightened the sliced envelopes stacked beside her. "He's a tough nut to crack."

"You managed though," Harry said with no little compliment. Fixed in his minds eye was the image of the dreary and desperate Snape from his vision. The missing pounds made the disturbing vision clearer. The contrast alarmed him.

"It was more me who needed to change than him, I think," Candide said, pulling Harry back with her voice.

"I know what you mean," Harry said after a space. Brightening slightly, he went back to the previous topic, "I've never been to a wizard wedding before. What happens at them?"

She waved his question off, "All the same things as a Muggle one, I'm sure."

Harry thought about that. "I've never been to one of those, either."

"Really?"

Harry felt vaguely annoyed at her surprise. Without meaning to, his hand felt around in his pocket again, seeking the missing pounds. His empty pocket echoed in his worried gut. He stood and said, "I'm going to see how Severus is doing."

Harry rapped softly on the spare room door, responded that it was just him when asked, and entered when told he could. Inside, the room had been rearranged. Fewer tubes bubbled and on the upturned door rested a row of black rocks with holes drilled in the top. Snape worked over one of these, dripping what appeared to be mercury into one of them as a spell hovered it in a tilted spinning orbit as though to coat the inside evenly. Harry took a seat on a stool well out of the way of the hiss of noxious steam and the scent of baking rock.

Hands clenched between his knees to hold tight the ungraspable, Harry watched Snape work, alarmed by the notion that somehow his dream had left behind yet more material proof of its reality. A yawning gap separated him from the will to speak his suspicions, since like a spell, speaking threatened to make them real.

Snape glanced at Harry, then away, and then sharply back again. "What is the trouble?" he asked.

Harry realized that he had been sitting there waiting to be prompted, childishly perhaps. "Er, the money I had in my pocket the other day . . . it's gone." Snape waited for more, so Harry added, "I remember giving it away in my dream . . . to you . . . and now it's gone. It was the pounds Elizabeth gave me for her wand. I had them in my pocket," he repeated, avoiding feeling around said with his hands for a fifth time.

Snape's gaze grew vaguely disturbed. Harry said, "I'd rather be prophetic than have my nightmares become reality. What if everything becomes a dream? How would I know what's real?"

Snape spoke lowly, "Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream. For the soul is dead that slumbers and things are not what they seem . . ."

"What's that?" Harry asked in alarm.

"A nineteenth century American wizard named Longfellow said that." Snape carefully placed the vial of mercury he held back in one of several crowded racks and crossed his arms. "You are not the first to worry about such things."

Harry's brow furrowed, unappeased. Snape plucked up a pointed chunk of uneven silvery metal between metal pinchers and held it over a flame. White snow flaked off as it burned and he collected it with a tin plate as it fluttered downward.

"What are you working on?" Harry asked, vaguely aggrieved.

"It is almost finished. You will see soon enough." Snape smiled faintly then. "I have succeeded though." He stated this with unusual lightness, which shook Harry out of his own worries.

"Succeeded at what?" Harry asked, peering at the mysterious porous rocks, some broken open, some wrapped tightly with metal wire, as if reinforced to keep them from exploding.

"You will see," Snape said, sounding distant.

Harry frowned. Now that he had unburdened himself he wanted more concern but by some infinitesimally small chance, had caught Snape in a buoyant mood. Snape placed the tin saucer on the stained door and waved the flame away with his wand before facing Harry again. "Suffice to say, you are not living a dream at this moment. Or we are all suffering one together if you are, but I cannot believe that true."

As unnaturally philosophical as that was coming from Snape, Harry resisted it and stated, "I'd rather be prophetic. I like things the way they are. I don't want them to change."

Snape's smiled faintly, but purely, again. "Satisfying to hear you say that." Stepping closer with a challenging swish of his robes, he asked, "Truly nothing you would change?"

Harry thought over the imminent wedding, for which Candide's broad concern well-covered any needed from him or Snape. He thought of his unclear notion of an

infant in the house. Even the dreaded dinner with the new in-laws felt dutifully acceptable. The past, however, still held stabs of regret. "I can't change the past," Harry admitted. "Everything else is good."

Snape made the unusual gesture of resting a hand on Harry's shoulder. It had the opposite effect from what was probably intended. It made it hard for Harry to take a breath. "What if I destroy all this. Without trying?"

Thoughtfully, Snape replied evenly, "Give us some credit, Harry. You are not the only one with power in this household." He fixed Harry with a level, unflinching gaze before releasing him and returning to his zinc and mercury.

The sky above Diagon Alley glared down with an unusually jewel-like blue as Harry walked toward Madam Malkin's. In his hand swung a sack containing his dress robes, still un-repaired after their last altercation with a public event. Even if they were serviceable, Harry thought them too formal for dinner at home and he had nothing besides his ordinary robes, which always seemed more worn than he remembered once he took a close look at them.

The shop was stifling in the heat, oppressive with new fabric scents. Even the bell chime on the door jangled mutedly in the robe-packed shop. Harry searched through a likely rack while the shopkeeper assisted someone else. Solid, bold colors dominated the robes in his size. Harry would have insisted before stepping in the store that he did not care what color robes he wore, but faced with saturated maroon and orange-brown, he realized differently.

The young shopkeeper bound over upon spotting him, pigtails bobbing along with her. "Can I help you find something?" she brightly asked.

Harry scratched his head. "Do you have anything in black?"

"What kind of event?"

Something about the way the scritching of hangers on metal across the shop stopped suddenly upon Harry's speaking, made him hold back on particulars. "Just a family dinner," he said, shrugging. He held out the sack with his damaged robes. "These need repair. And I need the robes for tonight."

She took the sack without peering into it and hovered it over her shoulder to the counter behind her. "Well, we have some greys . . ."

Harry tried to focus on the myriad robes held out for his inspection, but he could not keep his awareness away from the way the other customer happened to always remain out of sight when they moved about the shop.

The shopkeeper's voice was losing its perkiness without yet growing impatient as she held up a grey robe with light green decorative stitching. "The stitching would highlight your eyes . . ." she said in a practiced tone.

"I like that one," Harry said, dropping his shoulderbag to try them on.

Even before he had them pulled all the way over his head so he could see, she was leading him to the mirror. Harry tripped on the raised dais where he was supposed to stand for the fitting before stepping up onto it. He tugged the robes straight, while the shopclerk adjusted a curved, wall-mounted mirror to reflect the outside brightness on him. Harry had to agree that the light-colored stitching brought out his eyes. As he stared at his reflection, he wondered with a skip of his heart if his eyes had not become lighter still.

The shopkeeper prodded for a verdict, so he gave the robes a look. The spare and tasteful stitching evoked the right level of formality, he thought, without being stodgy. "They're good."

"Arms up, then," she ordered. "I need to pin them now for taking in if you want them tonight."

Harry held his arms out to the sides and waited while a tick tick sound emanated from taps of her wand along the side seams. The needles stiffened the fabric and pricked menacingly.

"So, important event?" the shopkeeper asked chattily.

"Just a family dinner," Harry said, squashing the urge to complain a bit about his new in-laws.

"That's all, really?" a new voice suggestively asked. Rita Skeeter, the source of the voice, slipped into view behind a tower of pastel pointed hats festooned with flowered ribbons.

Harry stiffened but sharp needlepoints bristled at him through his clothes, so he held still, arms tiring so that they drooped. "Almost finished?" Harry asked.

The shopkeeper was crouched, undoing the hem. "No, needs to be lengthened," she mumbled around the needles held between her lips. Harry sighed and held his arms up again. This at least removed the threat from the metal points in his armpits.

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Skeeter slipped her notebook out of her handbag and after stopping to examine her red nails flipped it open. "Come on, Harry, if you give me something of value, I'll go away and leave you alone. If you make me dig, you don't know what I might uncover."

Harry had no desire to help her. "Go ahead and dig, then."

She pondered him and scratched something down with a quill made of a feather the same blood red as her nails. The scratching aggravated Harry who wanted to know what she was writing. As though filling him in, she said, "Grey is such an appropriate color for you, isn't it?" With a glance up at Harry's fixed form, she returned to writing, commenting, "Those eyes of yours are heading for diamond, aren't they? Green must be out this year."

Harry weakly bit at his top lip wondering what magic he had done now to further that. Other related worries about his powers tumbled out behind that thought as though loosed from a gate. The shopkeeper was halfway around the hem with her pinning.

Skeeter pondered aloud, "There is a major family event coming up for you, I hear. I sadly did not receive an invitation. I do so love weddings. So what could be this evening that would make the most famous of wizards have to rush out for a new robe?"

Harry's stomach flipped at the notion of seeing his extended family issues spread out for all to see in the newspaper, right before the big event, which promised to be sufficiently complicated on its own. Bolstering himself with a dark look, that at least put a halt to her incessant scratching, Harry asked, "Why do you want me as an enemy?"

The question appeared to catch her off guard. Her nails were due again already for further inspection. She did this while saying, "Leaving aside that you are more profitable as an enemy, I personally don't buy the innocent routine. You spread it especially thick."

Harry's leaden arms had tilted lower again, garnering a rebuke from the shopkeeper. He sighed and raised his arms straight again, finding strength in the notion that she was almost finished. Pins glittered in a circle around his feet, brighter than the light green thread of the pattern along the hem.

"So your plan is to annoy me until I prove myself dark enough that it is safe only to leave me alone?" Harry asked Skeeter.

She closed her notebook and said soberly, "Oh, you've probably already done that." She turned while stashing her notebook away, and stepped out of the shop. The door squeaked closed with a jangle of the bell and the shopkeeper announced, "Done."

Harry dropped his arms in relief and got poked in the side for it. He had to raise his arms all the way up to have the robes safely hovered off him. She hung them on a rusty pipe behind the counter suspended from the ceiling by an even rustier chain. "I'll have them in an hour." She handed him a slip.

"That's fast."

She leaned forward and with a hand beside her mouth said, "My brother bought an elf so our mum could have nights off. He's really fast, the elf is, even if he doesn't speak much English, and not a stitch out of place." She waved at the otherwise empty pipe. "See, nothing waiting. We're going to go custom next month: bespoke robes while you wait and everything. That's why Rita was in here, to write an article." She accepted Harry's Galleons and gave him change, still chattering. "You should have told her all about your plans. She'd lap it up and then all your friends would get to read all about it. We were thrilled when she agreed to come do a piece on us."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Harry muttered.

Outside on the alley, the conversation with Skeeter still circled in Harry's mind as his eyes checked to make sure she was not around, in obvious human form. He was just considering heading home and coming back to fetch the robes rather than dragging Ron out of work early to keep him company when another voice stopped him short.

"Hello, Harry," Belinda said, appearing chipper in the fine weather, which startled him into uttering something unintelligible in response. "Would you do me a favor?" she asked.

He was so pleased to see her happier that he instantly said he would. She led the way down the Alley, explaining how the Minister needed a special, certain liquor for a visiting dignitary and the only shop that carried it was on Knockturn Alley and she hoped he would keep her company because it was more crowded that day than usual. Harry thought crowded better than empty from a safety perspective, but he agreed, knowing it would give him a chance to talk to her.

Her light footsteps floated her along Diagon Alley, Harry beside, until they reached the turn. Harry asked her how the Minister's office was treating her; the best small talk he could come up with in a hurry. She shrugged and gave a version of her standard answer about working too late every evening, but it being worth it.

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They ducked together under the crooked bay window that blocked part of the narrow entrance to the less-than-savory side alley to Diagon. The sun here fell on dusty wide-brimmed hats pulled low and hoods pulled far forward, leaving features in inky shadow. The scent of old smoke and bromide leached from the age-darkened walls. A group of witches slid aside grudgingly to let Harry and Belinda pass. The witches hum of conversation fell still, eyes tracking even though heads barely moved.

Harry fell silent too, needing to concentrate on watching the denizens of Knockturn observing them in return. Belinda continued to talk, until Harry said, "I'm glad to see you so upbeat."

Oddly, this set her lips into a purse and Harry regretted speaking. They neared the end of the alley. Cracked and aged signs hung lower here outside the shop doors, varnish darkened, obscuring the print. Belinda stopped before a newly painted sign depicting a curly eye surrounded by the words Cellar ObscurI.

Belinda pulled open the door, revealing not a shop but a long wooden staircase curving downward. A small lamp hinted at a landing somewhere in the depth. Harry stared down at the tiny light until his eyes adjusted and then around at the hunched and gritty old wizards and witches loitering near this end of the alley, slitted eyes slipping over to fix on him. A sharp glare at the closest renewed their walking.

The stairway appeared far more like a trap than a place of business, even if Harry's curse sense gave him only the usual distress of Knockturn Alley in general.

"How long will it take to buy the bottle?" Harry asked, torn between stepping into a trap and letting her step into one alone.

But her concerns had evaporated now that they had reached the shop. "Oh, just two minutes or so."

"If you aren't out in five, I'll come in after you," Harry stated, hand checking for his wand, obediently in his pocket where it was supposed to be.

Belinda laughed, believing he was joking, apparently. She slipped quickly down the steps while Harry held the door open to give her more light. After she had made the turn out of sight, Harry scanned around him and backed up to the far wall where he could keep watch on the whole alley and the shop. He noted the time on his watch and stood, waiting.

Hunched shoppers shuffled by, tattered robes dragging. Shop doors here did not have chimes but low foghorns, or even screams. Harry waited, thinking time must have run out, but a check of his watch repeatedly told otherwise.

When Belinda slipped out the shop door, sack-wrapped package tucked under her arm, Harry felt a bit silly about his worry.

"Thanks for waiting. Minister gives me these errands and its nice to have company."

"Where's Percy?" Harry asked. Forethought told him not to, but curiosity overruled.

"He wasn't around today. So I couldn't ask him to come with me," she added. "Normally, he would," she then added in a tone of defense.

Harry did not like Percy, but he did not want Belinda back. Sandwiched between those two zones, he could not find anything to say.

Belinda glanced at her own pocketwatch. "I'll Apparate back from here, if you don't mind. I hate to break the incoming rule, since our office wrote it, but we have no plans to regulate outgoing."

Harry barely nodded before she had gone with a last, "Thanks again." He stared momentarily at the shop door and the brand new sign. He turned to go and was run into by someone walking quickly and not watching where they were going.

Harry disentangled himself and said, "Candide?" in surprise at recognizing the person he helped right.

Flustered, she blurted, "Harry!" Then covered her mouth and said, "Oops, was I not supposed to give you away? Or, you're not in disguise are you?"

This all came flowing out so quickly, Harry needed a second to catch up. By the time, he did, she was tugging on his sleeve and moving down the alley.

"No, it's all right. What are you doing here?" Harry asked. Even with her head bowed, he could see her flush. On the return trip out, the alley's occupants moved aside more deliberately, eyeing Harry's companion and him alternately. Harry sent sharp Auror-eyed looks back. A particularly pointy-bearded, tall wizard standing in front of Best's Beastiary Provision seemed amused by this.

"I shouldn't have, I know, The boss was gone, so I slipped out," Candide said, sounding guilty. She took his arm in a tighter grip and whispered excitedly, "But I know what I'm having now."

Not understanding, Harry said, "What?"

"I went and asked Grisley–you know the old augerer–what I was having; you know a girl or a boy."

"Oh," Harry said. They were passing through the narrows leading to Diagon. Harry ducked so Candide would not have to. "So, what did she say?" he asked, suddenly intensely curious and jarringly on hold until he heard the answer.

Chapter 7

"It's a boy, she said," Candide recounted.

They stopped in the intersection of the two alleys, shoppers veered around them, packages rustling.

"That's excellent," Harry said, not sure what difference it really made, except that just knowing made a kind of major difference. He stared beyond her hair down Knockturn Alley and the robed figures skulking about there. "I'd not mind seeing Severus' reaction if you could hold off on telling him till I was there."

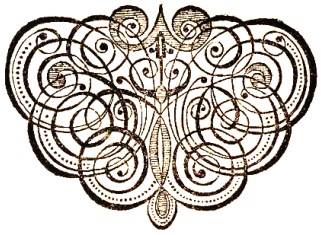
She smiled. "I'd like you to be there when I tell him, of course. But I have to get back to work for a bit, just in case the boss comes back." She moved off in a hurry after patting Harry on the arm.

Harry watched her negotiate the crowds to reach the door leading up to the accounting office. It swung closed and Harry felt strangely disconnected and unsure why that would be the case. The evening held the promise of even more interesting encounters and he now felt vague dread about it, even as he felt more determined to make things work with Snape and his new in-laws.

Shaking himself as a group of children passed, one of them turning back to wave excitedly at him, face aglow with recognition, Harry Disapparated for home.

> Author's Notes: The delay was due to my travelling around too much to write. If you follow my author link to my lj blog you can track what the heck is distracting me. It takes a lot to distract me from writing, but lately life has managed.
> Also, the misnaming of the village is intentional. Spinning is what one does to generate one story, but with this story I'm making a metaphor for fanfiction, and the multitude of stories that make it up, hence a weaving. Plus timelines are now seriously off from canon, so I can only peg it as close as I can to the books and the renaming is also an acknowledgment of that.

Chapter 8.



Trials

Grey robes just brushed the stone floor as they should, perfectly tailored. Harry gave himself one last check in the mirror inside the wardrobe door and shut it, consciously neatening the room despite not expecting the visiting in-laws to look into it.

Downstairs, Candide moved frantically about, straightening fresh candles in the tallest ornate holders on the dining room table, adjusting the silver and the napkins. She turned to Harry with the attitude that he was next in line for inspection.

She stopped. "You look good. New robes?"

"Yep."

Sounding doubtful it could be true, she asked, "Did you pick those out yourself?"

Harry grinned in the face of the implied insult. "Yes, I did manage to pick them out myself."

She pushed her styled and extra wavy hair around. Harry figured the comment had its genesis in stress, so he said: "It's all right. Really, the shop clerk suggested them."

Candide glanced at the simple little clock up on the shelf that had been moved from her flat. It was merely a varnished block of wood with four brass ticks in the cardinal positions. "Why did Severus have to go to Hogwarts today of all days?" she asked, peeved.

Harry assumed Snape was continuing to stay out of the way. "I'm certain he'll return soon." Candide crossed her arms, eyes fixed on the clock, frown still apparent. Harry went on, "I think it will go all right tonight."

She patted Harry's arm and burst back into preparatory motion, this time re-attacking the main hall.

Snape arrived shortly after, pre-occupied as he wandered into the hall, reading from a bundle of pale, animal-hide scrolls with bright red and purple tassels. By standing on tip toe to get a glance, Harry decided they must be school board decrees. "That time again," Harry said.

Snape harmlessly crushed the bundle together and slipped it under his arm. "Yes. Minerva for the moment kindly reassigned my preparatory teaching and even Head of House duties, but failed, suspiciously enough, to find another deputy." His words came out clipped, having wrapped himself in disdain already for dinner, Harry figured. Candide minced over while this conversation went on and Snape took wary stock of the two of them. "What is it?" Snape asked, put on alert by what must have been the pensiveness they exuded over Candide's news.

"I, uh, went to see Grisley Teaberg today . . ." Candide opened.

"Why? No, don't tell me," he added quickly holding up his hand. "You fetched a beauty potion for your cousin . . . an excellent plan," he asserted, turning to stride away.

Harry swallowed a grin, but Candide propped her fists on her hips, eyes narrowing. "That's hardly what I did." Snape made a bored turn back to them, leading with his toes. Candide said, "I had her divine whether we're having a boy or girl."

Snape's carefully built dismissive wall appeared to hollow out, even though he did not actually move. "And?" he finally asked.

Candide made as if to speak, but then crossed her arms and, perhaps in retaliation for his crack about her cousin, tauntingly said, "Which do you think she said, boy or girl?"

Snape considered for just a second before replying, "As long as she didn't say 'neither' it doesn't much matter."

"Or one of each," Harry contributed, enjoying this game.

This drew Snape's increasingly undone gaze to him. "She did not say 'one of each,' did she?"

Harry laughed, unable to leave him hanging vulnerable like that for long. "No."

The movement of Snape's shoulders gave away real relief. "Well, which is it then?"

Candide relented. "A boy."

Unmoving, Snape took that in. "Ah." Harry watched him fail to react, outwardly anyhow. He turned slowly to look at the tall clock. "I best get ready," he said. He stepped away and this time Candide moved as though to catch up and grab hold. Harry, without thinking, took hold of her as she passed. A dispute felt imminent and it could not be a worse time for it.

When the door clicked closed upstairs, Harry released her. Eyes watery and fiery, she demanded quietly, "What's the matter with him?"

Harry felt around inside his head for something to say, certain he lacked the skill to sooth her but having no choice but to try. He hesitated simply telling her to leave it for later, because even if that did not backfire, it would poison the evening. "Severus didn't have a very happy childhood," Harry said, sort of to stall but understanding opened before him as he said it. "Maybe he's afraid it isn't going to be any different this time around."

Candide lost her battle-ready posture and asked, "Do you think he'd have preferred a girl?"

Seeing as it was a done thing, Harry preferred not to conjecture on that but he had to answer the question. "That might not have reminded him so much, possibly. But it'll be all right," Harry insisted. "Give him some time to get used to the idea."

She sighed loudly, which under any other circumstances would have concerned him. In this case it was the sound of giving in, at least for the moment.

"I thought he'd be happy," she said.

Harry thought that a strong word for Snape under any circumstance. Trying to lighten things, he said, "Not that he'd let anyone know if he was . . ."

She ducked her head for a grin that was half grimace. With another sigh, she patted his arm and said, "I don't think this would work without you."

Harry would rather like to think it would, but he could see her viewpoint. "Your parents will be here soon. Is everything ready?"

This properly distracted her utterly. She strode in a circle around the carefully arranged hall, even leaning back to scrutinize the chandelier, composed entirely of fresh candles, all glowing merrily. "I think we're ready," she said, sounding fatalistic.

Harry pondered the notion of bringing someone home for the two of them to scrutinize with thoughts of marriage. His initial instinct that they would be more forgiving and

open than Candide's parents gave way to a more pessimistic vision of them asking awkward and pointed questions. These considerations made Harry more nervous for that evening.

Snape returned, taciturn and faintly glowering. They all sat down on the couches – Snape with a tumbler of something amber – and waited. When the knock came on the door and Harry stood, Snape arrested him with a sharply raised hand. "I instructed the elf to take care of the butlering."

A small pop indicated Winky had indeed gone to the door. The three of them stood as cloaks were shed in the narrow, dim entry hall. Three figures shuffled into the main hall and Harry was grateful to see Ruthie leading the way, knowing smile firmly in place on her substantial face. Candide's parents followed, trailing farther behind as the room widened out. Her father was a man going toward portly, but did not move like one as far along as he actually was. Her mother's greying hair was swept back in a style similar to Candide's but the grey streaks left one with the impression of a badger. This was reinforced by her distasteful expression as she took in the old house and its patchwork of recent repairs.

Harry fought a defensive acid rising in his chest and stepped forward with a friendly smile to follow behind the others' greetings.

"And Harry," Candide said, making introductions. "My mum and dad, Adalais Martyn and Farnsworth Breakstone, and of course you've met my sister."

Attitudes shifted instantly and Harry's hand was pumped excessively by Candide's father. "A pleasure, Mr. Potter, absolutely smashing to get to meet you . . ." He went on in this vein until realizing abruptly that he should stop. This was followed by a peck on the cheek by Adalais. Thus reassured that he could influence their opinions, Harry relaxed and took the liberty of suggesting they sit down and that Winky should fetch them drinks.

Harry taking charge eased the atmosphere until they were settled in and no good topics of conversation caught hold. Ruthie rescued them, by leaning her broadly round shoulders forward and asking Harry, "So, what is it like to be an Auror? Exciting I bet."

"Yes and no. We spend a lot of boring hours on patrol or stake-out between bouts of excitement."

No one joined in, certainly not the poker-stiff Adalais or slumping Farnsworth, so Ruthie said, "The papers have been covering the upcoming vampire trial. What do you think about the expensive solicitor Fueago hired?"

Harry knew nothing beyond that he would be pulled out of training for his testimony. Before he could explain this, Snape intervened with, "Harry prefers to remain ignorant of what gets printed about him."

Ruthie jerked in surprise. "Really. I'd love reading about myself . . . even bad things. Those would be the best fun." She laughed heartily and peered at Harry with amusement.

Harry could not judge if she was joking. The attempts at conversation were mercifully cut short by Winky, gold edged tea-towel glittering in the excessive candlelight of the chandelier, summoning them to dinner. As they made their way to the dining room, he overheard Adalais muttered something grudging about how nice it must be to have a house-elf to take care of everything.

Dinner slid by at a snail's pace with nearly all comments directed at Harry, who did not mind at first, but by the time the roast was cut into for second helpings he began to think more progress towards their accepting Snape would be more valuable. When a ripe opportunity presented itself in the form of Candide insisting to her mother that she had survived any bouts of morning sickness with a good potion, Harry jumped in. He said, "Severus is an expert brewer."

Candide's father wiped his mouth, folded his napkin and said, "You used to teach that, Candy tells us. I'd expect you to get good at it if you were teaching it." He sniffed, heavy cheeks shifting in layers as he considered the row of them across the table. "You teach Defense Against the Darker Arts now, correct?" His tone implied less small talk and more ground-work-laying. Harry began to see this not leading anywhere good and indeed, his instincts were correct. The man said, "You teach that from experience too, I suppose?"

"Of course," Snape answered easily, uncaringly, which unclenched Harry's chest. "I wouldn't be very good at it if I did not teach from experience. It is a serious and necessary subject, sadly neglected in the past as Harry can attest."

Harry took up this opening with the first thing he could think of. "That's true. It's so important now that Hogwarts has two professors on the subject, sharing the load."

Farnsworth straightened his silverware and said, "There was some controversy about that too in the papers this week, something about keeping a werewolf on around all those children. Or am I mis-remembering?"

Snape calmly refilled his own glass of wine. "No, that's correct, but he's rendered relatively harmless by regular potioning before and during the full moon."

"Well that's something anyhow," Farnsworth conceded without changing his challenging tone.

To Harry it seemed the strained discussion about Lupin and Hogwarts was actually a substitute for something else, a different topic or perhaps a duel.

Farnsworth went on while Adalais ate heartily, content with her husband's handling of things. Ruthie, the more likely candidate to eat while food was plentiful, had had the same potato poised on her fork for the last minute.

"Just doesn't seem worth the risk, does it? If I had a son or daughter there still, I couldn't possible approve it," Candide's father said and his wife nodded broadly in agreement. "I can't imagine allowing a dangerous creature like that around children. He could spread that evil easily, couldn't he?"

Harry cut Snape's reply off with, "He isn't a creature; he's a very kind man." He managed to pull his voice back from angry into the realm of calmly informative by the end, but his heart rate rose in response.

Snape did something unexpected; he reached beside him and gently laid a hand over Harry's arm, where it rested beside his knife, as if to silence him. Snape went on, the very model of control. "You have to forgive my adopted son, he is passionate at defending those he cares about."

Harry watched Farnsworth's eyes cautiously move back and forth between the two of them and realized that Snape's gentle assertion was actually a threat, and Harry had to slow his breathing to avoid giving away that he had grasped that. Ruthie's brows were at her hairline. She puckered her lips and ate her potato, which was the cue for the conversation to move to something else.

Things remained superficially congenial until the sherry was poured by Winky after the pudding plates glittered away. Winky bowed herself out with a quick backward shuffle clearly desiring to leave. Farnsworth, while peering through the dark red liquid in his glass at the nearest candle, said, "If we had a say in this, we'd put a stop to it."

Oddly, Harry felt relief upon hearing this, despite its bluntness. Snape swirled his own carefully observed sherry and did not reply. Candide colored but also held back. Harry suspected she had heard that at least once before.

Ruthie, finishing off her tumbler, said, "Good thing you can't then."

Farnsworth ignored her and accused Snape: "Figures someone with a background like yours would use the most despicable, old-fashioned form of coercion. Doesn't it?"

The tightening of the cords on the back of Snape's hand was the only outward sign of his self-control. He brushed the fingertips of his left hand over each other as he answered, "On that point you are grossly mistaken."

Adalais snorted faintly, prompting Candide to say with a blush clear even in the candlelight, "I'm certain I explained this, Mother."

Farnsworth did not remove his eyes from Snape. "Like I'd believe the likes of you," he said in a low voice perhaps propelled and bolstered by alcohol.

Harry would have spoken, but Snape's fingers brushed his forearm again before he could compose something. It was torture to sit quietly.

"Mother," Candide chastised, perhaps expecting an ally in this.

"Well, Dear," Adalais said in a voice pitched higher than normal, "We always expected you to do better than this – you of all people." Adalais glanced at Snape dismissively and straightened her crushed napkin back over her lap. "I mean, really, Dear," she added, flustered.

Candide dabbed quickly at one eye and bit her lip. Harry was ready to burst. Snape had tapped him yet again as though sensing this. Harry, taking his anger out on his guardian because it was the only direction allowed, asked, "Why don't you want me to say anything?"

"I simply don't," Snape said calmly. "You have already lost your temper."

"Oh, no I haven't," Harry countered, just barely in check. "I wouldn't be sitting here like this if I had, would I? I don't like sitting here quietly while the only family I've even known is roundly insulted."

Candide's parents stared at him. Harry tried to find another ounce of calm to apply to his nerves and he must have managed because he backed down, but assumed it was clear to others that he was struggling.

Ruthie piped up, "Well, like you said, 'nothing you can do about it'."

Farnsworth's face twisted as though the sherry beneath his nose had grown foul. "She's old enough to do as she pleases, but that still doesn't make it easy to turn her over to a supporter, former or not, of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. We read all the papers; have for years; years and years; we know what you are, even if she downplays it." He nodded in Candide's direction.

"Voldemort," Snape said just as Harry had opened his mouth to do so. "His name is Voldemort."

Candide's parents cringed and Ruthie had to hide a grin behind pretending to drink from her empty tumbler.

Adalais resumed addressing the daughter across from her. "People don't ever cease to be dark wizards, Candy-dear," she stated as fact. "Imagine if you told us you wanted to marry a . . . a vampire. Wouldn't you expect us to dissuade you?"

Candide, eyes bright, did not reply. She looked away, at the empty grate, char-coated and cold.

Silence reigned until Snape set down his empty tumbler and said, "Perhaps if we have run out of things people wish to get out in the open, we should declare this an evening."

Farnsworth tossed his napkin onto the table. "There's no legal recourse for us; I already checked. Even asked a solicitor for help requesting a dispensation directly from the Wizengamot."

Snape followed this immediately with, "But in the hearing you would be up against Harry Potter and I suspect that put an end to the idea." He smiled for the first time, but it did not reach his eyes.

"Daddy, you didn't," Candide complained and then huffed in annoyance.

Harry wondered if her father had considered going to the papers. Skeeter would certainly provide a willing ear. Harry did not ask about this, just in case.

Farnsworth said, "I can't in good conscience give you away."

Snape said, "Someone else will be happy to do so," at the exact same time Candide asked, "But you'll still come, right?"

"I insisted we go," Adalais said. "Wouldn't be proper to not go at all."

This finally was the last comment of any substance that evening. When the door finally closed and the three of them were standing alone in the hall, Harry said, "That could have gone worse, I suppose." Snape turned on his heel to face him. He was still calm, which Harry had to comment on. "You did well," Harry told him.

Dryly, he said, "With due respect to Candide, I decided they truly do not matter." Candide's gaze was fixed to the floor and it remained there until Snape said to her, "I do hope that's the end of it."

Candide nodded. Harry gave her a weak smile when she looked his way. "Thanks for trying Harry," she said.

To her he shrugged. To Snape Harry said, "Sorry I talked out of turn."

"Oh, do not apologize. I wished you to."

Harry lowered his brow and stared at him. "You were manipulating me?"

"I wished you to express your thoughts in a context that made it absolutely clear you spoke of your own will, which you did. It was useful that you are so predictable, but I must point out that you should work to eliminate such a bad habit that makes it easy for your enemies to entrap you."

"I can try," Harry said doubtfully. He huffed and said, "I have readings to do," before he strode up the stairs, intending to take Kali out of her cage, settle in with his books, and willfully ignore the realization that even when he tried to use his influence, he could not succeed at it properly.

An owl from Hermione distracted Harry from sorting through his books. The bird carried an invitation to a small luncheon she was having at the Leaky Cauldron before leaving for Hogwarts. Harry pulled out his small diary and made a note of it. At the bottom of the printed invitation she had added:

Harry, I should probably warn you that I invited Vishnu as well. We've owled on occasion, but I haven't seen him since your birthday and found I really have to or I might lose my mind. It should be safe enough since I'm leaving for ten months.

Harry tossed the invitation into the cold hearth to burn later, thinking Hermione may not want anyone seeing that note. He frowned, feeling for his friend and wondering how things were with his fellow. Harry should have found or created an opportunity to speak with him, but feeling partly responsible for his marriage difficulties made it even more awkward. Maybe he'd have a chance during the luncheon, or maybe that would be completely the wrong time to bring anything up.

Saturday, Harry took his bike out again, this time to meet Tonks, whom he had arranged to meet for dinner in Hogsmeade. Harry flew to the wizarding village, which gave him a rare chance to mull over things. The helmet, when he had to wear it until clear of Muggle habitation, rubbed painfully against the bump on his head, reminding him of the mystery of how he had ended up with it. He had flashes of crawling toward the warmth of the fire, but not exactly how he had become so cold in

the first place. Also a mystery that dragged on his mind was why Belinda had been back, mostly, to her outgoing self when he had seen her on Diagon Alley.

This second mystery still gnawed at Harry's consciousness as he landed with a musical clang! of metal on the narrow road before the Three Broomsticks. Shoppers turned to stare at him before giggling and going on their way. The great chrome machinery of Sirius' motorbike did stand out in the age-tainted, wooden surroundings of the wizarding village.

Tonks stepped out of the pub and propped a hand on her skirted hip. "That explains why you wanted to meet here," she said, giving him a peck. Her hair stood tall and lemon yellow today.

Harry rolled the bike out of the way into the alley and tugged her farther between the buildings using the bike as a barrier to hug her properly. "Glad you could get away today," Harry said. He felt eyes upon them and pulled away with a glance at the empty light behind the buildings. He fought a temptation to send a curse that direction.

Inside, the two of them settled over mugs of butterbeer. Harry, wanting help working things out said, "Oddest thing. Belinda was nice to me the other day."

Tonks' dismay was most likely exaggerated, making Harry grin. "Sorry," he said. "It's just that something has been up with her."

"Harry, is there a witch in England you aren't trying to come to the aid of."

"Don't be silly," Harry said, trying not to laugh. "Not all of them. Just the ones exposed to the hazard that is Harry."

Tonks tipped her mug at him, slopping some onto the table where it smoked a bit as it mixed with the other stains on the wood. "I'll grant you that one."

"You don't have to be jealous. I prefer my dates to not need rescuing. Really."

She smiled with her eyes and Harry accepted that she believed him. Her eyes rolled though, when he said, "But about Belinda . . ."

"How about some other topic . . . how are the wedding plans going?"

"Oh, please," Harry groaned. "Some other topic."

A group of hags shuffled in, the mustiness of their robes making some customers sneeze. Madam Rosmerta stalked over. "The Hog's Head serves fare more to your liking I expect," she said to them. The five of them ignored her and with much loud adjusting of chairs, made themselves at home.

Tonks took everyone in with a practiced eye before turning back to Harry. "I hope things aren't going badly."

"Well, the in-laws could be happier . . ."

"They always could be happier."

"But I'm just tired of all the discussion about dress colors and flower selection and music and . . . ugh."

She laughed. "Blokes don't go in for that; it's true."

"And Severus is up to something. Won't say what it is."

Tonks finished her butterbeer in record time and stood to get another. "That sounds like him." She returned seconds later with a fresh drink, this time sitting back more relaxed. "You have to get to know him by guessing correctly," she asserted. "But you would know that. How's he coping with having one on the way?"

"I haven't asked him," Harry said. A group of youngsters flew by out on the street dressed all in the same color robes as though on their way to use the school Quidditch pitch.

"I'd be dying to ask him," Tonks said. "Just see his reaction. Imagine a junior Severus. Or juniorette."

"Junior," Harry said.

"It is now?" she asked, grinning. "Seeing himself grow up again. That will be a change for him. Most blokes love that part of it, but I don't know about him."

Something about the hunched hags in the window made Harry remember the other Snape, the ragged, beaten down Snape. To distract himself, he said, "I've never met your parents."

"Eh," she said, waving her hands weakly. After a pause she said, "If you really want to, we could all go out for dinner some night."

"I think I'd like that. Is there some reason you wouldn't want to?" Harry had to ask.

Tonks shrugged and glanced into her mug.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Tonks shrugged again. "No, we can go out. Pick a date."

"Maybe after the wedding," Harry said. "You're coming to the wedding, right?"

"I received an invitation, in fact."

"Oh good, I just realized I'd assumed you'd go with me."

She laughed. "If I don't get called on duty in an emergency, of course."

Harry tried to keep his mind off concerns for Belinda and Elizabeth, but found it difficult. He kept clear of the topic in conversation as they sat, but he was distracted. Finally, he said, "Want to go for a ride?" to which Tonks after teasing him, agreed.

Chapter 8

Sunday for Hermione's party six of them settled into a corner table that afforded some privacy due to the irrational architecture of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry pushed the present he had brought across the table, gathering a sharp look from his old friend.

"Harry, what's this?"

"If you can't figure that one out," Ginny said of the beribboned package resting before them all, "I think you should disqualify yourself from teaching."

Ron gave his sister a slap on the arm.

Beside Ron, Vineet appeared slightly less than completely serene. Harry observed him in profile and hoped that angle accentuated his unhappiness. Hermione would glance at him and then glance away. Lavender caught onto this and shot Ron a knowing look, which Ron gallantly ignored or simply did not notice.

Hermione opened her tall gift and found it contained a stack of one of each kind of stationary currently sold at Flourish and Blotts.

"You'll be doing a lot of owling, I think," Harry said.

Hermione dabbed at her right eye. "I think you're right. It's going to be long months without seeing you all."

Ron said, "What's to stop us from coming up to Hogsmeade for a pint?"

"Well, I'm going to be terribly busy and I know it isn't so far away, but I suspect everyone will have other things to do."

"Yeah, I hear they lock all new teachers in the keep for the first year," Harry said. "Only the bats for company."

Hermione laughed, but her eyes were still too bright. "I feel like I'm going very far away, I'm not sure why."

Lavender said, "We'll come up to see you. Don't get all dewy-eyed about it. It's not like you're going to Durmstrang, then you would be on your own."

Harry had a feeling he understood this, that the opportunities to see Vineet were going to be cut down to nil. Vineet had not spoken at all, so Harry had no clue about his thoughts, which were apparently a matter of deep attention for him.

"It's going to be so strange, but I'm dying to get started," Hermione said. "I realized the last month how dreadfully bored I've been. I think this will put a stop to that."

She went on, words flowing freely. "Headmistress said that after a few years I could be Head of House, even, Sinistra only took on the duty because there was no one else. Wouldn't that be just grand?"

"You sound like a kid again," Ron said, slight disgust clear in his voice.

"Don't you remember our first year at Hogwarts?" she asked him.

"I remember Voldemort tried to kill Harry. And then the second year he tried again . . ."

"Ron, that's not going to happen this time. Harry took care of him once and for all. Didn't you Harry?"

Her need for reassurance surprised him. "Yes. He's nothing now," he insisted.

Hermione smiled and announced, "I think we need another round."

As expected, Arthur came to the training room door to fetch Harry. They were mid-practice of neutralizing curse spells frequently used for traps, like the Supergummy Curse, the Infinite Fall Hex, and the Brain Spin Hex. Harry immediately abandoned Aaron to Tridant and Kerry Ann, who were competing vigorously on trapping each other.

"You're next up in the dungeon. Courtroom Ten," Mr. Weasley said before turning to go back to his office.

The torches in the dungeon always seem to burn fainter and colder than in the rest of the Ministry, suppressed perhaps by the damp, thin air. The breeze of Harry's striding by made the tall flames spasm once before standing still again. The masked guard outside the door could have been related to a troll. He moved his ax aside and let Harry stand before the door and wait for it to be opened from the inside. All of these preparations made Harry wonder if the Ministry actually had brought the vampire from the French prison for the trial, even if Snape did not believe they would. Harry swallowed hard; he had put aside thoughts of any risk to his secrets from the trial and now those worries woke and came piling on again.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," the presiding elder of the Wizengamot said when Harry entered. The door boomed closed behind Harry as he strode across the floor. He was relieved to find the chair in the center empty, chains slack, but not as pleased to see that

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Tiberius Ogden was presiding. The old wizard squinted at his papers and said, "We have questions, for you. And when we are through, the solicitor for the accused will have an opportunity to ask you anything relevant as well." Here he gestured over to the side at the lowest seats which held a row of witches and wizards in fine black robes trimmed in velvet. The tallest one, a stately, greying dark-haired man, gave Harry a searching look with his transparent blue eyes.

Ogden went on, "Poyser DeBenedictus and his associates are here in the accused's stead, due to security considerations. We have already dispensed with the protests over this decision. Your fellow Auror apprentice, one Barbarella Blackpool, will be called to testify as well but based on the report, she is not as reliable a witness as you have been judged to be, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded in agreement and squinted into the high torches in an effort to see the faces in the tiers above him. Only twelve seats were occupied and McGonagall's seat was not one of them. On the far side a handful of reporters sat on stools added along the floor. Skeeter had her head of shining ringlets down, bracelets flashing as she wrote. Someone loudly cleared their throat during the lull while Ogden flipped through his parchments.

"Yes, Cornelius, we will be moving along presently. Now, Mr. Potter, we have read the report you signed off on, so we need not re-cover all of the events, but some points must be established to the satisfaction of this committee if we are to determine whether we should incarcerate the accused and for how long."

He went on to ask for more details about the vampire's hold over the Muggle family, asking specifics that surprised Harry, such as did the girl ever open her eyes or did she speak to the vampire. Harry had to admit she only moaned, which he was uncomfortable describing, and this must have come through because he could see amusement on at least two faces as he struggled.

"All right then," Ogden went on. "After that, Fueago was reported to attack Ms. Blackpool. You described him as 'hungry' in your report."

"Objection," DeBenedictus said, standing up, which showed him to be even taller than Harry imagined. "The witness cannot know this to be true and it is conjecture only."

Harry waited for his opportunity to speak and drawing on Snape's fine example of calm from the dinner on Friday, he said, "Fueago had his mouth open wide and he sniffed the air like a dog might when trying to find a scent. He moved jerkily, frantically," Harry also added, feeling that safe from the solicitor's reach to cancel out what he said.

Ogden finished up with his questions, which Harry strained his memory to reply to accurately. DeBenedictus stood again more deliberately, unfolding like a lamppost might he moved so rigidly. He eyed Harry as though not happy to see him there. "Why don't you take a seat, Mr. Potter," he said flatly.

"That's all right, I'll stand."

The man's voice did not modulate at all as he spoke, pitched to be heard clearly by the full assemblage while still sounding conversational. "Too familiar with that chair, are you? Well, your choice then."

Harry forced more calm on himself, having learned that this was not just defensive, but also could be used offensively and would suffice for the moment. He waited for a question as though bored.

DeBenedictus circled once, considering the tiers above them, picking out and attending to each individual peering down. Without warning, he asked, "Have you ever dealt with a vampire before, Mr. Potter, in the course of your Ministry work?"

"No, sir," Harry responded politely.

"No," the solicitor agreed like a whip-crack. "And indeed the report indicates that you did not even know the proper procedures that should be followed, such as taking a mouth swab within fifteen minutes of a vampire's purported attack. Did you know that was in the manual your very department keeps on file?" He turned and gestured at one of the wizards seated with his colleagues. "I have with me as a supporting witness none other than Eldred Worple, foremost expert on vampires and he can attest to your manual being veracious on this point."

He fell into a lecture mode then, as though pretending to help Harry for the next time. "You see, there can be no admissible determination of whether the vampire intended to create another vampire during the bite, if no swab is, within a short period of time, obtained and sealed in a silver box for later testing."

Harry wanted to shrug. He nodded weakly instead.

The solicitor went on still sounding kindly informative. "If you are, as Elder Ogden indicated, the best witness the Ministry Department of Magical Law Enforcement intends to produce for this trial, I would not be sanguine about your success in these proceedings."

Despite his heart rate rising, Harry believed he managed to hide his agitation. He imagined his department's dismay if, because of his testimony, Fueago went free.

Harry said, "He kept that Muggle family terrorized for over a year. He told me when I confronted him that he was older than the British Isles itself and therefore above or outside our laws."

"Is that an exact quote or are you interpreting?" the solicitor asked.

Harry cast his mind back to the darkened bedroom in Burnipsbie. "He laughed when I told him he was breaking the rules and he said 'what rules?"'

"And that means what?" The solicitor paced away. "Only that he found something funny and wanted more information."

"He was mocking the whole notion," Harry insisted.

The solicitor tossed his hand as though this was ridiculous. Harry longed to say, like you're doing now, but he held it in. More calmly, Harry said, "When I told him there were Ministry of Magic rules he had to follow he said, and quote, 'Do not insult me'."

"He just simply meant that it was insulting to imply that he did not know such basic rules."

Harry ground his teeth and took a deep breath. The solicitor beat him to speaking. "Really, Mr. Potter, your reputation notwithstanding, you are a mere trainee. You failed to follow the required procedures, understandable of course," he said with small solicitous bow, "given that you haven't learned them yet."

Harry found the man's ultra-friendly patronizing tone the most aggravating of all. As he lost control of the situation, Harry found control of himself slipping away as well. "He lied to the guards at the French prison." This was lame, but it was the one thing Harry could convey with certainty.

"How do you know? You do not speak French."

"He told me he did. When I asked him what he'd said."

The solicitor addressed the tiers now. "How do you know he did not lie then? And besides, lying to a foreign national, especially a Frenchman, isn't a crime in Britain."

Harry tried not to fall prey to the frantic thoughts circling in head. He was going to fail at this and that had been unthinkable when he had walked in. He grasped at something, "You spoke to the girl. She should have been a witness too."

An unexpectedly welcome voice came from above. "And she will be, when we settle which expert Healer to believe about her mental state."

The solicitor, perhaps sensing an increasing advantage, moved in for the kill. "Mr. Fueago complains in fact about your assault on his person and your repeated threats to cut out his heart."

Harry found the heat rising in his throat a comfort all of a sudden. It felt good to get truly, unabashedly angry about something worth getting offended about. "How can one possibly assault a vampire?" Harry asked. "Ask Worple there. He'll tell you they can disappear out of our world at will or turn into a mist and slip away. How does one assault something like that?" Harry felt hemmed in by his own need to hide the truth, so he stopped there. He needed a better tactic and quick.

Harry's turning and putting up a fight set DeBenedictus back a step. The sound of papers rustling more loudly in the tiers bolstered Harry, who did not give the solicitor a chance to reply. He laid the bait out and expected it would not be resisted. "What I saw in a Muggle house in Burnipsbie was a rogue vampire, a hungry dark creature . . ."

DeBenedictus raised his finger. "I objected to that already, Mr. Potter." He turned to the tiers, "I wish it to be stricken ag . . ."

"Why?" Harry asked sharply, too sharply. He needed more control.

DeBenedictus turned to him and Harry found his eyes and latched on. "Why?" Harry asked again, less excitedly.

"Perhaps you are more daft than expected, Mr. Potter, but you cannot know someone's motives if they are unspoken and sometimes not even if they are spoken . . ."

Harry cut him off. "I'm a Legilimens, Mr. DeBenedictus, I can indeed know a person's motives without he or she speaking them." He left off that this was not true of the Vampire.

DeBenedictus stopped, elevated finger slowly falling. It was Harry's turn and the man was stunned enough not to look away. "For example, I know you regret having to interview me of all people but are also thrilled at the possibility of besting me before this group." The man made the mistake of glancing for help at the reporters behind Harry before glancing back. Harry said, "You think Rita Skeeter should perhaps not wear such a short skirt and bright red tights to a serious official proceedings, but you think she does have nice legs."

Now DeBenedictus retreated two full steps. To the chair, he demanded, "Is he on the record as having this skill?"

Surprisingly bored sounding, Ogden waved at Fudge, who flipped through a stack of files in the trunk before him and handed one up to him. Ogden perused what must be Harry's file. While they waited, Harry, finding a patronizingly helpful tone himself,

said to the solicitor, "It's the same skill your client would be using against you were the French not potioning him into oblivion. You do realize that, I assume?"

Ogden spoke. "Yes, it is listed on Mr. Potter's internal biographical form and on his application to the Aurors program." A pause ensued before Ogden said, "Are you finished with the questioning of this witness, Mr. DeBenedictus?"

The solicitor licked his lips and had trouble speaking. "Yes." and then again with a normal voice: "Yes. I'm through." He hurried back to his files. His assistants rose up to assist even though they did not appear to be needed.

Harry thought that for a man whose primary weapon was hairsplitting to support the subtle ruse of his logic, discovering he was utterly exposed could be rightfully upsetting. As the solicitor kept his back to him, Harry's initial burst of elation simmered down into plain relief that he had survived.

Ogden spoke to Harry. "Perhaps in the interest of the defense's mental state, you should retire from the room. If we have any more questions, you will be called back. Next witness."

Harry tried not to grin. He turned to go, catching Skeeter's eye. She lifted one red calf slightly as though teasing, then shot him a look of grudging respect. Harry strode by her, not giving any ground to her either.

Back in the training room when Rodgers asked how it went, Harry asked in return, "Are we getting instruction in how to handle testimony before the Wizengamot?"

Rodgers chuckled lightly. "You will indeed, but third year."

Harry dropped into a chair. "We need it."

Still smiling Rodgers asked, "Went that badly?"

Harry felt a bit hung out on his own. "I could have used some preparation, some coaching." His voice sounded a bit blameful, so he added, "Sir."

Rodgers held his notes to his chest and said, "First off, I thought you had enough experience to handle yourself well enough, and second, the case doesn't hinge on you, but on the girl's testimony and the lab examination of the family."

Harry was relieved to hear that. "Oh."

After a short stare at Harry, Rodgers asked, "DeBenedictus take you apart?"

"He tried," Harry conceded, still aggravated by his early performance and the fierce fighting back that losing so much ground necessitated.

Rodgers found this amusing and he continued smiling as he returned to an introduction of heat-seeking hexes.

Friday, Harry arrived home after the pubs closed and his fellows had begged off searching for other amusement. Hermione's party had inspired Harry to get the five of them to spend more time together outside the Ministry even at the risk of their fieldwork sharpness. He was glad he had because Tridant by the time they left the last place, he behaved less reserved and brightly said he would see them all on Monday.

The house hung in stillness. Harry almost simply walked up the stairs to his bedroom, but the dark hall made the candlelight from the dining room clearly apparent. He stepped down backwards and glanced inside, surprised to find Snape resting his head on the table, pillowed with his arm.

"Severus?" Harry prompted.

Snape raised his head and reached out as though to grab something, presumably the tipped-over decorative bottle, its surface of green beaded swirls plucking at the gutted candlelight.

"Did you drink all that?" Harry asked in concern.

Snape righted the bottle with noisy effort and glared at it accusingly.

"Severus?" Harry prompted again. He slipped the delicate bottle out of Snape's grasp and set it on the mantel out of harm's way. "Where's Candide?"

Snape waved in a way that indicated elsewhere. Aloud, Harry remembered, "Oh, that's right. It's her hens' night tonight, isn't it?"

Gesturing at his own chest, Snape said, "Flashing robes."

"They wore flashing robes?" Harry confirmed.

Snape nodded and gestured at his head. "Matching . . . flashing hats."

"That was enough to drive you to drink?" Harry asked doubtfully.

Snape's hair tossed as he shook his head. He laid his forehead on the back of his hands, flat on the table. "Didn't help," he muttered.

Harry pulled the head chair out and sat down at it with a sigh, hands clasped between his knees. A pile of post lay unattended on the sideboard beneath the window and towering over that were the parchments and white leather planning books Candide had been using for the wedding.

"What else is the matter?" he asked.

A long pause ensued. Harry tried to be patient.

"I'm not fit for this," came the reply that filtered up from the table.

"You've said that before," Harry said. "It's not any more convincing this time 'round."

Snape rotated his scraggly head. Harry patted him on the shoulder. "Come on. If it were me doing this, you'd give me hell for it."

"'S different."

"Oh, how so?"

Snape did not reply and in the silence a voice in the back of Harry's own head reminded him how very much damage a few unleashed demons could do. Snape for all his bluster and snide insults could not touch that.

Harry patted him harder, forcing himself out of his self-rumination with effort. "Come on now . . . what is it?" he asked more strictly.

Snape lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face elongated as though melting. "How did I let it get to this?"

"Severus, you can't back out now," Harry insisted with firmness.

"No," Snape agreed. "The flowers are on their way to some Merlinforsaken glen somewhere or other."

Harry blinked at that. "How much sherry was left in that bottle?" When Snape held up his fingers, Harry said, "Two bottles? No wonder." Harry gripped Snape's wrist. "Everything's going to work out," Harry heard himself say. Those words worked to sound hollow, but Harry truly believed them.

Snape murmured "Hero of Wizardry says I should go through with it . . . it's not a farce." He passed a hand through his hair and sounded the headline reader as he said, "Former Death Eater, now upright citizen." He deflated after this pronouncement. "It's not going to work."

"What's not going to work?" Harry asked sternly.

Snape again did not reply.

Harry cajoled, "Come on. You're going to love being a dad. You'll have a little Slytherin around the house." A pause. "Well, I'm assuming he'll be a Slytherin," Harry said thoughtfully.

Snape's poorly focussed eyes slipped farther away. "What if he is not?" he asked with dread.

"No chance of that. Well, maybe Ravenclaw, like Candide, that'd be all right." Harry wanted to sooth him, but found honesty getting in the way.

"Ravenclaw . . . that would be all right. Smart enough to stay out of trouble. As long as he isn't a . . . Gryffindor."

"Well, thanks," Harry complained, stung.

The tired, black gaze slipped Harry's way, but it lacked the usual razor keenness. "You think you're still a Gryffindor?" Snape asked with slurred curiosity.

"Yeah."

"Hm," came the ambiguous reply that indicated only that this topic was of continuing interest. Snape gave up on it and scrubbed his eyes. "You don't have anything to drink, do you? Stashed somewhere perhaps? Winky refused to fetch more."

Harry laughed. "I'd have pulled it out for myself already if I did. You need your pink stuff, not more drink."

"I want to be drunk," Snape insisted. "Why does Candide get all the . . . fun?"

"I'll take you out if you want," Harry said. "I could get a crew together. McGonagall, for example, would pay to see you like this. She'd buy a few more rounds, surely."

Snape broke out laughing, a harsh, odd sound. He then returned his head to resting on his arm.

"Do you want to be found like this or do you want me to brew you up some pink stuff?"

"I don't care. I don't care about her bloody parents. I don't care about this."

"I don't believe you," Harry criticized. "Severus Snape and his all important dignity would care whether he were found snookered by his wife to be." Harry stood and propped his hands on his hips. "Are you playing for pity?"

Snape's head came up, eyes blaring. Harry had pushed too far.

"Sorry," Harry quickly said and reached for Snape's shoulder, but it was jerked out of reach. In making this sudden move, which tipped the chair onto two legs, Snape unbalanced himself and tumbled sideways onto the floor.

Harry came around to help him up, apologizing again.

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"Leave it be, Potter," Snape said while pressing himself up with his hands, splayed wide and pale on the dark wooden floor.

It took the combination of his last name and the tone to make Harry back off and let Snape right himself rather than give him reason to escalate into real viciousness.

Snape sat back in the chair, even more hunched. "Leave me be," he said.

Harry leaned closer. "Please don't do this," he pleaded, getting no variance in Snape staring straight ahead. There was nothing for it. Harry said, "You're afraid it's going to be as bad for your son as it was for you? It isn't you know. But that's it, isn't it?"

"Merlin," Snape replied as though stunned.

Harry said to reassure him: "No, you're not really that transparent. That was a lucky guess."

This drew quite a glare from Snape.

"That very last wasn't a guess," Harry quickly explained. "I just know you that well at least."

He re-grabbed Snape's wrist, which he was allowed to do, and said, "It's going to be better this time. You'd do fine on your own, I know you would, but you don't even have to. We're both here to help you. You act like this is still just you. That's the biggest thing this adoption's taught me is that I don't have to go through anything alone. We're in this together and after Sunday it'll be all three of us. You think we'd let you mess up that badly?"

Snape tugged his arm free and rested his cheek on his arm again.

Harry gave up, assuming the alcohol was hopelessly in the way of reasoning. "We both love you, you know. If you haven't figured out yet how to deal with that, you better do so right quick." At the door, Harry added, "If you want something to sober up, give a shout; I'll be in the library."

Harry perused the crammed bookshelves, pulling out books based on their color, not really in the mood to read anything for long. He wanted to sleep but felt he should keep watch and he could do so from here.

When Candide returned, Harry could see her robes flickering all the way to the walls of the hall out of the corner of his eye.

"You waited up?" he heard her ask Snape.

Harry hurried that way and from the dining room door said, "No, he's drunk off his arse."

She gaped at Harry. "Severus is?"

Harry nodded. Snape had not moved. "Maybe he's passed out now," Harry said.

Candide prodded a shoulder with no response. "Maybe we should move him to the couch."

Harry pulled out his wand, but she stopped him with. "He hates being hovered."

So the two of them, with the addition of a Feather-light Charm, carried his dead weight to the hall where it fit in better on one of the long couches than at the table. Harry sat down with a sigh on the other couch and Candide sat directly beside. Stale pipe-smoke drifted off her, but no scent of alcohol.

"What happened?" Candide asked.

"I wasn't here," Harry said. "Hey, Severus!" Harry shouted and when there was only a twitch in response, he decided it was safe to talk. "He's doubting himself and once he got started I expect drink only made it worse."

"Severus doubting himself," she uttered as though trying out a string of foreign words.

"Oh, don't let him fool you," Harry said, figuring that Snape had given up any rights to retain the illusion of his posturing about the same time he lost consciousness. "He doubts himself all the time. That's the usual reason he gets angry, when he does. Well, people just annoy him to, but if he's really worked up, it's probably something in his own head."

She stared at Harry as she took that in and then looked back at Snape.

Harry asked, "How was your party?"

She smiled. "Oh, excellent . . . brill. We had a great time, Dublin has a very nice Magical Corridor along the river. Have you been there?"

Harry shook his head, trying to hide his amusement at her almost bubbly shift in demeanor.

She sighed again and clasped her hands together out straight. "Well, it's nice to know even he has a breaking point."

"He has lots," Harry said, standing up "Why do you think he works so hard to hide them? I'll be right back." Determined to right Snape so he they could all go to sleep, Harry collected the ingredients for his favorite potion, a foamy pink liquid that rendered one free of immediate and past effects due to over-consumption of alcohol.

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Harry set up a burner on the floor to mix up one of the two key ingredients which they had run out of. He poured in a splash of ground cardamom, blue poppy seeds and horntail horn steeped in vodka. When this evaporated and left a sticky residue, he added bright blue powdered robin's egg and mountain goat milk. He stirred for a while, becalmed by having something concrete to do.

"Did Severus teach you how to brew?" Candide asked from where she reclined on the couch, one hand resting on her belly.

"Yeah," Harry admitted.

Minutes later it was finished and when poured into the Enchanted Mineral Water, it foamed a promising pink. Without preamble, Harry, bottle in hand, tugged Snape to a sitting position. His head lolled before it straightened up.

"Drink this," Harry commanded.

Snape at first seemed to want to resist, but he took the bottle and took a swig.

"It's hot," Snape observed. He rubbed his face. "Did you just brew that?"

"Yes."

He swung his legs to the side. "As long as you didn't poison me."

"Such confidence he has in me," Harry said, hovering the brewing setup back to the toilet.

In Harry's absence, Snape forced his tired eyes to focus on Candide, who had sat straight as well.

"Have a good evening?" he asked.

"Had a wonderful one. Looks like you did to."

Snape tried once to speak but then said, "Your sarcasm is not welcome right now."

She stood up and sat down beside him, arms enfolding him. "All right now?"

"Better," he admitted.

Harry stepped back in, saw them there, appeared to think he should sneak off but sat down opposite them instead. "You make a cute couple," Harry said.

"You did find more booze," Snape accused him. "Otherwise there would be absolutely no excuse for saying such preposterous thing."

Harry laughed. "Oh, come on. Relax a little." With his eyes he apologized for provoking him. He assumed the message was received because Snape suddenly looked away.

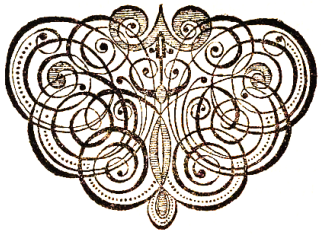
"Well," Candide announced. "I'm tuckered out. It was a long evening. Ready to sleep for real rather than just passing out?"

"If I must," Snape said, standing with her. He halted their departure long enough to turn and say. "Fine job on the brewing."

"Anytime," Harry replied.

> Author's Notes: chapter 9 is in rough shape so give me at least 10 days. I will soon add a progress bar to my website at darkirony dot com so you can check how things are progressing.

Chapter 9.



Fortune Favors

Harry stretched his arms as he strode through the house; they were stiff from a real workout instead of field shadowing. Rodgers had decided suddenly that they were all softening up too much and had set aside Saturday afternoon for weights and some Eastern Arts, demonstrated by Vineet. Harry's elbow twinged, reminding him that he had discovered the hard way that morning that Tridant also had a bit of background in this. He and Vineet, for the rest of the session, had circled each other as though sizing one another up in a new way. Harry grinned at the memory of it as he opened his post.

Under a large brochure declaring Ragnarth's Roustabout – Dangerous pet training is easier than you think! and more affordable than you might imagine! he found a package from Hermione. It contained a stack of books she had found on the new book carousel at Flourish and Blotts during one last round of book buying before school started. The note spellotaped to the stack indicated she feared he may not be able to do without them. Chuckling at his friend's ongoing proclivity for educating him, Harry picked up the top one, a thin book with a title of constantly fading and regenerating ink. It read Spell Dissipation: Current Thinking.

Harry was deeply involved in this book – actually a collection of notes compiled during a meeting of ISMS or International Society of Mage Studies – when Snape stepped in and jerked his head as though Harry should leave.

Harry closed the book and stood, taking it along.

Snape said, "Don't you have friends you should be out with?"

Harry scratched his jaw. "I suppose."

Brusquely, Snape said, "Candide will be home shortly and I have something I wish to discuss with her, alone."

"I can go out," Harry said amiably. His thoughts immediately leapt to doing more remote vision practice with Kali. He slipped by Snape, saying, "I'll be back later. I can go to the Burrow for dinner; Ron always tells me his mum expects him to invite me."

Snape gestured dismissively that that was acceptable. Harry kept his curiosity in check as he put his things together and collected his pet from her cage. She bit him because he woke her up and he threatened her with sending her to Ragnarth. Either she understood him or simply caught his disapproval, because she rubbed the injured spot with the side of her head. Harry stuffed her into his pocket, where she curled up and most likely went back to sleep.

Before he departed, Harry stepped to the doorway of his room to catch a glimpse of the hall. He spent a breath studying Snape's self-absorbed pose as he stood before the couches, then Disapparated before Snape could chance to look up at him.

Ron was not home yet from Gringotts but Ginny sat at the long table with Weasley Wizard Weezes boxes stacked before her. Her hunched and involved scribbling on a large sheet of parchment, hair veiling her task, drew Harry that way, unable to stomach even more curiosity.

Ginny looked up at his approach. "Hi, Harry." She went back to carefully darkening the lines around a giant label reading Galloping Galoshes. The Gs sprouted little running feet sticking out the bottom.

"How are things at the Twins' shop?"

Vexed, she said, "They won't let me help with anything dangerous, so I've been redoing the packaging. There's a lot of neat stuff that gets overlooked and the peak Hogwarts shopping season is upon us. You wouldn't believe how disorganized those two are. Verity used to straighten up, but she gave up doing that like a year ago."

Making conversation, Harry asked, "How do the new students look? Have you seen any of them come into the shop?"

"They look small," she said, making Harry laugh. "And their squeaky voices get on my nerves. And I think I could sort them as well as the hat, if not better."

"I'll let McGonagall know, in case the hat finally gives up."

Ginny raised her head again, eyes shining. "THAT'D be fun. I could sit in a big gold chair at the front and point at each tiny student. YOU, you're a Hufflepuff. Your shoes aren't tied, they're knotted, and you're holding your wand backwards. YOU, come on, those glasses could ignite a forest fire, RAVENCLAW!" She laughed. "Ah, a girl can dream."

Mrs. Weasley came in, and fussed over Harry before fetching him milk and a snack even though dinner was imminent.

Quietly, Ginny said, "Gosh, Mum is out of control where you're concerned."

Harry nibbled on a broken bit of shortbread and said, "You get special treatment too."

"That's because I'm the only girl," she stated as fact.

"It's a good thing," Harry said, thinking aloud.

Ginny erased some stray lines from inside her letters and reached for a bottle of brown ink. "Why?"

Not quite there, because he was seeing a vision of some other place, like this one but in critical ways, different, Harry said, "Because you'd be the seventh son."

"I always thought that be fun," Ginny said.

Harry's skin chilled as though an arctic breeze had slipped through his robes. "Maybe it doesn't matter," he said. He wasn't sure what he was seeing, it was more a sense, an alternative alignment of things that composed a reasonable whole of their own.

Ginny set the pen down. "Maybe what doesn't matter? Harry you are getting all Trelawney on me here. I don't like it."

Harry dropped his gaze from the arched window over the door, but the sense persisted. "Maybe it doesn't matter that you aren't a boy, I mean," Harry felt he should responsibly explain, just in case it might matter some day.

"You think I'm a sorcerer then?" she half-teased, clearly wanting to lighten the subject.

Harry who had heard that word from Snape in reference to himself, just shrugged. She waved a hand around, "Whoosh, look, a palace in place of the Burrow. Up, nope. Guess I'm not." She picked up her quill again and returned to carefully outlining the letters.

"Do you want the running feet to move?" Harry asked as she inked over the pencil lines, complete with little jagged treads on the boots.

She sat back. "I'd love the running feet to move. You know how to do that?"

Harry smiled and slid the drawing over to himself, careful not to upset the row of ink bottles. "I spent a summer trying to remake the Marauders' Map. 'Course I can make the feet move."

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Snape approached Candide as she sorted through the pile of parchments on the sideboard, unrolling each in search of something.

"Oh, hi," she said, vaguely startled by his silent approach. She picked up and waved a pink envelope. "My old chum from accounting school finally replied. She's been living in Paris, or so I thought, but the reply came from Cape Town." She laughed. "No wonder it took so . . . "

Snape took the fluttering letter from her and placed it near a pile of similarly sliced open envelopes, then took the current parchment away as well. "I have something I wish to show you," he stated.

This grabbed her full attention. "What is it?"

His reply was to lead the way to the hall where he gestured that she should sit. He removed something from his pocket and handed it to her.

"It's a rock wrapped with wire?" She queried, holding up a jet-black rock bundled twice around the middle with metal cord.

Snape tapped the rock and the cord fell away. Candide caught half the rock as it split and a ring that fell out of the middle.

"Hey!" she said, surprised. She scooped up the other half of the rock as it tried to roll loudly away under the couch. "Look at that, a golden ring!"

Snape sat beside and took the rock halves away and then the ring as well, so he could hold it up by the prongs of the empty setting. "This is no ordinary ring formed as the earth was. I made it." His eyes positively gleamed as he placed the ring back in her palm.

"You made the ring?" she confirmed.

"I made the gold," Snape corrected, voice low.

Candide stared at the ring while pushing it around her palm with a fingertip. "How does one make gold?"

"Out of lead. It is a base-metal transformation," Snape replied, clearly enjoying the explanation.

She stared at him. "You've been doing alchemy."

Chapter 9

Snape reached into his pocket again and pulled forth a small deep red stone, a bit large for a ring, but with a spell, the prongs of the fitting were convinced to take hold of it. As though explaining to a student, he said, "There was only sufficient ingredients left by my old mentor for a small stone. Easily enough to make the ring and . . ." He held the ring to the light. "Thirty years of elixir. Perhaps forty if one is stingy."

Her face shifted, eyes widening. "You made a Philosopher's Stone?" She accepted the ring as he held it out and also held it up to the lamp. "How . . . I didn't know there really was such a thing!"

Dryly, he said, "How else could I make gold?" He sat back casually and breathed out as though boring of the topic. "I imagined such a stone to be far more symbolic than a mere diamond, which is nearly worthless in comparison, and I have observed over the last month that burning time and money on pointless symbolic things was the purpose of the marriage ceremony. If not, it has no purpose."

She shot him a playfully dismayed look and slipped the ring on. "Stone's a . . . bit big, isn't it?"

"Once you decide to use it for elixir it won't be." He sat forward and lifted her hand to hold the ring out before them both. "But I recommend waiting until you are no longer pregnant. I have no idea what the effects might be. At best you would simply remain so longer. The consequences could be unpredictable, though."

She pulled the ring close and closed her hand over it. "No, I'd definitely wait." She held her hand out again. The stone was uneven but deep, so it caught the light and magnified it. "It's lovely though."

He held out his hand. "I'll keep it for now if you wish. Bad luck, isn't it, wearing the ring ahead of time?"

"That's the dress," she corrected, grinning. But with a vigorous tug and twist she pulled the ring off. "Fits perfectly."

"I measured. Of course," Snape intoned.

"You're a devil, you know that," she accused with affection.

"Slytherin, but why mince words?" he asked while fingering the ring thoughtfully.

She rocked sideways to bump shoulders. "Are you ready for this? I mean, you've been working day and night on the ring."

"I will never be ready, so it is no matter."

"As long as you're sober when they make you sign the certificate, so it's legal."

Snape slipped the ring away in a pocket and tapped it with a Nonobscondus Charm. "You said you did not want a binding spell. Is that still true?" his tone was too even as he asked this.

"I don't want one. I didn't think you would."

"I don't. It is a terrible ongoing coercion."

She grabbed her knee and rocked back beside him. "Some find it romantic, that total commitment."

"They deserve each other, then," Snape uttered. "And the hell the spell will put them through before one of them goes mad or they find a wizard powerful enough to cancel it, if that is possible."

Candide smiled into her sleeve. "If you even wondered why I didn't ask your opinion on flowers, now you know."

"I don't mind flowers," Snape corrected.

This caught her. "You don't?"

"Not at all," he replied. "They are composed of wonderfully useful potion ingredients."

This brought on a real laugh. "You should let that sense of humor out more. Usually you only use it for sarcasm."

He put an arm around her and she fit well nestled there. "It would ruin my reputation if I did that."

Harry did not need to move from his spot at the Weasley kitchen table; dinner and the Weasley family gathered around, except the twins and Charlie, who could not make it. Ron sat beside Harry and immediately began critiquing his sister's drawing, which Ginny put a stop to by pointing out that Harry had helped with it. When Harry looked over from Ron it was to find Molly insisting that Percy sit across from him. Percy had a distant, hard expression that lacked the normal pinching or smugness, making Harry wonder if he wasn't Moody again. Percy tore his eyes from Harry and watched Mr. Weasley enter and sit down after giving Molly a hug.

When he looked back at Harry, Harry boldly said to him, "Not yourself today again, are you?"

After a moment's consideration of the meaning of this, Percy's eyes flickered to a more normal alarm before shifting away, back to Mr. Weasley, making Harry believe it really was Percy and that he understood that Harry knew Moody had impersonated him for his Darkness Test. At least, Harry hoped he understood that.

"He comes to dinner a lot," Ginny whispered in Harry's ear with more than a hint of annoyance.

Harry wished he knew who had taught Percy to Occlude his mind. Harry, feigning a friendly tone, asked him, "How are things in the Department of Mysteries?"

Slightly mocking, Percy replied, "Mysterious. What else would they be?"

Beside Harry, Ron laughed as though this were a real joke. "Mysterious," he echoed and laughed more.

"Get any special training for that?" Harry asked.

"Quite a bit," came the flat reply. They were staring each other down now, both holding their thoughts obscured. Harry decided the game was stupid and turned to Ron to ask about his day. When the dishes were being passed and Molly asked Arthur how his day was, Harry noticed Percy set down the gravy without serving himself any and turn his attention that way. Harry realized with a jolt that he and Percy could both pry into the minds of anyone at the table, but that perhaps of the two of them, only Harry was scrupulous enough not to do it.

When Percy tore his gaze from the head of the table and picked the gravy back up and passed it without taking any, despite being about do so before, Harry asked innocently, "Learn anything?"

Percy spent an inordinate time finding a reply, which attracted the attention of most of those seated at their area of the table. "Research . . . is what we do," he said, quoting from something, most likely. "And the Mysteries, like Enforcement, offers considerable training."

Harry took his uneasy response to mean that he did not like getting caught out. For his part, Harry wondered how he was going to warn Mr. Weasley without getting pinched between his boss' strong loyalty to his family and his less strong loyalty to Harry.

Harry had not worked out how to handle this by the time he begged off that he had to go home because the next day was full of helping set up for the wedding on Monday.

It was Ginny who asked, "Why Monday?"

Harry, about to depart, felt the need to defend Candide on this point. "It's auspicious, according to the constellations, both their horoscopes," he explained. In his mind's eye he saw all the astronomical charts and plots that Candide had worked out in one of those white leather books.

"She had a joint chart made up? Those are pricey."

"She did it herself," Harry said. "Said it was just like accounting, only with parabolas, or something. Took her ages to work it all out. And the glen of her choice was free that day. For a weekend, they'd have had to wait until the kid was in Hogwarts, or so she said."

Ginny laughed. "Maybe I should rent a place now and find a boyfriend later then."

From the kitchen, Molly loudly encouraged, "Good idea, dear."

Ginny put her hand over her face.

"Well, you better get going," Ron said suddenly from where he hunched over the chess board across from Bill. When Harry waited, curious, he explained in a whisper, "Mum's got you pegged for Ginny, you know."

Ginny stuffed her hands violently into crossed mode and glared at her brother, a blush topping off the effect. "Ron . . ." she threatened.

Rescuing her, Harry said, "That's all right, Severus does too," to which Ginny gaped, "Really?"

"I really have to go now," Harry said.

Ginny pulled her artwork closer and said, "I have to finish this so I can get back to working on that sorcerer bit."

"What?" Ron and Bill both asked in unison.

"Harry said I could be a sorcerer."

The two Weasley sons turned to Harry with dismay. "What?" Bill asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. "Got to go. Really."

At home, Harry found Candide and Snape playing cards on a the stained spare door from upstairs, hovered expertly between the couches.

"Not too early, am I?" Harry asked, feeling vaguely left out even though his evening had been full of company.

"Not at all," Candide said brightly. "Show him what you made, Severus, or has he already seen it?"

Snape's hair fell forward as he fished in his pocket after touching it with his wand. "He has not." Snape held out a ring with a rather gaudily large stone.

Harry accepted it and stared at it, recognizing the color and the unusually curved faces of the asymmetrical facets. "It's a Philosopher's Stone," Harry breathed, stunned.

"Severus made it," Candide declared proudly.

Harry lifted his eyes to peer at Snape over the ring. "You did? I didn't know you knew how."

Snape held his hand out for the ring and Harry relinquished it. "It isn't so much the knowledge, which can be pieced together by anyone diligent enough, as well as practiced with deciphering the coded writing of the arcane, paranoid mind, the real sticking point is the extraordinary ingredients required. I was left just enough by Albus, it turns out." He studied the ring. "Much cheaper to make gold than to buy it. Back in the times when Galleons were more than dipped in gold it would have been easy to obtain sufficient metal."

Harry nodded vaguely. The stone made him uneasy and he was not hiding it well.

"Does it bother you?" Snape asked bluntly.

Harry tipped one shoulder. "Just bad memories," he replied, not wanting to dampen their enthusiasm, or Snape's pride. "Voldemort can't make use of it anymore."

Snape said, "It isn't a large enough stone to raise the dead. I think that is why Albus felt secure in keeping the ingredients."

Harry said, "Maybe he worried he would need to stay alive a little longer, so he kept them just in case."

Candide folded her cards together and set them down. "Is that how he lived so long?"

Snape nodded. "With judicious use of it and a little luck, you too could live to be a hundred and sixty."

Candide pulled her head back in surprise, but took the ring and examined it. "If I got rid of all the mirrors in the house, maybe. Otherwise no. Men look much better at that age than women. Women turn into white prunes . . . men turn into sages." She held the ring out to Snape. "You should use it; you're older than me. That way I can catch up." As he accepted it, she changed her mind. "Or Harry should use it. Wizardom needs him around longer than you or I."

Snape held the ring up for Harry again, but Harry did not take it. "No, keep it. It's probably the most valuable ring in the world."

Candide held out her hand, fingers splayed. "You'll have to charm it on for me . . . so it can't come off."

Snape shook his head. "In that case a thief would have to kill you for it and that would hardly be worth it."

"There are lots of theft-repelling charms," Harry offered.

Snape nodded. "We will manage something," he promised Candide.

Swaying decorations and the clashing scents of flowers spiraled in Harry's head Sunday night as he slipped fitfully into sleep. The continuously rotating streamers and the bright columns of the three-foot, white candles shifted into the dark, smoke marred walls and torches of Courtroom Ten. He was trying to explain something to the Wizengamot, trying to convince them of something, but he was doing a very poor job of it. The members' shadowed faces peered down at him from tier upon tier rising up until they tilted so the parchments before them must slide forward onto the center floor, but somehow did not.

Harry scanned for a familiar face, but found when he peered closely, each face was that of Umbridge, frog-like smile stretched unnaturally long and sinister. Grey dirt covered the floor and discolored the bottom edge of Harry's new robes. Shaking them raised clouds of choking dust. In the center of the floor, half buried in a saw-grass hillock, rose the chair and chained into it was Snape, glaring defiantly straight ahead. Beside the chair, Candide, in her tulip-like wedding dress, tugged uselessly at the chains, glancing about frequently to check if anyone noticed her doing this.

Harry struggled to find something convincing to say. Vernon Dursley approached, as tall as DeBenedictus but not any thinner, so he seemed akin to Hagrid. Dust clouds stirred around his menacing footsteps as he approached. Harry's feet tried to back off, but he forced them to remain in place by reminding himself that he'd been willing to sacrifice himself to Voldemort previously, so he should be willing to do the same to Mr. Dursley.

Dursley ranted about freaks and evil magic. From the chair, Snape hissed at him, snake-like, revealing long, sharp teeth.

Harry woke at this. Kali was hissing from her cage. Disoriented, Harry sat up and pushed the chaos of the dream down. The musty draft in the room drifted off and Kali settled back into her rag pile.

Harry dropped back onto his pillow, thinking he should not have eaten quite so many of the fire-biscuits while hanging decorations. He stared at the grey ceiling. In the dimness the patching was not apparent; the room appeared unmarred.

Harry's eyelids refused to stay open and he was sucked unwillingly back into the dream, where the troll-cousin guard approached, sparks scattering off the ax he dragged behind him. He released the chains on the chair and with a heave of his great arm, shoved Snape in Harry's direction.

Harry helped right his guardian, but found as he did so, not his Snape, but the one from the other dream, the bedraggled and defeated Snape with eyes of hazardous black ice. Harry glanced around the courtroom for help but everyone was departing. Only McGonagall turned to him and when she spoke it revealed pointed ivory teeth. Harry grabbed hold of Snape's robes and tugged him to the door, wanting only to escape, but as soon as he stepped into the corridor they Disapparated away.

Harry stared down at the trodden trash lining the road where they had arrived, and with dread glanced up to find he stood before the house in Weaver's End. Snape had hold of his wrist and Candide's and now pulled them toward the house.

"You're home now too, I suppose," he said with vague disgust.

Harry tried to resist, to pull back against the force applied to his arm. The door to the house opened and Pettigrew, wearing an oversized tea towel, stood there. He reached out a hand and the pound notes he clutched caught the breeze and fluttered away to mix with the rubbish.

Harry woke to scrambling in his pyjama pockets for a wand. Even after it was clear he lay in his own room, he took up his wand from under the pillow and held it, just to feel the warm hum of it against his fingertips. He sighed into the darkness, a noise accompanied by Kali climbing inside her cage.

Fully awake, Harry slipped out of his warm, welcome bed and over to his pets. As quietly as possible, he released them for company. The metallic sounds of turning Kali's cage latch rang starkly in the dark bedroom, making him pause to listen for footsteps before moving to the next cage.

Cuddled between his hand and his breast, he carried Kali to the window and sat on the trunk beneath it to stare out at the streetlamp, which barely illuminated even

the full width of the small road outside. A handful of bright stars glittered beyond the black branches of the stout trees across the road. Kali circled twice, brushing her soft body fur on his hand, before settling in so her only movement was the nearly imperceptible expansion and contraction of her breathing.

Her contentedness drew him in, but he felt compelled to remain alert. In his sleepy mind he needed to remain on guard to prevent that other place from encroaching upon this one, tonight of all nights. Harry rested his sweat-slippery wand on the windowsill so he would not drop it if he fell asleep; it barely fit there lengthwise. He gripped his pet with both hands, and stared out at the paltry pool of light on the tarmac beyond the crumbling garden wall.

Snape, unable to sleep for his own reasons, peered some time later through the doorway of Harry's room. A form huddled at the window, snowy owl perched on its shoulder. Orange-glowing fug haloed Harry's nose where it rested against the window pane. He looked small again, communing with his pets in this inexplicable vigil before the cold and breath-clouded window. Wanting time to understand, Snape did not immediately wake him. Careful not to disturb Harry, he leaned close to the window. Other than the empty circle of lit road and the two wan lights on the station platform, nothing was visible outside. The scene gave a sense that the world ended beyond that, no path in or out except via the starlit sky.

Snape straightened and held out three fingers for the owl, who tilted her head curiously but stepped onto them and accepted a ride back to the top of her cage. He waved one of the bedside lamps up and examined Harry from this new vantage point, wondering again why he sat in such an uncomfortable position when his bed was a mere seven feet away. Propped there, neck bent too far to the side and down, mouth parted, he did not appear even remotely powerful. As he stepped forward to lay a hand on Harry's shoulder, he fixed that much-needed notion firmly: this was first and foremost just a young man.

"Harry," Snape prompted.

Harry's head lifted and he blinked at the window in confusion. Snape had a hold of his thoughts and saw many similar vigils: summer nights away from Hogwarts waiting for owls, waiting for his friends, waiting for any hoped-for improvement in his situation. This past receded in a blink, and Harry shivered.

"Why are you out of bed?" Snape asked, not unkindly.

Harry's thoughts were Occluded then, so the only hint to an unobscured answer was in his brow curling worriedly.

Chapter 9

"I had a bad dream." Harry stood then with the easy unfolding only the young can exhibit. He stopped after a second thought to grab up his wand, taking care to hold Kali against his chest.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Snape asked.

Harry passed him on the way to the bed, where he slipped his wand inside the bottom of the pillowcase before settling in with his back against the headboard. "I don't want to bother you with it, tonight of all nights."

Snape stood beside the bed, considering before saying: "You are no less important than you were."

"I know that. But you have a big day tomorrow." Harry shivered and shrugged the duvet up to his shoulders.

Snape laid a hand on his face. "You are a little cold, but I expect that is from the window."

"It was an ordinary dream," Harry insisted.

"Not a nightmare?" Snape suggested.

"Well, maybe. But it's no matter."

Snape said, "I wish you would tell me," but it lacked command.

Harry lifted Kali out of the covers and placed her on the duvet to pet her. She stretched her membranous wings and shook the fur of her body out straight before sniffing the air in Snape's direction with her tiny black nose.

Harry said dismissively, "It's just stuff that's been happening."

"No Weaver's End in that case?"

Harry did not reply.

More firmly, Snape said, "I will allow you such an exception this evening, but not the morrow and not after."

"Fair enough," Harry said. "Good luck tomorrow," he added at Snape's retreat.

"Luck cannot favor me," Snape said.

"I don't believe that," Harry said.

A small, knowing smile transformed Snape's lips. "Remind me sometime to tell you about the Felix Felicis potion and a foolhardy brewer who made the mistake of misusing it."

Fortune Favors

Harry attended his training in the morning and was given the afternoon off, which he did not think he needed due to a full previous day of helping setup for the wedding, but his afternoon was full of last minute changes to the decorations, like swapping the gold bows for silvery green, and rearranging the placesettings in the dinner tent.

"Thanks, Harry," Candide said with real feeling when he announced things completed. Ruthie gave him a wink, which she did frequently. Candide pulled a watch from her pocket and stared at it the way one may the photo of a sworn enemy. She seemed to remember something and from another pocket, pulled out a charm on a thin chain and held it out to Harry. "Make sure Severus puts that in his pocket."

Harry held the tiny figure up to the bright ceiling. It was a terrier worked in pewter. "What's this?"

"It symbolizes loyalty," Candide said, already absorbed in a long, long list written on narrow parchment.

Pattering on the broad, white tent indicated that the intermittent light rain had chosen to return again.

"That's supposed to be good luck, right?" Candide asked Harry.

"Of course," Harry assured her, knowing no such thing.

"I told her that it was already," Carolyn complained. "She didn't believe me."

"She knows Harry wouldn't lie," Ruthie said, throwing in another wink, which made Harry wish he had simply said he did not know. This made him wonder what is was about weddings that led one to make up nice answers that were not necessarily true as often as he found himself doing.

Candide pulled a rolled parchment from the cluster in her hand and held it out. "Harry, can you mix this together . . . put some in bowls on each table?"

Harry peered at the list, seeing oak moss, larkspur, and carnation oil in a glance. "This is a potion?"

She tapped his arm with the parchment bundle. "You're as bad as Severus. It's a potpourri. The supplies are in the boxes under the table. Bad luck to mix them ahead of time, evil spirits can get into it. Or just pixies, which would be worse. And here are your boutonnieres, make sure Severus gets the rose."

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The pattering on the tent grew louder as Harry cleared a table to work at. Rather than risk misplacing the boutonnieres in the midst of all the other boxes of flowers, he pinned both on himself.

"Speaking of luck," Ruthie teased. "Only an accountant would chose a Monday to get married. The guests can better get blotto on a Friday or Saturday, you know."

Sounding like she held her nose, Carolyn countered, "Monday for wealth, Tuesday for health . . . Friday for crosses, Saturday for no luck at all."

Ruthie opined, "You operate on a very short week."

"Wednesday is the best," Carolyn said, "but Candy hates my pointing that out. She'll need the wealth Those who in July to wed, must labor for their daily bread."

Harry resisted shaking his head as he poured white angel wings into little spherical bowls, spilling some because the opening in the top was too small. He pulled his wand to spell them where they belonged, but Candide said, "Dusting the table with petals is fine. Do it to all of them."

The wind played with the clear plastic tent walls, snapping them inward and outward successively. Inside, however, barely a breeze passed through. Shrugging, Harry better spread the spill out to make it look intentional.

Candide disappeared, maids in tow, and Harry turned to find Lupin, in fine robes with a strangely Muggle cut to them, Pamela beside him. They peered about at the decorations. "I expected green," Lupin said, rocking back with his hands in his pockets to stare up at the streamers running to the tent peak. "But I expected more snakes."

Harry placed the last bowl on the last table and adjusted the spilled petals with a practiced flick of his fingers. "Snakes were right out," Harry said, laughing. "Talk about bad luck."

Lupin sniffed the bowl on the nearest table. "Never thought I'd see this day."

Harry preferred not to address such notions after the previous night's dreams. "It's good you could come," he said instead.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for . . . all the flower petals in Holland," he finished fancifully.

Others wandered in, shaking raindrops from their dress robes. Harry wandered over to Elizabeth and her mother. Elizabeth said quietly, "I convinced mum that since you're neighbors, we really should come. Not sure we can stay for the party."

"That's all right," Harry assured her, glad to see her.

Elizabeth examined the table-crowded tent and said, "Guess the other tent is for the ceremony."

"Yeah, come on. I should see that everything is set there."

Guests were slowly filling the white beribboned folding chairs. Harry returned McGonagall's dignified wave from a cluster of Hogwart's teachers. Hagrid sat off to the side on one of the trunks the tents had been packed in.

"Hullo, Harry!" he shouted, voice shaking the raindrops in a noisy rush from the tent roof.

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry returned.

When he turned, Harry found himself faced with Shazor and Gretta. Shazor appeared to be sizing up Candide's side of guests. Harry withstood what was certain to be too many firm handshakes that evening and found them seats before the teachers.

When the guests were all seated, including Hermione, who a bit shyly joined the teachers, Harry stood at the back, just outside the main part of the tent, under an overhand with a large flap that allowed in the mist of the rain. Lupin saw him there and slipped out of his row to join him, Pamela ducking to follow.

"Bride is always late," Pamela opined.

"How about the groom?" Harry countered.

Lupin glanced around. "Where's Severus?"

Harry shrugged. "I think he'll show," he offered, finding certainty in that based almost entirely on the ring. He had not seen Snape all afternoon, partly this was necessity so the bride and groom could avoid an unfortuitous meeting, but Harry would feel better if he had glimpsed Snape at least once.

The assembled inside were chatting quietly, showing no restlessness. Harry felt he floated above the trampled grass, or perhaps it was just the way the light came through the tent equally from all sides as though the world itself were aglow. Outside, the quaint glen surrounded them, unobserved.

An Apparition pop! made them both turn to the tent flap but it was not Snape, it was a charcoal smeared little wizard in a smashed top hat, carrying a telescoping bottle-brush broomstick.

"I'm not late, am I?" the man asked, sounding very concerned.

Harry was about to ask who he was, in that instant wondering if the man thought somehow that he was the groom.

Lupin said, "No, just in time. Go on in."

The man half danced his way inside with a little skip and jump and stood at the back. Harry could see his shadow on the rear of the tent, broom standing up beside him like a furry umbrella.

"What was that?" Harry sidled over to Lupin to ask.

He rocked up on his toes. "The chimney sweep, of course. Now we can start."

"Right. Just need a groom."

"You're the best man, you know. If Severus doesn't show you have to take his place."

"I don't believe you," Harry said, despite believing pretty much all the other silly things he had heard the last two days, including the part about the shoe shaped cake that Candide was supposed to get symbolically hit over the head with.

Lupin just grinned.

"Tonks wouldn't like that," Harry said, which caused the Auror to appear from inside.

"Wouldn't like what?" she asked, hooking her arm through Harry's. She wore knee-length pink robes that were longer in the back than front.

Harry raised his eyes from her exposed legs with some effort. "If I had to marry the bride in Severus' stead."

"Oh, that's not true. You're really here to help fight off the bride's family."

"That I'm well aware of," Harry stated tiredly.

"Besides, there is no bride," Tonks pointed out.

"She's around somewhere, getting ready. Severus we're less certain about."

A voice said, "pssst!" from the tent flap. It was Ruthie. "Harry, got a Sickle on you?"

Harry fished in his pocket, but shook his head because he only had a very precise number of Galleons. Lupin held out one. Ruthie pointed and said, "Give it to Harry, then Harry put it in your pocket and take it out again."

Having no good reason to argue the wisdom of that, Harry did so, then walked over and held it out.

"Got anything blue?"

"No," Harry replied. He could see that she stood under a very large pearlescent umbrella, one that would work well for Hagrid. Rain poured off the back edge of it in a waterfall.

"She'll have to use my shoelace then. Don't know why she doesn't want to." She shuffled off in her iridescent blue-green gown to the smaller tent beside the enchanted spring that made the glen such an attractive spot for weddings. At the moment the rain was causing the rock pool to overflow. Harry wondered as she disappeared into the seemingly wardrobe-sized tent whether he should have mentioned that they lacked a groom.

Harry walked back to the inner tent flap and watched Tonks retake her seat beside Shacklebolt. He stared across the heads of the assembled, some leaning together to whisper, others staring at the decorations. The Supreme Mugwump – a worrisomely aged wizard with a silver beard and silver-flecked red hair – sat serenely at the front acting accustomed to this sort of delay. As long as he didn't fall asleep, Harry thought.

When he turned back, the tent flapped opened and Snape appeared, brow surly and dripping water off his hair and the end of his nose.

Lupin strode over and tugged him off to the side, out of view of the guests who were peering back over their shoulders. With quick motions he dried Snape, straightened his robes, and pinned his cloak diagonally across his back, revealing the shiny blue lining. "That's more like it," he admonished.

Snape simply stared at his old enemy and Harry thought that even without Legilimency, Harry could read his thoughts and they were somewhere along the lines of how did it come to this? Snape peered over at Harry and his expression did not change.

"Ready?" Harry asked, as though everything were right on schedule and perfectly expected.

Snape nodded, just once, as if afraid his head might disobey and start swinging side to side instead. Harry unpinned the dill and yellow rose boutonniere from his own robes and pinned it on Snape. He straightened his own white chrysanthemum and lily and took Snape's arm the way he might McGonagall's. Snape arrested his leading him inside and gestured sharply to Lupin, who came closer. "Make certain the shoe-cake melts in the rain, won't you?"

Lupin said, "Consider it mush."

"Thank you," Snape said, seeming like that notion bolstered him.

Harry attempted again to lead him in, and this time he allowed it. The crowd quieted as they made their way. Harry sat him in the front row, alone. He bent to his ear and whispered, "Do make it look less like you're facing the guillotine." To which, Snape relaxed marginally. Harry left him sitting there, and thought things better move ahead without delay from this point.

On the other side, Candide's uncle and father had both stood. Harry thought they were having an nonvocal argument about whether her uncle should give her away as planned, but in the end Farnsworth, Candide's father, gestured for Harry to lead the way back down the aisle. Harry glanced at him following in curiosity.

At the rear, he said, "Changed my mind," quite gruffly.

"All right," Harry said, still in the mode of taking things as they came. The world, through a veil of too little sleep, felt tenuously balanced and he feared tipping it either direction by trying. Fortunately, letting it run along on its own was working out.

The massive umbrella stuck itself halfway through the back flap and Candide appeared, holding her dress up out of the fat droplets clinging to the battered grass.

"We set?" she asked.

Harry nodded and she bit her lip nervously. He was glad he had not worried her about Snape's late appearance. They could all now pretend he had been here all along. Candide bent awkwardly to reach under her broad dress, female hands of support instinctively coming in on each side. She pulled off her shoe and shook it to get the sickle to slide to the heel before putting it back on. To her sister she asked, "How do I look?"

Ruthie pinched her cheek in reply.

"Wish I could see myself," Candide muttered. "After all this effort for luck, this better be the luckiest wedding in history." She sighed and smoothed her dress and shook out the row of lace handkerchiefs sown at the hem. "Go on, Harry. Wave at the musicians to start."

Lupin waggled his eyebrows at Harry and they slipped in together. Harry went all the way to the front and gestured at the quintet and they gamely started sawing at their instruments, transforming the air of the tent into sound.

Harry remembered the trinket as he took up a position beside Snape. He slipped it out and handed it to him. Snape did not put it in his pocket, but held it in his hand and stared down at it, which meant Harry could no longer see his expression through his hair.

Harry glanced over the crowd and found Anita near the back on the end of a row, eyes disconcertingly distant even though they focused on the two of them standing there.

The music changed pace and Harry walked back to meet Ruthie and Carolyn and lead them in to the left as he had been told. The necessity of this and their bright dresses had been explained as a way of confusing evil spirits about whom the bride may be. Harry's suggestion about simply charming the bride against any hexes was not welcomed quite the way he expected.

These preparatory thoughts continued running through his mind as he resumed his place beside Snape. They represented the necessary momentum that would continue to drive events on the proper course, which seemed the only hope.

Everyone stood, including the Mugwump, to greet the bride, who kissed her father on the cheek, further reddening his over-stressed face. The Mugwump smiled serenely at the couple when they arranged themselves and faced him. He pulled out a gold-tipped wand and charmed them both with a tap on the head. Harry could not hear the spell, but he hoped it was something akin to a Mutushorum that would prevent either of them from bolting.

The Mugwump's face was as wizened as tree bark and his hands as quaky as leaves, but his voice carried authority as he addressed the guests and the couple and went on at some length about the point of it all. Harry found his shoulders unclenching with relief. No one spoke up when asked if they knew of any binding spells that should prevent this marriage, even though the Mugwump keenly demanded: "Anyone, anyone?" He then muttered something about preventing exploding grooms before moving on to the vows.

Candide had no trouble with this part, beyond a sniffle or two. Snape on the other hand seemed to require an application of great willpower to repeat what he was told to say. The Mugwump slowed down even, to make sure Snape was following, which only prolonged the agony. Harry closed his eyes. It's not a spell, he thought at Snape. It's just words, promises. They're only as important as you make them. But then it occurred to Harry that maybe Snape was making them very important, hence the pain. Dumbledore's past words floated through his thoughts, saying that Snape took nothing for granted. This certainly would all be easier if you did take it all for granted, he considered of the vows. Have, hold, faithfulness, partnership, friendship, forever . . . there were quite a number of words in there, most all of them a kind of binding.

Harry rubbed his hands together; his fingers were cold. He raised his head when the couple turned to face each other as indicated by the shuffling of a large dress. Snape

appeared to have recovered himself partly as he took the ring from the Mugwump, who had charmed it with a few spells to prevent loss, especially through a drain, and to deter theft. As Snape slipped it on Candide's finger, the Mugwump seemed then to recognize the stone because his face left its serene state and entered one of surprise and perhaps covetousness.

That particular ring meant more than forever, Harry considered, and it meant more than the words in any event, and this let him relax completely as the Mugwump pronounced them married.

A pause ensued after the guests shuffled in place in preparation for departing.

"Go on then," the Mugwump prodded. He was bent over more now, perhaps having tired of holding himself up straight against old age. "Why some of you young people have to be told to kiss flummoxes me."

Snape stared at Candide, thinking of the waiting crowd, Harry suspected. He shucked his pinned cloak free and raised it betwixt them and the rest of the room, hiding their heads as he bent in. Harry ducked to fight an urge to burst out laughing.

After they straightened, it was clear that Candide was also laughing. The Mugwump gestured over his head with a swishing motion. "Off with you now."

Yellow flower petals and sweetmeats rained down from tent ceiling in a line to cover the white runner leading out. After a brief adjustment on how their arms should be linked, the two of them strode out, Candide ducking, hand shielding her head.

Harry caught up with them at the rear, where Ruthie's massive umbrella was put to use getting them all to the next tent, which from the outside was only as large as a beach hut.

Ruthie let Lupin take the umbrella to ferry others through the rain. Snape still had Candide's arm linked through his as he stared at the tent full of empty tables. Harry pulled out his wand and one-by-one ignited the rows of tall candles lining the walls and the smaller ones on the tables. The space took on an honestly romantic glow.

Harry joined his guardian and Candide where they stood waiting by the tent flap to greet the guests. "How're you doing, Severus?" he asked.

"The worst is over," Snape stated.

There was not time to address Candide's bemused expression before Shazor and Gretta appeared. Shazor was perfunctory, but Gretta gave hugs down the line. The bride's father, despite changing his mind about giving her away, bowed rather than

shake hands with Snape, although he did so with Harry. The teachers came through next. McGonagall greeted them all with grace, but her crooked smile hinted at words too pointed for the moment. It was Trelawney who first requested one of the handkerchiefs off the dress hem to "carry off some good fortune." A few others, mostly children, did this as well, as did the Mugwump himself, who stashed it neatly in his breast pocket and fluffed the points where they stuck out. Harry needed nudging to be reminded he had to pay. He fished the brand new white leather drawstring purse containing fifteen Galleons out of his pocket and caught up with the curve-backed Mugwump where he stood off to the side, hat in his hand, deciding where to sit.

"Ah, young man," he said wistfully, weighing the purse before putting it away with a spell that did not involve going to his pocket. Harry believed that closed the conversation and started to turn, to make his way back to the greeting line when the old wizard said, "I remember you from Albus' funeral, but we did not get a chance to be introduced."

Harry said some words about that as he remembered that day without really wanting to.

The Mugwump looked him over and said, "Ah, like all young people, you have things to be doing. Go on then."

Most of the guests were inside or had made their goodbyes – like Elizabeth and her mother – when Anita slipped in with the last group. She and Snape greeted each other perfunctorily before she introduced herself to Candide. Candide insisted that she stay for the party, which she agreed to do and then headed for a seat without another word. Harry hoped all this self-control continued even after the many cases of prosecco stacked in the corners began to flow.

Harry took his seat between Snape and Shazor at the long narrow head table after everyone else had situated themselves at the round tables. The caterer's elves then did their magic and bowls of sugared almonds appeared as well as bread. One might have thought the wedding was fifteen hours rather than fifteen minutes the way the guests tore into these tokens.

Candide leaned over and asked in concern, "What happened to the shoe cake? I just remembered we skipped breaking that over my head."

"It got wet," Harry said.

"Oh. All right. Shame. It's good luck."

Harry leaned over farther. "Do you really believe that much in luck?" he asked in concern. The obsessive preparations had maxxed out his tolerance for irrational behavior.

"Do you really believe in prophecies?" she returned.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again. Snape said, "She's got you there."

Prosecco was poured for all but the wedding couple, who instead jointly poured mead into a beaten up old chalice that sported the selective gleam indicative of a recent desperate polishing. Candide took a small sip from this while the guests all started in on their own drinks. Snape followed by more than making up for her dainty helping.

Harry had his crystal goblet, which he was certain he had not emptied so far, topped up by a passing elf and then resisted drinking more of it immediately. When the crowd settled down, he stood, which finished quieting everyone except for some chairs squeaking when rotated for a better view.

"Thank you all for coming," Harry said.

"Wouldn't have missed it," Mr. Weasley's voice floated over the assembled crowd.

The crowd chuckled faintly in agreement. Harry said, "I was warned I had to say something and I've made a lot of speeches before, some I've even written ahead of time, but this one feels more important than the others and I did not figure out quite what I wanted to say until now." More eyes in the room turned and fixed on him as he spoke and the interest level rose. "This is really big day," he said, unwillingly remembering that he himself had been the first major roadblock to the two of them being together.

"Some people just have families . . . and some of us have to put them together." He glanced at Candide and worried that he was overwhelming her already given the shine on her eyes. The pattering rain above faded, allowing him to speak closer to normal.

"We're stronger as a unit than as individuals. But we have to give up something to be a unit and that's what today's about, pledging that the unit will be more important in the future."

He glanced at Snape, who was fixated on the chalice set halfway between him and Candide.

"Most of you who know Severus from before are probably pretty surprised to be here right now."

While the crowd laughed lightly, Snape made a motion, but it was just to smooth his eyebrow.

"But I'm not actually surprised. Well, I probably was at first, but not after I thought it over." In his mind, Harry considered that if Snape could keep Voldemort happy,

that he ought to be able to keep anyone happy, should he chose to. "He's very good at this father thing, so I'm certain he can manage the husband one too, if he has a mind to succeed at it." To Candide, he added, "Don't worry, he wouldn't get into this unless he intended to take it seriously. I don't see anything but a successful future for both of you together and it is wonderful that you're brave enough to give it a go."

Harry had let his glass fall almost back to the table. He raised it again. "So, a toast to the triumph of hope over . . . better sense."

"Hear, hear," various guests uttered and silence fell as everyone drank.

A knife clanged on a plate as McGonagall stood up two tables away. "If I may add a few words?"

Harry waved that she certainly could and resumed his seat. Under his breath and behind his hand, Snape uttered, "Why did you tell her 'yes'?"

Harry chuckled. "It'll all be over soon."

Snape drank another sip of mead as McGonagall began. "It was a lovely ceremony. I am quite happy for Severus as well as pleasantly surprised that he has found someone compatible."

Harry leaned closer to better hear Snape say, "I must be slipping. Usually I know what she's getting even for."

Harry said, "You are slipping, but we like you better that way."

This generated a sharp glance. McGonagall went on, cutting off the follow-on glare.

"I've known Severus for, oh, upwards of twenty-six years, first as a student and then as a sometimes adversarial colleague. We've been through some very difficult times and I'll second Harry's contention that we are stronger as a unit because it was the unit of many of you here, bound to Albus Dumbledore, that is the only reason so many can be here today to enjoy this lovely party."

She turned her dark green robed self to better address the room rather than the head table. "Severus doesn't always think the best of people, which can make him a little difficult to get along with, but there is no one you would rather have guarding your back." She turned again and raised her glass, which glittered in the now dominating candlelight. "I wish the three of you prosperity. I wish you peace, for what it's worth, but knowing two of you as I do, I'm not sure my wishes are going to have any effect. I believe Ms. Breakstone had a proper preview of what she has got herself into before coming today. She is presumably ready for a life of adventure and she is in good hands. So I wish her, especially, but all three of you, the best of luck."

Chapter 9

"I can top that," Ruthie said while glasses were being refilled. She stood on Candide's other side, sizing them all up while the guests adjusted. Candide dropped her head and shook it faintly. Snape handed her the mead cup from which she took another very small sip.

Ruthie took in the room next with her skilled eye, gauging the audience. "My sister, Candy. Always did everything just right. Perfectly. Perfect grades. Perfectly neat room. Mum and dad's favorite. Used to drive me bonko when we were kids. Years and years of this never living up to my sister." She indicated Snape with a movement of her glass. "I don't know where you found this one, but you've more than made up for everything." Ruthie leaned down and asked, "Where did you find him, anyway?"

Candide had to clear her throat to be heard. "Hogsmeade."

"Hog's Head?" Ruthie echoed loudly, to a few chuckles.

"HogsMEADE," Candide repeated.

Ruthie shrugged as if there was little difference or she did not believe her. "Well, I like this bloke, but others are needing more time to get to know him. We'll get there, I'm sure," she said amiably. "He's trouble, I can tell, but Candy needs balancing out for the rest of our sake. Between the two of them we've got one tolerable person here."

Ruthie leaned on the table with one broad hand, straining it, judging by the creaks. "You know how you are supposed to tell embarrassing anecdotes about one or the other of the couple when you do these toasts?" she asked the assembled. "Well, trouble is, Candy doesn't have any to tell. I would know, I've been her sister her whole life. Marrying this bloke is the only mortifying thing she's ever done and you all already know about it . . . because you're here. Takes the fun out of telling it to you."

Harry and Candide turned at the same time to check that Snape was still all right. Ruthie, with a crooked grin turned too.

Snape said, "Clearly, you don't know me very well."

Harry grinned at the implied threat.

Ruthie returned, "We have loads of time now to get to know each other. You have a house-elf . . . we, or I will at least, be over every Sunday." This generated more laughs.

"I look forward to it," Snape said easily, eyes keen.

Ruthie laughed the most of all. "If anyone had told me I'd inherit a brother-in-law who teaches dark magic . . . 'scuse me, Defense against dark magic and that I'd inherit Harry Potter as a nephew . . . pshew, I think I'd have suggested they seriously consider having themselves measured up for the proverbial tight white robes that buckle in the back." She raised her glass which triggered Harry to release the breath he held. "But welcome to our family. It's a very boring family where nothing much happens, and I'm very grateful for your livening it up."

With that, conversations broke out at every table and the food appeared. Everyone tucked into their plates and the conversation noise rose and fell pleasantly. Harry kept tabs on the bride and groom but they behaved as though this was just another ordinary dinner, as did most of the guests.

Long after the tables had been pushed aside and the makeshift wooden floor thinned out of eager dancers. Candide returned to the head table.

"All right, I've danced with every other male; it's your turn now."

Snape, who was sitting back from the table, hand on a goblet, said, "You danced with Hagrid?"

Candide propped her hands on her hips, an action accentuated by her dress rustling. "Yes. How could you have missed that? He is easy to dance with, I'll admit . . . you put both feet on one of his and he does the dancing."

"You have not danced with Harry, here."

Candide stared at Harry. "Oh, you're right. Come on, Harry."

Harry, who had just sat back down after dancing with Anita a second time, pushed himself back to his feet.

Over beside the quintet, Harry asked her, "Glad now that it's almost over?"

"No, now I'm not."

Harry kept one eye on the head table where Shazor and Farnsworth were smoking cigars and chatting with the groom. "Everyone behaved themselves," Harry commented as they circled.

"Yes, they did. Hey, you're not a bad dancer."

"Hm?" Harry asked, watching as Farnsworth grew animated discussing something.

"I said, your girlfriend is lucky you are such a good dancer."

Chapter 9

Harry glanced over at Tonks who had only danced with him once on the theory that flaunting themselves in front of both Shacklebolt and Mr. Weasley was not a good idea.

"You're very distracted," she said, more concerned than criticizing.

"I feel like I should keep an eye on things," he explained, finally turning to her. Her eye makeup had spread, heavily accenting her eyes. Her spell-fixed hair was still exactly the same.

She said, "Your little speech was nice. I think that was the right way to explain it to Severus."

"Was it that obvious I was talking to him?" Harry asked as they passed Hermione and Hagrid with a shuffle of steps to avoid serious injury.

"I don't think so. It was fine."

The song ended and Harry took her be-ringed hand and led her back to the head table. "All yours," he announced.

Snape, after a brief hesitation, stood and wove his way through the blue smoke of his neighbors to come around the table. A tango started up. When the two of them reached the raised interlocked platform, Snape waved the musicians to a halt and asked for something slow. The bride and groom proceeded to, not so much dance as, turn slowly in one corner of the dance floor.

A green robe cut into Harry's vision and McGonagall and Hagrid took up seats nearby, Hagrid on the trunk which he dragged over for that purpose. From where Harry sat above him, he could see two broken ivory combs stuck in his wiry hair. The three of them stared across the room at Snape and Candide dancing.

Hagrid said, "Aye, Dumbledore'd've like ter seen this."

McGonagall nodded sagely.

Hermione came over, empty goblet in hand, which she set down on the table beside some others abandoned there. "I should go," she said, slightly slurred. "Lots of arranging things for the term . . . Oh, hello Headmistress."

"Hermione," McGonagall greeted her, wearing that sly smile again.

Harry stood and saw his friend out. Hermione gave him a long hug before she Apparated away. Tonks was behind him when he turned back to the tent, Shacklebolt at her side. "We have to go too. Call."

Harry shook her hand with a professional air, feeling a little neglected by her rule for the evening and wanting to make a point. She frowned and they disappeared as well. Harry remained standing in the crystal starlight. The tent fabric glowed richly with candlelight as though with the size charming, the light concentrated as it escaped to the outside.

Footsteps made Harry turn and he was surprised to find Moody standing there, wearing dress robes, his hair slicked back. Harry wondered how long he had been around and how else he had been disguised if he had been around. A mustache would not have sufficed given his distinctive posture.

"Enjoying the party?" Harry asked with no friendliness.

"The whole rest of the Order was invited," Moody pointed out. "It was a good chance to listen in on what everyone is doing."

Harry decided to simply ignore him and moved to re-enter the tent. Moody halted him with: "I want to know what you think you're up to."

Harry rotated back slowly. "I'm at a wedding . . . a very important one that I don't feel like wasting time talking to you during."

Moody's magical eye examined Harry. "Someone's been tracking me, I've figured out," he said. "And I don't like it. Reminds me of the old days a bit too much."

Inside, the music changed tunes, picking up the pace slightly which made it merge better with the bubbling water of the spring. "If you think it's me . . . believe me, I've had enough of you. I would hardly seek out more of you." Harry started to walk away and stopped long enough to say. "Only a handful of people know you're alive. How hard could it be to figure out who it is?"

Moody grunted. "My figuring exactly, so that's why I'm here, asking you. I thought you the most likely to manage it without my catching you at it, seeing as how you have certain, shall we say, skills in this area."

"Well, it's not me," Harry said with feeling and slipped back inside the tent.

Harry's annoyed mood eased the moment he stepped inside the flickering, candlelit space. He slid back along the head table to the chair beside Candide's. Snape wasn't at the table; he appeared to be dancing with McGonagall. Harry squinted across the tent at this, stunned.

"She insisted on getting a turn," Candide said, sounding amused.

"Amazing," Harry uttered. He pushed aside a few stray goblets and a scattering of colorful dried fruit from the cake and put his chin down on his hand to watch the dance floor without having to hold up his head.

Candide scooted her chair closer and put an arm around him. "Thanks for letting me in, Harry."

Acute embarrassment made him wince. He had to lift his head to talk. "Sorry about that."

"What? Oh, that's not what I meant." She laughed lightly. "I meant the way you two had such a language of your own. I needed some translation and eventually got it."

"Oh," Harry uttered, partly relieved by her explanation. His eyes were getting as heavy as his head. The caterer's elves had not been around for the last hour, which was a shame as Harry could use that coffee now that he had turned down earlier with the cake. Candide's parents were dancing as well as Ruthie and Hagrid and Trelawney with an elderly member of the Order. Anita sat in the corner talking to Professor Sinistra, who nodded frequently as Anita gestured. Shazor and Gretta occupied a table about as far away as possible, near the door flaps. Harry considered that if this evening could work out, then pretty much anything could.

Candide's arm still rested reassuringly over Harry's back. She did not seem so much a mother, he mused, as an extension of his adoptive father. Or, if Ruthie's contention that the two of them formed a different whole was correct, she completed Snape, which was a comfortable thought.

The warm honeycomb atmosphere exuded by the candles overlaid the wet fresh leafiness of the glen. The air and the rhythmic music lulled Harry's eyes closed. He tugged off his glasses, intending just to rest his eyes a minute by pressing them against his arm.

He must have dozed because he woke with a small jerk when hands came down on his shoulders. A voice, Snape's, somewhere behind his left ear said, "It IS late."

Harry sat straight and rubbed his eyes. The music still played but there were just two couples on the dance floor and the tables had cleared further. Snape pressed Harry's hair back, giving it a tug as though to be sure he had his attention.

"You did not have so much to drink, did you?" he asked.

"No," Harry said, wiping his glasses before replacing him. "And look who's talking."

Snape's hand came down again on his shoulder, but he did not have a response. Across the room, Harry became aware of a stereo vision of Anita on one side and Shazor on the other, both watching them with expressions that were difficult to decode. Harry

pretended not to notice. Unexpectedly, Snape brushed his hair back again, making Harry wonder if he was making some kind of point. If so, Harry was glad for it.

Anita approached as did McGonagall with Richard and the remaining teachers in tow. McGonagall said, "I believe it is time for us all to do as Harry is trying to, as lovely as the evening has been."

Anita, hands clasped before her almost placatingly, said, "Perhaps time to take your wife and son home, Severus. It IS nearly 2:00."

Harry did not want to come down in support of the critical side of her twisted, half-acknowledging statement, nevertheless silently agreed due to his training the next day. "Who's cleaning up?" Harry asked.

"The caterer's elves will return at dawn," Candide supplied.

The musicians ended the song and began to pack up their music stands and instruments. After the teachers moved on, Shazor and Gretta approached as well as Candide's parents, Anita stepped aside but did not retreat. Ruthie rocked on her toes behind them all. The tension level rose. Harry would have stood, but Snape's hand was still firmly on his shoulder.

Gretta broke the silence with, "Lovely wedding, my dear," she said to Candide. Other similar murmurs were offered and the group, with last good wishes, moved on out of the tent, leaving the three of them there with just the musicians who were stacking their large instrument boxes in a considerably small trunk, which had been hovered beside their platform.

"They all behaved well," Harry said. A thought then occurred to his tired brain. He asked Snape, "You didn't potion the prosecco or something?"

Vaguely insulted sounding, Snape said, "No."

Harry stood finally. "Not that I care . . ." And at that late moment he certainly did not. "I just wondered if we could expect them to behave next time."

Snape said, "Unlikely" at the same instant Candide said, "I doubt it."

Eyes heavy, Harry peered back and forth between them. He felt dizzily pleased with the day. Eyes smiling at Snape he said, "Shall we go home?"

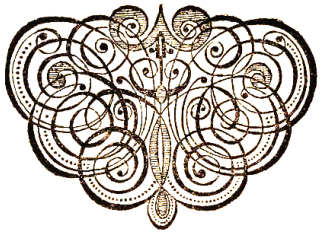
Snape bowed in place of a nod and Candide jumped over beside him, saying, "I have to side-along. It's bad luck for the bride to Apparate herself to her new house." With much movement of the ever resilient dress, she tugged off her left shoe, dumped the sickle onto the table and tossed the shoe aside. "Okay, all good."

They both stared at here. Harry said, "Well, we wouldn't want to break the streak we have going today."

Snape took her arm with accentuated formality and the three of them Disapparated.

Author's Notes: Sorry, got to get to sleep to get on a plane for home tomorrow. No time even for a preview. I'll add one when I get home.

Chapter 19.



A Darker Place

Quiet settled over the house in Shrewsthorpe as Snape, divested of his shimmering blue-lined dress cloak, sat on the bed to unwind the long laces of the dress boots he wore. A shush-shush followed Candide as she strode to her wardrobe and considered herself in the narrow mirror inside the door.

"Dress worked out well," she said in a fatigue-tinged voice. "Pearl was a good choice."

"An overly sedulous decision for something to be worn once."

She shrugged, smiling faintly. "I need help getting out of it. Bad luck to use a spell."

"Ah," Snape uttered. "So, a well-designed garment you are saying." He stood with deliberate movements and stopped behind her, studying the fifty or so hooks and eyelets lining her spine. "This would constitute cruelty under the right circumstances."

She laughed lightly. "You would object to that?" she asked doubtfully.

He peered at her in the mirror. "You have a bit more of your sister in you than you let on. Don't know where you hid her . . . Certainly no room in this dress." He started in on the eyelets, from the top.

"So," she began. "While I have your attention . . ."

"Less of it than you might imagine . . ." he came back, frowning at getting his fingers behind the fabric to gain enough slack to continue unhooking beyond the looser high neck.

She lifted her ring hand and stared at it before dropping it back to her side. "You said, I do, but there are other things you've never said."

This garnered a glare in reflection. "And?"

"Hm," she said, pushing her unruly hair back. The spell holding it in place finally had worn off. "I'm curious," she said as he made it beyond the tough section where the fabric was pulled taut by her shoulder blades and sped up somewhat. She moved a quarter-turn to see him at least a little in the mirror. "Have you ever told Harry that you love him?"

His voice was much closer to stern as he replied, "You aren't in a competition with Harry."

"I know that. I wouldn't have even tried if I was," she admitted.

The gained only a disturbed shake of Snape's head. More eyelets were set free. Snape said, "To answer your question, however, the answer is 'yes'."

"Oh, good," she said. "He deserves to hear it, and there is hope."

More shaking of Snape's veiling hair ensued. More than half the eyelets were undone now, revealing the fine lace of an undergarment that almost no one would see.

"What did he say in response?" Candide asked. "Or am I prying?"

Snape huffed inaudibly. "Clearly the topic requires resolution as much the dress does, so I suppose not. But in answer to that question, he said nothing and when I myself pried, he said it was obvious. Harry does not care about words nearly as much . . ." He paused for a tough eyelet that kept re-hooking as though cursed to do so. It gave in only when it was uprooted. "He cares about actions. He cares solely that someone has faith and trust in him, and at least makes an attempt at understanding."

"He likes to be taken care of, doesn't he?"

"Not really." Less than ten eyelets remained at the edges of a decorative flap at the bottom edge of the bodice, which an oversized fake button appeared to hold closed.

"He doesn't complain that you check on him at night."

"That is a glaring exception. It is the singular thing he needed most as a child that he did not have." These last few eyelets made for quick work. "There." He stared at her in the mirror. "Why are we discussing Harry?"

Despite the topic being unimportant for the following hour, after the previous nights' experience of finding Harry sleeping in the window, Snape snuck away just at dawn to check on him.

Harry was sleeping only lightly and turned when the door opened. In support of Snape's earlier assertion, Harry sat up, eyes grateful for the company.

"Did you sleep at all?" Snape asked.

"Did you?" Harry returned coyly.

"I'm not answering that," he asserted firmly. "I only ask because I wondered if you had the same dream again?"

"What dream?"

"The one last night that sent you keep vigil at the window in a fit of uncomfortable nocturnal arrangement."

"Oh, no. It was a dream, anyhow. Nothing more."

"Still doubting the strength of the fabric of reality?" Snape asked, slightly mocking.

Harry frowned and crossed his legs under the covers. "Maybe."

Lecturing, Snape said, "To damage reality without possessing a time-turner would require sorcery of unimagined power. You are the veritable ant in the realm of what would be necessary to even so much as tweak the thread of existence. To break and reweave it is inconceivable. You grossly flatter yourself by even worrying about it."

"What happened to me, then?" Harry demanded.

Snape's expression grew less fierce. "I'll concede that I do not know."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Immensely. But let me worry about your disturbed visions of my life, all right?"

Harry sighed and rubbed his aching eyes. "All right."

That evening, after a sleepy-eyed day where training felt more like drudgery than it should, Harry settled in with his books across from Snape, who worked at filling in fancy parchment forms bearing the Hogwart's seal on the top of each.

"Hogwarts stuff?" Harry asked. "Lupin can't do that?"

Snape pulled his sleeve out of the way and considered what he had just written while it dried. "Unless I wish to conceded my position fully to Remus, I feel I should do

the official paperwork. I also should make my presence felt at the Welcoming Feast as well as several staff meetings over the next week."

Harry considered how each year the students took early key impressions away from examining the teachers at the feast. "Good idea."

Candide arrived home just as Harry's stomach complained about wanting dinner. "Sorry I'm late," she said, setting a teetering stack of files on the sideboard. Dinner appeared shortly after she sat down. She jumped up again and fetched down the chalice used at the wedding and poured mead into it. She took a sip from it and set it before Snape's plate.

"It's the honeymoon," she explained to Harry's questioning look.

"I thought that was supposed to be a holiday of sorts," he said.

"That kind will have to wait," she said. "The Canaries or something would be nice. It's really getting into the busy season at work now and Severus won't have another break until Christmas."

When the dinner dishes disappeared, they all settled into their respective work.

This routine continued the rest of the week. In the late afternoon after training, Harry only joined his friends at a pub briefly if he did at all. Ron teased him about this one evening, but Harry just shrugged, knowing that Ron, with his constant overdose of family, could not appreciate Harry's wanting to capture this last two solid weeks of it.

Hogwarts' stone walls exuded a warm mustiness from summer's disuse. In an office on the fourth floor, overlooking the courtyard and the keep, Hermione blew her hair out of her eyes and pondered how best to arrange the next trunk of books. Unlike the two bookshelves full that occupied the office when she arrived, hers spanned a diverse collection of topics and it seemed a shame to disturb the lived-in organization of the dog-earred, old books with her own disparate and sometimes un-read ones.

She was just considering where to obtain another set of shelves to keep things completely separate when she realized the time, only by the accident of having a post owl arrive with the afternoon edition of the Prophet.

Hermione stared at the clock, brain unable to comprehend that she was supposed to be elsewhere just at that twitchy movement of the minute hand that landed it

straight up. She scrambled for her new gold-edged notebook, pens, ran back for an ink bottle, exchanged that for a Never-out quill, grabbed all of it up instead along with the attaché her mother had bought her upon getting her job at the solicitors', and ran out of her office.

The stairways down never contained so many steps as they did this trip, but she slowed on the last set to catch her breath, deciding that being later yet for her first staff meeting would be worse than showing up breathless and clearly at the tail end of an arduous run.

With one last deep breath and a quick finger brush of her hair, she stepped out of the Entrance Hall and into the staff room. The teachers, in all their varied colors and sizes, were standing around the long table, chatting, catching up on personal events from the summer. Hermione breathed out, heart still running fast.

McGonagall turned casually from speaking with Professor Sprout as Hermione placed her things out on the table, trying to ignore what she was certain was a borderline sneering amusement from Professor Snape, who stood off the corner of the table, facing Professor Vector as though mid-conversation.

"Are you getting settled in, Hermione?" McGonagall gallantly asked.

Hermione relaxed, being on time was not a test, it turned out. "Working on it, Professor. Lots of books to unpack still. Oh, where do I get some additional shelves?" she asked before McGonagall could turn away again. She thought this an excellent question, given the implication of it.

"Just ask Mr. Filch. He will come install them."

Hermione had heard about the new Filch. "Right," she managed to answer anyway. This one may actually be a test, she decided.

Hermione took a seat as the others, on some unseen cue, did so. Across the table Trelawney blinked her amplified eyes at her as though wondering why she was there. Hermione opened her lovely new gold-leaf notebook with an audible crack of the leather spine and listened as changes in marking and house points policies were considered.

At the end of the congenial meeting, McGonagall waved Hermione over to her side. "Take a seat, Hermione," she said as Snape glided over to stand on the headmistress' other side. He preferred to stand and glare down, it seemed, because he remained standing as McGonagall continued and the room cleared out.

"This institution has a program for new teachers who . . . may require it. You are a sharp young woman, Hermione dear, but brains alone does not a teacher make. I am

therefore assigning you a mentor to assist you. Severus has agreed to take the first round of mentoring."

Hermione glanced up at him, and then quickly down again before considering in private that for most of her school years, he had been her least-favorite teacher, although, she reconsidered, that had been based on a personal dislike, rather than a professional one. She composed her thoughts toward the future before looking up again. His eyes narrowed with a twitch before appearing grudging.

McGonagall went on, "You will report to Severus weekly to discuss how your classes are going as well as grading criteria, problem students, detention policy, etc." She stacked her notes together as she spoke and finished by taking off her glasses. "Any questions?"

"No, Minerva," Hermione managed to say with great effort, finding her first name far too casual for taste. "I'm excited to get started."

It was near the end of his rare normal family time when Harry left early for training in an attempt to catch Mr. Weasley before he got too busy. He found their department head in his office, reading the Weekly Snitch, the Ministry's gossip and sport's score newsletter.

"Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley put his feet down and sat straight, prompting a brush painted to resemble a colorful toy soldier to sweep off the edge of the desk where his shoes had been. Harry glanced back down the corridor to check that no one approached before taking a seat.

"It's like this, Mr. Weasley," Harry began. "I . . . have a bad feeling about Percy-"

"What's he done?" Mr. Weasley asked, perhaps sharply.

"Well," Harry hesitated. There wasn't all that much he had any proof of, really. Mostly just that he found him unsavory and with a bad habit of acting suspicious. "I think he's using Legilimency . . . around the Ministry when perhaps it isn't appropriate."

Mr. Weasley had picked up a ball point pen and was clicking the button on the end repeatedly. "As a Legilimens yourself, you would notice that, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

The pen clicking stopped while he asked, "You aren't guilty of that yourself?"

Harry spoke slowly as he said, "I'm very careful to avoid it sir."

Mr. Weasley leaned over to reach into the farther file drawer so his voice was strained as he said, "Not always, it turns out." He pulled out a sheet and held it out so Harry could read it. "That's a complaint filed with us from a Mr. DeBenedictus." He pulled it back and scanned it. "I think it may be the first time ever someone has managed to fill this form out correctly. That alone would make him a bad enemy."

Harry bit his top lip. "I caught Percy using the skill on you, sir. And when I called him on it, he blushed and backed down, so I'm quite certain he was doing so."

Mr. Weasley reddened slightly and straightened the files on his desk. "I don't know why he would bother. He could ask me whatever he wishes."

Harry regrouped. At least his boss was now warned. "There just have been so many suspicious coincidences with him."

The pen clicking resumed. "That's also cauldron-calling, Harry."

"It's what?"

Speaking more slowly, Mr. Weasley explained, "The pot calling the cauldron black."

"Oh," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley held up the little plastic pen. "Lovely little thing, isn't it. Sucks itself inside so it doesn't write on things when you don't want it to." He put the pen down. "It's clear, Harry, that you don't like Percy, and certainly he's given you reason not to, but I'm not certain what you want me to do." When Harry hesitated answering he suggested, "Do you want to file one of these complaints against him? It will probably be dealt with in the same manner as this one, which was that all the senior staff signed off on it and it went in a drawer. But you may do so, if you have some kind of direct harm to report and I'm afraid personal lives do not count for much."

"I don't have any . . . direct harm," Harry said, frustrated by these circles. "I just feel justifiably suspicious and I thought I should say something. I've been told to work though the system and I'm trying to do that."

This scored, Harry determined, when Mr. Weasley's posture loosened. "All right, Harry. Good. If there's anything to be done, it will be handled. You're going to be late for training."

Harry thanked him and stood, feeling utterly unsatisfied, but having nothing left to say.

After training, Tonks found him in the dressing room and Harry waved his slow fellows out so he could talk to her.

"Feel like going out?" she asked. "I'm off."

"It's Severus' second to last night home, but sure, a quick drink maybe."

Rather than discuss anything interesting, Harry found himself complaining about Percy as they shared a pint.

"I agree he shouldn't be using Legilimency on Arthur," Tonks said after Harry related his conversation.

"You believe me that he is?" Harry asked.

"Of course. I trust you can judge that," she insisted, sensing that Harry needed reassurance. Her violet hair stood out from her head in all directions today. "I can only do the barest Occlusion. But it's not suspicious that he can do that; all Department of Mysteries staff can Occlude their thoughts completely or they wouldn't be allowed to work there. Many people learn Legilimency at the same time they learn that."

Harry, for whom that was true, was forced to concede that. "Something about him still bothers me. I wonder what he's up to?"

Tonks shrugged. "Can you get away tonight?"

Harry could not imagine himself more torn by a question from her.

"Come on," she said, "you said yourself Severus is going to be home more weekends as long as Remus is fit . . . moon-permitting."

"After dinner, then," Harry said, and the core of him thanked him for that decision by changing from knotted up to happily anticipating.

Two days later as Snape stood beside the mantel with a small trunk at his feet, he glanced between the two of them with a hint of dismay as they hovered nearby to see him off. "I will be returning in less than two weekends. And will be home most weekends after. You look like the bon voyage committee for the Lusitania."

Harry ducked his head to hide his laugh. Snape stepped in his direction and came almost nose to nose with him.

“Be careful. Stay out of trouble.” He started to turn away and stopped to say, with a point of a long finger. “Keep me informed.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, finding odd comfort in being pre-scolded, but also somewhat lacking in decent warmth.

Snape relented just a bit and patted the side of his arm. He stopped before Candide and when she stood up on her toes and parted her lips, he gave her a kiss that went on long enough Harry felt the need to glance away, and even, eventually, clear his throat. After the flare of the Floo network died down, Candide smacked her lips and said, “I’ll have to tell the Weasley twins the lipstick really works and thank them as well. They said I could offer the ”ultimate“ test.”

“What?” Harry uttered, bordering on bending over on laughter.

She pulled a little gold lipstick from her pocket and held it up. Lip-Locker Luscious Red Guaranteed longer kisses.

“Do not let Severus see that,” Harry said, grinning.

“Oh, don’t I know it.”

Training got a bit easier with Tridant in the mix since they were splitting their time between first-year spells for him and second-year spells for the rest of them. This new routine gave him time to catch up and feel he could stay caught up. And the quiet evenings with just him and Candide at home left him little distraction from even doing some old reviewing.

Harry began carrying some of his older books to follow along in while Tridant received his lessons. Harry found them surprisingly easy to understand now that he had far surpassed them. This made his center glow warm with a sense of accomplishment. It unfortunately made his book bag rather heavy and he was adjusting the straps of it, slow to leave the changing room, when he heard an unusually large group of footsteps pass by in the corridor. Harry left his bag and went to the door and just pushed it open a crack using his toe.

Fudge’s voice could be heard echoing back down the corridor and, through the gap, the former minister could be seen standing outside the tea room with a large group. He

was saying, "Well, inter-departmental cooperation was of course one of my initiatives as well, and it's good to see Madam Bones continuing it. We should hold these meetings regularly, not just when there is a crisis afoot."

Harry shifted his head side to side and recognized Percy followed by Ogden entering the tea room along with a few others he did not recognize. Mr. Weasley was the last inside and he closed the door. Harry stood thinking a minute before scooping up his book bag and making a dash for the stairs.

More overly pompous voices halted Harry in the corridor outside the Minister of Magic's outer office. Harry waited around the corner out of sight while a Portuguese dignitary and his entourage made some extraordinarily drawn out goodbyes before finally departing. When the noise of the lift made it clear they has slid out of view at the far end, Harry slipped around to Bone's office.

Belinda was straightening up stacks of brochures on topics of wizard tourism and economic development. Other staff members were holding a debriefing of sorts. They glanced up at Harry and away again, ignoring him. Harry slipped over to Belinda.

"Hi."

"Oh! Hi, Harry," she sounded at least vaguely pleased to see him.

Harry could not help but suspect she knew something and simply was not saying. "Can I talk to you . . . er, this evening?" When her shoulders twitched, he said, "Your flat at say 7:00 o'clock."

She nodded, shoulder-length hair falling into her face so he could not read her expression. Harry thanked her sincerely, generating a faint blush in her ears and more interested glances from the others in the office, so he left.

Harry would have liked to have bided his time at Hermione's flat, but since she was even farther away than going home, he tried Vineet's flat instead. When the Indian came to the door, he registered no surprise at seeing Harry there in the corridor.

"Hope you don't mind if I call unannounced," Harry said.

Vineet gestured that he should enter without changing his distant demeanor. Harry stepped inside the now sparsely furnished flat and realized that in the process of worrying about Tridant adjusting, he had lost track of his usually resilient colleague.

"How are you doing, Vishnu?" Harry came out and asked for lack of any better tactic. It seemed clear from the empty rooms that Nandi had made a permanent move back to the home country.

Vineet tilted his head to the side, a gesture Harry was familiar with from another source.

Vineet's Adam's apple bounced once. "Would you like something?" he asked.

"Whatever you have," Harry said, and followed his fellow into the kitchen.

A stack of letters and other more official looking papers dominated the table, weighted down with half-globes of glass. Harry could not read any of these since they were covered in a script that resembled rows of dangling banners.

Harry waited until they were both settled into tea and biscuits before he asked, "Are you getting a divorce?" He held his breath while he waited for the answer, afraid he had stepped over some line.

"It is difficult," Vineet replied, expression unwavering. Harry wished he would show some disturbance; it unnerved him that he did not.

"I don't mean to pry . . . but I'm a bit worried about you," Harry admitted, trying to pry under that unmoving façade.

The façade shifted all right. It grew even more remote. "You have far more important things to concern yourself, I am certain."

"Not at the moment," Harry said. He sipped his tea since he had ignored it so far. "There hasn't been another prophecy that I don't know about, is there?" he had to ask.

"No. I would prefer that there were."

"Oh," Harry said. "We should hook you up with Trelawney more often then. Get a prophecy arranged for you."

Vineet stared at him, which was an improvement over him staring past him. "You are mocking me." He sounded on the verge of peeved.

"Only to get through to you," Harry pointed out, taking another sip of tea to seem more relaxed than he really was. "And it worked."

Peeved turned to annoyed, and Vineet dropped his gaze to stare down at the biscuit on his saucer. Harry considered that Vineet had been left to himself what with Hermione starting at Hogwarts on top of his wife leaving. Harry certainly knew too well what that felt like.

"I'm not very good at this," Harry admitted. "But rather than bounce back, you've just withdrawn. I don't mean to be a busy-body, but I can't sit by and let you sulk any longer."

This drew his fellow's gaze back up again and this time he seemed present and accounted for, bolstering Harry. "Fill me in, okay . . . it's hard for you to divorce?"

"Very."

It hurt to pry so much, but it was the next logical question. "But you want to?"

Vineet started to reply, opened his mouth, even, but he hesitated, caught in thought. "I don't want the necessity of it. It brings ignominy upon my family, as well being a personal failure." Making this statement returned him to withdrawn.

"So, what does your mother say?"

"She has begun to side with Nandi, perhaps because of proximity to her arguments."

"Do you want to go home?" Harry asked. "You aren't here because you think I expect it or something? I mean, I certainly like having you as a colleague, I owe you my life, but I just want to make sure you don't feel you are still under some obligation related to me." Harry frowned, that had not come out right. "I remember you saying you came because of me, but if you need to be elsewhere, don't let me stand in the way of that."

Vineet's gaze had returned to the present. "There is nothing for me there."

"Good. I mean, I like having you around."

Harry had the sense that if he wasn't already so grim, Vineet may have smiled at least faintly.

Vineet finally sipped his tea, expressed surprise that it was cold, tapped it to reheat it, and drank it down. "Would you be disappointed in me . . ." he faded out. "Hogwarts school is not so distant."

Harry threw his head back and stared at the cream-color ceiling. "How did I end up as the moral arbiter of you two?" he demanded. He relented his annoyance and peered at his friend and despite having scenes of Snape's recent wedding still fresh in his mind and life, he said, "Vishnu, I think you should do whatever makes you happy. It seems like the system isn't working very well for you."

"The system has been changed. Some wizards in my country still practice the old system."

"What old system?" Harry asked, now uncertain about the answer he just gave.

"The one where one can have more than one wife."

Oh, Hermione will go for that, Harry thought, but kept it in because she could answer for herself. At least, he hoped she could. At the moment, she was living as good as a monk to get away from this situation, so perhaps he should not prejudge. Carefully, he said, "You think that's a good idea?"

"It is a bad idea," Vineet said, to Harry's relief. But then less clearly added, "It is even more illusion that chains one to this life and prevents the soul from moving on."

After a pause, Harry said, "Right." He glanced at the time and finished his tea. "I have to go. I have an appointment and I have to walk a ways from where I can Apparate. Take it easy, all right? I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry still had the previous conversation in his head when he arrived at Belinda's flat. Belinda was waiting, wearing a long, red high-necked pullover over her nice skirt from the Ministry. The flat did not feel cold to Harry, but Belinda must feel differently.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked, buying time to adjust his frame of mind.

Belinda answered something meaningless and tried to lead him inside to sit, but Harry took her shoulders and said, "Look, something's been going on with you and I figured before that if you wanted to say something, you would, but . . ." Her eyes taking on a haunted look stalled him momentarily. "But, now I think you should talk to someone. Have you talked to Minister Bones?"

The absurdity of this was reflected in her reaction. "Talked to the Minister?"

Harry did not know what the topic was, only felt confirmed that was a topic so he rolled along with: "Have you talked to anyone?"

"Yeah, I talked to someone," she replied, annoyed and tried to turn away, but Harry held her fast, not finished yet. Her reaction to this was unexpected, she twisted instinctively, elbowing him on the soft part of his arm. "Let go of me!"

Harry did, immediately contrite. "I'm sorry." Harry envisioned knocking Percy around a little to bring himself back under control. Gently, he asked, "Can I ask whom you talked to?"

She turned away, arms half crossed-half wrapped around her middle as though despite the overgrown jumper she might still be cold. "No. I promised I wouldn't."

"Are you scared of someone?" Harry asked, struggling hard to sound softly understanding when his mind was full of making a careful arrangement of spells that caused some kind of pain.

"No," she replied, confusingly more certain of this answer than the last.

Chapter 19

"Will you tell me anything?" Harry asked.

"No."

Harry closed his eyes and then asked, "You broke up with Percy, right?"

"Yes," she replied, then finally turned to face him while asking, "Happy about that?"

"Yes. 'Cause I don't like him. It was your choice though. Why won't you tell me what's going on?" He was pleading now. He felt so close to something.

"Because I'll lose my job." She waved her arms around, thin fingers white. "Or at least get demoted down to . . . I don't know, opening owls for the Department of Complaints."

Harry had nothing but momentum now, "Why would you lose you job?"

Now anger came through. Harry found it welcome. "Because you'd tell someone at the Ministry, that's why."

"No. I. wouldn't." Harry retorted. "Why would I do that?"

Her voice dropped, perhaps to avoid shouting. "Because you're an Auror. Don't you think I've seen the reports you blokes file with every last detail of some poor sap's life laid out?"

Harry pointed at his chest and bent forward slightly. "I'm not an Auror yet. Don't you know how many times they tell me that . . . every week it seems like."

She wavered, almost convinced. Harry said, "I promise not to tell anyone. I'll, however, reserve the right to try to talk you into telling someone. But I won't say."

Her eyes dodged between the door and the room across from it. "It'd be nice if someone else knew." She rubbed her eye impatiently. Voice thicker, she added, "But I'm too ashamed to say."

"Hey, there," Harry said, not by any means, wanting to make her cry. He took her arms again, remembering only after his hands sunk into the thick weave of her jumper that she had reacted badly to that before. She did not pull away this time; she bowed her head and rubbed her other eye.

"Can you at least tell me if this has something to do with Percy?" he asked.

She nodded, back of her hand covering her right eye. She appeared so terribly miserable that Harry stepped forward and gave her a hug. Without the high-heels she used to wear when they dated, she fit much better in his arms.

"Come on, then. I'll kick his arse for you if you want."

Her limbs stiffened under his arms. Muffled, she said, "Don't do anything . . . really bad. Like you . . . you did at Malfoy Manor."

Harry bit his lip. Careful not to sound caught off-guard, he said, "No, of course not." But in the wake of her comment, he felt a little sour in the stomach.

He pushed her to arm's length and asked, "Better?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes down. Harry felt it only fair to leave the questions for later.

The next morning, early, Harry was awoken in an unusual way, by Candide's voice at the crack of his door saying, "Harry, you should get up."

Harry lifted his head and blinked in the direction of the door with half-opened eyes. She wasn't really waking him up early, Petunia-style, was she? He wondered this more in surprise than annoyance, but the first toyed with becoming the second.

He dressed and made his way downstairs to the dining room where breakfast appeared immediately, accompanied by a brimming cup of coffee.

"Ready for this?" Candide asked.

Harry stared at her. Gears not meshing quite yet. "Er . . ."

"Nope, have some coffee, then," she said, knowingly. Her hand rested on the newspaper beside her plate. The headline was something to do with a post-Quidditch match pub brawl.

Harry sipped the scalding hot coffee and taking a deep breath, said, "All right. What is it?"

Candide, mouth downward and regretful, lifted the paper, folded it so the back page was upward and turned it around. Filling the back page, as red as any blood, was a photograph of Harry hugging Belinda.

Harry stared at it. "I'm not being very careful," he said. He meant that differently than it sounded. He was really just filling in what Snape would say, were he here. Harry had not run any spells to check if he had been followed, or checked if the blinds

on the windows were closed or not. His eyes finally unlatched from the red wool filling the photograph to the headline: New Squeeze for "Boy" Hero?

"I have to go," Harry said, moving to stand.

"Eat your breakfast first," Candide said. "If you're going to have a bad day . . . you're going to need it."

Harry stared at her, and she added, "Sorry, don't mean to sound as if I'm mothering you. I'd say the same to Severus."

"Yeah, well . . ." Harry said, thinking this was getting deep quickly. He stood. "Really have to go."

She reached across the table and flipped his fried egg onto a slice of toast and folded it, squashing it flat. She bundled that in his cloth napkin and held it out.

"Thanks," Harry said as he accepted it.

"Good luck," her voice followed as he Apparated away.

Harry snarfed his breakfast as he strode across the atrium and stuffed the napkin in his pocket. One enormous benefit of his early arrival . . . he was almost alone in the atrium and the few glances he received moved on without real notice of him.

Harry could not locate Tonks in the department. Rogan was manning the office along with Blackpool. Harry snuck a peak at the log book and saw that Tonks was out on a call with Shacklebolt and had been for half an hour. It pained him, but he wished Candide had woken him earlier.

Harry sat down in the training room after giving up on waiting for Tonks. Kerry Ann shot him a most disappointed look.

"It's not what you think," Harry grumbled.

Her attitude immediately brightened. "Well, that's good to hear. You're one of the few men I still have faith in. If I lost faith in you . . ." She turned back to her reading.

Harry stared at the side of her head and her ear. Her comments reminded him of Vineet, of being given too much moral or philosophical credit.

Rodgers must not know anything about the Prophet because he did not mention or even hint at it, to Harry's relief. As their lessons wound through the morning, and Kerry Ann was called up for a third time, clunking her way to the front in her

awkward shoes, Harry thought about high heels. He thought about how hard it must be to walk in them. And then a very bad notion occurred to him.

At lunchtime Harry, as much as he would have preferred to have broken into the Department of Mysteries and confronted Percy, went instead to Mr. Weasley's office. Mr. Weasley was speaking with Shacklebolt about some ongoing trouble communicating with the Obliviator Squad. Harry waited impatiently in the corridor, making sure he was in Mr. Weasley's line of sight. But when Shacklebolt moved off, Mr. Weasley stood and donned his cloak.

"I have a lunch meeting with Minister, Harry." He stopped before Harry as though to make it clear he had given him some attention. "I sense this is a topic we've covered already."

Harry required a moment to recover from his surprise at the astuteness of this observation. "Yes sir," he admitted.

"It's been duly noted already, Harry," he stated flatly and, swinging his cloak onto his other shoulder, he hurried away.

Harry watched him turn the corner, thinking that they were not leaving him many options outside of taking action on his own. Harry returned to the tea room and found Tonks, who found him at the same instant. Neither of them said a word, but the room cleared out with everyone else spouting various absurd excuses.

They stared at each other. Tonks' hair was mousey brown, not a good sign. Harry tried to imagine the situation reversed so he did not completely muck this up. It did not make him feel better to do this.

"You know there's nothing to that stupid photo, right?" Harry said.

Tonks finished her tea in one long gulp. "I have to go, I'm on duty," she said.

At the door Harry halted her with, "You aren't even going to hear me out?"

She stopped, hand still clutching the door handle mercilessly. "Harry, if we are going to have a row, it has to be off the clock. Meet me after shift."

"There's nothing to have a row about," Harry said as the door swung closed.

After a day of distracted training where he only felt he made good use of the weight training portion, Harry waited around the uneventful office for an hour, doing some random filing and then thinking she may have meant the tea room specifically, he checked there, went back to the Auror's office and then went back to the tea room to wait there. Dinner hour had come and gone and Harry checked the sandwich cart

for leftovers from lunch. Only one pumpkin juice remained, tucked in the back on its side. Harry cracked the lid of this open, mind elsewhere. He took a long gulp of juice and set it down hard as the room began to swerve around him. He grabbed hold of the table edge, expecting the floor and walls to re-right themselves, but they did not. Harry's legs grew wobbly and he dropped to his knees. He called out, but heard no footsteps and when he managed to jerk his unwilling neck to stare at the door, he found it closed, even though he had not closed it.

Severus, Harry thought at the same time he decided firmly with his spastic mind that the juice had been poisoned . . . he had to get to his guardian. Harry immediately fell through the floor of the tea room into the Dark Plane. Unlike the quite corridors of the Ministry, things were busy here. Piecemeal, glittery creatures crept close, curious. Harry pushed himself up with one weak hand and stared down the nearest beady eyes. Saliva dripped from Harry's mouth as he did so and he knocked himself off-balance wiping it away. The creatures approached, rheumy eyes glowing more than they should in the scant light; Harry did not have the strength to will this second wave of tenacious beasts away. The closest one cocked its head and clapped its tiny jaws together, flashing row upon row of hypodermic teeth.

Harry had to get away, to Snape, right now. He would know what to do. He would take care of him. With that overriding thought, he pushed himself to Apparate.

A new section of grey desolation greeted Harry. Disoriented and weak and fearing for his life, he imagined the Hogwarts Potions Master in whom he had absolute faith, and dropped himself awkward and teetering through the gritty ground digging into his knees.

Harry arrived with a tinny clatter of ice shards in a lamplit room that smelled warmly familiar of stale potion brewing and wood smoke. His head was careening toward the floor that was already close due to his kneeling when he folded himself into the real world. As he collapsed, Harry cried out, "Severus, help me." His last thought before darkness sucked him in was to wonder why the stone floor pressed into his cheek smelled dank, like a dungeon.

Harry awoke to the same scents that had followed him into unconsciousness. He shifted his arm and found it to be under a warm duvet. A pillow cradled his head. Harry heard movement nearby and cracked his right eye open. Snape sat beside the bed, arms crossed, edged by the orange glow from the hearth far across the room.

Harry reached up a weak arm and rubbed his forehead. His scar itched. He lifted his head as a prelude to sitting up but decided to preserve his pride and not make the attempt.

"Er . . ." Harry said, trying to sort things out. He certainly felt greatly improved from when he had arrived, although he wished he felt more firmly himself.

Snape shifted minutely, seeming content to observe him. Harry squinted at him and leaned forward to look for his glasses on the bedside table. With minimal, almost economical, movement Snape reached into the breast pocket of his robe and handed them over.

"Thanks," Harry said, hooking them over his ears. The first thing that occurred to him was that this was Snape's chambers all right, but not his current ones. The center of Harry's gut grew heavy and ominous. He turned to his host and observed him in return. Snape raised a challenging brow as Harry did this, but it confirmed that this Snape was not the right one; his face was too gaunt, for one thing, and his gaze far too consistently hard as granite.

Harry sighed and regrouped. "Thanks for taking care of the poison," he tossed out as a test, hoping for some conversation.

"It was a sophisticated one," Snape stated with no feeling and left it at that.

"Was it?" Harry prompted.

A long pause ensued before: "It was a Personatus Potion. One that manifests as one thing to the casual observer, but in actuality, the expected antidote completes the original fatal poison."

Harry pondered that, wishing his faculties were a little more game for action. "What's the point in that?"

"The point of it is," Snape stated, sounding the aggravated tutor, "is that the recipient will appear to have been killed by their would-be rescuer."

"Ah," Harry muttered. "Someone is trying kill me and get away with it."

"A stunning conclusion," Snape observed.

Harry rubbed his forehead again and this time had the courage to assume the worst. He closed his eyes and with some effort found that niche in his mind where the world bled green and shadows lurked. Many, many lurked very close by as though inside the castle. "Damn," Harry muttered.

"Problem?" Snape prompted sarcastically.

This made Harry laugh. He could not have held it in had he wanted to. When he stopped he laid back on the thick pillow and said, "You even gave me your bed."

Snape stood suddenly. “No place else to put you. Could not allow you to be seen.”

The room swayed for Harry, and he wished it would not do that; he needed to be sharp. “You could have turned me in.”

Snape spun and studied him. After a long silence, he asked, “Where have you been, Potter?”

“Um, studying,” Harry ventured.

“And, how, pray-tell did you cheat death?”

Harry hesitated. “If I tell you that, you won’t be curious anymore and then who knows what you might do.” He sounded drunken to his own ears and wondered if the antidote was still doing its work.

Snape appeared to respect this answer. He departed through the door and moments later a glow indicated it was magically sealed.

Harry forced himself to sit up again, but dizziness overtook him and he fell back to the pillow.

Harry awoke later, quickly confirming that he had not just been having a bad dream. This time he applied more will-power and levered himself to his feet. He circled the room, which contained many familiar objects. He did not find his wand, even using an Accio repeatedly while holding out his empty hand.

Giving up, Harry stared down at a chess set near an overstuffed chair and considered simply departing. Except he wanted his new wand back and he was not fit for the Dark Plane in this state. Traveling via it in a drugged state was how he ended up here in the first place. On top of that Harry was as curious as he accused his host of being. He set the chess board for a game, waking the pieces as he lifted each out of the nearby bin. White was set up on his end, so he moved the pawn from in front of the right-hand bishop.

The door snapped open without warning. Snape stared at him long seconds before stepping inside and closing it again. He strode over to Harry, seeming to be trying to Legilimize him. Harry kept his mind properly closed, finally glancing down at the chess board. Snape followed his gaze and after consideration moved the opposing pawn for black.

Harry move the pawn before the knight ahead one and waited. Snape shifted to place some rolled parchments on the chair and placed his king’s knight out.

Harry did not make a move. “Can you stop potioning me into submission?” Harry asked. Until he asked this, he had not fully formed the notion that this was why he felt so helpless.

"Hm," Snape grunted. "If it results in a decent chess game, I suppose."

"Thank you," Harry honestly returned.

"I am curious, however," Snape said as he strode to a long narrow table upon which sat a row of decorative bottles. He poured out a tumbler-full of a milky orange one and brought it back for Harry. He tauntingly withdrew the offered serving with the words, "Why did you dare come here?"

"I knew you were the only one who could help me," Harry replied truthfully, mind open enough to let the truth be revealed.

The tumbler was held out. "You are a foolish young man."

Harry swallowed the faintly herbal liquid. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"I would like to know how," Snape challenged, tossing his sleeve as he turned.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

Snape's narrowed eyes slid around to Harry while he paced, muttering, "Albus must have arranged something . . . spirited you away . . ."

Harry drained the tumbler of the last few drops. "Maybe." Harry wished he knew how broadly he needed to lie. He wished his head would clear faster. Chilled and with his scar itching, Harry took the chair before the fire.

Snape said, "I must return for dinner. I will be missed if I am not there."

Harry's stomach rumbled at those words. "Any chance for . . . ?" Harry began.

Snape sneered at him. "A heel of stale bread, perhaps?" he suggested maliciously.

"Anything," Harry said, not insulted.

Snape rolled his eyes and stopped at the door. "The house-elves are forbidden to come into my chambers or my office because of the potions. They must not see you as they would report to the headmaster immediately."

Harry blinked at that. "All right."

"I removed everything from your person that could possibly be charmed as a portkey. I'm assuming that is how you got in here, apparently from the North Pole since you were covered in ice."

Harry didn't reply.

The sound of the fire ruled for several breaths. Snape went on in a lower voice, "How you came into possession of a portkey keyed to my chambers I cannot imagine."

It seemed Snape would not depart without some kind of response. Harry said, "Something I was keeping around just in case."

Snape's expression did not change, but what could he say? He dropped the issue. "The ghosts also have loose lips, but they rarely come into my chambers. The Bloody Baron does on occasion, but him I can control. He is not particularly fond of the Dark Lord in any event, having nearly got himself banished on several occasions." He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and hurried out, not noticing Harry's frozen expression.

Harry let his head fall back against the chair. "He didn't just imply Voldemort was headmaster, did he?" he asked the empty room. Suddenly, Harry felt much more reluctant to leave for his own Plane. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to track the shadows that moved in the forest of his mind. By concentrating very hard, while simultaneously not concentrating at all, he counted thirteen very close. One of those would be Snape. Harry went to stand before the small corroded mirror over the washbasin and wished he had his wand.

Snape returned an hour and a half later. Harry sat before the chess board, playing against the pieces themselves, which was challenging because they cheated.

"Definitely a Slytherin set," Harry commented when Snape came over to observe.

"A gift from a friend."

"Let me guess, name of Malfoy?"

After a pause, "Astute guess."

Harry scoffed lightly. "Was that a compliment?"

This Snape, after a glare, sat at a small desk and proceeded to do what his Snape did, mark assignments. "So," Harry finally ventured. "Still stuck teaching Potions? Never assigned anything better?"

Snape shot him a priceless look of disbelief. "Defense Against the Dark Arts is hardly in the curriculum at this time."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, trying to sound knowing. His insides knotted a bit farther. He opened his mouth but couldn't find a good way to ask if his worst assumption was correct. "No Advanced Arts of the Dark Arts class to replace it, eh?" he asked lightly.

This drew a unexpectedly thoughtful look from Snape, who said, "I expect the competition would not be welcome."

The fire slowly died down and the clock read half past midnight. Harry stood with purpose and said, "I want to go look around." It was either decide that, or depart entirely.

"Really?" came the sarcastic reply. "You do realize that the Dementors patrol the grounds and school from midnight to seven?"

Harry came to a halt, mid stride to the sealed door. "Oh." He considered the chair he had just vacated with reluctance. He could just leave, but instead he made himself retake the chair, pulling the footstool close enough to curl up and use it as a bed.

He fell asleep minutes later, woken only briefly by something tangy smoldering under his nose and then after a whiff, he was out cold.

A headache stabbed, making Harry wince, when he next opened his eyes. He was alone but a small breakfast was stacked in paper wrappers on the empty chess board. After eagerly eating, Harry patrolled the room, finally settling on a book from the shelf on mutation spells and potions.

When Snape returned, Harry immediately asked, "Can I have my wand?"

"First, I want to know why you are here."

"To destroy Voldemort, why else-"

Snape reacted with outright violence to the dark wizard's name, sending the book Harry was reading flying up into his face. Harry blocked it with his arm and it flew beyond to smack the rack of fireplace tools.

"Sorry," Harry said, rubbing his bruised arm. "I should have known better."

Snape was pointing his wand at Harry like he meant it. "You damn well should have," he snarled.

Harry ignored the wand aimed at him and reached over the side of the chair to fetch the book. "His name has no power you don't give it," he stated calmly. "I'm certain that I'm not the only person to point that out to you."

Snape lowered the wand.

"On that note," Harry said amiably, "it'd help to have my wand back."

Hands propped on his hips, Snape asked, "How do you think you are going to accomplish any damage to the Dark Lord? There are powers he controls that even I do not understand."

Harry closed the book, treating it carefully after the violence to it, and stood with purpose. "First, I want to take a look around. I need you to get Filch distracted so I can impersonate him. He can go anywhere in this castle without question. But first I need my wand."

Snape used a spell on one of his inside robe pockets and retrieved Harry's wand from it. Same as the antidote, he held the wand just out of reach and said, "I want to know how you survived."

Harry shrugged.

Impatient, Snape demanded, "What do you remember of that night you followed Quirrell?"

Behind his carefully impassive features, Harry's mind lit up. "Er, I thought it must be you, actually."

"Figures," Snape said, pacing away, holding Harry's wand almost as though it were his own.

"Hey, I'm being honest with you. It was a long time ago."

"And where have you been in the meantime?"

"Studying . . . with anyone who will teach me. With a shaman in Finland." Given whom he needed to lie to, Harry felt the best artificial story would be one wrapped tightly in the truth.

"Explains the ice. What were you learning there?" Snape asked doubtfully.

"Old Magic," Harry replied. When Snape shook his head doubtfully, Harry insisted, "That's what let me survive the first time Vo- the Dark Lord came after me."

Snape looked him up and down. "They even had your body, Potter. Of course it was Albus . . . who fetched it." He paced up and down the room again, agitated as though personally offended. "You and your little friends had broken through all of the protective puzzles."

Harry thought rapidly though the events of that night. If he were to have messed up that confrontation where would it have been? He had to admit, the promise of his parents returning had tugged at him. Quirrell may have been smart enough to not touch him a second time, used a wand instead. Voldemort may have simply taken Harry over and he had not mustered the will to resist.

"I messed up," Harry tossed out. "And I needed to get away to prepare better to face him. It was my task, Dumbledore said."

"You should have come back after Dumbledore's defeat; the battle weakened the Dark Lord immensely."

Harry did not reply to this directly, not wanting to dwell on what sounded like a tragically desperate bid on his old mentor's part. "My wand?"

Snape handed it over with clear reluctance. "He is stronger than he has ever been, even as distracted with running a school as he has been. Many times stronger. If he found out . . . " Snape actually bit his lip for just an instant before snarling and spinning away to pace again.

"Why are you helping me then?" Harry asked, needing to know.

"I promised Dumbledore, many many years ago, that I would act to protect you."

Harry smiled lightly and stroked his wand, glad to have it. "No matter what happens I won't implicate you, Professor."

Harry went to the mirror and began working on his disguise. Snape watched for a while before departing. He returned as Harry was finishing and said, "I sent him to the lower dungeon to clean up the water that floods there, a task he will be a long time completing."

Harry grinned at that and headed out, careful to shuffle as he walked and to keep a hunch to his back. In the second cupboard he found a mop and wooden bucket, which he proceeded to carry up the stairs to the Entrance Hall. From there he had a view of the Great Hall. The walls had not been scrubbed in years so the black of the fires and candles had coated the stone streaky grey. But most disturbing was the banners. The Slytherin banners hung long and proud but the other three tables were marked by only small ones at the very front, looking more like badges of shame.

Standing in that spot gave Harry a feeling not unlike curse aversion, so he moved on up the broad staircase. Students sat on the steps talking quietly and bending over books as though everything were normal.

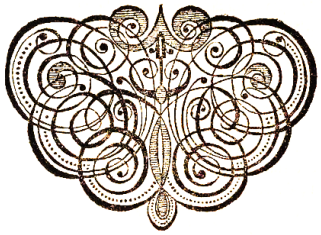
Harry wandered the corridors, ignoring the occasional look of alarm from a student lingering between classes. Most outrightly ignored him as though he wore an invisibility cloak. In the trophy room, Harry felt that awful aversion again, bad enough to make his eyes water. He stopped to pretend to mop until the room was empty and then moved down the case until he pinpointed where he felt worst. His eyes moved over the polished wood, and the gold and silver figures and plates until they landed on the golden cup that topped the tall House Cup trophy. That was it, definitely.

Harry looked around until he found a nearly identical cup atop another trophy in the next case on the bottom shelf in the back. Working quickly, Harry unwelded that cup

and swapped it atop the big trophy, where it would pass ordinary scrutiny. He even used an anti-dusting charm to make it look untouched, which helped hide the switch rather a lot. Pocketing the cup, despite a strong will against closer contact with it, Harry shuffled along the room. He had one last stop to make before heading back down to the dungeons.

Author's Notes: Well, this was the last chapter before Deathly Hallows. I'll see what I can incorporate or I may just stick with what I've got written. We'll see.

Chapter 11.



Crux of Evil

Kali flapped as best she could inside her cage and stuck her nose through the wires to the point where the thin bars pressed her ears back. Her tongue almost reached the fringe of Snape's hair when she flicked it to full length out over the dining room table where Snape sat with his head bent, resting on hands tangled in his hair. Kali's cage had been kept in reach for the last day and a half so he could keep a close eye on the creature. The sunlight streaming in the window mocked the household's distress with its glorious happiness.

A burst of ash ejected from the hearth as the Floo network flared and Tonks stepped out of it. Snape raised his head slowly, fearing hope, keeping it at bay until he could read her eyes. Her frown justified his caution.

She sat across from him with a sigh and without invitation. "I checked Transportation's records like you asked. They have no record of him Apparating out or using a Portkey and the atrium desk has no record of him leaving through the gateway. BUT, they aren't always a hundred percent there when it gets busy. AND, Transportation has been sloppy of late as well. But it is odd." She gathered her weathered, dim-haired self together and peered at Snape with curiosity. "Why did you ask me to check? What are you thinking happened?"

Snape had already made up an excuse. "I was wondering if for some reason he used his invisibility cloak."

"Yeah, but why would he do that?" At his shrug, she more stridently said, "He wanted to talk to me, was waiting, hanging around the office and doing filing for

Kingsley." She glanced up as Candide slipped into the room in the attitude of one at a wake. She laid a hand on Snape's shoulder and trailed it around to the other as she took the seat beside him, keeping her chair facing his rather than tucking it in as though eating. Kali, head still through the bars, twisted to peer at her, but quickly returned her tiny gaze to Snape.

Snape studied the Chimrian in return. "She is calm, but far too attached to me."

Everyone stared at the bat-like animal, but Kali did not take note of this and continued to try to press herself through the bars in Snape's direction.

Tonks, eyes on the pet, said, "Candide, I know we've been over this already, but have you thought of anything new from Wednesday morning that might give us any clue?"

Snape stood and reached for the Floo powder. "I'll fetch my pensieve."

In his absence Candide replied, "No, I haven't. You spoke with Belinda, right?"

Tonks nodded, glancing away as if to imply that topic line was not a welcome one. Snape returned to a silent room and set the pensieve down. To Candide he said, "You do not mind . . . I assume?"

"Severus, I'll do anything I can to help."

"Think of that morning," He commanded her, and touched his wand to her temple, drawing out a glowing blue-silver cord that he fed into the otherwise empty stone bowl.

Tonks stood to bend over the bowl as well and watched the events of that morning as Harry was shown the newspaper. When Harry said, "I'm not being very careful," Tonks grunted, and when they all stood straight after the memory ended, her eyes remained dark.

"Any help?" Candide asked, and Snape shook his head, face grim. He turned to face the hearth, away from the women.

Tonks said, "Maybe I should pay another visit to Belinda."

Candide said, "If you think Harry was cheating on you, you are sadly mistaken."

Tonk's hair remained brown, but it bobbed out straight before settling down again. "You never want to think that about someone, do you?" She huffed and said, "We have everyone out looking and the Ministry's offered a reward. That probably won't decrease the number of reporters outside your gate, so owl if you need help handling them."

Snape, in a tone that indicated he would be pleased to have something to take his frustration out on, stated with certainty, "I won't need assistance with that."

"Well, then, stay out of trouble if you would; we can't spare anyone." Her voice cracked as she closed that statement. "If you think of anything at all, let us know." With that, she turned to the Floo and disappeared.

Candide said, "I assume you didn't bother to tell her about the spell you and Headmistress McGonagall tried last night because it failed."

Snape strolled over to stand before the framed photographs of Harry and his friends propped on the sideboard, pushed to one end by the piles of Candide's folders. "I actually believe now that it did work."

"But it didn't flare red like you said it would. It didn't find him."

"He is out of reach of the spell. Out of reach of . . ." Snape, who had been standing with his head bowed low, raised it with a snap and grabbed up quill and paper from Candide's work pile on the sideboard. He scratched out a note quickly and folded it. "I'll return shortly," he said to Candide.

"Where are you going?"

"Owl Office. I need to send something as speedily as possible."

She opened her mouth to protest his thinking of something and not taking the information to the Aurors but he had already disappeared in the Floo.

He returned shortly as promised and began to pace. Candide looked up from her work and said, "Severus, please sit down."

He stopped pacing at least, but stood staring through her, thinking. She said with no little strain, "I'm sorry I can't be more help."

He faltered over the words, but managed to say, "You are more help than you know."

She bent back to the large grid sheet before her and said, "I figured I wouldn't get sent away this time." When he did not respond to this, she looked up with a softer expression and added, "You were feeling guilty last time Harry went missing . . . I think."

An empty gap stretched wide before Snape responded. "He is still my responsibility."

"He's nineteen."

"That does not change anything. He will need an eye kept on him as long as I have strength to do so."

She held up her hand, ring first. The scarlet stone echoed the square sunlight from the window in its core.

"Perhaps it will come to that," Snape said to the offer. He settled at the table across from her and sat with fingers perched before him, deep in thought.

"You don't want to join the search?" she asked after a while.

"I do not know what happened and must assume that this household is in danger."

She blinked at him. "Oh. One never knows around here, I suppose."

When Snape answered the knock upon his dungeon office door, Harry could see he had a student with him. Harry grunted, "You said you had a spill?"

"In the classroom," Snape said, snapping the door closed again.

Harry shuffled down there and took a seat at one of the familiar tables. He took the cup out of his pocket and dropped it into the bucket under a rag. This gave him a bit of relief from it. A noise at the door latch made Harry leap for the mop to pretend to be cleaning, but it was only Snape.

"You were quicker than I thought," Snape said.

"I-"

Snape held up a hand and gestured with a sideways nod towards his office. Harry picked up the bucket and followed him out. Safely back in Snape's chambers Harry pulled the cup out and placed it on the chess board.

"And what would that be?" Snape asked with no confidence that it may be important.

"A Crux Horridus," Harry replied.

Snape straightened and put his clasped hands to his chin, eyes glued to the object. He fetched the valet chair from beside the wardrobe and joined Harry in staring at the cup more closely. Eventually, Snape said, "That explains quite a bit. I don't know why I did not think of it."

"Have a Caeruleus fire handy?" Harry asked.

"Even in the Potions classroom, such a thing would not go un-noticed."

"Do you know how to destroy it, then?" Harry asked.

"Albus did not instruct you in that?"

Harry shook his head. "Got any good books on the topic?"

"Not in the library, certainly." He stood suddenly. "But I have a few that may have something . . ." He went to the shelf tucked behind the bed and with a tap of his wand the apparently built-in stone shelves slid aside to reveal another bookcase behind the first. Snape perused these and ten minutes later returned with four heavy old books, the kind that squirmed or nipped at you when you tried to thumb through them too fast.

The two of them set to reading until Snape had to teach. By the time he returned after lunch, Harry had learned a lot about spells involving human and animal lifeforces, far more than he ever wished to know.

Snape, after five minutes browsing Veil Avoidance, one of the books Harry had given up on, he said, "Here it is." He turned the book toward Harry, who read where indicated:

The soule risepticol is best maed from metele or jewel, or the soule with-in culd prove fraggile. An eccepxionale wizzard can crush the soule within wile forsing it to esscape too small an opening. The heete of esscape will bern up the soule, but bewaer if it doez not bern up, the soule will force a new home in whome'r is closest.

Harry took a deep breath and then another while considering the cup, shining there in the firelight. Tiny scratches marred its polished surface. He could do this, he was certain. Mind clear, he picked it up and pressed the bowl between his palms while imagining trapping what it contained. He knew what Voldemort's power and soul felt like, having once gathered part of it up to toss it away. The thin metal bent but what was inside resisted. Harry concentrated for a minute, but could not quite work out how to follow the instructions.

Harry straightened the cup to an approximation of round and set it back down to stare at it. "I can do this," he insisted when Snape shifted to cross his arms and peer down his nose. "Give me some time. And step back," he added, thinking he did not want to battle a possessed Snape.

It required an hour and uncountable tries but Harry finally got a feel for what was trapped inside and pressing hard enough to almost collapse the bowl, he imagined a tiny crack in his mental crushing and with an explosion, the cup jumped from his hands and clattered on the floor along with an unearthly cry of despair and a gurgle.

Harry shook his burned hand and examined the soot that coated it. He scooped up the cup from where it had rolled to a stop before the fire and used a spell to

straighten it again. It looked and felt perfectly ordinary now. "That worked," Harry said, accepting a relievingly cold, wet cloth from Snape. "There must be more of them. I wonder how many." He thought back to the evidence lists from Merton's hideout, trying to remember how many Horcruxes were supposedly found. "Let's say there are six," Harry mused, assuming the number would be the same. "Nagini is one, the cup, another . . . I better go out hunting around again. Nagini I can kill when the time comes."

"I may know where one is," Snape said softly.

"Can you fetch it?" Harry asked eagerly.

In the dining room in Shrewsthorpe nothing much moved until a glittering pigeon came to the window. Snape leapt up and opened the sash and then growled as he removed from the bird's leg the very letter he had written. The bird took off again, flying at a blur.

"You rented a Silver Pigeon?" Candide asked in surprise.

"The cost was no issue."

"I'm just surprised they had one. It's always rented when we need it."

"But it did not find the recipient. I may no longer have the correct address and the man has a habit, Harry said, of keeping an anti-post charm around himself." He tossed the message aside into the Floo and burned it up with a wave of his wand.

"Whom were you trying to reach?" Candide asked, watching the last of the flames flutter out as the paper curled completely black.

"The Shaman in Finland," Snape stood, thinking, and then without warning reached for the Floo powder again. "Come with me this time. You need to visit your office, correct?"

Snape left Candide at the accountancy and strolled to the Apothecary. Inside before a tall stand of glittering empty bottles, he waited for the current customer to leave and the proprietor, clearly aware of Snape's presence, hurried the customer along.

"Jigger," Snape said when they were alone. "I understand that you have a certain standard of secrecy toward your customers . . . indeed, I have much appreciated that over the years, but I am dearly in need of information."

The old man behind the counter frowned. "You are certainly one of my better customers, Professor, but like you said . . ."

Snape spoke quickly, "I wish only to hire this person that I need to locate, nothing more."

Jigger's face relaxed and he put aside some stray bottles on the counter while asking, "And exactly whom are you looking for?"

"I'm not entirely certain; that is why I have come to you. I need to locate a vampire, and given their usual dietary requirements as well as your expertise in procuring almost anything, regulated or not, I am guessing that they not infrequent customers."

Jigger stopped filing bottles and said stiffly, "There's a registry at the Ministry. Why not start there?"

"I want an unregistered vampire, if possible, one I can trust to keep a secret. We go back a long way, Jigger. I promise you the vampire will not know where I learned of his or her existence."

"Only for you, Sev," Jigger said, picking up a rag and wiping down the counter. The rag began to smoke, so he shook it out and hung it up. "There's an unregistered one of 'em moved in just a week ago on Knockturn. Number Twenty-Six. He's one of several who have moved in recently, I'm not sure why that's happenin', but the rest are registered. I know, because they bring in their blood ration coupons from the Ministry. This bloke's appetite runs beyond bovine and porcine blood, so do be careful."

"What's his name?"

Jiggers shook his head that he did not know. "I wish I knew why the neighborhood is suddenly so attractive ta them."

Snape stood thinking and said, "I believe it is because the most dominant of their number was recently removed to prison, leaving a vacuum. But that is only a guess."

"Ah," Jiggers muttered. "Good to know it isna something more worrisome than that."

Snape thanked him and stepped along a few doors and upstairs to the accountancy. Someone was letting an owl gripping a large package out of the window. More owls waited in a cage mounted directly in the largest window. When the woman turned, Snape recognized Roberta, who gave a small start at seeing him there. He knew Candide had invited her to the wedding and that she had refused to attend. He cared not at all beyond any impact on Candide's happiness with her work.

They stared at each other and for the first time Snape remembered her from Hogwarts, one of many students, nameless to him, who kept their head down inside a book most of the time except when an opportunity arose to glare with disapproval at a Slytherin. Roberta looked away first to return to her desk. Snape heard Candide's voice then, emanating from the smaller office off to the right. It pulled him out of memories not worth revisiting, for which he was grateful given that he had no thoughts to spare for anything beyond suppositioning on what may have happened to Harry.

As she stepped out of the side office, Snape noticed for the first time that her belly had begun to swell. A strange numbness suffused him as he considered a second son in his life. He had months to prepare, so he pushed it aside out of a mind too crowded with worry to take on even a remote conception of caring for an infant.

"Severus," she said, smiling in pleasure at his standing there. "Let me get some papers and we can go . . ."

Later that night, Snape's watching the clock caught Candide's attention.

"Expecting something?" she asked. There had been no communication from the Ministry, but several owls from Hogwarts asking for information and offering help. "Is Tonks supposed to call again?"

"No, I have to see someone, and it would be best to show up immediately at sunset."

"Whom do you need to see?"

Snape stood, thinking to get ready to depart. "You should go to the Burrow whilst I am gone. It will give you a chance to catch up on news of the search."

She put down her quill and followed him to the entry hall to collect her cloak. She did not ask anything more as Snape saw her off in the Floo. He immediately took himself to the Leaky Cauldron and out into the dewy air of Diagon Alley. He strode with focused purpose to Twenty-Six Knockturn Alley and inside a dusty staircase, knocked on the door. After many minutes, a metal plate slide aside with a clack and red-flecked eyes peered out. "What is it?"

"I have a proposition for you," Snape said.

The man on the other side of the door laughed harshly. "Why would I talk to you? I don't even know who you are." He started to slide the plate closed, but Snape hexed it back open again.

Vampires were a dark bunch, untrusting, but Snape had a significant past connection he could use. "I am Voldemort's last free servant; that is why you should hear me out."

The eyes in the slot attempted to Legilimize him, but failed. The door clicked open.

"No garlic," the man said as he stepped back from the door. Snape stepped inside, taking in the copiously candlelit room with strategic eyes. The vampire asked, "You aren't one of us, are you?"

"Hardly," Snape snapped back, insulted.

"Hmf," the vampire snorted. He was tall and blonde with aquamarine eyes that glittered red at certain angles of the many flickering candles. "You don't wish to live forever?"

"No, one life is quite sufficient."

He posed faintly. "I get to be beautiful and thirty forever, what more could one want?"

"To be eighteen forever?" Snape offered, immediately disliking the man.

"Eighteen is a foolish age," the vampire said.

Snape could not disagree with that given that he was hunting an errant nineteen-year old.

The vampire pulled the sole chair – an antique with lion-claw feet and a ghoulish face on the backrest – to the center of the room and left it there to lean casually against the closed coffin that sat on a stone pedestal off to one side. "Have a seat," he said. "If we were at my castle I could offer you an entire wing of it for your comfort, but this is what I have at the moment. So, what is this proposition? Realize before you waste your limited breath that an immortal has little interest in most things mortals value."

Snape took the chair only because he needed to stay on the man's good side. "I need you to look for someone."

"Really? A hunt?" The vampire tossed his wavy hair, displaying that it was brown underneath, which implied the improbable notion of sun-bleaching. "Few would hire a vampire for such a task, although we are quite good at it."

"I seek someone who has gone where only your kind and other beasts of darkness can venture."

He had caught the vampire by surprise with that. If Harry had not told him, Snape would not have known vampires were able to use the Dark Plane.

The vampire stood silent, calculating, before saying, "Say I were interested in this task. Whom am I seeking?"

"My son. I expect he will be easy to spot, being the only human there."

"He is not human if he is there," the vampire said with a hint of disgust.

"He is human," Snape insisted. "This is an easy task for you, surely you must need something. I can pay handsomely in gold or whatever currency is most convenient for you."

The vampire pushed away from the coffin and began a slow circling of Snape. "I don't need gold or rupees or florins or whatever is circulating these days." He came around the chair back where he had started, velvet robes dragging on the floor. Snape wished he were not sitting, but given his lesser height he would still be at a disadvantage if he were not.

The vampire turned his pale face Snape's way and it had lost the teenage blasé it had displayed before. "The task you request is indeed easy, and fortunately the payment will be equally easy for you." He stepped closer as he spoke and reached out his index finger and slowly dragged it along below Snape's jaw. "Trivially easy."

Snape froze, torn between revulsion and dear need for this creature's help.

The vampire went on, "You see, it is possible to purchase human blood, from the Muggles if you can imagine that. But it has been processed, filtered, treated, and chilled. You cannot imagine what an utter waste that is." He circled around the back of the chair, pulling Snape's hair back so that it no longer hid his neck. He dragged a finger the other direction, stopping and pressing at the jugular with a light touch. His voice was disconcertingly close to Snape's ear as it hypnotically said, "Biting an unwilling mortal is grounds for banishment and I am intending to repossess my castle here in your less than sunny country so I do not wish that to happen. But I am also acutely hungry for fresh blood." His breath brushed Snape's ear as he added, "It has been a very long time . . . my teeth ache for the pressure of hot flesh."

Snape twitched. It was a jump held back with iron will.

The silky voice at his ear laughed. "A barely willing victim would be even better."

Snape swallowed. "Nothing else you might want?" The presence at his neck lifted and Snape nearly closed his eyes in relief.

The vampire came around to stand before him again. "At some point, yes, an interior decorator capable of rescuing a castle that has been hideously converted into a museum, but frankly you don't look qualified for that position." He licked his lips which shone with saliva. "No, there is just one thing I would take in payment or you have no deal."

"You will not make me one of your kind?" Snape asked, gut urging him to make a run for it, but his rational mind seeing no alternatives.

"Traditionally, we dislike competition, to put it mildly."

Snape imagined Harry learning of this. He would not be pleased to say the least, but Snape had no options and he could not sit by and do nothing. "All right," Snape agreed. The vampire's eyes flared red and he bared his long incisors. Snape cut him off with: "But after you have succeeded. Bring me back my son or at least proof that you have found him."

"And how would I prove that. Shall I bring you his head?"

Snape sat unbaited by that. "Get me the answer to the question: what present did his father first give him?"

The vampire considered that. "Agreed. I will look for him tonight. Where shall I find you when I have found him?"

Snape did not want this creature anywhere near his house. "I will return here . . . a half hour before sunrise."

"Clever man. Make it an hour." He stepped forward again with a catlike grace and hunting manner. Whispering while leaning in close, he said, "I want sufficient time to enjoy my payment." He licked his lips faintly, drawing in the saliva pooling there.

Snape stood. "Yes, I'm sure you do," he stated brusquely, barely masking his violent disgust.

At the Burrow the worn, brightly mismatched couches and tablecloth calmed Snape given how far removed they were from black velvet drapes and wrought iron candelabras. Candide stood from the table where several Weasley's had gathered, drooping slightly. "Any luck?" Candide asked.

Snape shook his head, not wishing to discuss what he had been doing. Ron and Bill frowned and returned to clutching the large mugs of tea before them.

"I appreciate your assistance," Snape said to them.

"Anything for Harry," Ron said into his mug.

"Indeed," Snape agreed with vehemence.

The next morning, under cover of darkness, Snape escorted a sleepy and somewhat irritable Candide to the twin's laboratory where a light burned in the window unlike the darkened offices on the first floors up and down the alley, including the accountancy.

Chapter 11

"I don't understand why you don't want company?" Candide asked for the second time.

Fred, the twin who was not sleeping on the rug using a giant marshmellow as a pillow, came to the rescue of Snape's thin patience. "Don't ask something like that of Professor Snape," he told her in mock horror. "The mind boggles at the answer might be. Come on in. I'll make you some tea."

At Twenty-Six Knockturn Alley, Snape found the vampire pacing.

"Well?" Snape asked.

After a pause, the creature said snippily, "I didn't find him. I found evidence of him, in the form of a pentagram I'm quite certain none of the creatures would have left behind. Plus a lot of trainer footprints, already covered by other tracks. But no sign of the boy human himself."

"What would it cost me to have you look again? Or bring me there."

The vampire considered his nails before replying. "Nothing extra. Believe me, I thought I had my first real meal in a year coming to me. Waltzing in like a proverbial lamb, even." He threw down his hand, making the nearby candles flicker. "I know he is not there. I set my pets off to hunt for him as well as looking myself. He is not in the Dark Plane as the few mortals who know it refer to it."

Snape exhaled. He had not expected this answer and found himself lacking a plan for what to do next. He was slow gathering himself to leave. When he reached the door, the vampire joked in clear disappointment, "Stop in for a bite anytime."

Snape merely raised a brow at him as he tugged the door closed behind him.

The next day during Hogwarts breakfast hour when Voldemort would be out of the tower, Snape returned with four items in a small box and paced nervously while Harry examined them as they sat on the chessboard, which had become Harry's worktable.

Snape uttered, "Hurry with that, I must return them before they are missed."

"He must be overconfident," Harry observed as he lifted out each item from the box: a locket, a watch, and a pair of cufflinks. Each felt all right but afterward he still had a sense of advanced decomposition. Harry stared at the chessboard before him in puzzlement.

"What it is?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry lifted the box to look for a hidden compartment and said, "It's the little box itself, even though it's wooden."

The box did not want to deform while closed. Harry opened the lid and pressed hard on the frame of the box. After many tense minutes and a few droplets of sweat, the brass-strapped wood creaked and a ball of fire consumed the velvet lining, emitting a scream. Harry made himself hold onto it so he could quickly quench the flames. The lining and part of the wood inside were ruined.

"That will not be easily repaired," Snape observed grimly.

"Same dark green velvet as the curtains around your bed," Harry pointed out, half-teasing.

"Do you know how to sew?" Snape asked.

Harry, who as a child had tried to lengthen the life span of any clothing, nodded. "Well enough for this."

"But not fast enough, I suspect. Breakfast ends in ten minutes."

"Cut me a piece and let's see."

"You are not the one who must work their way past all of the barriers to return the box," Snape harshly pointed out.

"Return it as it is, then," Harry said. "Or don't return it at all; let it go missing."

Snape tossed the trinkets into the box where they clinked harshly, saying, "You have no idea how badly that would go over." He departed hurriedly. Harry dearly hoped he returned quickly and did not run into trouble. He reminded himself that he could leave anytime. He was certainly being desperately missed back home. Leaving and returning would be complicated; explanations would be required and Harry did not believe he could argue successfully that he should come back to complete the prophecy here. As he stood there, before the fire, it felt like his prophecy now and he could not resist it.

Snape returned presently, seeming distracted.

"Go all right?" Harry asked.

Snape took this as an invitation to get directly in his face. "Finish this quickly or we are all doomed."

"I plan to," Harry said. "I'll go out right now looking for the remaining ones."

Minutes later he re-emerged from the toilet, passable as Argus Filch. Snape stood in the center of the room, arms crossed, looking smug. "You don't require a distraction?"

"No," Harry said.

"No?" Snape echoed doubtfully.

"No," Harry insisted, "I have this." He pulled out the Marauder's Map and snapped it open with one hand.

"What is that?"

"Something I picked up from Filch's office last trip out."

"I've seen that before," Snape breathed, sounding suspicious.

"Yes," Harry said, activating it and waiting for the decorative and infamous printing listing the designers to die away and the Hogwarts corridors to appear. "It was my father's."

Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I should just turn you in now, shouldn't I?"

"Right," Harry said tiredly. "After all you've already done, for one thing." Snape did not reply, just continued to glower. Harry lowered the map and said, "Look, I'm sorry my dad was cruel to you, but there's nothing I can do about it now." He wanted to say more, about Snape keeping his priorities straight, but did not wish to risk arguing about that. Snape continued to glare as though thinking things through. "Come on," Harry said. "Hasn't your dad done things you didn't agree with?" Harry returned to studying the map. "I bet he has."

Harry folded the map away. Filch was on the far end of the fourth floor and Harry wanted to take a look around on the lawn anyway. "I really am sorry," Harry insisted, although he was understanding a little better right then his father's animosity towards this man. "What more do you want from me?"

"That you don't get me killed, I suppose."

Harry departed with, "I'll try."

The Entrance Hall was full of students, so Harry did not pause to investigate the aversion he felt there. It was one more of the Crux Horridii, most likely, which meant there was still another to find. Harry wandered out into the cloudy day. Shouts drew him toward the Quidditch pitch where one of the Houses was practicing. Harry stood and watched, wondering that things could go on so normally with someone like

Voldemort in charge. Perhaps most momentum was too strong even for a powerful evil wizard to stop. Harry wandered past the gameskeeper's cabin where a small woman with a shiny bald head and wispy hair over her ears was tending to the pumpkin patch. Harry wondered where Hagrid was with a feeling of deep worry. Farther around the castle, just beside the rose garden he encountered a row of fancy cages set up like a miniature zoo or a menagerie. A pair of unicorns sat forlornly in the first cage, eyeing Harry anxiously, moving their tiny hooves spasmodically in lieu of running away. The next cage held a giant spider that snatched at Harry through the bars as he past, using a leg that clearly had taken a beating already. Harry looked down the row and hurried on to the largest one which had a kind of dirt hovel near the back of it.

"Hagrid," Harry breathed.

The large man inside stirred. The half giant resembled a towering pile of untanned skins thrown together. Harry backed up a step. Hagrid could not be trusted to keep news to himself. Before Hagrid could rise, Harry quickly moved on, slowing only when he passed a cage with a brass sign reading Werewolf. This cage also had a hovel in the center, this one made of wood. The figure curled inside the hut did not stir when Harry called out, "Hey there!"

Harry could do nothing at all for them if he was caught here. Severely pained, he walked on, entering the bailey through the rear gate. Harry paced once around the fountain, forced to fish leaves out of it when a group of Slytherins came meandering through. His mind was moving too fast to be of use. Tossing a handful of rotted, slippery leaves aside, Harry strode to the door and into the castle.

The Entrance Hall was quieter now. Harry stood beneath the great hourglasses that recorded the house points and craned his neck to study them. He was feeling desperate and even knowing that would make him insufficiently careful, he waited for the hall to empty, lifted his wand, and said, "Accio Crux Horridus." The jewels shifted and the glass of the Slytherin hourglass cracked in a spider-web pattern.

"Now you've done it," Harry muttered to himself. He glanced around the hall. A few students were coming down the stairs but they ignored him in favor of their gossip and entered the Great Hall. Harry decided that fixing this would be Filch's job, so he fetched a ladder from the nearest cupboard and climbed up to decorative wooden rack holding the row of glasses.

Harry assumed the emerald lodged at the center of the web of cracks was the one he wanted. It was near the bottom of the top conical section. Fortunately the Slytherins

were far ahead and not many emeralds remained in the top portion. Just that moment ten blue sapphires flew upward in the next hourglass, putting Slytherin even farther ahead.

Harry adjusted the ladder to better reach the top and with some unlock spell attempts, finally got the glass cylinder to open. He had to wait for students to pass between attempts with his wand, and soon chilly sweat was dripping down his ribs under his robes. The ladder wasn't high enough for him to reach inside or even aim his wand inside and he did not want to risk climbing up on the rack itself to do so, picturing in his mind the whole thing crashing to the floor. He also had to keep an eye on the Marauder's Map to be certain the real Filch kept dallying in the attics.

Harry used a Hoover Hex to remove the emeralds above the one he wanted. The sucked up ones weighted down his robe pockets until they overflowed. He then used a whip charm to snag individual gems, feeling like his cousin Dudley must have when he tried to win a prize in one of those Muggle machines with a claw on the end of a crane.

Finally Harry snagged the correct one, feeling only relief, not joy at doing so. He slipped it into his jeans pocket and quickly hovered the remaining emeralds back inside. He then used a repair spell on the crack and retreated down the ladder on legs almost too shaky to stand, let alone climb. Keeping his head down, he properly snarled at some students while putting the ladder away.

He was back safely in the dungeon just a minute later, trying to get his breathing slowed to normal. He had taken the risk in the middle of the day because he had been angry about the menagerie, but he knew it had been foolhardy and that kept his heart pumping long afterward.

Snape strolled in as Harry was studying the gem in the firelight, pondering how he was going to deform a crystal to crush the soul inside of it.

"Another one?" Snape asked. "Ah," he said. "A student complained that the total house points may be wrong, now I know why."

"As if Slytherin could ever lose," Harry mocked.

Snape grinned with no cheer. "I had a thought as to where another might be," he said, raising Harry's spirits. Snape went on to explain, "The Dark Lord was not always so sanguine regarding his position. He spent a month of the first year working in the lower dungeons on some project and did not let anyone down there for several years after."

"Filch survived going down there, so it should be safe to take a look," Harry said. "That would be the last one."

Snape derisively corrected, "I thought you said six. You have the cup, the box, the emerald, and Nagini. Add to that the one in the lower dungeons and that still leaves one."

"That would be me," Harry said softly. "I'm the last one."

Snape straightened and stared at him. "And do you plan to dispense with yourself using the same method you intend for Nagini?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Harry admitted in all honesty. This was a topic he had been ignoring for lack of any hope for a solution. "I don't plan to stay around here. I'll take myself far enough away that it won't matter."

Snape dropped into the overstuffed chair, saying, "I think I am going to regret helping you at all."

"Why?" Harry asked. "You like living like this?"

"The living is fine," Snape said, sounding vaguely spoiled.

"You're lying," Harry accused. He put the emerald down, intact, in the center of the empty chess board and asked, "Why was V- the Dark Lord allowed to continue as headmaster?"

"Why was he allowed?" Snape echoed derisively. "No one had any choice, Potter! What a ridiculous suggestion. Fudge believed it would keep him busy, and he was correct about that. Turns out he never lived down Albus refusing him a job."

"Blimey," Harry muttered. "It's a wonder any students come."

"Most Slytherins still send their children, even more families from the continent than before, and some still don't sort into Slytherin, so we still have four houses. The castle spells have been reinforced and he has the Dementors and the Giants patrolling the forest. There is no chance to overcome him by force. Even a large force, should they wish to risk the children."

"Hm."

Snape scoffed at Harry's doubtful noise. "You will be dead before this is finished."

"Neither can live while the other survives," Harry quoted. "Or hadn't you ever heard the ending of it?" he added mockingly. It was clear from Snape's expression that he had not. "I can take care of myself; keep an eye on yourself."

Chapter 11

The hearth flared green and Harry barely had time to leap aside to press his back to the wall beside the mantelpiece before the dreaded slit-eyed, noseless, face moved into view in the flames.

"My Lord," Snape greeted calmly. So calmly that Harry thought he deserved some kind of medal for it.

"Come to my tower, Snape, I would speak with you."

Snape bowed and the awful face pulled back and the green flames flickered back to yellow. Snape glanced at Harry on his way to the door.

"What does he want?" Harry asked, whispering unnecessarily.

"I don't know."

Still pressed against the wall, chair-rail under his hands, Harry asked, "Does he summon you up like that often?"

"No."

Harry sucked in a deep, worried breath. Despite or because he still felt shaky, Harry said, "I'm going to look in the lower dungeon. But I may need your help."

Snape's brow lifted. He departed without replying.

Motivated heartily by fear of his safe haven being at risk, Harry checked the corridor in the wake of Snape's departing and dashed around to the door to the lower dungeon and slipped through after hitting the rust-red hinges with a quick oiling charm. The smell of crypt and the sound of lapping water wafted up as he descended the long curved staircase carved directly out of the foundation stone. With a wave, Harry lit the torches at the bottom so he could see more than the faintly lit arched opening that led to the quay.

Meanwhile, Severus Snape strode up and around to the gargoyles with his normal purposeful speed. He had grown immune to fear, which was fortunate, since he had no room to spare for it right then if he was to survive the next ten minutes.

On the second floor staircase he encountered Minerva McGonagall, one of the few remaining professors from Dumbledore's era. Originally, she had remained because MacNair, the Care of Magical Creatures instructor had her under an Imperio, but later after it weakened, she seemed to believe she could do more good remaining. A naïve notion, but one that events never seemed to shake, especially given how lost many of the students felt when they failed to sort into Slytherin.

McGonagall, held up two fingers as though to slow him down and he shook his head and pointed upward. She pulled her fingers back into her sleeve and appeared to shrink into herself as she let him pass.

The headmaster's tower no longer had a turning staircase, but instead had a slide, and visitors were required to utilize a magic carpet to rise to the office. Snape stepped off the carpet at the top and it snapped its fringe at him before rolling up and storing itself against the wall to wait. An unwelcome guest would be unceremoniously rolled down beyond the second floor and into the bowels of the castle where it was rumored a basilisk awaited. Snape was not certain he believed that such a creature lived beneath the castle, but he certainly had seen his displeased master dispose of people utilizing the slide and its victims were never heard of again.

The snake-headed door knocker hissed and clacked on its own upon Snape's arrival and the door creaked open. Sunlight stabbed in slashes around the thick curtains valiantly blocking it out. Voldemort sat at the broad desk, pondering a long scroll. A basket of scrolls sat on the desk edge, awaiting review. Snape saw the scene with fresh eyes borrowed from Harry's ignorant questions and he almost laughed. But he held it in, not wishing to die so early in the conversation.

Voldemort said, "Two of your House's students were caught off school grounds. In the Forest no less."

Idiots, Snape thought to himself. Aloud, he said, "Do you wish me to punish them?"

"That failed to change them last time, so I have turned them over to Filch."

Snape withheld a shudder. "Until what time, may I inquire? I may wish to add onto their tasks." In reality, he wished to warn the Mediwizard so that he would be certain to be sober at that time.

Voldemort carefully re-rolled the parchment before him with his oddly knobbly hands. It was a if they were the hands of a elderly person with severe arthritis, but with smooth young skin. "I did not give him a limit, so it will be ten, when he must clear the corridors preceding the Dementors' patrol." His factual tone was most likely designed to lull Snape into letting his guard down.

Time passed as Voldemort continued reading the long scroll. He finished, rolled it up, tied it closed and turned to toss it into the hearth, burning heartily despite the September warmth of the tower. Snape waited without moving or speaking.

Finally, Voldemort said, "You sent Filch down to the lower dungeons. Why?" The question was flatter even than normal, setting Snape's nerves on alert.

Using a tone carefully crafted to contain a hint of boredom and an underlying current of annoyance, Snape replied, "He crossed me too many times last week. Broke several rare potions open while cleaning up. I thought a pointless task would make a point, so to speak. The floor has undoubtedly re-flooded already."

Voldemort did not look up from the wand he rolled between his fingertips. Snape had not seen him take it out, but he showed no reaction. His explanation may have been too long-winded, but there was no withdrawing it.

"The lower dungeons continue to be off-limits, Snape."

Snape bowed as though mere acknowledgment was all that the situation required. "My mistake, my Lord. I certainly recall that used to be true, but . . . much time had passed since a reminder." Snape feared that he was losing his touch at this game, having not practiced it in years for anything more than protecting the occasional student. That meant he was relying rather heavily on hopes that Potter, by some inconceivable chance, could actually complete the prophecy. The fact that the boy was alive at all made the odds something greater than zero, but not high enough to survive sloppiness.

Voldemort lifted one brow the way he did when annoyed with the likes of Crabbe or someone equally incompetent.

"The dungeon is your domain, Snape; I expect you to enforce the rules there that no one enter the lower dungeons or the cave leading to the lake." He waved his hand dismissively as though wanting Snape out of his sight.

As the flying carpet unrolled and hovered and the office door slammed closed and the bolts thundered into place, Snape pondered that his shaky performance may have in fact lowered the Dark Lord's guard and saved him from suspicion.

Shaking his head and trying to see hope while fearing its poison, he stepped onto the carpet and let it carry him downward.

In the lowest dungeon of the castle, Harry stood with the toes of his trainers hanging over the water of the small quay which was clearly now unused. No boats rested here but if he leaned far over, he could see two battered ones resting belly-up on the larger docking area used in the past by the First-Years. A bulky, rusty gate was closed across the entrance to the cave and the only other boats were sunken and sprouting plantlife.

Harry waited for his eyes to readjust to the darkness after staring outside at the lake, glaringly bright in comparison to the cave, even on a cloudy day. He examined the

cave walls and then squinted, glasses pushed hard to his face to see across to the far side. A niche, perhaps just a natural indentation in the rock, kept catching his eye. Wand raised, Harry considered his options. He spelled a Lumos and shielded his own eyes from it. Something lay in the niche, weakly reflecting the blue light. Harry wasn't watching thoroughly enough or he may have noticed eyes opening beneath his toes, peering up through the cold depths.

Grumbling to himself, Harry shook the Lumos out of his wand and paced. He could take a boat over and look. So, leaning dangerously around the corner of the wall, he hovered one of the rickety old boats around from the other entrance and gently down on the quayside at his feet. He manually rolled the badly peeled white hull over and hovered it into the water. A chill went through him as he held the boat against the rock edge, and considered that he should get help before going further. The oars were narrowed with rot, but serviceable. Harry set these into the boat; the thunk of them hitting the bottom echoed around the cave and he held his breath and waited to see if anyone heard. A minute passed before he breathed normally again.

Harry crouched at the quay edge, one hand holding the bow steady, while he considered whether to get help or just get moving. Snape may not even return, Harry considered. This may be the only chance.

Harry awkwardly stepped into the rocky boat and shoved off. He struggled to mount the oars into the rusty locks and began rowing across. His sense of cursedness increased as he approached the other side, giving him a joyous lift even as it made him cringe.

It was difficult to hold the boat against the rock wall while standing up to see into the niche, but Harry managed long enough to see that there was a metal ring on a chiseled hatch in the bottom face of the niche. Harry tugged upward on the ring, nearly sending the boat out from under himself. He had to shove with his hands against the rock and jump for the boat to catch it and prevent himself from tumbling into the water. The boat sailed back out to the middle of the cave before coasting to a stop with him in the murky, smelly bottom of it.

Harry's sense of alarm increased and he looked around the cave repeatedly for danger, but failed to look down into the water. He gazed instead at his trouser knees, which were soaked with green, slippery water. At the bottom of the lake more things were rousing, dead eyes snapping open to stare distantly upward.

Using the oars, Harry paddled back to the cave wall below the niche. He cast his mind back to Ravenclaw's book and used a demolition spell around the metal ring. Loose

stone spattered into the water and into the boat, thundering, until Harry pushed with his feet to keep the boat away from the rock wall and apply some Silencing Charms.

The door at the top of the steps opened and footsteps sounded, just as Harry, perched to look into the demolished niche, finally looked down into the dark water. Harry's grip on the rock became tenacious with panic as he stared down into an army of dead white faces rising dreamlike toward the surface.

"Potter, you could perhaps make enough noise to be heard in the Entrance Hall if you worked at it – " Snape's voice criticized in a hiss.

"Get a broomstick!" Harry insisted, fingertips clinging to the rock as the boat inextricably drifted again away from the cave wall, taking his feet with it. "Hurry!"

Snape raised his wand and used a weak blasting curse to shove the boat back under Harry's legs, knocking the head of the dead man just clearing the water. Harry leapt for the disintegrating niche and grabbed up the only thing that did not feel like rock, liberating a small golden box from the debris. More figures were rising. Harry tossed the box into the boat and heaved on the oars, but they had arms and hands clinging to them, so he moved no where. A hand came over the gunwale, tipping the boat dangerously toward the water. Harry lifted the oar to beat the hand off and then shoved against the cave wall with the oar, moving the boat a little. The other oar was tugged overboard and thrashing ensued as it disappeared beneath the choppy surface.

Harry glanced back at the quay, needing help. Snape stood, wand extended, gaping in chilled alarm at the figures rising out of the water. Harry took another swing with the oar at someone he tried not to recognize despite how familiar they looked. He was not certain what spell to use that would not risk upsetting the boat and he did not want to lose the last oar if he let go to use his wand.

The boat suddenly surged toward the quay, sending Harry into the wet belly of it beside the golden box. The surge also shed the worst of the clawing hands. The boat ran hard into the stone edge and a fiercely gripping hand hauled Harry up onto the quay.

"You did not exaggerate when you said you required help," Snape muttered before issuing a stunning curse from his wand that slowed the figures from clambering up onto the ledge after them; their bleached and torn clothing dragging on their limbs, dripping. "Inferi," Snape breathed. "Of all the horrific things."

Harry joined him in casting spells to keep them at bay as they backed up to the staircase. "So, you did not know about this?" Harry asked, knocking a white-haired heavy figure back, which took down his companions as well.

At the top of the stairs Snape held Harry back from the door and opened it to check that the corridor was clear. He gestured abruptly for Harry to follow, and Harry gratefully did so.

"Keep your head down," Snape hissed.

Harry leaned on the door to press it closed, keeping his face ducked and averted. Something thumped into the door from the other side and water sloshed under it.

Snape sneered to someone, apparently a student, "Mr. Callow, fetch a mop, will you? The rest of you clear out or you will all be assisting." Harry was extremely relieved right then that Snape could wield that dreadful tone that even now, made him grateful it was not aimed his way. The door thumped again. Snape hit it with an Impervious Charm, a Silencing Charm and several more things since Harry was using one hand to hold the door and the other to hold the golden box. The door fell silent and still. Harry released his hand from the damp wood slowly.

The student returned at a run and Snape set him to mopping with strict orders not to open or touch the door itself. Harry snuck off while the hapless Slytherin had his head down, mopping inexpertly at the fluid slipping in under the door. After Harry turned the corner, Snape snapped his fingers at the boy and ordered, "Enough. Leave it."

"Army of the flippin' dead," Harry muttered as he tried to shake off chills by settling before the fire. The golden box joined the emerald on the chess board. Harry rubbed his hair back and calmed himself. "Let's hope they can't get out of there," Harry said as Snape approached.

"The cave is barred to the lake and the path to the Entrance Hall bricked in long ago."

"Still, let's finish this quickly, just in case." Harry held the emerald to the firelight as he spoke.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "Just like that? Just finish it? You think it so easy?"

Harry did not want the questions that would follow his pointing out that he had done it before, more than once. "I'll manage. Watch yourself, – cause I can't do both," Harry said garnering a disbelieving glare. Harry turned to contemplate the box. It had the seal of a cross on it. "Ah, a traditionalist," Harry observed.

"What do you mean by that?"

Chapter 11

Harry opened the box. Inside was a carefully preserved digit. "Its an old reliquary. Fitting." Harry dusted off the plaque inside. "Hey, it's St. Mungo's finger." Feeling punchy from too much stress, Harry said, "Should be grateful it isn't some other part of him . . ."

He carefully lifted the leathery thing from its setting, forced to overcome both curse discomfort and general dislike of the task. He squeezed the finger in his hand with great concentration, then jerked as it burst into flame and let out a wail. He tossed it on the fire and brushed his hand on his robe. "Sorry Mungo."

Harry set the box aside and turned back to the emerald, saying, "I assume you don't want to return this box . . . ?"

Snape shook his stringy veil of hair, eyes fixed on the jewel.

Harry pressed the emerald between his fingers to no effect. He returned to staring at it, unsure how to proceed. In the end he knelt on the hearthstone, gem against the slate, held between his index finger and thumb, the fireplace poker point aimed at the flattest side of the jewel. He crushed with his mind before bringing the poker down hard. If he were to hit his fingers, his concentration would be broken and he was not certain what would happen then. To be possessed by Voldemort did not appeal, but the path home led through this task. His aim was true. The flare burst from the emerald as it was crushed and a thousand tinny cries of despair drifted around the room before dying out. Harry barely pulled his fingers away from the flame in time and had to suck on his fingers to relieve the sting of the burn. When the hearth cooled, he collected the green salt-like gem fragments into his robe pocket and sat back in the overstuffed chair to think.

"One left," Snape reminded him helpfully, needling Harry with an accuracy only he could manage.

"Don't I know it," Harry returned, fingers rubbing his chin as he contemplated what he was going to do next. His thoughts came around nicely with a glance at the clock showing half past four. "I'll finish it tonight, at dinner."

"Will you then?" Snape asked sarcastically.

"Just don't give it away."

"YOU just don't give me away," Snape countered. "You are going to fail and I don't wish by any means to go down with you."

With a small smile, Harry said, "Such confidence." He stood then and with a quick check of the Marauder's Map, said, "I have to something to do before the Dark Lord

Death Day Ball this evening." He smiled more broadly. He wanted to go home and he could taste the freedom to do so, it was so close. "I'll come in after the plates are cleared but before pudding is served. It will be over soon."

Snape glared at him as though questioning Harry's sanity.

"This is my destiny, Severus," Harry said, stepping to the toilet to don his disguise.

"Did I give you permission to use my first name?" Snape snarled lowly.

Harry turned and gave a small bow, still smiling. "Professor."

Dinner in the Great Hall progressed much the same as all the others the last five years. The castle felt colder than it should. The sky reflected in the magic ceiling slid by more brooding than the one outside as though the accumulated soot stained the magic. The students kept their heads down as a few owls swept in and down in a spiral.

Snape had by far the toughest job of any Head of House. His House table was full and even overflowed into the half-empty Ravenclaw one beside it. Only the Slytherins would dare make trouble during a meal. Snape wanted none this evening.

With a foreboding that made his stomach rebel against eating, Snape watched the main course appear. He had to eat, had to behave normally. He was more grateful than most nights to be on the very end of the staff table, overlooking his own table. MacNair and Umbridge sat on either side of the headmaster, pandering to him nonstop.

Snape served himself beans and potatoes with casual uncaring to hide what otherwise would be an utterly unacceptable shaking in his hands. He gave two students, Yuba and Oppeum, sharp looks when they furtively glanced his way. They looked to be plotting something out of a black velvet sack and clearly were checking if he had noticed. After seeing they were observed they placed whatever it was on the floor and bent their heads together.

Snape lifted his fork and tried to eat. He very nearly could not swallow even the thinnest runny edge of the lumpy mashed potatoes. What was bothering him so? He certainly should hold no concern for that miserably annoying son of his worst enemy. And at one level he did not. It was not concern for Potter that closed his throat and made his heart race beneath his carefully crafted calm exterior; it was hope. Hope had slipped in despite no conscious room for it in his soul. His fingers trembled in fear at losing that hope again.

Damn you Potter.

Chapter 11

Snape made a show of eating. No one paid the least attention to him; certainly the headmaster did not appear to, but often that meant he would later recount your every move back to you, expecting an explanation for each small thing. Snape thought he could handle that, if necessary. Certainly he could insist that he hated Potter to his very core. Yes, he could honestly state, even under Veritaserum, that he hated the boy . . . after Voldemort defeated him in just ten minutes time; hopefully the Dark Lord did not inquire if Snape also hated what the boy stood for.

Author's Notes: I see you are all rubbing your eyes and waking back up after Deathly Hallows. Welcome back everyone!
Yeah a cliff-hanger. I so love them.

Chapter 12.

Adopted Destiny

Harry, without disguise, strolled through empty corridors to the statues that guarded the headmaster's tower. The hall leading there had been redecorated and now black curtains covered the walls, rendering the path tunnel-like with just a torch flickering at the end. The gargoyles sat unmoving and the doorway was open but there were no stairs. He put his head inside and called upward in parseltongue, then listened. Deep beneath him he felt a rumble and glanced down, noticing that the curving slide that had replaced the stairs spiraled away into the floor and darkness. The Basilisk would still be down there, he realized, since he had not been around as a Second Year to kill it. Voldemort apparently fed it often, since it called out with its deeper-than-Nagini's voice that it would appreciate a meal.

Harry feared using a spell so close to the headmaster's tower, so getting an idea he raced back to the main staircase and Accioed a barrel of cooking oil from the direction of the kitchens. He brought this back and after pouring it over the slide as high up as he could reach, he called to Nagini again and moments later, a slithering sound could be heard, but he could not be certain if it arose from above or below, so he backed off and, wand held at ready, waited for something to appear in the doorway. After half a minute of thumping and sliding, one of Nagini's coils slid into view from above. Harry, fearing being seen by her, ducked against the wall beside the still gargoyle and pressed himself there. Flailing sounded and more thumping and then a rapid sliding receded down into the bowels of the castle.

Harry stuck his head in the doorway and listened to the hissing that ensued and then the screeching and then the silence that followed. He called down in parseltongue

and heard only the deep voice of the Basilisk. With a sharp exhale and glance at his watch, Harry hurried off.

Harry next strode into the kitchens with the attitude of head elf. "Attention, all of you!" he shouted. He scanned the array of bumpy heads framed by tall pointed ears, hoping to find Dobby, but did not. He spotted Grimpy, whom he recognized. He was by far the stoutest of the school's house-elves and always eager to give Ron food when his friend asked.

"Grimpy," Harry said. The elf blinked in surprise. "Get everyone out of here, now."

"You is being Harry Potter?" Grimpy asked. A few of the elves gasped. When Harry nodded, more a bow, really, Grimpy turned his long-nosed profile one way and then the other as though considering his instructions.

"Come back in ten minutes," Harry said to the kitchen elves, lowering his bargaining position. They shifted from foot to foot, nervous. Harry gave up on being nice. "I'm going to present you all with old socks of Dumbledore's if you don't leave now!" He pulled out a pink and green pair he had found stuffed in the Mrs. Pince's desk drawer when he was looking for the key to the Restricted Section. He brandished them at the elves. "You have ten seconds or I start distributing socks!"

The elves disappeared with a chorus of pops! Harry sighed and with several great heaves, shoved the long marble-topped tables aside to make room for two tall spell columns that, when they were finished, radiated prickly blue light even to the most remote nook of the vast kitchens.

The puddings sat on the longest table, on small overlapping plates, waiting to be magically served. Harry dipped a finger in one as he passed and then frowned. "Hopefully the food improves with Voldemort gone."

Harry initiated the spell he wanted, but stopped before the last line of it. He left the blue towers burning merrily to themselves, the air between them electrified and sizzling, and stepped out into the corridor leading to the Hufflepuff dungeon, but instead of walking up the stairs, he Dark-Plane Apparated silently to the Entrance Hall, just before the center doors. He stared at the marred old wood, took a deep breath, and adjusted his grip on his wand. His heart fluttered, inducing lightheadedness like it had before his first Quidditch match. Harry charmed his robes to bright blue, feeling he needed to represent some team, even an absent one. Beyond the doors, at the end of the staff table, Snape rubbed his thumb over his chin, experiencing similar cardiac symptoms, but no feelings of team spirit.

Harry pulled his hood far forward over his head, raised his wand, and blasted the doors open, following quickly through them before they could bounce closed.

"Lord Voldemort!" Harry addressed the surprised room and especially the slit-eyed man facing him in the center of the distant table. As he crossed the threshold of the tables, two forbidden curses formed behind him, aimed his way. Sharp watering came to Harry's eyes as he squelched the spells, which made the magic explode inside the casters' bodies. A few students gasped; the appearance of taking out one's opponents, without lifting a wand let alone turning to look at them was impressive all right, but Harry's feet had lost their marching cadence, and for that he berated himself.

Harry reached exactly halfway down the hall and he tapped his hand on his wand and pointed at the banners, snapping consecutively the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor out to the same size as the Slytherin ones. "All houses are equal here," Harry boomed as best he could. He wished he had a deeper voice. Fervent whispers rustled through the hall as though blown through by a breeze.

As Harry approached the end of the long House tables, Voldemort derisively asked, "Who dares challenge me?"

Harry stopped and tugged off his hood, wand aimed steadily. "Harry Potter."

The frantic whispering reached a quick crescendo then fell to stillness, the audience fearful of attracting attention or of just missing any detail. The closest Hufflepuffs leaned or scrambled away from where Harry stood defiant. Voldemort's eyes flickered with utter disbelief, which gave Harry a painful stab at the realization that his counterpart truly was dead in this Plane. Just as well he himself had stayed, then. No one else could do this.

Voldemort's wand flashed and Harry met the Disemboweling Scissors Hex with a block because that was ingrained habit and their wands and their paired cores locked together. Harry felt the first shudder of doubt; if the wands had not responded to their common origin, he was not sure he could have countered that spell well enough. To say the spell was loaded, did not cover it; it carried power equivalent to every wizard in the Ministry added together.

The ball of hex energy hovered between them, but Harry, familiar with this, forced it toward Voldemort, while mocking him to hide his sudden nerves, "Ha! Albus Dumbledore tricked you and assured that you would have a wand to match mine!"

Harry's words had the effect he had hoped and the hex exploded just in front of Voldemort, forcing the tall, boney wizard to duck awkwardly. MacNair was caught in the backwash and flew backward in his chair to smack the wall. Umbridge tumbled from her chair with a squeak. Harry laughed. It echoed around the hall's tall buttresses, reflecting back maniacally, sounding nothing like him. The room held a

collective breath. Some of the teachers made a run for it, including McGonagall, who took up a defensive position at the top of the Gryffindor table.

Voldemort said, "You are surrounded, Potter."

Another spell came Harry's way and again they locked and Harry pressed his advantage of experience. Voldemort was standing now, his cloak and robes billowing in an unseen wind. He dodged this curse too as it erupted. This time, Harry used the gap, and very fast speaking, to complete Salazar's spell while looping his wand over his head.

The hall erupted in blue electricity that crawled madly over the walls before sinking into a cold glow in the stones. Half the Death-Eater laden staff table flopped to the floor in fits of hallucinatory horror along with several students. The others began to flee in earnest, lining the walls and pounding out the doors at the far end. Voldemort stood firm, shouting in fury, "My forbearer invented that spell. You thought to take me down with it?" He tossed a curse at Harry, which Harry dodged, letting it bounce along the floor between the tables. More students scattered to get out of the way. Some remained pinned where they were, forks in hand, bound in trances of amazement.

"Good!" Harry shouted as he rolled to his feet. "I prefer to take you out personally." He shot a curse at Voldemort that was blocked far too easily, but it let him dodge back to where fewer students were in harm's way behind him. Harry tried to pry open the Dark Plane, but it resisted his call; the castle resisted him too. He bit his lip.

Covering for his failure, he met Voldemort's Crucio with his own and this time they were spell locked for much longer, the curse energy hovering in the middle ground, neither holding an advantage for long. Voldemort was a fast learner, but he broke the spell off himself, possibly because of impatience. Harry dug desperately inside himself for enough pain and hatred to crack open the Dark Plane; it was surprisingly hard to find a sufficient amount. As a distraction while he worked at that, he said, "I'm your destiny, Tom."

Voldemort's eyes glowed even brighter red and he tossed an angry and less powerful spell at Harry, who matched it and held fast to the bound spells. "You are dead," Voldemort stated. It was unclear if this was a prediction of the future or an established statement of fact.

The spells were still locked, Harry propped up his tiring wand arm with his other hand. "Funny, I don't feel dead!" he mocked. "Perhaps you're not the only one who can't be killed."

Voldemort broke off the spell, startled by that statement. He tried to Legilimize Harry, making his scar burn.

Breathing heavier, Harry lowered his wand and found the pain he needed. He found a lonely boy, beaten down by his aunt and uncle with no hope for a life of his own.

"This one's for Lily and James," Harry announced in a snarl as he overcame the castle's weakened spells and glistening black creatures poured out of the seam between the right-hand wall and the floor. Most of the remaining students ran or leapt up on the tables. Those floudering on the floor of the hall, incapacitated by Salazar's spell, were ravaged. Blood began to flow into the cracks between the hall's worn stones. Harry could spare no attention for Snape or McGonagall. He held his wand on Voldemort, who gaped at this freakish invasion.

"Don't know that spell, do you, Tom?" Harry shouted. Voldemort was forced to defend himself from the hordes, but he glanced up at Harry, letting a few crawl his robes before he cursed them and they fell with queer squeals. Harry went on, voice returning to maniacal, "Here's a Riddle for you . . . Harry Potter is darker than you are!"

Just as Voldemort swung his wand to again blast the creatures trying to devour him, Harry snagged the dark wizard, bodily, with a whip charm and jerked him over the staff table and into a skidding stop on the floor. Harry dealt with Voldemort trying to aim his wand by stomping on his forearm. Voldemort dropped his wand but it zipped back to his hand. Harry stomped on his hand instead, sending a curse wide that smashed the upper windows, raining down a spray of glass.

Voldemort's eyes betrayed him. Harry spoke, wand at Voldemort's throat, "Yes, you fear death, don't you? But you know, by doing so you never actually live."

Black-bodied, disgusting creatures, part crustacean, reptile, and rodent, encircled the two of them. They smacked their jaws and scratched the stone floor musically with their absurdly long claws.

Harry, calmer, said, "And now you are going to die, consumed by evil greater than yourself."

Voldemort, by attempting to not betray himself, did so with his flat and almost confident expression. Harry chuckled and reached into his robe pocket. He scattered the smashed emerald powder onto the chest of Voldemort's robe. "I destroyed them all," he said, trying not to smile too broadly.

Voldemort rolled his bare head to peer around himself in horror. The stench was distressing, let alone the vision of so many bared, needle-like teeth.

Harry said with queer pleasantness. "It's like they haven't eaten in an eternity . . . which I happen to know is not true."

Voldemort thrashed then, lifting Harry's foot with his arm, Harry hit him with a blasting curse that stunned him back flat again. "This is the end for you," Harry promised. "You are released from this un-life of yours. Considering what my options are . . ." He thought of his Voldemort, trapped in a mere Muggle existence. ". . . think of it as a gift."

Shifting all his weight atop Voldemort's wand hand, Harry used a Sectumsempra Curse to slash open Voldemort's chest and then leapt aside to let the creatures pile on. The thrashing figure was dragged toward the wall, trailing bright red, and Harry Sent them all away, just as the upraised hand visible over the slithering black bodies drooped and released the wand it held.

The hall fell quiet after the creatures sank away into the stone and Voldemort's wand rolled to a quiet stop in a deep swath of blood. Several more smeared rivelets led to the right-hand wall along the staff table and in longer streaks from the Slytherin house table. The scent was like a butcher's might have, healthful still, but unnerving. Someone was sobbing nearby. A Ravenclaw boy clung to a bench, holding his broken leg. Blood drizzled from bites on his hand. Harry moved toward him to help, but the boy panicked and tried to escape him, falling under the table.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, not wishing to scare the boy just to fix his leg. McGonagall swept over and Quiesced the boy and hovered him onto the tabletop. She turned then and said, "Harry," with overwhelming emotion.

Harry gave a little bow and said, "Headmistress," without much thought. The comment made McGonagall stand straight in surprise.

Snape slowly came up behind McGonagall. She turned and started, saying, "You survived, Severus."

Sharp and annoyed, as always, "Yes, of course."

Harry looked beyond him, barely giving him a glance, insistent still on not implicating him. Harry moved to repair the boy's leg while he was still quieted and while McGonagall went to attend to others. Finished with that, he looked around. Other students had taken refuge on the tabletops, one still brandished the stone goblet she had used as a weapon. A few stalwart friends were slinking back in to help the stragglers. Harry remembered the menagerie, turned, and strode out the door, ignoring McGonagall trying to call him back.

Outside, a light drizzle floated in the still air, soaking Harry's robes. His robes' bright sky color darkened as they grew damp and as the Morphmagus spell wore off.

At the largest cage, Harry called out to Hagrid, who roused slowly. Once the giant heaved to his feet, bent low because of the cage, he stomped up to the bars and lowered his bruised brow. He took a long sniff and said, "Harry?" with empty belief.

"Yeah, Hagrid, it's me. Stand back, I'll open the cage." Harry, after much urging to get Hagrid to move, blasted the lock. The door opened, but Hagrid remained standing where he was, perhaps finding freedom not entirely comprehensible.

Harry left him to recover and went down the line on the left, opening every cage except the giant spider's. At the unicorns, one ran off, but the other was lame and it did not get beyond the cage door. It floundered on the ground, eyes wide and alarmed by Harry's presence.

"Hagrid," Harry yelled to the half-giant. "Come help the unicorn!"

This got Hagrid moving. Cooing, Hagrid stooped to lift the creature in his broad hands and then stumbled off to the forest carrying it, glancing backward repeatedly, still disbelieving. Harry moved down the line of facing cages, releasing a beaked gibbus, a vampire duck, a hippogriff that was mostly likely Buckbeak, except it lunged at Harry before scampering off and taking flight on wings that lacked several major feathers. Harry reached the werewolf cage with great trepidation. He destroyed the lock and called out, "Hallo!"

Slitted eyes snapped open and a shaggy form put its head out of the wooden hovel.

"Remus," Harry said, surprised to find this Lupin appeared partially werewolf outside the full moon as well.

Lupin limped slowly out of the cage, gazing quizzically at Harry. "Can't be," he whispered. "Can't be."

Harry felt a twinge at his ruse, but it could not be helped. "It's Harry Potter," he said in a reassuring manner .

"You look just like James," he whispered hoarsely. He then jerked and looked about in fear as though an attack may be imminent.

Harry turned to look as well and found a familiar pink Mohawk approaching. "Tonks," Harry greeted the witch, with too much familiarity it turned out. She peered at him suspiciously. "Harry Potter," he said with a little bow, by way of introduction. "You're one of the Aurors, right?" he went on, masking the pain he felt seeing her prematurely aged and careworn face.

"Yes," she said flatly and turned to Lupin, who had taken to clinging to the bars of his cage, looking away from both of them as though ashamed. Tonks' pained gaze fixed on Lupin's tattered back.

"Can you take care of him?" Harry asked, nearly pleading. He wished to leave, but these new burdens were threatening that.

Tonks did not reply, only moved to put a hand on Lupin's arm to draw him away from the metal bars. Lupin resisted but finally leaned on her. Harry felt a twinge of jealousy and turned away.

"What did you do in there?" Tonks asked Harry over Lupin's shoulder. She sounded mistrustful.

Harry suppressed more disappointment. He did not want to feel the need to make her understand. "Something I should have done a long time ago," he replied, voice harder than he intended. He was not going to argue over, or justify anything he had done. Her eyes gave away that she saw only the blood on top of too much other blood.

"Not really Harry, is it?" Lupin asked faintly, scratching his pointed ear with one clawed finger. "Can't be."

Harry walked away, back to the Great Hall.

A Ministry retinue was mincing here and there in the Hall, oohing and ahing over what they were hearing described and seeing in damage. Harry strode up to the familiar, brown-coated figure and stopped in his face, just as he turned at the sound of advancing footsteps.

"Oh!" Fudge said in surprise. "Potter?" he prompted, befuddled.

"Don't blow this, Fudge." Harry jerked his head in the direction of Lucius Malfoy standing amongst Crouch, Jorkins, Percy, and Bones. "Clean up the likes of him. All of them."

Malfoy's mouth twitched and he drew himself up taller and set his cane before himself, one hand over the other.

"He's one of them," Harry said. "And there are most likely others. Get them out of the Ministry, into prison. If you don't, I'll be back."

Harry turned, waylaid, by Fudge's bruised pride. "Now, see here, Mr. Potter, if that's who you really are!"

Harry spun back around, unnaturally pale eyes blazing. "You let this go on," Harry snarled. Fudge's mouth snapped closed. Harry's gaze took in the group. "All of you, catering to evil." Fury was taking Harry to another level of his mind, and uncertain what he may find there, he made himself step down away from it, tearing parts of his ego it felt like, in the process. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Snape standing with the surviving teachers, hawk-like gaze taking in Harry's every move.

Harry gestured at the smashed window, the darkening bloody streaks on the floor, the empty robes and hats, the littered bones, cleaned bright white. "This is nothing," Harry said, stepping closer into Fudge's simpering face. "You should see me when I get really upset. Clean up the Ministry or I will be back to do it for you."

With that, Harry stalked out the door to the hall, out the door to the castle – propped open with a bench from the hall – and away across the lawn. The lake stretched out before him, sparkling in the evening light in the spots where the clouds were breaking up. He could leave now, but he felt less than himself, and he wanted to shake that before facing what was certain to be a crisis at home, sparked by his absence. Buckbeak sailed into view, angling away from the hills to stay over the water, a grey reflection skipping over the waves. Harry heard voices approaching, arguing as only political figures could. He dropped into the Dark Plane to avoid them.

Chilled, he returned to Snape's office where he imagined it would be warm. He pulled a chair over to the fire, snagging the sherry bottle from a shelf on the way past. He sat, feet propped upon a trunk, using the hypnotic sound of the fire and the stomach warming effects of the liquor to let go of the last few hours, working his way up to letting go of the last few days in total. His robes dried and finished deepening back to black. When he left for good this place would cease to exist. Given that, being haunted by it would be tantamount to a psychosis.

The door to the office swung open and Snape, appearing distracted, stepped in and did not notice Harry until he was halfway across the room. He scuffed to a halt, exhibiting rare uneasiness. "You are still here," he stated.

"I hadn't tried your sherry," Harry explained, voice gentle because his meditation had helped set his mind and emotions straight.

Snape crossed to the desk and stared down at it before stalking to the door to his chambers. His mouth worked before he said, "I was perhaps remiss in not offering it."

Harry felt saddened and adrift at being feared by this man, by any version of him. "Have I ever, ever threatened you?" Harry asked.

Snape turned to him, studying him.

Harry said, "I owe you my life."

Snape's shoulders rounded and his movements were less jerky when he came over to borrow the sherry bottle. He poured himself a full tumbler and handed the bottle back graciously, making Harry laugh lightly. "You think I buy that from you?" he asked and then regretted the teasing, since Snape's black gaze flickered with fear again.

"You really think I'd do something untoward to you?" Harry asked, badly needing to settle this.

Snape did not reply, but his eyes did. They answered in the affirmative. At Harry's prompting of "Severus?" Snape spoke: "I saw what you did to get even . . ." He trailed off.

"Ah," Harry said, understanding. "You mean for my parents." Harry swallowed the half tumbler of sherry he held. He tilted his head back to stare at the cobwebs on the ceiling of Snape's office. "I've forgiven you for that."

"Really?" Snape laughed uneasily. "Why?"

Harry rubbed his head and said. "You saw what happened in the Great Hall. If I didn't find the power to forgive you, I would have lost myself long ago. I wouldn't have power over myself and I'd self-destruct."

Snape considered that and added uneasily, "And you apologized for your father, no less."

"Of course," Harry said, and stood, finally approaching the mood to depart for home.

"Where are you going now?" Snape asked, sounding casual and for all the world like he was dying to know the answer.

"Far away. Very far. Keep an eye on Fudge will you? Hold his feet to the Caeruleus fire."

"I don't have much power, Potter," Snape pointed out. "Especially now. Before, I had rather a lot."

"You're good at surviving no matter what. It's better this way and you know it," Harry said. "If I stay, things will only be fixed for appearances, for my sake. Not really fixed." He set his tumbler on the desk and said, "I'm going and I don't intend to ever return. Do take care of yourself."

Snape bowed faintly, doubt tinting his eyes even darker. Harry disappeared without a sound.

Clearheaded and determined, Harry found his way opposite his own house and tumbled sideways, focused on a painful affection for his real home.

"Severus!" Candide shouted frantically from the balcony where she peered over the rail down at Harry, strewn half across the rug below.

Snape came out of the library and, after spotting Harry, dashed over to him. He placed his hand on his shoulder to roll him on his side and icy sparkles haloed Snape's hand against the dark fabric. "He is half frozen again." Raising his head, he called out, "Get a blanket and heat it, quickly." He pushed Harry onto his back, setting off swirls of crackling in the ice clinging to Harry's robes. "And there is some odd residual magic still upon him."

At a run Candide brought a heated blanket and helped Snape lift and wrap Harry bodily in it. The frost coating the tips of Harry's locks melted where his limp head rested on Snape's robes. Once lifted off the floor, Snape had not put his charge down again. He pressed his hand to Harry's scarred forehead.

"Is he warming up?" Candide asked.

Snape nodded. "Get some hot water."

Harry woke groggily. He could not move his arms for the heavy blanket bundled around them and his face was pressed into robes scented with Hogwarts and potions.

He was home.

And he was being clutched with surprising fierceness. Perhaps he did not fully appreciate how much he was cherished, he considered. He might be able to stir, but he did not, enjoying the warmth too much.

A hand ran through Harry's hair and with a spell he was forced to swallow warm water. The hungry heat of it seeped through the very center of him and he opened his eyes to Snape's dark concerned ones.

Candide was speaking. "And I contacted the Auror's office."

Snape started at that, looking away from Harry. "I wish you had not."

"No?"

"We need to protect Harry from everyone." Figures Apparated into the Hall. Snape finished with, "Even the Ministry."

The Auror's descended upon them, led by Tonks, who crouched close. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry opened his mouth and tried to concoct a reasonable story that was not the truth. He lifted his head but could not yet hold it up without severe strain.

"More water," Harry requested, to stall.

He was propped up better in the crook of Snape's shoulder and given several more sips which warmed him enough to let him sit up, but Snape's grip seemed uninterested in even allowing him to try.

Harry cleared his throat and said, "I was poisoned," which made Snape's grip tighten even more. Harry closed his eyes. "I tried to Apparate to Severus but . . . I missed."

Tonks, from close by said, "Well, of course, you can't Apparate to Hogwarts. You shouldn't have even been able to depart."

Harry shook his head, formulating a modified story with effort. "I tried really, really hard. I ended up in a different potioneer's dungeon."

Silence fell over the listeners. "Where?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "Somewhere . . . somewhere in Eastern Europe. Latvia maybe. He was good at potions though . . . he cured the poison. Which was in the pumpkin juice in the tea room."

Mr. Weasley gestured to Shacklebolt to take note of that.

Snape asked, in a manner that Harry could not read as helping a ruse or honest curiosity, "Was the castle small with two tall towers close together?"

"Er, yeah," Harry said, willing to accept any help to explain himself.

To the others, Snape said, "I know a wizard there by the name of Aldaris." To Harry he asked, "Do you remember the name Jazeps?"

"Uh . . ." Harry stalled and Snape caught on quickly.

Snape turned back to the crouching assembled and said quickly, "He is a hermit, corresponds only with those far enough away to be deemed not direct competition."

Harry broke in with a partial truth. "He was very good about the poison, but then he didn't want me to leave. Slipped me potions to keep me disoriented."

Tonks motioned as though this were horrendous. "No," Harry corrected. "He was nice, enough, sort of, and he saved my life. I think he was just . . . lonely or something."

Shacklebolt leaned in closer. "So, you don't want us to track him down, then, you are saying."

"No," Harry said in relief. "He saved my life; it's all right."

"How did you get back?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I Apparated."

"From Latvia!" several people exclaimed at once.

"I concentrated really hard," Harry insisted.

"Wonder you didn't get Splinched worse than you did. You all right? No missing parts?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry sat up and was allowed to. "Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't feel very good when I first arrived, but I'm better now."

"Don't make a habit out of Apparating so far," Mr. Weasley ordered him.

"I won't, believe me," Harry said.

Snape helped Harry to his feet, but steered him to the nearest couch. Of Mr. Weasley he asked, "Do you need to debrief him or can we keep him here?"

"No, I think we're set. I'll call a press conference and get everything straight."

After welcomes and wishes that he feel better and congratulations on making it home from so far away, the three Ministry people departed.

Snape turned to Harry and said, "What actually happened?" gathering a startled look from Candide.

Harry had a bad sense that they were not alone and he said, "Clear the house of bugs and we can talk."

Snape drew his wand and held it out toward the center of the room while turning in a circle around it. Harry had thought that the Snape he had shared quarters with the last three days was a slightly different man than this one, but what happened next disproved that assumption. Snape, with a slashing motion, cast a spell that forced any Animagus on the area to reveal themselves and falling with the floor lamp in a great crash was Rita Skeeter. Snape aimed his wand at her while she stood and brushed off her skirt and primped her curls. His gaze was hard and unyielding, looking for all the world capable of anything.

"Don't you dare point that at me," she commanded, trying to swap her quill for her wand in her beaded handbag.

"Get out of this house," Snape ordered. "You are not welcome here; you are trespassing."

"The wizarding public has a right to know," she stated, wagging her wand at him like one might a finger.

"The public has no such right as far as I am concerned. And that is just an excuse for what only concerns your ego. Get out or I will bind you with a mummy hex and hang you from the ceiling of the Ministry of Magic."

"You wouldn't dare," Skeeter countered, voice nasty.

"I'll have the Weasley twins provide passersby with paint-filled balloons suitable for throwing at you; I expect they will have no shortage of takers."

With a snarl, Skeeter Disapparated. Candide exhaled and said, "Oh she's really going to love us now."

Snape shot her a disappointed glance but moved to Harry and crouched before him, hands on his arms. "Are you all right?" he asked, sound like he had a long list of questions to follow. When Harry nodded, Snape asked, "What happened? Where did you go?"

"It was a terrible place," Harry said, thinking first of the menagerie. "I . . . with the poison, in the panic, I forgot you were no longer in the dungeon. I got confused and tried to reach you there. So, as a result, I ended up there."

"I thought . . . Latvia?" Candide interrupted, while taking a seat beside Harry.

"Harry needed a plausible story," Snape explained.

"Thanks for that," Harry said.

Candide clasped her hands together. "I'm sorry I called the Ministry in."

Snape held up his hand. "You thought it was the right thing to do. Now you know better." Returning his attention to Harry, he said, "Go on."

When Harry said, "Voldemort was headmaster," Snape's head fell forward. Harry went on, hopeful that he would not be in trouble. "I felt I should stay and take care of things. That Plane's Harry died in his first year trying to reach the Philosopher's Stone."

"And did you take care of things?" Snape asked.

Harry, mind full of the duel and the blood, replied, "Yes." After a pause to push the fresh memories down in the hopes of making them older faster, he added, "I'm glad to be home. It's Saturday, right?"

"Yes, you have been missing for days. We were most concerned about you." Snape touched the side of his head lightly and stood. "I expect your friends to come swarming in shortly. Are you up for it?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, very much so. Tell me more about this Aldaris and his castle, will you, before they arrive."

Snape smiled back, settled on the couch, and began speaking very quickly, holding up a hand when Candide tried to ask a question. "I'll explain it all later," he assured her.

She crossed her arms. "That ought to be good," she whispered.

Harry's friends began arriving within minutes as expected. Harry did not realize how badly he needed their companionship until he repeated his modified story and was roundly sympathized with by all. He wished he could tell Hermione the truth. Perhaps he would later. She was one of the few who knew already that he could Apparate inside of Hogwarts and she would keep any secret. Strange to imagine, but he found himself more willing to tell her than Tonks, who had just returned.

She gave Harry a hug. "Next time send an owl, a bat, anything!" she said while patting his back.

"I couldn't," Harry said. "Believe me . . . I wanted to."

Elizabeth arrived carrying a cake that said Welcome Home Harry in pink icing. Ron reached for the first piece, saying, "That was fast."

"I found a recipe in my mum's old magical cookbook."

Ron, mouth full, asked, "So it isn't real food?"

Elizabeth laughed while Harry worried about her doing magic at home where her father might spot it. "I just used a Foaming Heat Charm to cook it up in two minutes after the batter was mixed."

Hermione held her hand over her full mouth and asked, "Can you show me that spell?"

Elizabeth smiled painfully. "I'd love to show you a spell. You're the kind of witch who knows every spell. I'd be thrilled."

Hermione glanced at the clock and shoveled the next bite into her mouth faster. "It may have to be another time. I have to get back. And I'm sure Harry could use a rest more than a huge, late-night party."

She made her goodbyes and this triggered most everyone to leave. Eventually, only Tonks remained. Harry sat across from her in the dwindling candlelight, expecting Snape to check in any moment as he had throughout the evening.

Things clearly needed to be said, but her gaze skittered away whenever it met his. She said, "I was really worried about you. I couldn't understand why you left."

"I didn't leave-"

"I know that."

"Did you find anything out . . . about the poison?" Harry asked.

Tonks shook her head. "Everything in the tea room had long since been cleaned up."

Harry sighed and tweaked his fingers to turn the empty butterbeer bottle sitting before him. "Someone wants to kill me."

"Someone inside the Ministry," Tonks added. After a spell, Tonks whispered, "Can you come to my place tonight?"

"I shouldn't go missing, and . . ." Harry glanced into the hall, which was quiet. "I could ask, I suppose. Tomorrow would be better."

"I'll come here."

Harry imagined Snape checking on him. "Maybe not a good idea," he said, chaffing a bit at feeling over-protected because of this cramp on his sex life, but it quickly was overwhelmed by the basic notion of home.

Tonks tossed her tall pink hair. "I should go too. The office wanted a report on how you were doing and I've been here forever."

"Thanks for staying as long as you did," Harry said on automatic, standing with her.

She gave him a deep kiss that said more than any conversation could manage.

Harry strolled through the hall and the dim but warm light of the chandelier. The peace of the house both soothed him as well as put him on alert to defend it. Here's a Riddle for you, Tom . . . echoed through his skull. At the time he had only been trying for mockery of his enemy, but now the assertion mocked him back.

Snape and Candide were sitting in the drawing room. Candide's gaze held wonderment, presumably as a result of Snape's explanation of what had happened. Harry hoped it went away soon.

"Friends all departed?" Snape asked. "I'm curious about exactly what transpired at this other Hogwarts. If you would indulge me?" For a polite question it came out rather commanding.

Harry glanced at Candide. She put her things together quickly and said, "I'll leave you two alone."

"Thanks," Harry said. She hurried out with one quick smile back at Snape. The door clicked closed. Harry took the chair she had been in. The seat was still warm.

Snape pushed his own parchments aside, grasped the edge of the desk, and sat back, but it felt a false show of letting his guard down. "Did you kill Voldemort outright?"

Harry nodded and then equivocated by tilting it side to side. "I fed him to the demons."

"Ah."

"They always seem to be hungry."

"Or there are many, many of them and only the hungry ones bother to show up." Snape stated this dryly, factually.

A pause stretched out too long with Harry trying to stay out of memory, especially the memory of the menagerie, which had the tightest hold on him for some reason.

Snape finally said, "I worry that you are paying an unseen cost for utilizing these dark creatures to do your bidding."

"I didn't have any choice. I had already used Salazar's spell. It didn't take Voldemort down, just all his followers. Well, except your counterpart, who wasn't a threat to the castle." Harry pushed his fringe back out of his eyes. "He was stronger than me, Voldemort was. I couldn't take him down by myself. The wands saved me again. Kept him distracted until I could call in reinforcements. The Raksashas certainly took him by surprise."

Snape had him under intense scrutiny as he said, "I imagine it took everyone by surprise."

Harry nodded, thinking of the other Snape's fear of him. Harry examined his new wand, wondering that it didn't show any damage from battling. It looked exactly the same as before. He replayed the spells in his mind, wondering what he could have done differently. "I need to get stronger. I should have been able to beat him."

Snape merely stared at him, apparently unable to generate a response. An owl arrived, distracting them both. Snape opened the letter, which prominently displayed the Ministry seal on the flap. A minute later, he closed it, stuffed it back away and said, "It is from Arthur Weasley."

"Addressed to you?" Harry blurted, finding that odd.

"The Ministry is putting you under twenty-four-hour guard."

Harry laughed in a short burst, still deep in reliving the battle with Voldemort. "They think I need guarding? And besides, it's someone inside the Ministry; how do they know they won't just assign my attacker as my guard?"

Snape waved the letter. "They are certifying select individuals, by means of Veritaserum, and only they will be your guards."

"They can't spare anyone," Harry asserted. "And I don't need protection. I look forward to this person trying again, so I can catch them at it."

Sternly, Snape said, "I am not objecting to Mr. Weasley's plan, quite the opposite."

"Well, of course, it'll make it right impossible for me to spend any time alone with Tonks. I'm sure you'd appreciate that." Harry immediately wished he had not said that, but his frustration over being unable to arrange to stay with her that night boiled over without his control.

Snape's features sharpened with a predatorial edge. "I do not expect coercion to repair that proclivity of yours, so I would not attempt it. I would much prefer you get wise on your own." He stepped around the desk with a swift movement, trailing his robes. His voice lowered as he said, "For your edification, she is at the top of the list of guards to be certified, which if I am not mistaken will mean you will frequently spend nights with her for the foreseeable future."

"Oh," Harry uttered quietly.

Snape snapped the envelope with a flick of his wrist and tossed it on the desk, clearly disgusted. "For the weekend it will be myself guarding you. You are not to leave this house alone, do you understand?"

Harry felt about four years younger at that moment. But given how fiercely Snape had hung onto him when he had reappeared, Harry did not complain or argue. This stern admonishment was just another expression of the same thing, he knew in his gut. "Yes, sir," he said.

Snape crossed his arms and leaned back against the front of his desk. Still business-like he asked, "Do you have control over what happened? Or can we expect further disappearances?"

"I have control," Harry insisted. "I know exactly what happened, this time. I better understand last time too, now that I know it was real."

"Good," Snape said.

After a space, Harry added, "Sorry." But he wasn't any clearer on what he was apologizing for than Snape, given his guardian's raised brow. Maybe, as usually, he felt he should make up for the trouble he caused.

Snape relented; it was clear by the way he said, "Do not apologize."

After an awkward pause, Harry said, "I should get to sleep. I had a long day of killing Voldemort and I'm kind of tired." Harry stood when there was no objection to this. "Thanks for kicking Skeeter out. It was fun to watch."

"My pleasure."

Hermione sorted through the parchments spread out before her as she stood at the front table facing the First-Year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. She had expected that by three weeks into the term she would be less nervous, but she had not yet completely shaken a base unease. The students who did well, she felt were not really her doing; the students who were already falling behind, seemed unreachable; and the two who she sometimes suspected may be Squibs, or close to it, she was not certain what to do with. This included the Mer-boy, Namortuk, who sat even now, eagerly in the front row, his slowly shifting magical collar of lake water reflecting the room around him.

It was not that Hermione did not think the boy had any magic, more that his magic was too different to get anything out of her class and perhaps out of the school. She did not hold this against him; it would be as if Hermione herself had been sent to a school only for Divination. She could read the textbooks but never really produce any meaningful output, except by random chance. But the boy continued to be intrepidly pleased with his surroundings and the assignments, so despite her gut instinct that something drastically needed to be fixed, academically, she forced herself to just let the situation be, but it still needled her.

She asked the reluctant children arrayed before her questions about the assigned reading – a short and easy chapter that despite being so, had gone unread by a handful. Finally, names were coming to her easily. Last names, though. She found herself losing track of students' first names and sometimes when speaking to a student about another student, was not always certain as a result who was being discussed. As with most days, by the time she set them to trying out new spells and had circled

the room offering advice and encouragement, the class period was nearly over. She considered doubling the reading, in the hopes of making the slackers take it seriously, but instead threatened them with a short quiz. Groans emanated from the room, a counterpoint to the vibrating squeaks of the desks shifting as the children rose to their feet.

It was lunchtime, but as usual Hermione had too much to finish to contemplate the luxury of the Great Hall's food and instead hunched over the Third-Year textbook entitled Witchy & Warlocky Wand Waving and jotted down a few notes for questions and as a sort of desperation outline for that day's topic.

A knock on the door interrupted this and for a moment, Hermione feared she was late for class even though only forty-five minutes had passed. Relieved by what the face of the clock showed, she called out that the person could enter.

In stepped McGonagall, smiling graciously. She took a position beside the guest chairs and clasped her hands before her. "I could not help but notice that you were missing from the mid-day meal once again. This is a first for a Monday."

Hermione replied, "I was helping look for Harry part of the weekend, so I didn't catch up like I usually do."

"Ah, of course," McGonagall said gently. "The students wish to start a Harry Hunt Club, in fact. When I informed them that only those of age could join, given the requirement to leave school grounds, they were most crestfallen."

Hermione smiled since she was supposed to find this story amusing, but it was difficult to do so given how much trouble Harry still managed to get into.

McGonagall said kindly, "The teaching will get easier. It is hardest for those who care the most about getting every last thing perfect, but for the first year it is impossible to do that, and you risk burning out while trying."

Hermione gazed unseeing at her notes. "I wouldn't know where to . . . cut corners to manage better. There are such a terribly large number of sections. For the First through Fifth Years there are two each twice a week, sometimes doubled in length, and then two more Advanced Charms for Sixth and Seventh. I don't know how to fit it all in without a Time-Turner."

"When you are practiced at it and are not doing prep each time, it is far easier."

Another knock sounded. Hermione exhaled, blowing her hair around her eyes. "That must be my weekly review meeting," she said, working very hard not to sound completely overstressed. She put away her notes in a folder neatly labelled for the next class while McGonagall opened the door to let Professor Snape in.

"Ah, Severus, I wanted to speak with you. Sprout again caught Orfius and Sirco again attempting to sneak into the off-limits greenhouse. They have fallen afoul of a skin-eating slime mold and have been sent to St. Mungo's. If you would be so good as to pay a visit to their parents with a longer explanation than I could manage by Floo owl, I would appreciate it."

Snape nodded and said he would do so immediately after his next class. Hermione was glad she was not yet at a level to be assigned such tasks. She wondered at McGonagall handing it off to her deputy, but Snape did not show any sign of complaint, in fact he behaved surprisingly obedient, something she had noticed before, that is, when he did not disagree forcefully with an expressed idea. She puzzled that while the two of them discussed the troublesome students using their own administrative shorthand. And she wondered if Snape had a need to be loyal to someone and so had transfered his old loyalty to Dumbledore wholesale onto McGonagall.

McGonagall parted and Snape took one of the visitor's chairs, efficiently moving on to her weekly review without any small talk.

"How is Harry?" Hermione asked before he could start.

From his pocket, Snape removed his rolled parchment of notes from previous meetings and replied, "You saw him on Saturday, did you not?"

"Yes, but . . ." She hesitated, but with renewed confidence, said, "I had the distinct sense that a cover story had been fabricated so I wanted to know that Harry really was all right."

Snape read over the unrolled the parchment before him, stalling it seemed. "Harry is fine," Snape stated.

Hermione did not like being kept away from the truth. "What are you hiding?" When no answer was forthcoming, she said, "I can ask Harry. I know he can Apparate inside the school, which means he should've been able to reach you. That part was a lie; I know for certain."

Snape rubbed his fingertips together. "Then you understand the need to protect him."

"Yes. I do." She stopped, having trouble with seriously contemplating something so terrible. "That's why they were going to give Sirius Black a Dementor's kiss, wasn't it? Because they couldn't keep him in prison. Azkaban, when it's completed, wouldn't hold Harry either. If he ever got into enough trouble with the Ministry . . ." She had to stop.

"They could hold Harry, but, like the few vampires they have incarcerated, quite a few precautions are necessary and the risk of escape is high if any of the extra security fails. So yes, under an exceptionally bad alignment of circumstances I fear the worst."

Hermione held off on pointing out that he was one of those arguing forcefully for giving Sirius exactly that treatment. Perhaps that was precisely why he was being so very paranoid this time.

Snape said, "Suffice to say, the story told to the Ministry and the press was essentially true. Beyond Harry returning safely and avoiding future such mishaps, I have less care for what actually transpired." He referred to his parchment, and moved to their meeting topic. "How did this last week go?"

Hermione pulled her thoughts from Harry to Charms in all its seven levels of learning. "I thought it would go better than it did," she confessed. "I don't know what to do with the very slow students and the slackers."

"You cannot force every last one of them to learn. If you have not accepted that yet, I suggest you work harder on doing so."

"Yes, but if they aren't doing well in Charms then they must be struggling mightily in Transfiguration."

"That is not your problem."

"It is, because Charms is the easy one. It's the one everyone can do first because it is all impermanent."

"Hexs are what everyone gets first," Snape countered. "How you failed to notice that the very first day in the corridors . . ."

Hermione lightly rolled her eyes. "I'm also reluctant to assign points except as deductions."

"That is solely your prerogative."

"It just feels so . . . like such uneven treatment to reward someone for doing what they were supposed to do anyhow or just rewarding the ones who are trying to cozy up to me."

Bordering on derisive, Snape asked, "Did you not like receiving points as a student?"

"Well . . ." Hermione said. "Well, yes, of course." She stared out at the round stone tower outside the window. "It just all feels so different from this side."

"You are worrying over it too much." He let that lie for a moment and then said, "I need to sit in on one of your classes in the next week, but there are not a terribly

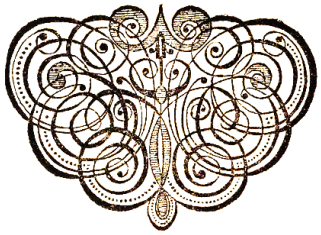
large number of open times in my schedule that are actual class times for you. I may just have Remus take over and come some afternoon when it is convenient. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"Harry is really all right?"

Snape stood. "Harry is fine," he repeated, but he sounded far away as he said it.

Author's Notes:
Special thanks go out to those who nominated Resonance for a Dobby!
Yes, quick turnaround. Please, don't get used to it: I'll need two weeks for the next.
I haven't done this is a long, long time, but I feel compelled–due to the sheer volume of comments that all say the same thing–to make a comment/clarification/offer some thoughts. First off, let me say that I love that you are all taking the story seriously and you are all sharp enough that I can't keep up with you, which means I don't have to worry about getting too far ahead. Very cool. Thanks for staying along for the ride and caring how it turns out. But to the meat of it: Harry's response to Snape that he is the last horcrux. Yes, that dimension's Harry is dead, which means that horcrux is gone too. (I didn't adjust these chapters for DH, so the total is off, but no one's mentioned that, and it doesn't really matter.) Harry is an endearingly straightforward guy. When asked where the seventh horcrux is, Harry doesn't think about this in a complicated way. He answers honestly, and also as a kind of confession, that he is the last one. Harry confesses because being the last horcrux (in his Plane, at least) still gnaws at him and he wants this Snape to understand what's going on. And, it's kind of a power move as well to tell Snape that. At the moment Snape asked the question, Harry's answer was essentially true. Now, were Harry to stay in this Plane, would he really qualify as an undestroyed horcrux? Interesting question. I lean toward a "probably" because Harry, since his arrival in this other place has been using that connection to detect this Voldemort's presence, so he clearly has a connection to this Voldemort (and for the record to the book 6 "canon" Voldemort too from the last fall into another Plane). At any rate. Those are my thoughts on this. Fascinating that so many of you had identical reactions to the scene.

Chapter 13.



Guard Duty

Harry had Aaron trailing him as guard to an above-ground shop to get a pasty for lunch. The day was warm and breezy and the Muggle streets loud with cars and buses.

"Who's your guard tonight?" Aaron asked.

"Tonks is supposed to be, but they don't always say. They just gave me a list of passcodes to verify from whoever shows up next." He handed over a few Muggle coins and accepted the wrapped food, which immediately soaked grease and heat through the crinkly paper.

"Well, Tonks wouldn't be a bad deal."

Harry smiled crookedly. "No, she wouldn't."

They returned to the atrium and walked to a bench overlooking the fountain to eat. Hungrier than normal, Harry had already taken a few bites and Aaron, when he noticed, asked, "Not going to use the poison-revealing drops first?"

Harry carefully waved his lunch and said, "I just bought this from a Muggle shop where no one knows who I am. That's why I went there. The drops taste funny."

"Your choice, I suppose." Aaron groaned as he sat down and stretched his feet out before him. "We had a devil of a time looking for you."

"Sorry about that. If I disappear like that again, don't bother trying to find me. If I can't get back, I'm too far away to be found."

"Yeah, Latvia. It was not high on the list of places to search." With false thoughtfulness, he added, "I don't think it was on the list at all. So, what's it feel like to Apparate that far?"

"It hurts," Harry said. "Don't try it."

"What are you doing about this wizard, Aldaris?"

Harry tilted his pasty so the filling wouldn't ooze out. "Adding him to my Christmas list. I owe him one."

Aaron laughed.

During afternoon drills while facing his trainer for a demonstration, Harry asked how he could increase his spell power.

Rodgers scoffed. The others in the room turned their attention to them. "You aren't feeling lacking are you, Potter?" Rodgers teased.

"Well, sometimes," Harry said.

"Raw power is slow to increase. You're born with a certain amount and if you vigorously make use of it, some people anyhow, are lucky enough to get a little more of it."

Harry tapped his wand on his hand, impatient with that answer. "So, you're saying that there's nothing I can do."

"I didn't say that," Rodgers came back. "Step back and get ready with a Titan block." Rodgers also stepped back. "Part of what you think of as power is just focussed energy. The difference between this . . ." Here he sent Harry a Cutting Curse, but its beam wavered in the air, wide and ineffective. ". . . and this. Be ready for it." He repeated the spell, but the spell trail was almost invisibly thin. Harry's block sizzled and he was forced to jump out of the way and let the spell burn itself out on the wall behind him.

Harry stared at his trainer from where he kneeled in the corner. "Good thing you're on our side, sir," he said as he got to his feet. He tried not to feel frustrated with the thought that this was the second person in mere days who could take him down on raw power.

"Can you show us how to focus spells better?" Harry asked.

"We've already done exercises to improve that. But it doesn't help with all spells. I used the best example to demonstrate. Frankly, finesse is often more valuable and

that you gain through repetition." With an amused tilt of the head he considered Harry before saying, "You don't look happy with my answer."

Harry, feeling unusually desperate about this, explained, "Well, what if we do meet a . . . bad wizard who can overpower us?"

"Outsmart them," Rodgers answered a tad mockingly. "Or bring a partner and corner them if you can't manage that. All kinds of options. Got someone in mind that we don't know about, Potter?"

"No," Harry answered honestly.

Rodgers dropped his suspicion and said, "We'll work on fine-tuning some powerful spells during drills. Everyone pick a partner."

Blackpool followed Harry home that evening and read Witch Weekly while Harry studied. She traded with Tonks at 11:00.

"Puffball Mushrooms," Tonks proclaimed when she arrived in the Floo.

"That right?" Blackpool asked Harry, wand unwavering.

Harry resisted laughing at her care. "Yes."

"I'll leave you to it then."

"Thanks," Harry said before she departed.

Candide, with a broad yawn, declared it time to go to sleep and Harry had to agree. Upstairs on the balcony, she bade them goodnight with a knowing smile, making Harry grateful Snape was away at school.

Harry slept with Tonks half overlapping him and was glad for the reassuringly pleasant feel of her when he awoke with a start from a dream involving hoards of demons rampaging out of control.

"Harry?"

"Yeah, just a dream," he mumbled, because the room was quiet and it was clearly not happening here and may not be happening anywhere.

In a fit of what felt like rare good fortune, Tonks was assigned most all night guard duty for the rest of the week, except for when she had the regular night shift at the Ministry. During those times, Harry had a different guard in the form of a small, stout wrinkly-faced woman from Control of Magical Creatures. Mr. Weasley had pulled Harry aside and informed him that the woman, Hornisham, was overdue for

retirement and due to her fearless handling of calls, her department worried she may not survive to retirement, so they were happy to give her something else to do. Harry believed they might feel differently if they knew what kind of creatures Harry could conjure while he slept.

The first night with her sitting beside the cold hearth, knitting metal dragon-proof cord into a tunic, Harry did not sleep so well. But the second time, other than wishing for Tonks instead, he slept immediately, lulled off by the faint grinding and clicking sounds and the thought that, if necessary, the witch could don the tunic which might actually hold up to demon teeth. Harry's dreams remained murky, muddy and algae colored, like the lake water under Hogwarts castle. He always awoke feeling slightly less than well rested.

Friday, before Harry departed for field shadowing, Candide shooed Hornisham off, insisting she needed to talk to Harry alone. Candide had a letter in her hand, but she rolled it tightly into a tube and held it at her side when she noticed Harry eying it.

"How are you doing, Harry?" she asked bluntly.

"Fine."

"Training went all right this week?"

Harry stared at her, wondering at the redundancy; they had engaged in similar small talk all week.

"Fine. Still easier because of our newest apprentice, but Rodgers promises that the repetition won't last. Why the interview?" he returned bluntly.

"Severus wants to know if he should come home this weekend."

"He doesn't need to for me. If you want him home . . ."

She frowned. "Work is only getting busier. I'll be at the office at least some Saturday and Sunday, so he shouldn't bother on my account, I won't be here . . ."

"He shouldn't bother on mine, either," Harry said.

Candide moved her letter-laden hand, but did not need to reference it directly. "How are you sleeping?"

Harry did not want to reply, but he had to answer and he could not find the will to lie. "A few odd dreams but I'm sleeping all right."

Again, point-blank: "Voldemort? Is Voldemort in your dreams?"

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"No."

This time she did raise the letter. While reading it, she said, "You need to go or you're going to be late."

Harry collected his guard from the hall where she was making faces at herself in the wood-framed mirror. Harry had to suppress a much-needed smile at the scene of this stout, middle-aged women arranging her face into various scary expressions.

"Ready to go?" the witch queried, unfazed at being interrupted.

"Yeah. Thanks for giving us a few minutes."

"No worries. Bugger for you losin' your privacy like this."

Harry was surprised by her understanding. "Well, you lose your nights," he said.

She waved one pudgy hand that was missing the ends of two fingers. "'Tis nothin'. It's jus' me cats at home anyhow."

Thinking of Mrs. Figg, Harry tried to make conversation, "How many cats do you have?"

The answer came after they arrived in the Atrium. "Twenty four . . . no . . . twenty . . ." She made a different kind of face and stared at the ceiling while pondering an answer.

"That's all right; I get the idea," Harry said quickly.

Up in the office, Harry waited for Shacklebolt to finish his report from his last assignment. He was speaking unusually fast to his quill, making it skip words and have to jump around filling in. Eventually, the nib broke and it fluttered to the floor.

"Ack," Shacklebolt uttered and pulled out a regular quill to finish by hand. Even writing fast, his handwriting was neater than the Autoquill's, which said a lot. To Harry, he said, "We have a call we should hit within the hour; that's why I'm hurrying."

Harry Side-Alonged to Mumbles-under-Tyne and followed Shacklebolt's lead in stashing his wand away in his sleeve before stepping out onto the pavement from the abandoned newspaper printers where they had arrived. Harry thought it a less-than-wise place to arrive given the looming old equipment filling the place and the hiding places it provided, but he assumed Shacklebolt was well aware of that, so he remained silent. Harry marked the doorway into the building in his memory. A sign with faded scroll letters outlined in still-bright gold paint read Mumbles Echo.

Harry remained mum as they walked with purpose, finally stepping down a narrow crooked alley that was much darker than it should have been in the noon-time

sun. The entrance was between Mandragon's Haberdashery with unpromisingly faded wares in the window and a nail salon with so much neon tubing framing it one could not see inside. The salon might have had a name, but if it did, it was part of the Chinese lettering sharing space with the English.

Shacklebolt tapped with his wand on the keystone block of an archway spanning the alley twenty feet in. Beyond it a row of five shops sparkled into view. They entered the first shop. Inside, stacks of hats, large atop small, lined shelves and racks ranging from staid, closest to the door, to flashing Quidditch-themed ones lighting the far corner.

"Oy, what can I do you for?" a portly man with short mussed hair asked, making it seem the business of hats was a serious one with him. His eyes came around to Harry, standing off Shacklebolt's shoulder, and his attitude grew wary.

"We're from the Auror's office," Shacklebolt explained. "We had a report of some trouble . . . ?"

The man laughed lightly, his lips glistening with saliva. "My sister, she over-reacted. It's nothing. Ministry didna have ta send Aurors of all things," he complained, glancing at Harry and away again. "No one's been doing any dark magic around here abouts."

Shacklebolt stated helpfully, "You aren't the only ones having problems."

The shopkeeper laughed nervously. "So we are in good company for this thing we are not involved with?"

"Yes," Shacklebolt replied after a beat.

Harry watched the various signs the man gave off, the wet lips, the nervous movements of his feet that he was probably unaware of. "We don't need you here. Go take care of something important."

"This IS important," Shacklebolt said. "If it gets out of control, everyone suffers."

Harry Legilimized the man the next time his eyes grazed Harry's. All he caught was a flash of an argument with a woman.

"Is your sister here?" Shacklebolt asked eerily narrating the vision.

"She is. She's in back listening to her favorite on the wireless. I'm sure she'd rather not talk to you."

Harry considered piping in, but waited to see what Shacklebolt would do. The Auror said, "I'd rather hear that from her."

The man grumbled but fetched his sister, who gave off more signs of nerves than the brother, including laughing more. She gave Harry more chances to see her thoughts because she seemed fascinated with him standing there and kept staring. Harry had visions of nighttime visitors full of threats. No faces, just odd grey cloth masks over wrinkled black veils so even the eye holes gave nothing away. Shacklebolt eventually gave up getting her to admit there was a problem. Perhaps he even felt bad for making her so agitated.

As they departed, Shacklebolt insisted to the shopkeepers that he, or someone else, would return if called.

They then went to each of the other shops on the alley, interviewing clerks and owners alike; Shacklebolt was adamant about talking to everyone who was available. No one was any more helpful. Only the young woman working in the beauty salon, whom Harry knew from Hogwarts, seemed to have no idea at all why they were there. The rest were all wary and dodgy with their answers.

Back in the printers, Harry waited while Shacklebolt paced.

"Is it safe to talk here, sir?" Harry asked. When Shacklebolt nodded, Harry went on, "Can I ask what this is about?"

"It would seem a shakedown is in progress on Mandragon Alley and I was hoping for a little more cooperation . . . from anyone. Question I have now is, are we dealing with just one gang or do we have a copy-cat already."

Harry said, "The ones that came here wore odd masks, with cat-eye slits over the eyes and . . ." He gestured on his own face. ". . . over the nose and mouth. With a netting underneath so you couldn't see any part of their features."

Shacklebolt stared at Harry. After a long pause, he said, "I guess given that Severus taught you, I should expect you'd be that good at Legilimency. I saw you giving a few of them a good eyeing. I wasn't sure if that was just intimidation . . . which didn't seem like your style."

"I didn't mean to intimidate anyone," Harry said. "That probably wouldn't help."

Shacklebolt waved his hand, raising his pale palm to face Harry. "In fact, one tactic is to come across far tougher than the people they fear. Not the nicest thing to do, but it can work."

Shacklebolt straightened his cloak. Harry thought his chance for answers grew short. "Who are these people?"

"Don't know. Fudge believes they are foreigners, from Italy or Portugal where the government is either not effective at shutting them down or are worse yet, part of the problem."

"What do you think?" Harry asked.

"In an insular place like this, where the shopkeepers are English." He shook his head. "I think they'd cooperate with us if the perpetrators were foreign. Must be locals involved. The ideas and methods may be imported, but I bet the manpower isn't. Reggie took the last call of this nature and I thought maybe his glowing personality was part of the reason we didn't get any help."

Harry grinned.

Shacklebolt said, "Trouble is, if they're smart, their threats are far greater than the fee they are asking for in return for protection. But that will change, and then we might get some help, but someone will get hurt first, I'm afraid. Let's get back; there's probably ten other things we could be doing for someone willing to have help."

They spent the remainder of the shift trying to track down someone dealing in illicit cursed devices. This meant they snuck around sometimes very secure warehouses and interviewed people, mostly Muggles, which was time-consuming and involved making up lots of unlikely stories.

Harry's feet complained when he finally had a chance to get off them back in the office at 7:00 in the evening. Rodgers sauntered in and said, "So, how'd it go?" with an annoyingly knowing lilt.

"Same as you," Shacklebolt conceded. "Harry gets two gold stars for today. He's a better partner than you . . . and on top of that he complains less."

Rodgers crossed his arms. "Well, if you prefer a partner with a contract out on him . . ." He looked Harry over. "Waiting for your guard?"

Harry nodded. "I don't really need one," he said, not terribly hopeful that he would get free of the requirement, but feeling better to say that.

Tonks came in. "Ready?" she asked. "I'll take you home and wait for your other guard, unless Severus is there."

"No."

"Or unless you want to go to dinner at my parents."

Harry wondered at her saying that in front of not only Shacklebolt, but Harry's even stricter trainer. "I don't mind that."

"You're certain?" she asked doubtfully, straightening her robes which were not quite dress robes, but they glittered along the collar, matching her metallic silver hair. "No house elf at their place."

Harry could not imagine anyone not wanting to show off their parents. He nodded.

"And Candide's not expecting you?"

"She's working late."

Tonks tossed her head. "Well, come on, then."

The other two watched them leave. Harry kept his head down until he was well out the door. In the lift, Harry asked, "Why would you think I wouldn't want to go to your parents for dinner?"

Tonks puzzled the question, looked on the verge of explaining, but then shrugged.

They arrived in the Floo at the Tonks' house. Harry conked his head getting out when he caught sight of Andromeda. Rubbing the crown of his head, Harry peered at her with eyes squinted in pain. Tonks gave her mother a quick hug.

"I brought Harry along, I hope that's all right."

"Of course, dear," Andromeda said playfully. She held out her hand to Harry. "Nice to finally meet you, Harry. It's all right to call you 'Harry', right?"

Harry nodded and flinched at the stab this sent behind his right eye. At Andromeda's doubtful watching of him nursing his head, Harry said, "I thought you were your sister for just a moment."

Andromeda propped her hands on her hips accusingly. "Would you like some ice for that?"

"Yes, thank you."

To Tonks, as an aside, she asked, "Not as clumsy as you, I hope." The two of them went off. Harry looked around the ordinary room, at the fancy oil-lamps on wrought iron stands and the forest-colored furniture.

A sandy-haired man with a rotund gut came in the door, dragging muddy robe edges across the pale green carpet. Harry's presence distracted him from considering what to do about that. "Er, hello there. I don't think we've met," the man said.

Harry stepped up to him, hand out. "You must be Tonks' father . . . I mean, uh, Ted Tonks right?"

"'Dora's father, yes," Mr. Tonks said energetically, recognition brightening his eyes. "Very nice to meet you." His hands were dusty with earth as well, it turned out.

"Dora? Oh, yeah," Harry said.

"What can we do for you . . ." Mr. Tonks started to ask.

"Ted, the floor, honestly," Andromeda interrupted, returning. She handed Harry a hot water bottle full of ice and pulled out her wand to clean the carpet. "Perhaps you should change for dinner." She crossed her arms, wand bouncing. "Unless you want to stand there for the full treatment."

"No, I'll just go and change," he said. The trail he left as he departed was quickly Scourgified away.

Andromeda gave a long suffering sigh. "I'll just see to dinner."

Tonks sidled over to Harry, who was finding relief in the ice after the initial discomfort of it. "My dad doesn't know we're dating," she said in a low voice.

Harry lifted the ice out of his view. "You waited till now to the tell me?" He considered that as the ice crackled, heated by his head. "Same complaint as Severus?"

"No," she said, turning away.

"Er . . ." Harry decided that could lie for now. "What about your mum?"

"She likes you a lot," Tonks said, brushing her hand over the back of the nearby linen-draped couch.

Harry, voice low as well, said, "I didn't get the sense your dad disliked me."

Tonks started. "Oh, no, it's not that . . ." But Mr. Tonks returned, robes changed, hair slicked back.

"So, Harry, very nice to meet you close up. Certainly have seen you at a distance a few times and in the papers far more times than that. Come over and sit down." He gestured at the couch which he himself settled onto with a sigh of relief, belly covering part of his lap. He gave Harry a smile and reached for a box on the small table beside him. "Honeydukes?" he offered.

Harry accepted a chocolate covered wafer in the shape of a cauldron with a little loop of licorice for a handle.

Mr. Tonks went on, "Play any Quidditch these days? You're finished at Hogwarts right . . . or not?"

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Harry had trouble swallowing.

"Oh, yes, of course you are," Mr. Tonks went on, slapping his leg. "'Dora's told us you're apprenticing in her department." Whimsically, he said, "They start you kids so young these days. It's a wonder . . . Did you finish school, or well no, you must have left early, right?"

Dinner broke the flow of conversation but it resumed on the same course when everyone settled in behind their plates of ravioli.

Right after Mr. Tonks chastised his wife for offering Harry mead "at his age," Harry finally said, "I've turned nineteen now . . . as of July."

Tonks was shading her eyes with her hand while eating. Across from her Andromeda was enjoying the confusion and did not look likely to help.

Harry went on, "I finished school years ago, well, over a year ago. Completed a pile of N.E.W.T.s and everything." Feeling defensive and hearing it in his voice, Harry took a deep breath and stopped talking.

"Really?" Mr. Tonks asked in confusion. "Hard to imagine you as anything but little Harry Potter." He held his hand out at seated shoulder height. Maybe taller than a house-elf, but not by much.

Harry shut his mouth, which was hanging open. "I've finished a whole year of the Auror Apprenticeship," he said after regrouping, working hard on a factual voice. Maintaining the conversation had resulted in his not eating much. He thought he had managed to get his point across, but Mr. Tonks said, "If you don't like that, you can skip ahead to dessert. We have chocolate ice cream."

Harry almost said yes, but his pride would not let him. "This is fine," he said, completely at a loss.

Back in Shrewsthorpe where Tonks waited for Harry's guard to report, Tonks said, "Sorry about that."

"Not your fault," Harry said. But then shook his head and held his hand out. "Little Harry Potter? Hello?"

Tonks laughed but it was mostly embarrassment.

Harry said, "No wonder you didn't want to go to dinner with your parents."

"See, I tried to explain to him when I told my mum, but he completely misunderstood when I said I wanted to spend more time with you off-duty. He thought . . . I don't

know . . . that I was doing what the Order always did, you know, keeping a close eye on you now that Dumbledore was gone. Heck, then he so misunderstood, I feared he would start to understand. Do you understand?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, actually."

She shrugged, blush visible in the dim main hall light where only a few candles in the chandelier were lit. "You know, for a long time you were Little Harry Potter, this . . . child . . . with far too big of things to do. He can't get beyond that."

Harry admitted, "I sometimes have trouble looking at the old photographs from first and second year at Hogwarts. I worry about the lightning-scarred kid in the picture. I can't help it. So I sort of understand what your dad is thinking. It's getting harder to imagine those days, in fact. I know so much magic now . . . I wonder how the heck that kid is possibly going to survive without having a clue."

Tonks said, "You didn't get any mead at dinner . . . do you have any in the house? I could use another too."

Harry turned to go to the kitchen, but Tonks caught up to him. "I haven't cleared the house," Tonks said, arresting his progress. "Not to treat you like my dad was . . . but I have to treat you like my dad was for just two minutes while I check things out."

Harry stood in the center of the hall and watched her disappear down the stairs leading to the kitchen. She reappeared shortly after, saying, "Winky says it's all right." But she checked all the ground floor rooms anyhow. Harry continued to wait while she checked the first floor, finding strong comfort in basic duty, as he had since his return to his own world. Her attentive progress around the house represented something so utterly lacking in that other place that he found no will to be annoyed with it, even post-dinner with Mr. Tonks.

"Candide working late again?" Tonks asked after sticking her head in the bedroom.

"November is the end of the accounting year for most wizard businesses, so she's quite busy starting in September."

"I'm surprised Severus doesn't suggest she quit," Tonks said upon returning to stand beside Harry. Winky appeared with a tray and two tall ceramic cups of mead.

"I don't think she'd want to."

Cupping their drinks in both hands, they sat down and the house settled around them. "When's the baby expected?" Tonks asked between sips.

"Early March sometime. I forget the date."

"Severus ready to be a dad?" Like most people, she could not help grinning while asking this.

"He already is one," Harry pointed out.

"That's not the same." Tonks waved Harry off dismissively.

Harry felt a stab of annoyance and drank his mead with more purpose.

"Come on up here, Potter," Rodgers said the next Monday during training. While Harry obeyed, Rodgers announced, "Harry's comments about working on power made me realize I've grown too easy on you all."

Tridant made a noise halfway between a squeak and an erp.

Pretending not to hear, even though he grinned more, Rodgers went on, "So we are going to push you all a bit more every day and see if we can't squeeze a little more magic out of each of you over time."

When Harry took up a position across from him, wand out, Rodgers said to him, "All I heard about all weekend from Kingsley is how much he prefers partnering with you. Get ready with a Chrysanthemum . . ." He fired off a curse, which Harry blocked. "Got a little old, I'll admit." Then the same curse repeated with more behind it. Then again. Harry's wand began to vibrate when the curses hit his block.

"Shall I go back to making trouble during my shadowing?" Harry asked, trying to be cute.

Rodgers gave him a mocking grin and changed curses. Harry hit the wall.

"You all right?" Rodgers asked with an amused laugh as Harry righted himself.

Harry's head still hurt from striking it on the mantelpiece at the Tonks house, otherwise, he would not have any complaints. "Fine, sir."

"You need to put more focus in the front AND back of that block for a Gorgon Curse. Try again."

Harry did not complain as he sat down, even though his body did. He wanted to get better at handling someone with stronger magic than himself, and if getting beaten

up a little every day like he used to was what it took, then so be it. Harry nursed his elbow, wishing for a little ice. Up at the front of the room Aaron managed four blocks in a row and then completely blew the same one on the next spell.

Rodgers said, "You have to concentrate, Wickem. You have it in you, you just don't always pull it out and use it."

Kerry Ann snickered. Rodgers directed his wand at her. "Don't laugh; you're next."

Tridant did well; he fared almost as well as Aaron, albeit on a limited set of attacks since he had not yet learned nearly as many attack-counter combinations as the rest of them.

"Getting better," Rodgers said when he finally released him. Tridant nearly lost his footing at the praise and had to put a hand on Vineet's desk.

Vineet was last and Rodgers went much easier on him for a few rounds. "Everyone else gives you a Counter workout every day, I think. Why don't you give me one. Everyone is having fun but me." He gestured with a come-hither of his hand that he was ready. "Hard as you want . . . you're like me, holding back all the time."

Vineet cast a Blasting Curse at him and Rodgers used a rubber shield that deflected it under him as he jumped over it awkwardly. He stood straight. "Holy Merlin. I guess I should worry less that your blocks aren't what they should be." He stretched his shoulders back. "Okay, something else this time. Mix it up a little."

Harry's week continued on in this rough vein, including getting called onto duty with Tonks late on Thursday night. They, and every on-duty Auror and available personnel from Reversal were called to the scene of what Harry at first thought was a building fire: Blue and yellow flames licked out of smashed windows. Powerful lights cast circular beams on the scene.

Harry slopped through the puddles surrounding the fire trucks, following behind Tonks. In their black robes, disguise spells were barely needed, but by the time they passed the second truck, Tonks appeared to be in a rubber coat, baggy trousers and bulky boots. Harry made similar but not nearly as convincing or easy changes to his clothes.

The fire personnel were sitting on the curb, comically interspersed with civilians, including a woman in a nightgown and nightcap, her little white dog asleep in her arms. Reversal had just finished going down the line, issuing Memory Charms to the lot of them.

Harry had at least ten questions begging to get answered. He kept silent and waited for instructions while Shacklebolt, Mr. Weasley, and other Ministry personnel talked.

Shacklebolt said to Tonks, "Keep an eye on him," in reference to Harry. "Lot of confusion, anything could happen."

Tonks turned. "Come on, Harry."

Harry still felt a new seriousness to his duty, an impersonal seriousness that made it easy to say: "Should I go wait elsewhere? I don't want to be in the way."

She peered at him in the flashing, reflecting light, almost like that on a dance floor. "No, just stay close to me. Kingsley's just reminding me that guarding you is my priority right now."

They circled the building around to the far side and Tonks began laying down Muggle repelling barriers. Harry did not ask if he could help; if she wanted help, she would ask. He did keep an eye out through the dark trees and the dancing shadows beyond them on the surrounding buildings. Around the front, Reversal was canceling the spells that were causing the place to burn, brick and all. Clearly it was a magical fire, rather than the normal kind.

Beside him, Tonks said, "Get ready, as soon as the fire is just heat-based, they'll release the Befuddlement on the Muggle fire brigade and we'll have to get out of the way."

Harry again forced the questions down. He kept his wand up, eyes never resting anywhere for long. At Tonks' signal, they returned to the Ministry, their Apparition noise lost in the crack and pop of the fire.

Harry stood against the wall in the Auror's office. Reports were assembled, casual debriefings ensued. He took a seat at Rogan's empty desk and picked through the stack of Daily Prophets stashed on the overhead shelf. There wasn't much of interest to read about and after flipping through three issues, one after the other, it occurred to Harry that the sports pages had by far the best photographs. Harry watched Krum sailing around at an International Invitational match and read that article with more interest than the one about training gnomes to care for begonias that occupied the page before it. The next section on the stack had been folded in strange ways. Harry turned it over and found Fudge giving a press conference. Fudge's statements read like a bizarre litany of reverse Memory charms. Fudge claimed that the current Ministry was "acting too slowly to combat new trouble" and "falling back on old thinking despite it not working" and "not calling for help from our international partners in a time of need." Harry scoured the rest of that issue, but it was not made clear what exactly the "trouble" was purported to be. Harry had an idea what it could be, but oddly it was never really stated literally for the record.

At the end of the article, the author stated that when asked for comment on Fudge's comments, the Minister for Magic had nothing of substance to say on the topic. Other witches and wizards were interviewed and all agreed that something should be done, about whatever it was. Harry rapidly shook his head to clear it. The byline on the article was Mediastinus Delatio, whom Harry had not met, that he could remember.

Harry folded the paper back the way it had been and put it back with its fellows. He had field shadowing again the next day and considered that he better get used to this routine since, after his training was completed, every day of every week would be like this.

Friday after his field shadowing, Harry wanted to go out, but Tonks did not think it a good idea. She was tired from the double shift and lay down at Harry's insistence for an afternoon nap. Harry sat with Kali in his hands, trying to get a better sense for what his pet felt. He pulled one of her leathery wings out straight and let it go again, repeating this until he could catch the feel of that through his link with her. Her wings were marred by long, vivid scars from battling the demons at Malfoy Manor, but the old wounds did not bother her; he knew this because when he traced the bubbly lines he felt no distress from her.

"Shall we give it a try?" Harry asked her in a whisper, holding her up to stare closely at into her beady eyes. He carried her to the open window and commanded: "No pigeons."

With her wings pumping rapidly in the evening light, his pet resembled a violet puffball sailing over the garden wall. Sitting on his trunk, Harry closed his eyes and tried to see out of his pet's instead. She dived and swooped disconcertingly, lights and the twilight sky streaking diagonally one way and then the other. Harry had to grab hold of the solid window sill to keep his mind and dinner from rebelling. The distress grew and Harry lost contact with his pet. He used an Occlumency technique to clear his own emotions and imagined flying. This was relaxing but it did not bring his pet's direct experience back. Harry huffed and cupped his hands to the glass of the window to try to spot her, but she had flown out of sight.

The Chimrian would not fly far, Harry knew. She would hunt moths and night birds and return when she was satiated. On a whim Harry imagined being hungry and Kali came into his head and went away again like a passing cloud. Closing his eyes,

he repeated this and found her more clearly this time and tried hard to hold onto her. When his vision of the streetlamps and passing car lights stabilized, he tried to steer her. She resisted, tugged side to side by scents drifting on the wind. Harry heard something unexpected: a woman's emotionally distressed voice raised high. He opened his eyes. Tonks lay soundly asleep on the bed and nothing stirred in the room. Harry held his breath and listened, but the occasional car out on the road was all he heard.

Realizing that Kali must have been the one who heard the voice, Harry closed his eyes again and searched for her. This took a few minutes, since she had been successful at hunting moths around a street light and was no longer as famished. Her vision swam in and out of Harry's mind's eye. When he heard the voice again, his instinct was strong enough to make Kali turn her head to tune into it better with her keen ears. She swerved in the direction of it on her own, picking up on Harry's curiosity.

Through her distorted, careening, fish-eye view Harry discerned the Peterson house with its tall glowing peaked windows. Harry thought he recognized the voices alternately yelling and he snapped back to his bedroom.

"Tonks!" Harry said, shaking her leg to wake her.

She sat halfway up with a jerk and grabbed up her wand while rubbing her eyes. "Yeah? What is it?"

"I think something is happening at the Peterson house. A fight or something with Mr. Peterson. We need to go over there." Harry was on his feet, straightening his robes and finding his shoes.

Tonks fell back onto the bed. "If it's a domestic, call the Muggle police."

Harry stared at her reposed form. "I don't want to leave this to the Muggles; Elizabeth and her mum are witches."

Tonks, groggy with fatigue, said, "You said the dad forbid magic over there, that makes it a Class Six household."

"Well . . ." Harry said, trying to find an argument because he had not expected this reaction.

"Call the Muggles in, Harry," she said, shifting her feet, making her boney knees more apparent.

"No," Harry said, now annoyed. "Elizabeth is my friend." Harry had found his shoes and he tugged them on hurriedly.

Tonks sat up. "You have to wait for me," she scolded.

"Hurry up, then," Harry scolded back.

Tonks, well practiced at jumping into duty, was up quickly. Harry Disapparated for the front steps of the Peterson house and listened, wishing for Kali's sensitive hearing, but his pet was off hunting again. He knocked on the door just as Tonks arrived behind him, wand out.

"You can hear the fight?" Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head. Tonks stashed her wand away. "Better pretend its a social call, then," she advised.

Harry put his wand away as the lights showing through the windows framing the door shifted to indicate closer ones had been switched on. The door clicked and Mrs. Peterson, more mousey than Harry imagined she could behave, cracked open the door and peered out at them.

"Hi," Harry said and, unable to concoct a neighborly reason for standing there, asked, "Everything all right?"

Somewhere inside the house a door slammed. Mrs. Peterson flinched backward. Mr. Peterson's voice filtered down the broad, white-carpeted stairs: "I know you've got one of those sinister things!" Pounding sounded and Mrs. Peterson partly closed the door, except her face was still blocking her from completely sealing it. The voice said, "And I told you I'd take it away if I caught you with another one!"

Harry reached out to push the door open farther, despite Rodger's voice in his memory telling him that barring clear danger to someone's life or limb, he should wait for an invitation. "Can we come in?" Harry asked. More banging sounded.

The door closed a little more. Harry, with a full Auror standing behind him, knew he was going to violate his training in Ministry rules and go in anyhow. He felt both light and heavy at the same time. Light with the knowledge of his imminent transgression against carefully drilled procedure and heavy with the notion that ongoing training would limit him from future transgression when he wished it would not.

He stopped the door with his foot. Mrs. Peterson hesitated. Tonks remained silent behind him.

"Open this door, young lady!" Filtered down with more pounding. "Ouch! What did you do to this door, you little witch! This is my house and I'll have none of that!"

Harry wished Elizabeth knew how to Apparate. A standstill fell briefly upon the house. Harry hoped that Mr. Peterson had given up, and perhaps he had, but just

as Harry opened his mouth to ask again to be allowed inside, the sound came down of a door opening and banging against plaster.

"This what you want?" Elizabeth's nearly hysterical voice bounced down the stairwell.

"Don't you point that thing at me, young lady!"

Harry Disapparated for the upstairs corridor. Mr. Peterson had a tight hold on the wrist of his daughter's wand hand and was forcing her aim away, making the cords in Elizabeth's wrist stand out.

"Let me go!" Elizabeth shouted, voice strained. She pounded her father's arm with her free hand. A blast of hot sparks erupted from the wand and Mr. Peterson shoved Elizabeth away from him, hard enough to knock her down and make her cry out in surprise.

Harry jumped in between them as Tonks and Mrs. Peterson arrived. Harry left his wand in his pocket since he was dealing with a Muggle, but itched to have it in his hand.

"What are you doing in my house!" Mr. Peterson snarled, spittle flying from his angry mouth. He grabbed Harry by the front of his robes and jerked him forward, using his height and surprise to pull Harry onto his toes. Harry used a move he had learned from Vineet, and he swept his arm in an upward arc to break the man's grasp.

"Stop it," Harry ordered, catching his feet and settling into a low stance. Behind him he could hear Elizabeth rising with a single sob and her mother moved to help her. Harry did not trust the man in front of him enough to glance around. "What is your problem?" Harry asked him, furious.

"Get out of my house," Mr. Peterson ordered, low and nasty, head cocked forward, comb over flipped outward. "You have no right to be here."

"We'll leave as soon as we're certain everything will remain calm," Tonks informed the man with annoying calm.

"What are you supposed to be?" Mr. Peterson said to the pink-Mohawked Tonks. "You a double freak?"

"Leave her out of this," Harry said, stepping between the two of them now.

"This is all your doing." Mr. Peterson said, grabbing Harry again. Before Harry could react Mr. Peterson pushed him into the wall. Harry had been tossed against walls by spells all week, but this physical move triggered something new. He straightened

himself slowly, keeping his back pressed flat. Across from him, Elizabeth nursed a bruise darkening her cheek. Her tragically unhappy, red-rimmed eyes peered at her father.

The white corridor darkened despite the copious, powerful electric lighting. Mrs. Peterson glanced up at the ceiling lamps in consternation. Harry remained pressed to the wall, breathing fast. He could feel things clambering at the interstice. It made his skin itch as they clawed at the barrier just beyond the walls, eager, hungry. They could smell Harry's fury and anger and they believed it meant a feeding was imminent. Harry imagined Mr. Peterson's horror should he unleash them and with effort, squashed the imagining. Blinking, Harry watched Tonks move in, hand held up to calm Mr. Peterson, other hand on her wand pocket.

Harry pushed himself away from the wall to stand straight, trying to bottle up all the anger. Too much had escaped already and Mr. Peterson, arguing insultingly with Tonks, deserved something. The creatures prowled and circled, impatient with a frantic hunger that made Harry breathe faster in fear.

Elizabeth disappeared into her room and reappeared with a trunk which, after a hissing argument with her mother, she hovered while biting her lip defiantly and rubbing her wrist. Harry went over to her, needing something concrete to distract himself.

"Can I take you to your friend's place?" Harry asked.

"You've never been there," Elizabeth said.

Impatient and a little rough, he grabbed her chin and pulled her gaze to his. "Just think of it."

Startled, she complied. To Tonks, Harry said, "I'll be right back."

Moments later, they stood in the entry hall of a quiet flat. They both breathed heavily in the stale air.

"She must be out," Elizabeth said shakily.

Jarred out of thoughts of hungry demons by her voice and the change of venue, Harry took over her trunk and set it inside. "Sit down, I'll wait with you," he said, despite what he had just said to Tonks.

She put her hands on his robe front. "You have to go right back," she insisted with surprising presence. Having her close was doing strange things to him, sending a flutter over his abdomen. She added firmly, "I don't want to get you into trouble.

Go on." She let go and crouched beside her trunk and started plucking things out of it and setting them on the floor in neat piles. "Thanks," she said without looking back at him.

"You're going to be all right here?"

"Yeah, Diane will be fine with it. She kept insisting . . ." She trailed off and shook her head.

"I'll come back when I can; make sure everything is set," Harry said, thinking she was right, that he was going to be in trouble for leaving. "Owl . . . well, it's a little far . . . and you don't have an owl, anymore. Er, I'll come back first chance I get. I might have to bring my guard."

She looked up with a faint smile. "Thanks, Harry," she said wistfully.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Harry arrived back in the upstairs hallway and found it empty. He found Tonks interviewing the Petersons downstairs by the front door. Mr. Peterson sent visual daggers Harry's way as he took up a spot beside the Auror. Tonks half-turned to Harry and he could hear her sigh between questions.

"That's all for now," Tonks said tiredly, flipping her notebook closed. "You'll be hearing from us with some follow-up paperwork, I'm sure."

On the way down the pavement, Tonks said, "They cooperated all right. They were grateful we hadn't called in the Muggle police." When Harry remained silent, striding rapidly beside her, Tonks added, "Not an Auror-level call. Usually Reversal handles these and refers it to the Wizard Family Council for followup."

Harry still kept silent. He was uncertain how angry he might get if he started talking. The creatures had retreated, but in addition to not wanting a fight with Tonks, he did not want to feel them prowling around again.

Tonks gave up on conversation and they were both silently grateful when she changed shifts with Hornisham. Harry thought they could work it out later, especially if they had not actually let a real argument get started.

After Tonks had gone, Harry quickly wrote out a note for Candide and told Hornisham that he needed to run an errand. Hornisham repacked the knitting she had pulled out and stood by the hearth to join him.

On the hill above Hogsmeade, in the waning evening light, Harry argued with his guard. "I really need to go speak to someone, alone."

Hornisham glared back, stubborn in the face of Harry's misplaced anger. "I don't care what you want. I'm on duty to see you come to no harm and that's what I aim to do."

"Look," Harry said. He stepped back and transformed into his animagus form, flapped twice and transformed back. "I'll fly up to the school like that. Will that be okay?"

She stared at him like a Third-Year on her first trip to Honeydukes. "A Mountain Gryffylis. Can I see that again?" she asked in dazed wonderment.

Harry dropped his anger and obliged. He tilted his cat-like head at her and shook himself before changing back.

"Yer one dangerous creature, aren't you?" she asked. "Well, I doubt anyone would bother you if'n yer like that. I'll wait over in the Hog's Head for you."

Once Harry took flight from Hogsmeade, he could not resist circling the lake and a taking a short, weaving flight over the Forbidden Forest. His Animagus form did not care that it was delaying, it just liked to feel the autumn breeze buffeting its fur.

The Defense office window was dark as was Hermione's window, so Harry flapped hard to reach the roof and landed on the slate, taking care not to knock any tiles loose with his claws. A steady breeze poured through the gap in the hills behind him. He pulled his wings tight to avoid catching it, but found he needed them for balance, and so he spread them again, but kept them angled and loose to not catch air and send him flying again.

With his animal eyes he watched the people walking on the street in Hogsmeade, alternating between orange and shadow as they moved from storefront to storefront. A mist moved in over the lake, radiant in the twilight.

Harry decided he should not wait any longer. He launched himself on newly fresh wings and dropped down to Lupin's lit window and transformed into himself with his toes just clinging to the outside sill.

Lupin answered his knock immediately. "Well, Harry," he said, putting his wand away. "Didn't expect to find you there. Wasn't certain whom to expect, really. Come on in."

A young student in Slytherin colors sat at the visitor's desk, eyes wide, mouth open. Harry said hello to the girl, but she did not respond.

"Do you know where Severus is?" Harry asked Lupin.

"He's in a meeting with Minerva. Rough board meeting yesterday, I hear. They're plotting something."

"The board, or Severus and Minerva?" Harry asked, honestly uncertain.

Lupin laughed. "Both, I expect. They've been at it almost two hours. I expect you could go on up. But, aren't you supposed to have a guard?"

"She's waiting in Hogsmeade for me. She agreed that in my Animagus form, in transit to the castle, I wasn't in any danger." Harry started to step away, but stopped to ask. "How are things with you?"

Lupin smiled, doubling the crinkling around his eyes. "Quite good, surprisingly."

Harry put his own concerns aside and enjoyed that answer. He almost asked how his cousin was, but held off in the presence of the student. "I'll stop by on my way out," Harry promised.

With a slightly lighter heart, Harry made his way to the Headmistress' Tower. Guessing the password required three minutes of racking his brains for types of tea and coffee. "Macchiato" finally worked and the gargoyles leapt aside. Harry stared at the turning staircase, lost in overlapping memory for several breaths. As bad as suspicion of him sometimes became, as bloodyminded and annoying as the Ministry could be, this place, with everything in order as it should be, acted like a balm on his nerves. Harry stepped onto the stairs and rode it to the top, looking forward to seeing McGonagall, even as reluctant as he was to explain to his guardian what had transpired that evening.

"Harry, what a pleasant surprise," McGonagall greeted him when the door swung open. Snape's eyes came up from the scroll before him, keen, as expected.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to talk to Severus for a few minutes."

"Of course, my boy, this meeting has gone on far too long already."

"Is there a problem with the board?" Harry asked Snape as his guardian rolled the scroll before him and tossed the tassels around it.

McGonagall answered. "Some pressure to make changes that we are not certain are in the best interests of the school. This sort of tug of war goes on all the time, but I feel this time, we are the rope rather than the mud puddle as we usually are." To Snape, she said, "You can go on. I'll finish composing this letter to Cornelius and run it by you in the morning before sending it off."

On the way to Snape's office, Harry asked, "What's Fudge want?"

"Power, so he does not feel as insignificant as he actually is," Snape replied.

"More specifically, I meant," Harry said. "He's been talking to the press like he's in charge of everything. I don't get it."

Snape waited until the clusters of students had finished greeting Harry and moved on. "What exactly is it that is unclear?"

"He's just head of the Department of Mysteries. I guess I don't understand why Minister Bones doesn't slap him down."

Snape unsealed his office door. "I expect because she is busy with real work. But I agree, she has probably missed her chance to do so without creating a stir while doing it."

"Did I say that?" Harry asked, confused.

"You implied it. I assumed intentionally," Snape said with a slight sneer as he waved the lamps up. "Sit down. I assume Fudge is not what is on your mind." He himself leaned back against his desk where he could tower over the visitor's chair.

Harry took a seat and rested his eyes on a crowded shelf behind the desk. "You wanted me to tell you what was going on with me."

"Yes, I did. What is going on?" When Harry hesitated, Snape asked, "Is this a complimentary status report or did something happen this evening?"

"Something happened."

Into the empty air that ensued while Harry formulated, Snape prompted, "But you are reluctant to say exactly what?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Snape rubbed his hands together before propping them back on the desk edge behind him. "Does anything require fixing at this time?"

"What? No. Everything's all right right now." True, Harry reminded himself, things could be much worse.

"What happened?" Snape asked.

Harry tossed his head to the side, uneasily dipping into memory. "Elizabeth got into a row with her father . . . over magic, of course. I don't know how bad it would have got if we hadn't intervened, Tonks and I, that is. Mr. Peterson was as angry as I've ever seen my uncle Vernon. He wasn't rational. And . . . Tonks wasn't happy. Thought we should leave it to the Muggle police. I think she's jealous, partly." Harry sighed and rubbed his neck, more pained about everything. "Anyhow, the bad part was when I was trying to separate Mr. Peterson and Elizabeth. I mean, they were fighting. And I got angry. I mean, how could someone do that to their daughter. Well, not like Elizabeth wasn't part of it, but still."

Harry faded out, remembering the scene, Elizabeth's mussed hair and red, distressed face. The way she nursed her wrist.

"And?" Snape prompted.

"You know, I told you how I fed Voldemort, the other Voldemort, to the Raksashas." No response came to this. "Well, they seem to, er, expect that now. If I'm really angry at someone, that is."

Snape stood in stillness, arms crossed but relaxed. "Did you let them into this world?"

"No," Harry said. "No, nothing happened. I just didn't like the . . . feel of it. I had more control over them before, I thought. This time I was angry enough that I could feel the Dark Plane. It was too close, and the creatures . . . they expected to be fed. It felt awful, their hunger did." Harry rubbed his nose. "I don't know how to explain it. It's not like I had to do anything for them, but they were right there, not visible but really close by and they just expected."

Harry sighed again and slowed his breathing. "Maybe I'm over-reacting."

"No." Snape stepped casually around Harry to stand by the window. The one Harry had once repaired with glass beyond which demons swam. "You are not over-reacting." He sounded far away as he spoke and perhaps a little tired, which gave Harry a twinge because he had rendered Tonks into the same state. "I can only implore you to leave the Dark Plane alone, but I know you will not do so. The temptation of it is too strong, if only for the power it gives you to move at will, barrier or not, in utter silence."

He spun on his heel and faced Harry down. "Did you get the sense that the creatures were angry with you as a result of your resisting them?"

"No," Harry replied. "They don't get anything if I don't give it to them."

Sharply, critically, Snape said, "You treat them too lightly."

"I have to," Harry argued, to growing annoyance on Snape's side. "You don't seem able to understand that." Harry pointed at his own chest. "Either I have confidence that I control them or I lose myself to them, completely. That's how this works."

Silence fell. Harry broke it by more quietly pointing out, "I've tried to explain this before."

"You have. I remember. I just cannot accept that there is no middle ground where you can respect that these creatures are not tools to be toyed with by you, without consequence."

Guard Duty

"I didn't have any choice but to use them against Voldemort," Harry said.

"You had a choice about whether to fight Voldemort," Snape pointed out.

"Did I?" Harry asked. "It didn't feel like it."

Author's Notes: Yes, very long gap. Life has been too much lately. It isn't getting much saner soon either, but trust that the next chapter will appear eventually.

Chapter 14.

Chafing

Ron arrived at breakfast time on Saturday and took Hornisham's place as Harry's guard. Harry was quite pleased to see him. "Let's get out, all right?" Harry said to him before managing even "hello".

Ron shrugged and took the seat beside Harry. "Mrs. Snape," he said, greeting Candide.

Candide gestured with a rasher-laden fork. "Didn't actually change my name," she pointed out.

"Ah," Ron said, "Good plan that." He paused to let his mind drift. "How shall I call you? Harry's New Mum?"

Harry coughed on his juice.

"'Mrs. Snape' is fine," Candide stated slowly. "'Candide' is fine."

"'Mrs. Professor'," Ron suggested in a tone of trying out the sound of it.

"You gave the right passcode, didn't you?" Harry asked his friend in dismay.

"You tell me," Ron replied. A full plate of breakfast appeared before him. "All right!" he cheered lightly.

"Didn't you eat yet?"

"I did," Ron said, eagerly picking up his fork while carefully surveying the diverse field before him.

"Guess you are Ron," Harry commented quietly.

Ron, still chewing a sausage, asked Candide, "So, what names are you thinking of?"

Harry pricked his head up. Candide replied, "Apuleius maybe. Argentio is nice too."

"Ah, so you haven't got to the Bs in the book yet," Ron said, nodding knowingly. "I have an aunt named Argentinia," he went on between bites. "But that's because they were running out of girls names on that side. That's how my mum got the name 'Molly'. They say granddad really meant to say 'golly!' but his mouth was full at the time, or so the story goes."

Harry and Candide shared a silent laugh.

"Such big families," Harry said, shaking his head. "I can't imagine."

"Ready for a brother, right?" Candide asked with amused force.

Harry did not want her to worry about him, of all things. "Yeah. I'm looking forward to it. It's just a baby. How hard could that be?"

Candide seemed to freeze, but then she said, "I hope you're right, but I somehow don't think you are."

"Oh," Harry said. "What are babies like?" he asked Ron.

Ron raised and lowered his boney shoulders. "Loud, smelly. They get into things. Sometimes magic comes flying off of them and then their nappies won't stay on . . . you'll find them dangling from the chandelier in there..."

"The baby or the nappies?" Harry asked, not sure he wanted to hear which.

Ron did not reply, just went on with: "The windows will all shatter from this hyper-magic crying . . ." He waved his hand dismissively. "You wouldn't believe what happened when my cousin took her baby daughter to a croquet match once. They never did find all the hoops."

Given Candide's quizzically alarmed expression, Harry thought it best to interrupt. "Well, we should go, maybe."

Harry, as a quick way of coming up with a plan, mentioned that it was certainly looking like a great day to stroll up and down Diagon Alley, and he dragged his friend off to do just that.

Half the wizarding world was out that morning, it seemed, and as well as recognizing many old school chums, they encountered Aaron, window shopping before Madam Malkin's.

Chapter 14

"Don't you have field work?" Harry asked.

Aaron gave the hand sign for "taking care of it", which may, as strange as it seemed, mean he was doing his field work right then. Aaron turned and greeted Ron a bit loudly, and chummily suggested they enter the store. The shopkeeper glanced up and gave the fleeting impression that she had expected someone else.

Aaron perused the racks in the manner of a connoisseur who expects to be disappointed with absolutely everything. He made a big scene of looking for robes for a nice dinner out with his mum.

Madam Malkin shuffled over to him, sliding the racks of robes around to better reach him. "Well, what will your father be wearing, dear?" she asked him.

"If he has the misfortune of being there, it would presumably be in the same tailcoat we buried him in three years ago."

Madam Malkin held her hands up then placed one on Aaron's arm. "So, sorry, young man, I should have remembered that. You are certainly in here often enough. Well, how about this one." She held up a green set of robes with maroon lace trim. "I found it in the warehouse. Vintage, from Italy."

Harry thought there was absolutely no chance his dapper friend would even consider those quaint and studiously old-fashioned robes, but Aaron held them up in the light of the window for inspection, and took a long time about it.

Ron nudged Harry, who also thought it may be time to move on. But Harry also suspected something more was going on, so he brushed Ron off. Indeed, not five minutes later–while Aaron stood before the triptych mirror in the back of the store, alternately studying the decorative back hem and checking the sleeve length on a set of robes for which it was frankly surprising that neither he nor they burst spontaneously into flames upon his donning them–the door chime mutely clanged and three skulky figures entered.

There was something odd about the tri-some that was not immediately quantifiable. They resembled two brothers and a sister in their mid-twenties, but Harry did not recognize them from Hogwarts as he would expect to. Aaron went on, deliberating about the robes, sounding spoiled about what he disliked, but Madam Malkin dutifully agreed with everything he said.

One of the wizards circled around, desultorily shopping, and came up short upon encountering Harry beside the mirror. He recovered and moved on with a quick gesture to the other two that would have been easy to miss if one were not looking

for it. They gathered in the far corner and the woman shifted robes on a rack while they bent their heads together. Aaron's gaze flickered over to them and then to Harry before he resumed his unsatisfiable shopper routine.

Harry bit his lip. He was in the way, perhaps. Aaron was on duty; Harry was certain now. He was staking out the shop and Harry was disrupting that. But Aaron could have suggested Harry leave before now and had not done so. Harry casually made a comment to Aaron about the green color not being flattering to him because it would imply he was proud of being a Slytherin. Aaron sent a surprised and insulted look his way, but Harry missed it; he was glancing at the group in the corner, determined to memorize their faces, which wasn't easy; they were very ordinary looking beyond their dark, shiny hair. No particular features of their faces stood out to make note of.

The group broke out of their whispered conversation and departed the store with a last challenging glance at Harry. Ron had started to search the business attire rack out of sheer boredom and noticed none of this. Aaron sighed at his image in the mirror and slipped off the robes like one removing a sweaty uniform after a long match.

"Oh, you don't want those?" Ron said brightly. "Can I try them?"

Aaron peered down at the robes, bundled like rubbish in his hands, and then back up at Ron. For a second he seemed to contemplate intervening and refusing, but he handed the robes over and relinquished the spot before the mirrors.

"They do look better on Ron," Harry whispered to Aaron a few minutes later while Ron studied himself in the mirror. Indeed the lace matched his hair and that made a world of difference.

"I have a spare Slytherin pin you can borrow," Aaron suggested when Ron pinched the neck closed with his fingers and lifted his chin with a staid air.

"Was I in the way?" Harry asked Aaron in a whisper.

"No," Aaron said, shaking his head while critically eyeing Ron.

"Was that part of the gang that came in here?" Harry asked.

"Probably," Aaron replied, far more interested in Ron's attire than Harry's conversation.

"Well . . . we should go back to the Ministry then," Harry insisted. "I remember what they look like."

Chapter 14

"No, you don't," Aaron calmly countered.

Harry stared at him. "I don't?"

"Shacklebolt said they'd probably be Rho-Potioned and you couldn't know what they really looked like."

"Row-Potioned?" Harry repeated. He'd never heard of that.

"Did you see them with all black hair too?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah."

"Hm. Kingsley said the potion had a regression to the mean effect. So maybe they are from somewhere south."

Harry shook his head, not following at all.

Aaron leaned closer to explain. "The potion makes you appear as an average of everyone you've ever met. So, you can't tell what they look like, but you know they aren't from, say, Sweden."

"Right," Harry said, following that part, at least.

"I better go report in." Aaron said. "Shacklebolt said to come right back if anything happens, and on top of that, I can't stand to watch real Galleons get put down for those robes . . . no matter how good they look on someone. Or maybe because they are starting to look good on someone."

Rodgers teased Harry on Monday during training. "We must not be giving Potter enough field time . . . he's repeatedly went out hunting for his own over the weekend." Harry's fellows grinned, while Harry stared at his fingernails. Rodgers went on, "If you want more assignments, I have one for you. Fudge wants a few Aurors assigned to him half-time. I'm half-tempted to half-send you, if you are so bored."

Harry balked. "Fudge and I don't get along very well."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Rodgers stated airily. "Fudge wants to form a permanent committee to focus on combatting organized crime."

"Er," Harry asked even though it pained him to support Fudge, "Don't we need that?"

Rodgers raised a pale brown brow and glared at Harry. "We don't have time for committees. Fudge used to do this to us all the time. Six months of pulling us one way and then tugging us to something completely different for the next six months. All the time, meetings and reports. We never accomplished anything and as soon as we turn our backs on all the other problems to jump on one alone, all heck in a handbasket breaks loose and we have to scramble to just get things under control. Minister Bones has been a god-send. If she sticks her nose in, it's just to ask if we need anything; she otherwise leaves us alone to get things done."

Tridant piped up when Rodgers ran out of diatribe. "The Prophet seems to think she's asleep and lacks leadership." It was not clear from his tone if he were baiting their trainer or just wanted to get a response.

Rodgers said, "I prefer to think she just trusts us to do our jobs and knows we can't do them from a meeting room or stuck behind a dictation quill. Let them use their own personnel; we have enough of our own troubles."

During lunch, upon which Harry was forced to use the slightly stinky, poison-revealing drops, Harry fell thoughtful, perhaps due to having to eat slowly while half holding his nose. It was occurring to him that he had not felt Moody following him for quite a while. Harry dumped the remaining half of his sandwich and went to find Mr. Weasley.

Harry found the department head in the file room, leaning over a teetering stack of files on a cabinet, taking notes from the top one while pressing a finger on it to keep it from spilling onto the floor. "Hello Harry, need this drawer?" he asked, when Harry stepped over.

"I just wanted to ask you something."

Mr. Weasley closed the top file to give Harry his full attention and said, "Go on."

"Is Mad-Eye still working for the Department of Mysteries?"

"I think so," Mr. Weasley replied after glancing around the empty room for anyone possibly listening in. "Fudge has been repeatedly requesting manpower from us at the same time as he's been bragging that he has someone mysterious working for him who he claims is better than anyone we have to offer."

"Clearly, he thinks flattery will get him somewhere," Harry commented.

"What? Oh, yes," Mr. Weasley chuckled. "Clearly." He sorted through his files seemingly at random and said, "You should come for dinner this Wednesday, the whole clan will be there."

"I'd like that, thanks," Harry said.

Harry had started to turn back to the heavy door, but stopped when Mr. Weasley asked, "May I inquire what made you ask about Moody?"

"Oh," Harry said, not meaning to be opaque. "I was just thinking that I hadn't noticed him following me lately. Not that I'm complaining."

"If Cornelius is giving him the kind of pointless assignments I know he's expecting of us, I expect Moody is rather busy. More so now because the Department of Mysteries had one of their technicians injured in that fire Thursday night."

"They did?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It was just announced this morning to the Ministry at large. Probably will be in the press this afternoon."

"What started the fire?" Harry asked. "Was it an accident or a fight?"

Mr. Weasley sighed, gave Harry a firm look, and then appeared to give in, "Looks like an accident right now. Felton had taken some work home and it got out of hand. He's expected to recover eventually."

"What was he working on?"

Mr. Weasley smiled faintly as he said, "Too many questions, Harry." He scratched his head, tapped the files before him and admitted, "Department of Mysteries refused to give us a straight answer to that anyhow. I expect Alastor will get to the bottom of it for them, since they haven't told us enough to help, really. Moody is sharp enough to handle it, I expect."

Harry was less certain. "I wonder who was following him," he muttered aloud.

Mr. Weasley returned his full attention to Harry. "Following whom, Moody?"

Harry recovered from having spoken his internal musings. "Yeah. He accused me of doing it."

"He accused you? I'd expect he'd realize you've seen enough of him."

Harry shrugged, which was a kind of lie, since he knew very well why Moody suspected Harry of being skilled enough to slip within Moody's copious warning barriers undetected, should he care to.

"Maybe Alastor really should retire for good," Mr. Weasley said, shaking his head. "So! I can tell Molly to expect you on Wednesday?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley winked. "Kingsley's been praising your field shadowing. Good to see you're settling down a bit, Harry." He sounded inordinately pleased. "Still more curious than you're really allowed to be at this stage. . ."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "I've been finding it a bit easier to follow the rules lately. For some reason . . ." he added despite knowing that the rules felt better now after seeing how miserable the world would be without them.

"Probably just growing up, Harry," Mr. Weasley said patronizingly, in a way that set Harry off slightly.

"Maybe," Harry said, not conceding at all to his own mind.

During the afternoon, Rodgers had to leave them for several hours to drill on their own. When this happened again the next day, Harry and Aaron just happened to slip down to the tearoom for an unscheduled break and just happened to loiter outside the main offices, listening for any clue as to what was happening.

Harry wished for a set of Extendable Ears as he sipped a cup of tea he did not really want, just for an excuse. His fallback plan was to weasel some information out of Tonks if she turned out to be his guard that night. There in the corridor with the steaming, thin tea under his nose, Harry felt a wave of general frustration that they were not allowed to help more.

Aaron cocking his ear toward the doorway pulled Harry back to their spying. Rogan was saying: "Ragnok insists that the wizards in question are just trying to cheat them. They are threatening to close the vaults except during an hour a day and force everyone through some rather unsavory screening."

Tonks voice then: "Last time they did that Diagon Alley had to resort to barter and a few merchants started accepting pounds. It was chaos. I couldn't pay my rent and had to befuddle my landlord to avoid being thrown out of my place."

Harry and Aaron stared at each other while they listened to more descriptions of dismayed Goblins. Harry wondered again what Moody was doing for Fudge. He thought about who else he might ask. It occurred to him with a chill of realization that he could slip into the Department of Mysteries to see for himself what was happening there. He stopped listening to the Auror conversation and fixated on what he knew first-hand of the Department of Mysteries. The memories were fraught with stress and bad outcomes but within that thorny thicket, the visions of it were as clear as the paneled wall he stood before now.

Chapter 14

"What do you think?" Aaron asked, jarring Harry away from hatching plans.

"I have to think about it more," Harry said, answering only to his own thoughts.

"Hm, sounds to me like the shakedown is taking in Gringotts," Aaron said with confidence.

"What?" Harry said, wishing he had paid more attention.

"Well, you know. Extortion and fraud, that's usually where this type make their money."

"Er, yeah," Harry agreed. His mind jumped to another mystery topic that he wished he could resolve. It occurred to him that Aaron would be an optimum guard to take on a mission to check in on Belinda. Harry had found it inconvenient to try and convince Tonks to make a social call to the Minister's office, but Aaron would not mind, nor would he ask too many questions. "Hey, if you think the other three wouldn't miss us, let's go up and see someone I want to talk to."

Aaron rubbed his elbow. "I could stand to skive off for a while longer. These power-building drills are really taking a toll on my quest for a bruise-free lifestyle."

As they headed for the stairs, Harry said with a laugh, "A bruise-free what?"

"Bruises aren't as sexy as they used to be. Healers can't do a thing for them, so I'd prefer to abstain, thank you."

Up in the Minister's office, Aaron showed just how valuable he could be . . . he sauntered over to the other assistant, hunched over a pile of reports taking notes, and began to chat her up. Harry did not think they knew each other, but within seconds Aaron had her smiling and completely distracted from everything else.

"Hello, Harry," Belinda said, looking up from a typewriter she had opened up before her, the letter-tipped metal arms splayed at random up and backwards.

"Hello," Harry returned. "Er, what are you doing?"

"Muggle correspondence." She shook her head and moved in with a tiny pick to clean out the circular letter parts. "We used to have an old witch down in records that could charm a quill to mimic a typewriter, but she retired and now we have to keep this thing running for Muggle organization-bound letters."

Harry blinked at that and considered that a typewritten letter probably looked as out of date as a quilled one these days. He watched her work for a minute, cleaning the black gunk out of the silver letter shapes and folding each one back down, repeatedly

having to unfold some because they refused to go back in if pushed in the wrong order. Harry was thinking about criminal gangs and Belinda confessing that she did not want to tell anyone at the Ministry what was troubling her because she would lose her job. Belinda sighed and rubbed her blackened fingers on a white rag.

"Muggle machines aside, how are you doing?" Harry asked.

Belinda shrugged. She cleaned her hands more thoroughly with a spell before reaching under the wheeled typewriter table for a sheet of crisp real paper. The paper was fed into the rollers of the machine and adjusted with much clacking and rolling back and forth.

"Sorry, I don't mean to ignore you, but I'm behind on getting these done." She stopped and glanced at the other office assistant. Harry glanced that way too and found the woman completely involved in her conversation with Aaron.

In a low voice, Belinda said, "I've wanted to have coffee with you, but I notice that you are always under guard now. Makes it kind of hard to talk to you." She said this in a way that maybe implied Harry was at fault for the situation.

Harry imagined that she had vacillated on whether to tell him what was wrong and he wished he had not missed finding out. "I know."

The door to the Minister's office opened and Harry stood straight, not prepared to deal with Bones right then, but it was just one of the other assistants, a skinny man with rimless glasses and a shiny bald top to his head. He closed the door behind him and moved to the shelves without once glancing at the strangers in the room.

Quiet still, Harry said, "You know, if you need anything, just owl. I'll shake my guard if I have to."

"You shouldn't do that," she said, firmly correcting him. She bit her lip. "Don't shake your guard even if I ever do owl you saying you should."

The male assistant took something back into the inner office and Harry had a glimpse of Bones at her desk, reading something by holding it far from her eyes.

Harry was still trying to grasp her last statement when she said, "There's a meeting soon . . . so, you should probably go."

Harry tried to Legilimize her in the last glance before she bent back to typing by poking at one key at a time, but did not catch anything beyond an image of two Goblins carrying gold-plated briefcases.

Aaron did not need to be prompted. He caught sight of Harry stepping back from the desk and immediately closed the conversation he was having. The woman said, "Hey, we should have drinks sometime."

Aaron turned on a deadly smile and replied, "That would be lovely," without promising anything firm.

In the corridor, Harry said out of the corner of his mouth, "I'd hate to be your girlfriend."

"I'd hate for you to be my girlfriend too," Aaron agreed, deadly serious, but he laughed hardily after.

On the stairs, Aaron said wistfully, "Why is it the one you've got never seems as nice as the ones you don't?"

Harry needed the whole trip down to come up with a response. With his hand on the door latch to their floor he said, "That attitude sounds guaranteed to lead to unhappiness."

"If I had your fame, I could have anyone," Aaron said dreamily.

Harry still held the door closed. "You have money; isn't that enough?"

"It does help," Aaron agreed. "My mum still doles it out. Insists I'm not ready to have it all in a lump sum yet. I think she just wants to drag me home for luncheons at will. Potential girlfriends do not like to learn that this is the case."

Harry opened the door. "If they can't handle that, you're better off without them."

That evening, Harry unusually chaffed under having Tonks as a guard. He wanted to try slipping into the Department of Mysteries and could not work out a scheme to get enough time alone to do it. Candide came home for dinner, hair mussed, eyes sore looking. When the settings arrived with a sparkle, she carefully straightened the silverware and waited for the food while tapping her finger on the wood.

Concerned, Harry asked, "Are you going to make it through November?"

Candide brightened. "Oh yes. This has been an easy year so far."

"Really?" Harry asked.

When the plates of food arrived, Candide's was not only larger but piled with fruit on one half. Candide stared at it before popping a grape into her mouth. "Winky's started doing this to me," she commented, not sounding annoyed, but not sounding pleased either

"Maybe Severus should be here looking after you," Harry said.

"No," Candide denied, holding up a peach for examination. "I'm fine. Winky has her own ideas, is all."

"Hm," Harry muttered, unconvinced.

Candide nibbled a second grape thoughtfully and said, "He'd come home if you needed him."

"I don't. I just think you do," Harry returned.

"I don't, but if you are insisting, it makes me think you think you need him."

"What?" Harry asked with a sharp head shake.

Tonks chimed in, "This is the strangest argument I've ever witnessed."

"It's not an argument," Harry snapped lightly, then sighed sheepishly.

That night as Hornisham took over because Tonks was on duty, Harry sat partly reading and mostly thinking about how he might get away long enough to do some investigating. This restriction on him was making him ill tempered, which made it difficult to concentrate. There was nothing for it; he had to convince Mr. Weasley to cancel his guard. Of course he could hardly tell him why he needed the guard removed. And he doubted he could convince Mr. Weasley to agree. But he had to try.

Harry frowned into a small book on the history of weather hexes, specifically on a chapter covering combined spells to create storm clouds. Hornisham was knitting again, but this time the hooks and perls built up something wide and square that was unlikely to be a scarf given the heavy grinding sound of it rubbing on the hearthstone. The creak and grind of metal needle on metal cord had grown into a background noise for Harry's home life, a background noise for his lack of freedom.

Harry stared at the inexpertly typeset and crookedly printed page before him. The book would be even thinner if the margins were not so wide. He considered that he could trick Hornisham easily enough with a Doppelgänger or a Memory Charm, but that felt like too cruel a trick.

That night Harry slept poorly. He dreamed that Rodgers was unrelenting in striking him with spells. Harry refused to beg for him to stop, even when he discovered his hand empty of wand and could not find it on the floor near his knees. Battered with spells intended to improve him, Harry crouched with his hands over his head in a futile effort to protect himself.

Harry squinted around his dimly lit bedroom after Hornisham prodded him awake with a knitting needle. His trunks, against the wall where they belonged, sat in blurry stillness, as did his wardrobe. All was normal.

"Potter, Potter," Hornisham repeated in a little voice when Harry did not respond.

Harry rolled away from her to collect himself. Across the room, Kali crawled violently inside her cage for a burst, then quieted.

"Ack," Hornisham muttered and returned to her knitting.

Chapter 14

Harry used dinner at the Burrow to begin the long impossible work of convincing Mr. Weasley to remove his guard. Several other early-arriving Weasleys were more than happy to throw their support behind Harry. Both Weasley parents insisted that Harry's arguing that nothing had happened to him was all the more reason to keep him under guard, not remove it. Ron refused to take sides, as did Bill. Harry let the topic drop when Percy arrived, new girlfriend in tow.

The Weasley family all stopped what they were doing, heads cranked around, bodies frozen in place, when the pair entered from the Floo. Percy led the woman in by the hand, except her hand remained a fist. Her brow and lip edge glittered with silver rings and her shoulder-length hair was of a black hue that reflected absolutely no light, so that it appeared a blurry hole following behind her face. Her clothing, with long silver chains adorning it at random, reflected slightly more light than her hair.

Percy sulkily glanced at his family members in turn and stopped before Mrs. Weasley. "Mum, this is Vespera. Vespera Eyre."

"How do you do, dear?" Mrs. Weasley managed faintly.

Vespera may have smiled, may have sneered. The others were recovering enough to send funny-faced glances at each other.

Harry did not intentionally sit beside Vespera during dinner, but at the last moment he rescued Ginny from having to do so. Percy's date was wearing something mildly cursed and it seemed to vibrate in concert with the bizarre scent of her perfume, so Harry ate little and began to contemplate going home early. Dinner was a mute affair punctuated by one or the other of the parents attempting to learn anything from Percy's date. She was entirely monosyllabic, so this was a slow, tortuous process for all present. Percy exuded an air of smugness and attempted to dote on his date whenever possible, to no reaction from her.

When Harry made to leave, to loudly expressed disappointment, Mr. Weasley started to say, "About that issue we were discussing-"

Harry cut him off. "I'll see you tomorrow about it, sir." He thought he had dodged Mr. Weasley's revelation, but Percy narrowed his eyes at his father at the far other end of the table. Harry frowned, but then considered that perhaps this was perfect. If Percy was after Harry, then him believing Harry may lose his guard could draw him out where Harry could catch him. "I'll come to your office in the morning, if that's all right, sir."

Mr. Weasley gestured that Harry could do as he pleased. Ron and Ginny and then the twins even, all jumped up to escort Harry home. Ginny was beside Harry, looking the most in need of a breather, so he chose her.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Harry said, "I don't like the way Percy Legilimizes your dad."

Ginny replied simply, "I don't like Percy."

The house was quiet. Harry stepped into the hall and glanced around, ran the barrier detection spells, and then turned to Ginny. "I need a guard that will give me some leeway. I have some things I need to do."

"Won't Tonks give you some room?" Ginny asked, mystified.

Harry huffed. "Yeah. Good question." It pained him to wonder about it. "It involves the Ministry, so I think not."

"Harry," Ginny began but then hesitated for quite a while. "Harry, if you don't trust Tonks, you know, to tell her pretty much anything, I don't think it's going to work out, long-term."

Harry stared at her pale, freckled face in the candlelight. He did not want to say aloud that she was probably right, but part of him had already turned traitor and had started pounding on him with that notion. He should just trust Tonks and if she did not trust him in return, well, then it was not meant to be. Standing there in the dining room, with the light reflecting brightest on the glass of the framed photographs on the sideboard, it seemed far too obvious that this issue was the problem between them.

"Harry?" Ginny finally prodded.

"Yeah," Harry breathed. Not admitting to anything, just acknowledging that she was still there.

Ginny flipped her hair around, perhaps out of impatience. "Is your next guard here?"

Harry rose out of his lowly spiraling thoughts. "No."

Ginny pulled out a chair and took a seat. "I'll wait." She drummed her fingers. "If I wish for a Butterbeer, will–" A Butterbeer bottle sparkled into place before her. "That's lovely," she said happily.

Harry sat across from her. He should fetch his readings, but did not move to do so. "I'm sick to death of being guarded. I can't even remember what it was like to be alone."

"That doesn't sound that bad."

Harry gazed around the room. "I wonder where Hornisham is, or Tonks, or whomever it is supposed to be."

"You don't know?"

"No." Harry too drummed his fingers. "I could sneak away right now," he said, sitting up.

Ginny's mouth made a popping sound on the bottle top when she tugged it away suddenly. "No you aren't."

"What?"

"You're staying here. We don't know what happened to your guard and I'm not going to get reamed for losing track of you. Sit."

Harry settled back into the chair, surprised by her.

"Where is it you want to go anyhow?" she asked.

"I'm not telling you."

"Fine."

Harry crossed his arms and rotated a quarter turn away from her. A second butterbeer appeared to replace Ginny's just emptied first one. Harry pulled his wand, summoned his books and slouched far back to read.

"Maybe you should go tell your dad that my guard is late," Harry said after a while.

Ginny considered this suggestion. "Why don't we just send an owl through the Floo?"

"No owls around at the moment," Harry stated a bit stiffly.

"Boy, you are just a cheery bundle of gnome dancing this evening, aren't you? I didn't notice that earlier while you were sitting in the shadow of She-Who-Must-Not-Speak-In-Complete-Sentences." When Harry expressed some chagrin at his behavior, Ginny said, "We can both go back and tell him." She stood. "Come on."

"You know, I may just be too early returning," Harry said, reluctant to further discuss the issue of his guards in front of Percy, who may still be there.

Ginny settled back and took up her full Butterbeer. "I can wait."

Harry yearned to point out that he could defeat Voldemort, single-handed, should he choose to return that evening, so he certainly did not need a guard, but he kept silent.

Hornisham arrived shortly after Candide did. She and Ginny were involved immediately in a detailed discussion of Candide's pregnancy so far. Harry listened in, wondering at this instant connection between the two of them that seemed to spawn from nothing more than that they were both female. Hornisham was a welcome distraction. She gave the correct code word and Ginny departed with a warmer goodbye to Candide than to Harry.

That night, Harry dreamt he was attending Percy and Vespera's wedding. The tent and the guests were similar to Snape's wedding and everyone waited anxiously for the bride. She finally arrived, in the form of a black rat, who scampered down the aisle before transforming into a women in a broad-skirted black dress heaped with layers of torn black lace. Everyone quieted for the ceremony and Harry longed to leap from his flimsy folding chair to shout that something was wrong, that it all had to stop. But he stayed put, stressed dearly by feeling it best he do so.

When Harry turned to his companion to whisper his concerns, he found Snape glaring flinty-eyed at him, in a manner that suggested they shared no history. Harry rose from his chair, collapsing it loudly. The surrounding guests turned in their seats to stare. At the front, the ceremony halted and Percy lifted his nose in the air and turned away.

Harry backed off, finding concerned faces where he least expected it: like upon the Malfoy family. Harry encountered the plastic window on the tent wall with his hand. The breeze snapped the side of the tent against his back, nearly knocking him forward into the nearest chairs.

He was in the wrong place, he realized with a prickly jolt. Heart racing, Harry felt along the wall of the tent until he found an opening and slipped through out to the damp darkness. Overhead, leaves clattered ominously, casting water droplets at him. Low clouds blocked the stars. He had to get home, even if he could not remember how he had arrived in this place.

Harry's room snapped into view when a knitting needle prodded him on the leg. Kali made a fuss in her cage and Hornisham shuffled over there and opened it. Harry sat up, groggily worried about his pet's reaction to a stranger, but Hornisham had no difficulty. She gripped the often vicious chimrian confidently in her broad palm, head pressed out between her index and middle finger, wings bundled, tiny legs flailing helplessly.

Harry relaxed and accepted his pet, who immediately crept under the coverlet and disappeared. He rubbed his tender and tired eyes and fell sideways on his pillow,

determined to ignore his embarrassment. His guard resumed her usual spot by the hearth, but the clicks of her knitting needles did not return before Harry fell back into swirling sleep.

When Harry awoke the next morning, he found his room empty. He put on his dressing gown and headed downstairs where he found Candide and his guard standing in a silent tableau, clearly interrupted from speaking. With a frown he turned away to get ready for the day.

Harry's determination to ignore his embarrassment mutated into raw determination to get his way as he landed in the Ministry Atrium. He left his guard with a polite "thank you" and a quick bow, and marched upstairs to find Mr. Weasley. This was easy; the department head was in the corridor, talking to Percy and Fudge.

"You're here bright and early, Harry," Mr. Weasley said approvingly.

Harry Occluded his mind before studying anyone closely. "Lots to learn," Harry said sweetly. "Thought I'd get to it."

Mr. Weasley missed the tone and gestured at the training room opposite. "Well, don't let us get in your way."

Harry plopped down at the desk beside Vineet, who was reading to himself alone in the room.

"You're early too," Harry said to start a conversation, which failed. Harry sat straighter. "Hey, I want to check on a friend. Can you come along as a guard?" Harry asked this partly to avoid trouble, but also because he wanted the company. Instinctively, Harry thought Elizabeth would hold together better in Vineet's presence. She had still been quite upset the night of the fight when Harry had gone back to check that her friend was indeed allowing her to stay.

Elizabeth's roommate was just preparing to depart for work when Harry knocked on the door. The door opened before he could even lower his hand to his side. Diane smiled upon recognizing him and moved her substantial, skirted self out of the way for the two of them to enter. She scooped up her slim attaché from a chair and said, "I'll be back sixish, Lizzie."

Elizabeth stood from the breakfast-strewn table where she was reading official-looking papers. Harry made sure she remembered his fellow apprentice and asked how she was.

"Well enough," Elizabeth said, accentuating her strained words with a toss of her unstyled hair. "I have to figure out how to pay for term, which starts next week. I'm a little late applying for a loan for Michelmas."

"You're going to manage, right?" Harry asked.

Elizabeth threw her arms to the sides. "It's a problem I wanted to have–figuring out how to do this myself. It's part of getting away from dad." Her head bowed, highlighting her more than usually unkempt state.

"Do you want to come to dinner at my house?" Harry asked. "You're welcome to, you know."

She smiled wryly. "I appreciate that, Harry. It's maybe a tad too close to home. Maybe some other time. Don't worry about me."

"You're certain?" Harry asked, not liking the deep shade under her eyes that implied she had not slept well.

Vineet, cutting a serious figure in his dark robes with his arms crossed, stated, "Your friend appears to keep food well at hand."

Elizabeth smiled for real. "She does that. There's a small shop's worth of crisps and sweets stuffed in the cabinets and in the coat cupboard even."

It made Harry feel better to know she at least could not go hungry, but he wished he could help her more. She glanced at her watch and interrupted his wishing with: "Don't you have training?"

Harry reluctantly departed, remembering too well a long blur of feeling badly treated by his relatives. He did not manage to corner Mr. Weasley that day, despite numerous attempts. At least that night Tonks came home as a guard, so he was happy enough to put off his determination for another day.

While Harry caught up on assigned readings, Tonks tried out various nail colors and lengths, as well as finger lengths, between perusing the archive of newspapers that Candide allowed to pile up during Snape's absence. Harry thought that they should talk, but his uncertainty about what he should say, along with nervousness about how strained the conversation may turn, made his readings far more interesting than normal. His re-reading of a chapter on the psychology of obsessive magical animal collecting was interrupted by a three-foot long index finger tweaking him on the nose from across the table.

"Am I too boring?" Harry asked.

"Well, now that you ask . . ." Tonks grinned. "Actually wondering when Winky would bring dinner."

Harry glanced at the clock, surprised to find it so late. "If she's waiting on it, she thinks Candide will be back in time." He closed his books and sat back, thinking he

might ask for a snack if it went much longer. The section of paper facing him had a photograph of Diagon Alley and a special sale to celebrate the five-hundred year anniversary of Eeylops Emporium.

Little has changed at Eeylops in the last five centuries, the article went. Witches and Wizards has been outfitting their owls, large and small, domestic and exotic, with the best Britain has to offer in feathered pet paraphernalia.

The article sounded far removed from the dark shadow of extortion and organized crime. Harry did not want to see his beloved Diagon Alley damaged in any way. He asked, "That gang is starting to operate on Diagon, aren't they?"

With a crinkling of paper, Tonks turned the news around to glance at what Harry was referring to. "Durumulna? We think they are trying," Tonks said, flipping the paper back.

"Durumulna?"

Tonks shifted again behind the paper so that just her spiked hair appeared over the top. "Yeah, that's what they're calling themselves."

"So, someone's talked to them," Harry said.

"Someone's talked to someone who's talked to them," Tonks replied.

Tonks stayed for the night and when Harry woke from a dream of crawling over the musty Hogwarts dungeon floor, trying to escape something dreadful, he could never have imagined being so simultaneously glad she was there while also wishing to be alone.

Breathing heavily, Harry clutched his middle and sat hunched over his legs. The cool air from the covers falling away helped wake him up to the reality of his room.

"Harry," Tonks said, arm slipping around him. "Are you having dreams like this all the time?"

"Not always like this. They've all been different."

"Well, but, you've been having a lot of nightmares, haven't you? What's going on?"

Harry did not know what was going on. He refused to consider it too closely, especially right now when he should be asleep. Instead he focussed on her hand stroking his back.

"Harry?" she prompted after a while.

"Hm?" he grunted, not wanting to talk.

"What's brought on these nightmares?"

Harry shook his head and Tonks let it drop.

"All right. Can't force you to talk." She flopped back down on the bed.

Harry remained sitting up, thinking. He wished that he did not need to sleep. And despite wanting not to again that night, could not resist it. He fell asleep over his knees twice before relenting and taking up his pillow again properly.

Harry was facing down Snape, a chiseled, scarred and ruthless looking apparition in coal black, high-collared robes. Harry backed up. The cryptic scent of the dungeon was overlaid by the scent of dried blood and raw fear. Harry did not know what he was doing there; he only knew that he was already tired of running away and of fighting.

Harry's back met the shelves of colorful potion bottles and bloated creatures floating contorted in green-hued cloudy liquid. In contrast to Harry, who had no idea what he should do, Snape had a confident determination to his predatory approach. Harry's instincts flailed at the situation; if he could get away, why was he still here?

A long finger, nail stained and chipped, reached out brushed Harry's cheek. Harry forced himself through the floor . . . and awoke in the dust of the Dark Plane. His startled fear attracted a crowd of creatures.

Harry raised himself to all fours and slipped back into his bedroom.

"Harry!" Tonks shouted.

"Right here," Harry said from beside the bed.

"Oh, Merlin! What . . ." Her head came over the edge, highlighted by the bedside lamp. "You must have fallen out of bed and rolled under it. I couldn't find you."

Harry stood and sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his head. He needed a minute to feel safe again.

"Harry, what are you dreaming about?" Tonks asked.

"It's too hard to explain," Harry returned. A knock on the door saved him from trying to.

"Everything all right?" Candide's uncertain voice came into the room.

Harry insisted it was. Candide hesitated in the doorway adjusting her dressing gown. "Well, it is almost six," she said. "I'm going to ask Winky for breakfast if you want to join me. Maybe if I get an early start, I can get home early."

Chapter 14

Downstairs, at a bleary-eyed breakfast, Candide had turned business-like. She said to Harry, "I'm owling Severus today, to tell him you're having nightmares. What are you having nightmares about?"

"He won't say," Tonks filled in while Harry pondered an answer.

Defensive and annoyed now, Harry said, "They're just bad dreams. There's nothing to say."

After Candide departed, Harry said to Tonks, "I need some time to myself for once. Can I meet back up with you at your place in an hour or so?"

Tonks made a face but said, "Yeah. I could stand to clean my flat anyway."

Harry dressed quickly and while still standing in front of his wardrobe, he focussed on a good mental image of the Department of Mysteries. This time the Dark Plane sat in silence. No creatures approached this time because he had no emotion beyond determination.

The Department of Mysteries slid quietly into view. Harry looked around what his adult eyes identified as a workroom. Shelves and work areas alternated along one wall. Harry had a sense of being followed as he took a few steps. He spun, wand ready in the low light, to discover the tank full of tentacled brains. A tentacle rose, dripping, out of the glassy surface. Harry stepped back instinctively and had to turn fast again when he encountered a wheeled chair that creaked when he touched it.

With a huff at himself, Harry lowered his wand. Clearly, he was too jumpy. His personal history with this place aside, it was just another Ministry department. With calmer purpose, Harry walked around and studied the room, stopping when he spotted something familiar among the densely-packed storage shelves. Just sticking out of its felt casing was the half silver cane Harry had picked up at Merton's house. The familiarity of it among the mysterious and sometimes cursed clutter made him smile faintly.

On the far side of the room, Harry turned his head quickly, thinking he heard voices, even early on a Saturday. Cocking his head this way and that, he followed the sound beyond the higher shelves to a rear corridor. Harry hovered in the doorway to the work room and listened. Footsteps approached, making Harry duck fully back inside. Teacups rattled.

"Thank you," Cornelius Fudge's voice said. Then after a pause where footsteps retreated: "As I was saying, and I feel like I have to repeat myself too much of late because no one is listening, the enemy is among us and no one cares one whit about that."

Someone grunted. "I've been keeping an eye on things," Moody's voice said. "But I agree with you in general. There are wizards worth monitoring."

Harry's jaw clenched. At the sound of shuffling footsteps he ducked farther out of the doorway, prepared to slip away completely if need be.

Moody growled, "That room's setting my eye all atwitter, as usual. Perhaps we can meet over in my office?"

"No one can get in or out of this place," Fudge insisted.

"You have a lot of trust in the people who work for you," Moody commented lowly, criticizing.

Fudge retorted, "I am an excellent judge of character, Alastor. I don't keep people around me who are not absolutely loyal to me."

"No wonder he doesn't like me," Harry muttered under his breath.

"There are problems inside the Ministry," Moody said. "I have my suspicions about that fire that injured Felton, but I can't put my hands on sufficient evidence. I need a little more time. He is going to make a mistake one of these days that I can't overlook for the sake of his family history, and when he does I'll be right there to haul him into prison."

"If you are on about Potter, I have more pressing things to worry about. You said yourself, you talked him in to behaving himself."

Harry scrunched his face up to hear better.

" . . . I don't have time for these new investigations. Get someone else," Moody said.

"I've asked for more help. But for now you'll have to manage. I offered to assign you an assistant and not only did you flatly refuse you were inexcusably insulting about it." Objects were slid around inside the office. "This is what we're up against. A completely devilish infiltration. Look at this history text Hogwarts is using," Fudge said. "Published in Slovakia. What are we going to do next? Take Potions advice from the Spanish?"

Another grunt from Moody. "I think you and I have a different idea about what the enemy might be doing," he said tiredly.

"But it is all the same," Fudge said. The sound of chairs and books shifting around echoed in the still corridor. "All this foreign influence. Next thing you know magic

carpets will be legal again. Then after that foreigners will be moving into England ON them. And try to tell that to the Wizengamot, not to mention Amelia. They just refuse to see it, or Merlin forbid, welcome it. Thank Merlin you are here to help, Alastor, that you understand."

"I'll be keeping an eye on the things that really matter; let's just leave it at that."

Harry set his teeth again and slipped out of the room and back to his own bedroom so that he could Apparate from there, without suspicion, directly to Tonk's flat.

Tonks was drinking tea at the small table, hair wet and scented from a shower. She looked up at him. "How are you doing, Harry?" she asked as if they had not just been together most of the night.

Harry shrugged but since she sounded worried, he sat down beside her and said, "Everything's fine aside from a few bad dreams."

"If you want a distraction, you can shadow me on duty today."

Harry would not be bothered by that at all. "I'd like that."

Tonks sipped her tea. "You may be useful today. I have stake-out and it is usually boring as heck."

Hogwarts lay in a cloud-bank that roiled by between the hills, filling the gaps and pooling in the valleys. A persistent drizzle stained the walls and towers a gloomy slate grey. Students gathered on the soaked pitch for Ravenclaw Quidditch team selection trials. The stands surrounding the pitch faded in and out of view as they cut into the clouds. A few students hunkered in the stands to cheer on their friends, shaded under waterproof cloaks.

At the sound of claws on the tall, mullioned window, Snape raised his head and waved the lamps in the room up. The noise turned out to be his owl, Franklin. Snape removed the small, un-addressed missive from the owl's leg. It contained just three short lines.

Harry is having nightmares.

He will not discuss them with me.

He knows I am sending you this owl.

Snape gave no indication of surprise as he folded the letter into his pocket, only resignation.

McGonagall's meeting with Hermione had turned into a social call of sorts, the way most of them seemed to. McGonagall was just thinking that they would be more likely to stick to the agenda if she had Professor Snape present at these meetings when Snape himself appeared at the door. He stepped into the office, neck angled forward, hands loosely clasped before him in the shadows of his wide sleeves.

"I need to be absent this evening, possibly until tomorrow."

Treating the announcement as routine, McGonagall said, "Of course, Severus."

Hermione treated it otherwise. "What's the matter with Harry?" she sat straight to ask.

Snape ignored the outburst beyond a small flick of his eyelids. "I have already informed Remus."

McGonagall nodded. Hermione rose to her feet. "Is Harry all right?" she demanded.

Snape glared at her rather than reply, not in the mood to cater to her nosy penchant. "What makes you think this has anything to do with Harry?" he asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh," Hermione uttered and backed up. "Oh, well, I hope Candide is well, then." She twisted her face and said, "But it's Harry, isn't it?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "You may owl him and ask him about his nightmares yourself, Ms. Granger," he said impatiently.

Hermione rolled her eyes as well. "Nightmares?" She dropped back into her chair. "Harry has always had nightmares," she said dismissively. "But I'll owl him." She made just such a note on the top of the parchment before her, then raised her head as though a meeting would continue as before. With a glance at the two of them standing silent, she collected her papers together and departed with one glance back and her papers barely gathered together in her arms.

"Everything all right, Severus?" McGonagall asked, dropping the professional tone.

For a moment he teetered on the verge of simply departing with a grumble. Instead, he found the need to talk. "This is extraordinarily difficult, this finding the right balance between giving someone space to make mistakes and guiding them too closely."

"You are usually quite good at it. I would not want that role as Head of Slytherin House. It was hard enough with Gryffindor."

"This is different," he said. He tossed his head and paced once. "Or perhaps I am different. I do not know."

"I suspect the latter," she said soberly, but then gave a small smile.

Snape shook his stringy hair forward. "I fear if I try to rein him in, I will lose all influence over him, and I cannot risk that."

"I think you underestimate his feelings for you, Severus. Your low regard for the softer emotions makes you underestimate your position."

Snape considered that. He made a laughing scoff. "This is hardest thing I have ever done, this letting him make his own way with his growing powers when the stakes are so high. My influence is already slipping precariously."

McGonagall steepled her fingers, pressed them to her lips and them propped them before her on the broad desk. "Severus, if I may be so bold . . . I believe you are too accustomed to managing from a servile position. Harry is not Voldemort. Your roles are the reverse of how you are wont to view them."

"Ah, Minerva, you have come so far," the portrait of Dumbledore said proudly.

"You stay out of this," Snape said.

The portrait chuckled. Snape sighed. "I do not know when I will return," he admitted to the current headmistress.

McGonagall shifted things around on her desk, implying she wished to move onto other things. "Your presence here is appreciated, Severus, but not required." She stopped to stare him down fully. "Take as long as you need."

As Tonks had warned, the day was rather boring. She and Harry sat in the Leaky Cauldron for half the day, in a position where Tonks could watch the door, and patrolled various wizard business areas around the country for the rest of the day. By evening, Harry's feet hurt, but he hoped the walking and brisk air would help him sleep soundly.

Tonks followed Harry home to wait for his next assigned guard. They had not even settled at the table before Snape swept into the dining room from elsewhere in the house.

"I will take care of the guard duties for the night, Ms. Tonks," he said dismissively with a tiny hand gesture towards the hearth.

Tonks put her hands on her hips. "Do you have the next codeword?"

"No," Snape returned.

"Call Winky in here, so she can vouch for you, then I'll get out of your way."

When that was settled and Tonks had left, Snape re-emerged from the shadows beside the hearth and half-circled Harry. "What is in your dreams?" he asked while staring at a spot on the far wall rather than at Harry. He had a whiff of Hogwarts floating around him, which normally Harry would have found reassuring, but given his dreams, he did not.

"They are just some odd nightmares," Harry said, not wanting to discuss it. "They don't mean anything."

Snape gave his fingertips some attention before saying. "You have studies, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you go do them." It was not a question; it was an order.

Harry slipped by him into the main hall. With his hand on the bannister, he turned, feeling vaguely resentful. "You know, you should be keeping a better eye on Candide," he criticized. "She's working far too hard."

Snape snapped his finger in the direction of the balcony. "Your studies," he repeated, trailing out the "s" at the end.

Harry ducked his head and went upstairs to fetch his books. But when he arrived there he sat on the edge of his bed and sorted them instead, reviewing things he already knew. Flipping through one of the regulations pamphlets made him appreciate how much better he remembered things now than he used to. He was probably as sharp as Hermione was when he first met her and felt such awe in her ability to pack information into her brain.

Harry tried to come up with the will to start the next chapter in a book on dark wizard psychology, normally a welcome topic, but this author rendered it down into long latin words and boring tables of numbers. A soft knuckle-rap sounded on the doorframe.

"I'm studying," Harry insisted.

"I can see that," Snape said gently. "Is there anything you wish to talk about?"

Harry stared at the column of numbers before him showing the percent of magical British folk involved in various kinds of dark wizardry and the frequency with which they engaged in it. Most only tried it once, or so it appeared. He thought about Belinda, hoping whatever she had been involved in, she was out of now. He thought about Elizabeth and wished his vault still seemed limitless so he could help her more. He thought about Tonks, who was more than willing to give him a little space . . . he just needed to ask for it.

Harry shook his head.

A voice came from farther down the balcony. "Severus, if I'd known you were home, I'd have left earlier. The client insisted on ordering dinner in for us all." She stepped into view and gave Snape a hug.

Harry turned the page where the next chapter, Dark Magic Recidivism, began.

"Long day. I'm turning in," Candide said through a yawn and made her good nights.

When they were alone, Harry asked, "Do you have any potion I could use? The ingredients have thinned out here I noticed the other night."

"If your dreams are so minor, then you do not require any potion," Snape stated slowly. He sounded calculating.

Harry stared at him now, rather than dividing his attention with his book. He tried to gauge him and failed at it. His dreams and his vaguely tired mind were in the way of deciding how to take that last statement, so he gave up on doing so. "I'm studying," he insisted, and bent back to his book until the doorway emptied of its visitor.

Author's Notes:
I am, of course, continuing to write. Tomorrow I'm leaving for the south of India for a month. I'm not sure what kind of impact that is going to have on my output. Could go either way... I'll keep updating the progress bars on my homepage, accessible from the author info link on this site. Next chapter the fun stuff begins again!

Chapter 15.

What May Dreams

"You weren't a little brusque with Harry, were you?" Candide asked when Snape arrived in the room and had closed the door.

"If he indicates he wants help, I will provide it. I fear he will shut me out if I force it upon him."

"I don't know about that," Candide countered, but she declined to back it up with more argument. "You know; I make more than you anyhow. You could just stay home and keep an eye on him all the time."

"I . . ." He stopped and regrouped. "You are going to want to stay home with the child for the first year at least, aren't you?"

"A year?" she sounded shocked by the notion. "Well, a while, yes. I haven't thought about how long." They both fell silently into their own thoughts. "But you could be home to be his guard all the time, then."

"I did not imagine they would not have found the culprit by now. Which reminds me that I wished to owl Arthur to ask about the progress on the investigation." He pulled a small sheet of parchment and a quill from the night stand and jotted down his question, bluntly, feeling no need for pleasantries. Franklin responded to a faint whistle from down in the drawing room, where his perch had been moved, and the message was soon off.

Snape returned to sitting on the edge of the bed and made no move to prepare for sleep.

Chapter 15

"Severus?" Candide prompted upon noticing Snape still in his lecture robes.

"You have no sense of what his nightmares entail?" he asked.

"No. And his usual guard, Hornisham, said they woke him several times a night. I wouldn't expect him to talk to me or her about it. But he wouldn't open up to Tonks either."

"She would be the last person he would tell. He has a touch of hero worship for her."

Candide sat up, keeping the covers wrapped around her in the cooling air. "Harry has what?" she asked with a laugh.

"It has faded somewhat, but I think it is still there."

Candide said, "Well, that would explain a few things. They aren't quite right for each other, but Harry is persistent, even in the face of problems he cannot solve."

"That particular trait comes from a life of fighting evil far greater than himself."

When Snape still failed to move after many more minutes, Candide asked, "What are you thinking about?"

At her question Snape leaned over to look for something in the bedside table drawer. "Something Minerva said." He found what he was looking for, the baby monitor, and stood while tossing it once lightly in the air and catching it. "Perhaps I will put her wisdom to the test."

Harry sat propped up with his pillows, reading from his lap when Snape knocked and entered. He strode over and placed the glass half dome down on the night stand and held his hand on it for longer than necessary. Harry watched this, but turned back to his book without objecting. Snape even hesitated longer beside the bed to hear any complaints, noticing during that time that Harry had not only outgrown his pyjamas but that they had been expanded at least twice with a spell to make them fit. He could tell this because the neat stripes were strangely akilter at the shoulders and around the neck. They were just one of many things Harry had outgrown. He could easily be on his own, Snape considered, not for the first time. The thought chilled Snape; it would be impossible to keep a proper eye on him then.

"Well, good night," Snape intoned. "If you do need to talk, do not hesitate to wake me." This was a command.

Harry raised his head slightly. "I wouldn't want to disturb Candide."

"She'll understand."

Harry shrugged. “All right,” he conceded stiffly.

Harry turned down the lamp wick soon after he was left alone, and he was glad to be alone for once. He flipped to his other side, trying not to worry about the dreams that may or may not come. The glass dome glowed and flickered faintly, watching and waiting.

Harry rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The headlamps of a passing car wavered overhead. He did not want to sleep; he wanted to talk. He wanted to know where these odd dreams were coming from. Harry exhaled loudly; maybe the dreams would leave him alone tonight.

Harry was back in the dungeon, some dungeon; it wasn’t one he recognized. His body was shutting down from pain through his midsection that kept him from breathing properly. Someone moved on the far side of the room. Harry did not want to look up and find out who it was. Footsteps approached and a hand grabbed hold of his hair. Forced to see his tormentor, Harry met the cold, bright gaze of Lucius Malfoy.

“I put you away,” Harry said, confused.

The man laughed. “I don’t feel very put away, Mr. Potter. It is, in fact, you who are incarcerated at this moment.”

Harry glanced around. The very stones of the place held the stagnant aroma of desperation. “Where is this?”

“Must we go over that again?” Malfoy huffed. “You are in my personal dungeon. Awaiting my master, who will be most pleased to see you, I’m sure.” He began to pace and missed Harry rubbing at his scar, which was silent. “I wish to move up in the organization,” Malfoy went on, happy to talk about himself. “And I can do it by handing over you. It would be a pleasure to do so even absent reward.”

“You’re not handing me over to anyone,” Harry said.

“You are very tiresome, Mr. Potter,” Malfoy complained and raised his wand.

Harry slipped away and after struggling to stand and fend off the creatures attracted to the blood on his clothing, found the strength to slip home again.

Harry came to awareness on a gritty, warped and split floor. He raised his head and took in the half-destroyed main hall of the house. He had missed; he was not home. With substantial effort against unknown injury to his gut, Harry pushed himself to his knees and sat panting in the gloom to think desperately of what to do next. A sound interrupted Harry’s panicked thoughts. He turned and found a small glowing

thing approaching along the floor. Harry tried to stand, but could not manage it; he was too spent. The approaching figure hesitated and looked up at him with broad, transparent eyes. It was the ghost of small child, perhaps one year old, and it gurgled at him and put up a hand before putting it back down and crawling faster toward him an inch above the floor, leaving the dust undisturbed.

A hand contacted Harry's shoulder, making him jerk and roll to face whatever it was. He snapped awake and, after finding his bedside lamp glaring in his eyes, attempted to roll back on his front and pull his pillow thoroughly over his head. But the light duvet was too tangled around him to even get both arms free. A figure rose up and bent over him and, with strong hands, tugged on the covers binding him. Harry, vexed at treatment better suited to someone much younger, nevertheless lay still until he was freed, because struggling was only drawing the process out longer. He rolled away while the duvet was carefully straightened over him and punched his pillow a few times for good measure.

The now cocooning bedcovers eased Harry's energized nerves. He breathed in and out through the familiar scent of his pillow.

"Harry," the expected voice finally came.

Harry grunted a reply but did not move. The bed shifted, indicating that Snape had stood. Harry did not imagine he would give up that easily and, indeed, Snape had not. Kali's cage twanged open and Harry felt her escaping those confines, only to be wrapped up more thoroughly in Snape's hands.

Snape returned to sitting on the edge of the bed with Harry's pet pressed into the crook of his shoulder. The animal had not been sleeping any better than her master, so she happily burrowed into the warmth. Snape ran his knuckles over her furred back and her wings went slack. Harry fell slack too, more deeply into his pillow, pressed there by the connection with his pet.

"What are you dreaming?" came after many quiet minutes.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Snape continued stroking the Chimrian's fur. "I insist," he said. When Harry did not reply, he said, "What was in the dream that you were having just now?"

Harry sighed and rolled over to sit up. He really did not wish to discuss that one. If the child were in this house, then it would have been Snape's child, killed about the age Harry himself had been attacked by Voldemort the first time.

"I was dreaming that I was in the wrong place. And I couldn't escape. Well, I could escape, but only to a place worse than the last. I couldn't find my way home." Harry hoped that answer satisfied his guardian.

Snape stated, "You need not worry about getting lost if you do not leave."

Harry thought over his dreams of the last few nights. "Do you think it's possible I'm seeing other Planes for real in my nightmares?"

"I doubt it."

Harry frowned and rubbed his hands over his scalp. His eyes were sore and it was late, too late to be awake let alone debating such things. "Where are these bad nightmares coming from, then?" he asked.

"Your subconscious, presumably." Snape adjusted Kali down into the crook of his elbow, and folded her wings back. The creature chirped in minor protest but stayed put. "Since you refuse to tell me the contents of them I can not help you with explaining their meaning."

"They seem like other places. Real places," Harry said.

"And they may very well be," Snape said. At Harry's confused expression, Snape explained, "Since every possibility you could imagine could indeed have a Plane of its own, there is no distinction between your imagining something and its existence."

Harry stared at him as he took that in. The lamp flame cast a chiseling light on Snape's features. Snape gave him a little time, then added, "I do not think the other Planes are the germination of your dreams."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know. It is simply more power than I can imagine you having."

Harry snorted faintly. "I don't have that much power. One of my dreams is of Rodgers relentlessly putting me on the floor like he does during training every day, nearly, in the furtherance of building up our spell capacity."

Kali tried to climb out of Snape's grasp so he handed her over to Harry, who let her make her way to his shoulder where she stretched and groomed her scarred wings.

"There is more than one kind of power," Snape pointed out. "How well one does recreating the preponderance of prescribed spells that untold witches and wizards have invented over these last hundreds of years is only one kind, and it is the least interesting kind. Spells for object repair, Muggle befuddlement, and even self-stirring cauldrons aside, the vast majority of Ministry-approved spells are pointless as well as outdated. And any magical person with a wand can do them provided they are coached long enough. That is precisely what Hogwarts was set up to accomplish –

rigid standardization of magic. We make a lot of noise about promoting and nurturing magic, but in reality it is enforced mediocrity."

"But it makes magical people safe-" Harry began.

"Yes. It does that, by providing a structured outlet for magical power that may, if given time left to its own devices, create a more interesting one of its own. How many people do you know who travel in and out of the underworld?" He answered his own question, as if to drive the point home. "Yourself, one shaman that we know of . . ."

"Vampires can," Harry said.

"Yes. Because they wield old magic . . . raw, pre-historic magic. Raw energy transformed and molded at will. The fabric of reality itself parted and twisted to your wishes. That is what has changed your eyes. I suspect most handed that power would be destroyed by it. You channeled powerful raw magic as an infant and it was that occasion I believe which has made you an able vessel for it." He had been leaning forward to urge his point across, but now clasped his hands and rocked back. "This formulaic magic the rest of us do is dwarfed by what you are capable of if you work out how to put it to functional use." His gaze shifted to the unlit lamp on the near side of the bed. "You slip between possibilities of fate the way others enter a vault at Gringotts. I watched you carve the very magic out of someone. What greater powers do you want?"

"Lockhart was already damaged. His magic was loose," Harry said, trying to excuse what he had done.

"But you could do it again," Snape stated as an invitation that forced a denial or confirmation.

Harry thought that over. Kali circled his neck, pricking him. He plucked her down to the bedcovers without a glance and held her there. "Probably," he said because he couldn't imagine what might stop him from succeeding.

"There is no greater power in the realm of magic, in my opinion. Death is easy to bring about and requires no magic. But rendering someone unmagical is something else entirely."

"Rodgers can put me on the floor at will," Harry complained.

"For now, that is. And you can negate his curses later in a manner only the most accomplished Healer can."

"I suppose," Harry said, still doubtful.

Snape watched him for a minute as he wrangled his pet, who was keen on taking flight back to her cage now. As if pre-judging Harry's ongoing thoughts, he said, "Voldemort was very good at maximizing the spells he found, at pushing the edge of what a spell could do – generally the dark edge of it. But he needed the spell to start with and was constantly hunting for forgotten ones. You, on the other hand, do not even need an existing spell as germination. You have an instinct for detecting and shaping the raw energies of magic that is extremely rare, and it classifies you with sorcerers. Your trainer, in a fight with no rules, would stand no chance against you."

"I wouldn't do that to him, though, like I did to Voldemort."

"It does not matter."

"Yes, it does," Harry argued. "I'm an Auror; I'm supposed to fight fair."

"Then work out a way to use your instinctive power to do that. Can your trainer block a Forbidden Curse?"

"No, of course not."

Snape tilted his head with an expression of see?

"You're saying I can work out more ways of using . . . non-formulaic magic against formulaic magic."

"I don't see any reason why you cannot. Working without a guide, it may take some careful experimentation to figure out how. I emphasize careful."

"Why are you telling me this?" Harry asked. "Usually you want me to limit what I'm attempting."

More resigned, Snape said, "I do not know the source of your nightmares and the only one you would relate involved what I can only interpret as a fear of being bested. Are the others like that?"

Harry thought about his answer before shaking his head. "A bit, but not exactly."

"What do they involve, would you say?"

"Er, getting myself into trouble with these raw powers."

Snape stood and shook his dressing gown straight. "I am not troubled by your fearing that," he said adamantly. He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Something more you wish to discuss?"

Harry's eyes felt like lead. "No. Thanks though."

Chapter 15

Snape departed and Harry released his pet to fly back to her cage, but as soon as she was free, she clambered back up his chest. He clutched her close so she would not claw him when he moved suddenly, and fell back onto his pillow.

Harry slept eventually and more dreams flowed by, murky and anxious, and in the morning, his body resisted waking up and he only went down to breakfast because he was ordered to.

"You can retire early, or nap later even, but come down now," Snape said from the doorway.

Harry suppressed a flush of embarrassment at Candide's sympathetic smile when he arrived at the table. He quickly picked up the Sunday Prophet and flipped it open as a barricade.

An article caught his eye about the Goblins threatening exactly what he had overheard Tonks mention: that increased security may be necessary and everyone should be prepared to be subjected to it next time they wish to visit their vault. The bank security staff may institute a gauntlet of anti-illusory spells and forced potion antidote consumption should a customer be deemed to be behaving suspiciously or has set off the nose of the bank's newly trained bloodhound rats. The new procedures are expected to result in an additional two hour delay in servicing vault access requests.

The interviewed Goblin stated that these procedures were necessary to sort out those being cheated by others from those seeking to cheat the bank directly. The article went on to say that lines at the bank were expected to be extremely long Monday morning as witches and wizards attempted to set themselves up ahead of any increased inconveniences.

The next article, buried under a column of adverts showing the latest mufflers and muffs for winter, also peaked Harry's interest. It read simply: Ministry Totem and Potion Technician G. Felton is still recovering in hospital from injuries sustained in an unspecified magical accident at his home. The Minister for Magic today stated that the Crack Magical Reversal Squad dispatched was successful in keeping the suspicious nature of the fire secret from the Muggle authorities despite the large amount of damage caused.

Harry's mind harkened back to the wet ground and flashing lights of the scene that night, feeling a small rush at knowing he was finally getting to be part of what transpired in the official magical world. He put the paper down and Snape asked, "How was your sleep the remainder of the night?"

Harry shrugged. In his peripheral vision he could see the two of them sharing a meaningful look and found himself chafing under its implication. He ate breakfast quickly and excused himself to do his readings.

The morning dragged by slowly. Harry continually thought of places he would rather be, like visiting his friends, but he would need to arrange a guard to follow him and at the moment, he could pretend he did not have a guard at all.

He sent Hedwig off to Elizabeth with a letter and told her that she could use his owl for the day if she needed to send some post. Harry wished he could do more; his friend's situation irked him whenever his mind wandered over to thoughts of it. If he only had more gold.

Harry's thoughts wandered off from the magical weather book open before him and back in time to when Lord Freelander offered to cover any expenses Harry may incur in his apprenticeship. If Harry had taken Freelander up as a patron, he would perhaps have enough money now to help out Elizabeth, at least until she could arrange for loans. He supposed that he could still go to Freelander now and ask, as hard as that would be on his pride.

Harry put his book down and dug into his trunk for some of his good stationery. But as he leaned over to write out a letter in the neatest hand possible, he decided to ask simply for a chance to speak to him about some unspecified assistance, with the notion that once he was standing before the wealthy wizard, the man would have a more difficult time saying no.

Harry had to make an envelope out of another sheet of stationery because there were none nice enough that matched. He then borrowed Candide's company owl, with the stipulation that it follow her to the office because she was to spend the afternoon there and would need him.

Harry took the weather book downstairs and out to the back garden. He had never really thought about different shapes and altitudes of clouds before and what that might mean regarding what the cloud would do. Outside, the sky was a ubiquitous grey and clouds did not so much have shape as represent a layer looming over the world. Harry paged through the illustrations, but did not see any resemblance to what he saw above him now. The breeze fluttered the page corners as he flipped them. The first diagram was the most interesting, it showed an great anvil shape with angled columns of lightning and hail ejecting from it. The sky did not contain anything this threatening, or if it did, it was hidden.

Sirius' bike leaned forlornly against the garden wall under a tarpaulin. Harry tucked the book away under his arm and went over to clear the newly grown ivy off it, thinking that he did not get out nearly often enough on it. Pale green vines had grown through the spokes of the wheels. Harry tugged them free, noticing for the

first time an emblem on the wheel hub. It was inlaid glass in the shape of a goldfinch in flight and even on such a cloudy day it caught the light and glittered. Harry tugged the tarpaulin back over, secured it, and went back inside.

Harry opened his book again at the dining room table in hopes of lunch, which arrived when Snape and Candide did. Despite his continuing low-level embarrassment, Harry savored the feel of all three of them together.

Candide repeatedly checked the clock before topping her plate up from the heaping plates provided. She and Snape debated minor household issues in a casual manner, very unlike the Dursleys. Harry picked his book back out of his pocket and flipped it open, partly to demonstrate that he really did spend all his time reading.

The book fell open to the page with the sky-anvil. According to the text, the Goblin wars were the primary impetus for the development of weather curses involving hail and tornados. Trouble was, directing the storm at the enemy was not a certainty and surrounding areas or even one's own side were often the victim. Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned, wishing he had slept better. He wondered about the goldfinch emblem and whether it was the symbol of the bike's maker. Harry also wondered that he had never noticed it before.

Candide stood hurriedly before lunch was finished, Accioed her cloak from the entry-way, and gathered her things from beside the hearth.

"I'll remain another night," Snape said in reply to a question from her, making Harry glance up again.

Candide smiled at this news and insisted she would only be absent a few hours, at most.

Harry put the book aside and stared at his lunch, at the chunks of bread soaking into the dark gravy. It was the oddest thing, Winky had never served yesterday's joint up quite like this before. It was such a small thing, but it loomed large in his sleepy brain.

Snape moved to the window to collect post from an owl, blocking the grey light for a moment before he reclosed the sash and moved away again. With a slash of a short knife from the mantel, he opened the envelope, then paced slowly to read it. Harry watched him do this with a dull, but building sense of unease. Snape stopped before the mantel and rested his letter-laden hand upon it and continued to read with his other hand propped on his hip.

Snape looked normal enough. Harry recognized the robes he was wearing with their minimalist decorative stitching on the sleeve and down the back. Snape folded the

letter and took the seat across from Harry, the one Candide had just vacated. Harry felt cold and empty and unable to cope with the notion that was taking hold of him.

He stared at Snape while his guardian tucked the letter away in his pocket and, finally noting Harry's attention, stared back. Harry consciously breathed in, glanced around the room, then back at Snape, who now had the slightest rise to one brow.

"What if I'm not in the right place?" Harry asked because it was ready to burst out of him, not because it was the wisest thing to say at that moment.

"You are in the right place," Snape said with a quiet confidence that indicated he was ready and waiting to say it.

Harry opened his mouth but required a second attempt to form his thoughts before saying, "You've already thought of this."

Snape dropped his gaze and sat back, eyes hooded. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry demanded, quickly getting upset. He propped his hands on the table, as though ready to launch himself somewhere.

"And distress you in this manner? Whatever for?"

Harry pulled his hands back. "I . . ." He swallowed hard.

Snape said, "I do truly believe you are in the right place."

"Of course you would think that," Harry said without really thinking it through.

"Why would I think that?" Snape challenged.

"Well . . ." But Harry did not have a good reason; it was just gut instinct made him say that. Many little things in the last week now looked off in retrospect. His heart rate sped up as his mind latched onto each in turn.

Snape sat back more comfortably, in contrast to Harry's elevating anxiety, and said, "Do you want to know why I think you are in the right place?"

"Yes, please," Harry said, desperately wanting to be certain when he was so much the opposite that he felt almost paralyzed.

"For starters, I don't believe there can be too many of you with this skill. Yes, there are other Harry Potters, an infinite number of them in fact, but how many of them can do as you do, that is, jump between Planes?"

Harry had not considered that. "I . . . I don't know," he said, soothed simply by Snape's attentive effort at explaining.

"I expect not many," Snape answered his own question. "A handful perhaps at most. As well, how many would just happened to have left and returned home at exactly the same time as you did?"

"Oh," Harry said, starting to understand. "You're saying . . . that if I am in the wrong place that another Harry had to have left this place and gone to the wrong place, my place and not returned, so that I've taken his place?" Even to Harry that sounded quite the string of long odds.

"That is precisely what I am saying," Snape intoned, sounding pleased. He waited patiently while Harry thought that over. A minute later he said, "I have another . . . point to make in this regard."

Harry met his gaze and found nothing strange in it, just Snape, as he understood and expected him to be. "What's that?" Harry asked.

"Before being poisoned and accidentally meeting with Headmaster Voldemort, you were not worried that you were in the wrong place, correct? You felt that you were at home?"

"Well, yes, of course," Harry said, uncertain where this was leading.

"But you had left and returned from another Plane once previous to that escapade."

Harry's flesh solidified on his arms in a wave of nervous energy and he held his breath. "That's right. I did," he agreed, remembering his visit to Weaver's End.

Snape hesitated, but finally said, "I did not intend to alarm you with that revelation. I just wished you to recognize that you returned home safely on that occasion as well."

Harry gave that due consideration. He thought about all the things he had done after that in complete ignorance of the possibility that he could be in the wrong world.

"Do you think you returned to the wrong place that time, as well as this most recent time?" Snape asked, with just the faintest, barest whiff of snide.

"No," Harry managed, still thinking things over. "I hadn't thought of it at all. Nothing strange happened to make me wonder. There's been some strange stuff since . . ."

"If you look for anomalies you are guaranteed to find them. But what caused you to think of it this time?"

Harry gestured at his plate. "The joint was reheated."

"Winky is doing that for Candide. Warm food is more healthful," Snape stated.

Harry stared at the meat juice pooling on his plate, solidifying at the edges into white fat. "Oh." A smile flickered over Snape's lips, prompting Harry to demand, "You think that's funny?"

"I am not by any means amused by your distress. I find it amusing that such a grand philosophical uncertainty about one's very existence could be triggered by a warm plate of food." He uncrossed his arms and sat forward slightly. "I will happily sit here as long as necessary to convince you of my certainty."

Harry bit his lip and stared out at the main hall. "You realized I may be the wrong Harry and you didn't do anything?" he demanded.

"I realized the possibility and quickly dismissed it. I was certain that I had the right one back. That is all."

"And you didn't say anything," Harry repeated more forcefully.

"No," Snape agreed.

Harry frowned at the room in general. "Anything else you aren't telling me?" Harry asked sharply.

Snape matched Harry's challenging glare. "Several things. In good time I will, perhaps, tell you what they are."

"What?" Harry asked a little smartly. "When I am old enough to hear them?"

"Age has little to do with it."

"You're reminding me of Dumbledore," Harry criticized, crossing his arms and sitting back. But he could not hold onto his annoyance; the realization that Snape had left him here, alone with his pregnant wife, kept seeping in and melting his peevishness. Snape absolutely would not have done that if he harbored any doubts.

"What if I am not in the right place, though?" Harry quietly asked again. "What if?"

"If you cannot tell the difference, does it matter?"

"Of course it matters," Harry retorted. "I want to be home."

"If you cannot tell the difference, it IS home."

Harry rocked forward and gestured with his arms. "But, what if something is different that I just don't happen to know about?"

Snape smirked lightly. "You and Schrödinger," he quipped.

Harry huffed and dropped his head. He pushed his now cold plate an inch forward and it sparkled away.

"I wish you to feel secure with where you are," Snape said. "And I reiterate: if you do not wish to wonder if you have returned home, do not leave again."

"I hadn't planned on leaving again. I didn't plan on leaving in the first place."

Harry stubbornly argued further, but eventually grudgingly accepted that he could do nothing that evening about his situation, even if he did decide that things were askew. If he took off in search of a more rightful place, he could easily end up in far less desirable quarters; that he was certain of.

Harry sat in the library, looking through one of the heavier law books for past rulings on weather manipulation. Partly he was curious if he went out and tried some of those spells, would he get into trouble for it. He thought it better to research it himself rather than ask their trainer directly. When Snape came to the door, Harry had lost himself in this task and found it wearisome to return to his earlier anxious state. It was far easier to accept that this was home unless he encountered something truly, hopelessly amiss.

"How are you doing?" Snape gently asked.

"Fine. I wish you hadn't asked."

"Not like me to do so?" Snape airily returned.

"Something like that."

Lips slightly curled, but with a far more Slytherin smile in his eyes, Snape sat on the leather divan. "I was going to ask if there was anything I could do, but I see now that it would be best to be miserable to you so that you feel better."

Funny thing was, every time Snape spoke so calmly about the possibility that he may be in the wrong place, it did make Harry feel better. Harry said, "So, you think most of the other Planes are worse ones? Why?"

"Law of averages. You believe things worked out well for you, do you not?"

"I'm not dead, true," Harry agreed, thinking of his last trip to another Plane where he had not even survived his first full year at Hogwarts.

Snape considered him in depth before saying, "That is your primary criteria for whether your life is working out for you?"

Harry shrugged faintly, then laughed lightly. "This is my life, what could I have changed about it?" He frowned and amended, "I mean, there were some mistakes I could have avoided . . ."

"It is not just your actions that would invoke change," Snape said, intent on interrupting. "It is everyone else's coupled with random chance falling a different way. Cascading differences. Interacting cascades of differences, even."

"So, are you saying that because this place is so close to what I expect, that is has to be the right place?"

Snape shook his head. "I am tempted to lie and say "yes," but I won't. There are as likely to be Planes with just a single incidental difference from what you are expecting as there are to be Planes where nothing is the same, where you and I and even Hogwarts do not even exist."

Harry scratched his head and thought aloud: "I wouldn't be able to get to those places, because I wouldn't have anything to focus on."

Snape clapped his hands down on the divan and stood up. "I do not want to urge you to explore, so I am going to leave that point un-addressed." He stood with his hair hanging forward, looking at Harry. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Harry put aside the book he had out. "Maybe we can work on a few spells. I want to try what you said."

Snape's hair fell farther forward as he nodded.

Harry quickly hovered the main hall furniture to the side and took up a position before the front wall, as far from the windows as possible. He held his wand out, but then lowered it. "Can you cast a spell with very little force on it?" he asked his guardian as he took up an opposing position as though to duel.

Snape raised his wand and Harry held his down. "If you are going to leave yourself undefended, then that is all I can do," Snape said. He cast a heat charm at Harry.

Harry felt the spell brush him like a passing sunbeam, then fade. The counter would be so easy through the wand, but how else could he possibly negate it? "How should I do this?" he asked.

"I do not know," Snape said, "How do you block Forbidden Curses?"

"That's easy," Harry said, not noticing Snape's amused reaction to his flippancy. "Those come from the Dark Plane. They open a crack into the underworld. That I

can control. I can shut it, even from a distance like this. But a charm, where does that come from?"

"Where does any magic come from?" Snape rhetorically asked.

"Charms don't feel like anything," Harry went on. "Curses I can feel but I can't do anything about the ones that aren't truly dark magic. At least I don't know how."

Snape aimed his wand again. "We'll work with curses then for the moment." He cast a very weak Blasting Curse at Harry, so weak it merely ruffled his robes.

Harry felt the curse being generated but it came from nowhere in particular, just ballooned into being. He felt it ripple around him, both as a force of movement and as a force of magic but the two were hard to separate. "Can you cast something that doesn't flow like that one, so I can sort out what is the magic and what is the result of it?"

Snape angled his head in a kind of nod. "A Ice Spear Curse, perhaps?"

Harry could feel this one two ways more clearly, but that did not help him sort out what to do about it. He signaled for Snape to recast it several times then held up his hand because he was nearly shivering. "This is like learning Legilimency again," he complained. He rubbed his arms vigorously. "You don't know any heating curses, do you?"

Dryly, Snape replied, "There is a sunburn curse, but it will damage your eyes if used repeatedly."

"How about some other one then."

Alternating various weak spells, they worked at it for an hour or so, until Harry was bored with trying. "My readings are starting to sound good again," he said. "I'll try to work out something during drills, while also countering the normal way."

Ginny and Ron came for dinner that evening. They did not expect Snape to still be at home, and Harry had not owled to tell them otherwise. Conversation at the table was a little subdued as a result. Snape himself broke one of the lulls with: "So, Ms. Weasley, still intending to become an Auror?"

"Yes," Ginny replied primly. "I will apply again next year." The way she stated this implied she expected an argument.

"Perhaps you should regularly get together for drills with Harry, in that case," Snape said. "He roped me into it this afternoon." He spoke with an coldly factual edge that led Harry to conclude he was up to something.

Ginny's face brightened. "I'd love to get more practice. My brothers either pull their spells to avoid hurting me, or use some difficult and painful spell I don't know to get me to want to quit."

"Drills are just supposed to be easy, repeated practice," Harry said, "so that you can react on instinct for the basic attacks and counters."

"I'd love to get a chance to work on spells with you."

"Get assigned as my guard in the evenings when Tonks is on duty," Harry said. "Someone has to be here anyway. Point out to your dad that if he ends up with Vespera as a daughter-in-law, he will need an Auror in the family."

"Yeah, good idea. I'll ask dad to do that. I've been trying to work my way through the books your fellow apprentice, Aaron, recommended, but Ron usually insists we do something fun instead." She sounded criticizing, prompting Ron to say, "It's not like you make a fuss when I do that."

"I need someone around the house who is also swotting," Ginny complained moodily.

"I need a guard who is more fun than Hornisham from Control of Magical Creatures," Harry said, thinking having his friends as guards regularly may make this rule more livable since there was no sign of it being lifted in the near future.

After his friends had departed, Harry turned on his guardian. "What was that about?"

Snape, raised an innocent brow. "What?"

"Contriving to have Ginny over for regular spell practice."

Snape sipped his sherry and stated, "I thought you wished to work additionally on your alternative curse counter. A great deal of trial and error will be required to work out a method, assuming you can manage it at all."

Harry set his jaw, but did not accuse him further. He suspected Snape of preferring he be in a relationship with Ginny rather than Tonks. But Snape was playing ignorant and he would not budge from that position once he was in it.

That night, Harry slept without waking from any bad dreams. Snape, doubting the monitor, went to check on him directly, just before dawn, and found him soundly slumbering with the covers undisturbed. A few hours later, Snape prodded Harry awake.

"Huh?" Harry grunted, raising his head out of the delicious depths of his pillow.

Chapter 15

"Since you are doing all right, I was thinking of returning to Hogwarts this morning. Breakfast in the Great Hall is in just a quarter hour."

Harry cleared his throat and pushed himself to a sitting position. "Yeah," he muttered, still waking up. "If you need to go back. I'm fine." Indeed, he had slept through the night for the first time in a week. He studied Snape, studying him back. "I mean, it's not like we don't prefer having you around."

"Hm," Snape muttered.

"Look at Candide's reaction when she found you home," Harry pointed out.

Snape straightened. "I've been meaning to talk to her about that."

Harry punched him on the leg. "Severus," he chastised him, despite suspecting him of making a joke. "You should be taking better care of her."

"She insists all is well," Snape said, clearly closing the topic.

"She works far too hard. And it's only getting worse. You need to tell her to cut back."

"I have done so," Snape informed him. "She is rather conscientious about doing her job well, for which I commend her, even as tedious as I would personally find her activities to be."

"As opposed to brewing, which is just about the same level of excitement."

"Accounting forms rarely blow up in your face and burn your house down," Snape drolly pointed out. "And you will note, I am rarely called to brew any longer."

"Maybe that explains your newly sunny disposition."

"You are being sarcastic, I assume," Snape stated. "Are you meaning to imply that I have been exceptionally unsunny?"

"No . . ." Harry rubbed his chin. "I don't know."

Snape huffed. "How many times in your life have you found things to be different than you believed them to be . . . found that you were mistaken about some major object or fact?"

"Loads of times," Harry admitted.

"You will drive yourself mad if you continually assume the worst about ones you encounter from here on out."

Harry decided to let the topic drop. "Are you going to be home next weekend again?"

"If you wish me to be," Snape said.

Harry was torn badly between an instinct for independence and strong liking of the times when they were all home together. It felt childish to insist Snape return so soon. Instead, he said, "Halloween is coming up soon. You'll have to be at school for that because it's always chaos." He then added: "I need to plan a party."

"A small party. Too difficult to guard you at a large one."

Harry clasped his hands together. "That's one nice thing about you being home: I can pretend my life is normal. On that note, who's replacing you?"

"Ms. Tonks is downstairs, waiting."

Parts of Harry, hitherto asleep, woke up with a wash of tingles. Harry, thoughts well Occluded, said merely, "Okay, " with what he was proud to believe was not the slightest hint of what use he intended to put the short time to before heading into the Ministry.

Snape started to leave, but paused to say: "Half of what your trainer has over you is psychological. Cease to let him have that easy advantage and I suspect you will do better against him."

"I don't think it's that. He really is . . ." Harry began.

Snape lifted a finger toward Harry's nose and said, "See. That precisely."

"I'll try."

Harry did try, but not with much visible success. That week during demonstrations and drills opposite his trainer, he felt he was battling himself as well as the spells. Trying to battle the assumption that he would get beat was a distraction from actually trying to beat him. But his trainer became less grudging with his scant praise, so perhaps Harry was progressing, he thought, as he nursed his always sore wand elbow and returned to his seat.

It was mid-week and Harry had another distraction that day; he had an appointment with Lord Freelander and he still had not figured out exactly how to approach the man, what arguments to use, or even what to say. At the end of the day, Aaron was assigned as his guard, which Harry was pleased by because given his bearing he would make a better-than-average impression on Harry's hoped-for patron.

"I need to run an errand this afternoon; if you don't mind," Harry said to his fellow as they were packing up their things.

Chapter 15

"Somewhere we can Apparate to, or will this be shanks mare?" Aaron asked in the attitude of a polite butler with a funny accent.

"We can Apparate," Harry assured him, smiling at his fellow's antics.

With Harry handling the traveling, they arrived a moment later at the base of the drive leading to the Freelander estate.

"Ah," Aaron said. "I've been here. Been a long while, though."

"I was here just once, at night for a dinner party; wasn't sure I could find it in the daytime," Harry said, making conversation as they walked between the stone posts and up the gently curving, white gravel path.

"Lawn bowling party, I think it was last," Aaron said in a bored tone that came out haughty. "Must have been, well, ten years ago; I was still in Hogwarts. That was back when my mother attended more than she hosted." He turned a circle as he walked, taking in the grounds. "Amazing to think, no one to inherit all this."

Harry decided to keep to himself the fact that he himself could have.

The butler promptly escorted them in and Aaron agreed to wait in the entry hall for Harry to return. Harry followed the slightly stooped and squinting butler through several shuttered rooms into one flooded with light.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, do come in," Freelander said. He used his cane to rise from a small, white baroque desk and came around to where a pair of long blue couches dominated the floor, surrounded by an army of chairs. He gestured for Harry to take a tall chair whose cushion turned out to be softer than it appeared.

Freelander sat on a couch and set his cane aside. "Well, I expected this visit to have come a year ago, if it was going to occur at all. But, my offer of assistance was open ended and still stands, of course." He gazed at Harry frankly as he asked, "So, what can I do for you?"

"It isn't actually for me, the assistance isn't," Harry awkwardly began. "What I'm trying to say is, a friend and neighbor of mine, a witch in a Muggle household, has begun to find it difficult to remain at home. She's attending Oxford now," Harry rushed in to say, since he felt he was losing his audience. "And she wants to continue that, but it is difficult what with being cut off from her family's assistance. Well, I would help her myself if I could. I know what it's like to be stuck in a house that forbids magic, but I don't have any funds of my own. I thought first of coming to you for money for myself and getting help for her from my adoptive father . . . but that seemed a bit silly, so I thought I'd come with a direct appeal for her."

"What is this young lady's name?"

"Elizabeth Peterson. Her mum's a witch, but doesn't practice magic much at the insistence of her husband. They live just down the road in Shrewsthorpe."

"I assume the daughter did not attend Hogwarts if she gained a place at Oxford."

"No, she didn't. But there are loads of magical tutors around. And she does want to learn more than her mother taught her growing up, before her father decided he didn't like it."

Freelander stared out the window where leaf-filtered sunlight sparkled. Harry waited patiently while he pondered. Freelander finally said, "Did you come alone, Mr. Potter? I read somewhere that you were always to be under guard."

"No, I came with a guard. He is waiting in the entry hall."

Freelander plucked a small wand from his pocket and used it to jerk the thick bell cord in the corner of the room. Far off in the vast house a muted ringing sounded. A servant in white came to the doorway.

"Bring tea, Benjamin, and bring our other guest to join us." He placed his hands on his lap and sitting a little straighter said, "We might as well enjoy a spot while we consider the problem you have brought to us, Mr. Potter." He sat thoughtfully, until there was a noise near the door. "I have to admit I find your appeal for another to be a tribute to your character, and reinforces that I did not make a mistake in my earlier judgement of you."

"Mr. Wickem, sir," the servant announced from the doorway.

Freelander's head came up faster than expected. "Mr. Wickem," he repeated, not quite a greeting. "You are here with Mr. Potter?"

Aaron slid over to them, navigating the excessive furniture with practiced ease and gave a bow. "Yes sir. I'm the guard of the moment." He gestured gallantly back at the doorway. "Though, I'm a little reluctant to interrupt this meeting of the Harry Potter Appreciation Society."

Freelander colored slightly. "Have a seat, Mr. Wickem." The statement was not so much welcoming as resigned to being polite.

Crooked grin still in place, Aaron accepted the indicated chair and said lightly, "Not that I doubt I could pass the initiation into such an able society . . ." He sat back, crossed his arms, but held them formally high on his chest, and winked at Harry. He looked very much in his natural environment. "Knowing Harry, it would involve

demonstrable skill at Quidditch and dueling someone evil. I'm certain I could manage, given some time to prepare." After a beat, he added: "I'm confident of a win as long as it's a Malfoy I get to duel."

Tea arrived, just in time, by Harry's judgement. It came on two large silver trays, one stacked with little sandwiches, the other with biscuits.

"Please." Freelander indicated they could start with a gesture. With a slight scowl marring his middle-aged brow, Freelander said to Aaron, "I'm a little curious how you came to be assigned as a guard to Mr. Potter."

"I was drafted. It's a bit like being assigned to the trenches in France, except it involves more photographers and better beer."

Harry had learned a bit about his fellow over the last year. One of the things he had learned was that Aaron pulled out his flippant silliness when he was trying to remain aloof. Harry was not as familiar with Lord Freelander, but his growing sense of vague dismay was confirmed when he said, "Strange choice," with clear disappointment.

Harry took a deep breath and held it. Aaron, did not take this comment too personally, or if he did, he kept it hidden in his move to sit more casually in a chair that resisted it by design.

Harry needed something from Freelander and found himself limited in defensive comments as a result. Very factually and conversationally, he said, "Aaron is in the Auror's program with me. We are second-years together."

Freelander froze with his small teacup poised before him. "The Auror's program?" Moving slowly, he took a sip and returned his cup and saucer to the low table between them. "It was my understanding that academic qualifications for that are quite high. You did not even sit for any N.E.W.T.s did you, Mr. Wickem?"

"Not while at school, I didn't," Aaron said, while Harry glanced between them and considered that Freelander had a pretty good memory and kept surprisingly abreast of his bowling party guests. "I didn't feel doing so at the time," Aaron explained. "But I decided it was what I wanted to do. So I hired tutors and kept retaking the admissions examinations until I did well enough to get in."

Freelander seemed be reassessing. "Fine determination on your part."

Airily, Aaron said, "I was bored. I needed something to do besides party every night."

Freelander hefted his teacup again after the servant refilled it. His finger tapped the handle as he composed what to say. "And have you settled down in other ways as well?"

"Ah, no," Aaron admitted, slightly wistful. "I haven't managed to excel at that examination yet."

Freelander considered Aaron for half a minute, before turning back to Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter," he began, sounding less himself. "I think we can make some kind of arrangement. If you don't mind, perhaps we will put your name on it. Structure it as an open fellowship and see what happens long-term."

"Thank you, sir."

Aaron glanced curiously between them, but remained silent between sips of tea and bites of biscuit and prim bites of biscuit with pinkies extended.

On the walk back down the drive, with the sparkling white gravel shifting underfoot, Harry's thoughts moved from pleasure at solving Elizabeth's financial problems to a niggling curiosity about Freelander.

Harry asked, "So, was it a bit odd to you that Lord Freelander remembered that you hadn't tried for your N.E.W.T.s?"

It was a dozen or so steps before Aaron answered. He sunk his hands in his pockets and slumped slightly before replying. "My mum used to be more in his circle when I was in school." The crunching gravel took over again until they reached the gate posts where they stopped. The breeze emerging from the trees felt chilled despite the warm day. "The expectations were so high. Honestly, it's one of the reasons I didn't take my N.E.W.T.s. Everyone expected the world out of me and my friends, and heck, my parents had enough money; it didn't matter what I did."

"Well, but, I'd think you'd want to make your own way. Wouldn't you want to?"

Aaron lost his grim attitude. "In the end I decided that. It helped that I was attempting something no one, but no one, thought I could do. For the first few years, they thought it was funny, then they thought I was unhealthfully obsessed. Then they decided I wasn't as much fun at parties anymore. I may have given up on my fourth try except what my father said to me a few weeks before he died. He said, he finally believed that I really could do it – could get an Auror apprenticeship."

"You've never mentioned your dad," Harry said.

"He was gone a lot when I was growing up. He was on the Continent all the time on business. I thought mum would have more trouble getting along without him, but she's done fine."

"Speaking of doing fine, want to try to catch up on readings this afternoon at my place?" Harry asked.

"You mean, actually do the readings for once?" Aaron asked, sounding ambivalent.

Harry grinned. "That's what I meant."

"You're not trying to take advantage of this momentary weakness I'm having because of that little exchange in there, are you?"

"No," Harry insisted.

Aaron stared off along the high stone wall surrounding the Freelander estate. "Yeah, why not? Let's do some revising."

Harry arrived home to find Ginny on the couch in the main hall, chatting with Winky, who stood shyly before the witch, clutching her tea-towel.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of the time, I think," Harry said.

Ginny stood, eying Aaron as she sidled over to them. "No worries. I'm not assigned for another hour, just thought you'd be home early." And, Harry could see in her gaze, she was hoping to see Aaron.

"Shall we run some drills? I'll show you a new counter and you can help me work on something I'm trying to figure out."

"And I shall . . . ?" Aaron asked airily.

"You can read aloud to both of us," Harry said. "This will be just like Hogwarts again, us all studying together."

Aaron took up a spot on the couch, opened one of the books from his bag and began flipping through it while the two of them rearranged the remaining furniture off to the side. "Except we were stuck in the dungeon, you got a tower."

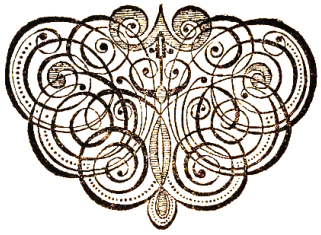
"Are Slytherins always so whingy?" Ginny asked.

"I Am. Not. Whinging," Aaron stated primly. "I never whinge." He flipped a few pages more, seeming nervous maybe, which Harry took as a good sign for Ginny. "I go straight to all out fit if you must know. Shall we begin? Chapter Eight: Counters and Counteractions," he announced to the room. Then mumbled, "I'm going to need a pub after this."

"Sounds good to me," Ginny said, eyes asparkle as she raised her wand to match Harry's.

> Author's Notes: Something about my workday having no overlap with anyone else's has freed up some time, surprisingly... Ah, and scenes got shifted around, thought we'd have some action this round but I was wrong. And sorry for the change in format, mid-story; I'm trying to replace the scene breaks with real transitions.

Chapter 16.



Halloween Friends

Aaron returned from the light-haloed bar through the darkness with more drinks, sloshing some because a mug caught the edge of the high table.

"Thank you for buying another round," Ginny said.

Harry brushed droplets of beer off his trousers and said, "We should have waited for Thursday to go out, maybe."

Ginny shot him a look meant to dissuade such talk and Harry subtly held up his hands in surrender. Aaron regained his stool and slid the drinks to each of them over the suddenly less sticky tabletop.

"You should do fine next year," Aaron said to Ginny, continuing their conversation after clearing his throat. "You understood more of those two chapters I read than I did."

Ginny shrugged and dropped her gaze.

Aaron again cleared his raspy throat. "Someone else will have to read next time. Though, I'll admit, I paid attention to every word by reading aloud. That's why a second beer was essential." He held his mug up for a casual clacking of glasses. "If we can turn revising and practice into a party, count me in every time."

After a thirst-quenching lull, Harry asked, "How are things at Weasley Wheezes?"

Ginny replied, "Swimming. They still won't let me do any mixing. I think now they won't because they're afraid later when I'm an Auror I'll know all the illegal

ingredients they're using, as opposed to the few I catch an eyeful of when accidents happen, which is too often. I think at least one of the upstairs walls is just an illusion put up after one especially bad one." She sipped her beer and waited for a group of Muggles to make their way past their table to the bar, bumping into them in the dimness of the pub. "If Diagon Alley ever burns down, you'll know where to start the investigation."

"Such a loyal sister. Makes me glad I have no siblings," Aaron said.

"You can have a few of my brothers. I have extra. How many do you want?"

"Hm," Aaron said thoughtfully. "You can keep the twins, and Percy . . ."

Ginny slumped over her mug. "Figures you'd say that. Ron and Bill work at Gringotts. You're probably familiar with that place," she said with a hint of sarcasm. "You probably have two vaults there, or a dedicated wing."

"Ah, therein lies a tale . . ." Aaron said accompanied by a large swig of his drink. He sighed and traced his finger through the liquid on the table, which reflected ripples from the fake gas lamp light mounted on the wall beside them. "It will probably hopelessly decrease me in your eyes, but . . . my mum keeps me on an allowance."

Ginny laughed. "At least you get an allowance. You'll eventually inherit something, right?"

Aaron tossed his hand. "Presumably."

"Your mum must trust you not to off her."

Aaron stared at her, but said after a sip: "She knows I'm too lazy to do that."

"Well . . . how old is she now, your mum?"

"The question is: how old is great-grandmum."

"Oh dear," Ginny said with a giggle.

"These are the sort of old ladies that stash gold in old hats, charm them invisible, and hang them from trees in a remote forest somewhere by broomstick. Usually after tippling the cooking sherry. Who knows if they even remember where the money is."

Harry said, "No wonder you're working to be gainfully employed."

"Harry, my dear man, an Auror's salary is not 'gainfully employed'. But as a wage-based position is makes everyone my mother luncheons with distinctly uncomfortable. On that point it IS gainful."

On the way home, Aaron insisted that he would escort Harry home. They both escorted Ginny home first, after much arguing on her part that it was unnecessary. The two of them remained standing, framing the Burrow's hearth while they waited for Ginny, who arrived presently. Mr. Weasley sat hunched over the dining table on a stool that had been repaired with what could be a bent car axle. "Well, I guess there was no reason to worry about the late night with you two on duty."

"Good night, dad," Ginny said disgustedly, as she marched to the stairs. "Thanks for thoroughly embarrassing me."

"Good night, sir," Harry said to the accompaniment of Ginny's pounding footsteps on the staircase.

"Hm," Aaron said moments later while pacing around the main hall in Shrewsthorpe. "It's not even that late."

"Mr. Weasley gets an early start," Harry said.

"I didn't mean that." Aaron crossed his arms and looked at Harry. "So, you haven't told me 'hands off', I'm wondering if or when I should expect it."

Harry stopped sorting out which books were Aaron's from the neat piles Winky had made on the end table. "Why would you expect it?" Harry asked.

"Not keeping her in the wings? She seemed previously to be keeping herself in the wings. I thought for a while tonight that she was trying to make you jealous. I don't expect I could reliably out-compete you in this arena. I'm grateful I don't usually have to."

"I am not keeping her in the wings," Harry said. "She's like a younger sister."

"Oh. That's worse," Aaron exclaimed in surprise.

"How so?" Harry said, handing his books to him.

The bedroom door upstairs opened. "Oh, Harry, you're home," Candide said.

"Yeah, turned into a late night," Harry said. "Sorry, are we disturbing you?"

"No, I was waiting up for your guard. Due in a few minutes, isn't she?"

Harry glanced at the clock. "Yes. How was work?"

"Alright, I should get to sleep, though."

"Good idea," Harry gently agreed.

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When the door had clicked closed again, Aaron said, "So, as far as you're concerned I can take Little Miss Weasley out."

Harry felt a twinge of something, but determined it was just some residual protective instinct. "Don't hurt her," he blurted.

"Oh, please. You are so old fashioned. What does that mean?"

"It means," Harry said, stepping closer, not quite in a manner of facing the other man down. "Don't promise things you don't intend to deliver on."

"I'm very careful not to do that," Aaron smugly replied.

They stared at each other until Harry said, "That's all you're going to hear from me."

"That just leaves Mr. Weasley." He paced once. "I forgot about Mr. Weasley."

"How could you forget him?" Harry asked. "You work for him."

"He's just that kind of guy," Aaron insisted. "You know . . . forgettable."

Harry did not make it all the way though the week without another nightmare. After a particularly tough day of working on their power during training, Harry again dreamed he was fighting with Rodgers but had no wand to fight back with.

This time Candide woke him. Harry lifted his head from the mound of his pillow and saw Hornisham shuffling out the door to leave them alone. He grudgingly propped his head up on his hand and waited for Candide to say more than his name. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, which made him uncomfortable in the same way Mrs. Weasley did whenever she tried to treat him the same as Ron.

"Do you want me to owl Severus?"

"No," Harry stated with clipped certainty. "It's fine."

She did not move right away, so Harry said, "I'm just dreaming about training. It really isn't something to worry about."

"Training gives you nightmares?" she returned, surprised.

Harry paused and considered that perfectly valid question in the private darkness of the room. The floor creaked outside the door where Hornisham waited. "Er . . . " Harry began, but then wondered if it was something else again that was really

bothering him. The other dreams had been his subconscious fear that he was not really home. What could this one mean? It had not gone away like the others.

"Harry?" she prompted, insisting on an answer. "Why would Auror training bother you so. Don't you do well at it?"

"Ummm," Harry sat up, propping his back against the headboard. He tiredly scratched his head and said, "In my dream I never seem to have a wand. Or I can't find my wand. No, I just don't have it," he corrected after thinking it over more. Meaning teased at the edge of his sleep-heavy brain, but he could not grasp it.

Candide stood up. "Well, other than bothering you, that doesn't sound serious. Or should I owl Severus?"

"No, no," Harry insisted. "I just have to figure it out," he said, mind far away.

"Well, if you think talking it out will help, let me know."

"Um, thanks. I'm fine right now." He added, "Good night," as she moved to the door and changed with the guard.

Harry decided to wait for Freelander's paperwork to be finalized before attempting to explain the funding situation to Elizabeth. Without the proper details at his disposal, Harry worried that he would be unable to work around any pride issues that may crop up. He did not see her again until Halloween when she made an appearance at his party, dressed as a disturbingly accurate hag.

Squinting at the dried-fruit-skinned, hairy-chinned figure that Ginny led into the relatively quiet party, Harry asked, "Who are you?"

"Elizabeth . . ." she replied, partly a question.

"Oh," Harry said. "I didn't . . . you look great. Um, well, not great. Well, you know what I mean."

Tonks had sidled over while Harry struggled. "Nice disguise."

Elizabeth, wart hairs bobbing, said, "Thanks. Ginny helped a bit."

"Did she?" Harry said, wondering about that.

At this cue, Ginny, bearing white horse ears and a spiral horn on her forehead, strolled casually away to the drink table. Tonks followed her off with a dubious glance at Harry.

Elizabeth leaned closer, on the side away from where Kali perched on Harry's shoulder, and said, "I didn't feel comfortable coming recognizable. It's too close to home."

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's a disguise worthy of an Auror, really." He tried to hold an enthusiastic tone, but had trouble. "Want a drink? I could use a refill."

"What are you supposed to be?" she asked on the way. "A phoenix?"

"A Griffin. I had to give up on the paws in order to open the door and serve drinks. I still have a lion's tail." He rotated to show off his Weasley Wizard Wheezes Trusty Twitching Tail.

"Ah," she sounded unimpressed.

Harry, figuring if she could feel critical of him, that she must be feeling better, led the way to the snacks. "How are you doing?" he asked on the way.

"Well enough. I miss my piano, but it will be a long time before I can get one of my own or a suitable keyboard, even."

From beside the table, Ginny scanned the room. "Where's your guard?" she asked knowingly.

Harry replied, "Fetching his date."

"Oh," Ginny replied, her chipperness slipping.

Tonks said with a laugh, "Knowing him, it's someone he met on the underground yesterday morning."

This did not ease Ginny's dismay. Harry tried to rub his forehead, forgetting that he wore a beak mask. He straightened his headgear and sought out Hermione, expecting her to be a safe conversation partner.

He found Hermione on the couch, leaning far forward towards Vineet on the opposing couch, hands emerging from her formal robes to be clasped vice-like before her. Harry decided it was past time to check in with her. He sat down beside Vineet when Ron shoved over.

"What are you dressed as?" Harry asked. "No, let me guess: a Hogwarts professor."

Hermione pulled out her wand. "The charm keeps wearing off," she said, dismayed. She tapped her chest and her robes turned purple, making the homemade felt W more obvious. "Supposed to be Wizengamot."

"Ah," Harry said, wondering if he sounded like Elizabeth just a minute ago. While he was sitting, Kali took the opportunity to crawl off his shoulder and around the couch to investigate things.

"You would be a exemplary member of the Wizengamot," Vineet stated with grave seriousness.

Hermione blushed and tried to keep her lips straight. "Maybe someday."

Lavender, wearing ragged men's clothes, came over and sat in Ron's lap. Mrs. Norris blinked at them all from her arms.

"And who are you dressed as?" Harry asked.

"Don't ask," Ron insisted at the same instant Lavender chirped, "Filch."

"Well, you do have his cat," Hermione said, straining to sound neutral.

"Mostly I wanted to drive Ron bongo," she happily explained while petting the ratty cat.

This did not stop Mrs. Norris from hissing at Kali, who raised her wings and backed away, also hissing. Kali backed off Harry onto Vineet's shoulder. Harry voiced a warning when Vineet reached a hand to her and she hissed at the Indian instead.

Vineet said, "She is an bloodheart leech, correct?"

"I'm not certain what that is," Harry said at the same time Hermione replied, "Yes."

Extending his hand within the danger zone, Vineet softly said, "Sometimes you must get hurt to prove something, especially to one with such a name." He didn't even flinch when Kali struck out at his hand. Her nose went to work immediately after, scenting out the blood slipping from two slits across the back of his hand.

Hermione cringed and looked away as the Chimrian began licking the blood away. Wounds healed, Vineet moved his hand closer and Kali climbed on, nose sniffing fiercely. She made the rounds of his robes before returning to sleep on Harry's shoulder with a satiated flop of her limbs.

Hermione glanced up at someone behind Harry, "Let me guess, Oliver, right?"

Harry turned and found Aaron, also wearing threadbare clothes, face smeared with coal.

"You got it. My favorite costume. Lets me practice my pickpocketing without trouble."

"You, a pickpocket?" Hermione asked, laughing.

Aaron held up a familiar, colorful woven purse. "Isn't this yours?" he asked innocently.

Hermione's face transformed into insulted. "Yes! Give that back."

Aaron gallantly bowed to hand it over. Hermione flipped it open and closed, saying, "I had it charmed too!"

"Not very well, Madame Charms Professor. I would suggest working out something combinatorial rather than simply strongly fixed"

Hermione slipped her purse away in her handbag. "I will; believe me."

Ginny slid quietly over to their group. Harry, thinking to help her out, asked his fellow trainee, "Where's your date?"

"Over there," Aaron said, angling his head to the corner of the room.

All eyes turned that way, where a tall woman with towering blond hair stood talking with Kerry Ann. She wore a glittering, chained bodice under her velvet cloak. Ginny took on a posture of defeat and scratched one tall white ear as though it itched her greatly.

Hermione spoke first. "Who's she dressed as, Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Harry choked down a laugh. "Maybe," Aaron said. "I expect her teeth are not normally so pointy."

Bill propped himself up to see better and said in alarm, "Vespera has a sister?"

This led the surrounding Weasleys to laugh uproariously.

Ginny sent one last glance at the pair of women and headed back to the drink table, downing most of a full mug on the way. Harry extricated himself, handed Kali off to Vineet, and followed her over.

She started when she found him behind her. "Hey," she muttered, refilling her cider.

"Your aren't allowed to get drunk," Harry pointed out, "You're one of my guards."

"You don't need a guard." She put her head down and muttered, "Anymore than Prince Wickem there needs another girlfriend."

Elizabeth slipped closer. "You have your eye on someone?" she asked Ginny.

Ginny glanced at her, but ignored the question. "I should have dressed like you. I see the appeal of not caring to even try." She stroked her short horn and then her pink-hued silver hair. "Kind of a stupid costume, isn't it?" she asked.

"I think it's cute," Harry said. "You did a very nice job on the ears." He pried the refilled cider from her fingers, feeling emboldened by the extra time they had been together that week. "Why don't I drink this one?"

"Yeah," she said and sighed.

Harry glanced behind him to make sure Aaron was out of range. "It's him, really, I've rarely seen the same girl twice."

"That's a bad sign," Elizabeth agreed.

"I could have brought a date, too, but didn't," Ginny grumpily said. The music increased in volume and couples started to dance, including Aaron and his date.

Elizabeth took Ginny by the elbow. "Come on, let's dance. Who cares about having a date?"

They moved off to the open area and Harry returned to the couch. He dropped down beside Hermione, whose robes had faded halfway to black again already.

A few minutes later Tonks leaned over Harry's back, and said, "I've got a call. I'm taking Kerry Ann, so make sure Aaron stays as second guard."

Harry tried hard not to rebel at the notion of needing a minimum of two guards in a crowd.

Hermione answered for him. "We will."

"Speaking of security. Someone should have frisked Blonde Vespera when she came in," Bill said, eyeing the full head of hair bobbing over the other dancers.

Ron shuddered. "You go tell her that. I didn't bring any dragon skin gloves to the party."

Bill said, "If this were the bank, she'd have been directed through the triple-long identification process."

"Do you recognize her?" Hermione asked.

Bill and Ron both shook their heads.

After midnight, guests began to leave in earnest. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Vineet and Ron occupied the couches, tucking into a second round of snacks. Aaron, leading his starry-eyed date by the hand, said, "Well, we're off."

"You can't be. You have to stay," Harry enjoyed informing him, due to Ginny's deepening frown at their approach.

Stunned, Aaron echoed, "I have to stay?"

Everyone nodded while Vineet explained, "Tonks informed us of this before departing."

"Oh." Aaron extricated his hand. To his date, he said, "Duty calls, I'm afraid."

In a faint accent, his date said, "You are not coming to the . . . next party?"

"No, I can't. I know I agreed we'd split the evening, but I have Ministry duties."

Her cold grey eyes took in the remaining guests. Her eyes contrasted with her strange beauty which radiated a pushy warmth. "I am supposed to bring . . . a guest."

"Yeah, I know, you said, but I can't," Aaron insisted. He took her by the arm. "Here, I'll show you to the Floo." The others watched them navigate across the floor to the dining room.

"Kind of a strange bird," Ron said. "Full security scan."

Bill said, "She didn't pay any attention to Harry. I was keeping an eye on that." He stood and said, "Well, my girl will be home from the evening shift and is going to wonder where I am, but I wanted to stay until the strangers all left."

Harry took a breath, prepared to yell at him, at all of them, for their care. He clenched his teeth instead, reminding himself that someone had tried twice to kill him, and they only wanted to help, just like he would want to help if the situation were reversed. It only helped a little to remind himself of this. The party was emptying out. Harry wished that Belinda had accepted his invitation. He needed to corner and talk to her again, but resisted because of the emotional strain on her last time. He expected that if she wished to talk, she could easily find him, and short of that, pursuing the issue would be cruel.

Hermione stood as well and gave Harry a hug. "I have to get back too. I only got away because Minerva expected that I could report back on how you are doing, Harry. And I have the night shift ahead, patrolling the grounds after the feast."

"Thanks for coming, especially since it made you miss out on your first Halloween Feast at Hogwarts."

"Oh, as a teacher, skipping the feasts is not a sacrifice, believe me." She gave a surreptitious glance back in the direction Vineet sat, reserved as ever even with Kali draped on his knee, tiny eyes peering up at the room.

"Have a good rest of the evening. And be careful," she commanded Harry before heading to the hearth.

"No one gives me any choice but to be," Harry complained.

She stopped to peck him on the cheek. "Poor Harry. Confined to a boring life, caged like one of Hagrid's creatures."

"Um, yeah," Harry replied. "You're sober enough to get home, right?"

"We are going to try something new today: Double-reverse counters," Rodgers said the next Monday. "This is for defending from behind, hopefully needed because you are in thick of things rather than because you are running away." He gave them each an eyeing to reinforce this opinion, ending with Harry. "Potter, come up here."

Their trainer continued, "Most counters will work in double-reverse, but for the strongest ones you are often relying on the appearance of the spell to control it, even if you don't realize it. So, to cast it blind requires some practice. Let's start with a Titan since that one is just cast with the wand pointing backward. Turn around."

Harry faced the wall, feeling vaguely uneasy about having his back to Rodgers.

"Point your wand back at me."

Harry hooked his wand in his fingers and hung his hand over his right shoulder.

"Now I'm going to show you why that's not right. Flibbergibbit!"

Harry felt the curse, cast a block, but the tendrils of the spell took out his feet, and he hit the floor.

As Harry picked himself up on shock-stunned knees, Rodgers commented, "For someone who lives under the same roof as a Death Eater, I'd have expected you to have more experience with getting hit from behind."

Harry did not immediately have a response to that implied insult to his guardian. Tridant tittered from the back of the room. Harry remained facing his trainer, unable to let the comment slide. "I'll thank you to not get too personal, sir," he said.

Rodgers slapped his wand against his leg in annoyance. "Oh, come now, Potter. I'm trying to make you angry so you put a little bit more into those counters of yours. You treated it as routine. Turn around again."

Biting down on more he wished to say, Harry turned around, wand over his shoulder, despite his face growing hot.

Rodgers said, "His former colleagues were put away long ago. If he couldn't handle the hit to his reputation, he shouldn't have kept such poor company."

Harry hit the floor again but was jarred less this time. It reminded him too much of endless curses from Ginny in the afternoons that he also could not block because he was insisting it could be done without a wand.

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"Potter, were you listening to the explanation at all? Sit down and watch for a few rounds, eh?"

Harry, stretching his back, slumped in his chair and watched Kerry Ann tackle a reversed Titan and begin the shifted phase spelling needed on a reversed chrysanthemum, this time with her wand forward. While this went on, a thought vibrated in Harry's head, trying to to coalesce into something substantial. As Aaron changed places with Kerry Ann, Harry began to feel worry, the kind that made his heart feel like clay. Snape's voice echoed in his memory with a taint of dread, I don't have much power, Potter. Especially now.

Harry breathed in and out, trying not to let panicked concern overtake his thoughts when he could be called up in a moment to practice something he was having trouble learning. But he could not shake his realization that he had left the other-dimension Snape to manage by himself with no patron to defend him. At the time, that had been expedient and Harry had not thought twice about it until now. He gathered his wits and repeatedly squashed his worry while Aaron got extra help.

Harry got a break from this new concern the next day when something positive distracted him. Freelander owled at the Ministry, requesting that Harry visit the next afternoon to sign some paperwork with the solicitors present. Harry, to spare both his patron and his fellow from another visit, thought it best to ask Ginny to accompany him. Vineet followed Harry home to wait for her to arrive for their usual Wednesday practice.

Winky appeared instantly with tea and little chocolate cakes. Vineet silently plucked two from the tray and sat on the couch with them balanced on the palm of his right hand. He stared blankly beyond the wall and the flickering hearth.

"Maybe you should be my guard more often," Harry said, thinking they did not talk nearly enough and that it was clearly not for the best that Vineet continued to spend his evenings alone.

"I would be honored," Vineet said.

"Well, don't go that far . . ."

Ginny arrived and Harry saw his fellow trainee off with the promise to see to it that he be assigned as Harry's guard that weekend.

"I'm worried about him," Harry said to Ginny as they walked up the gravel drive between the ostentatious gates of the Freelander estate. "He's too quiet and I can't tell what he's thinking." Harry walked with his hands in his pockets, head down and

thoughtful. Ginny craned her neck forward and back to better see through the gaps in the high fence.

"Sorry, I'm listening . . . Merlin's molars this is one hell of a place."

"What? Oh, yeah."

Ginny's exclamations of astonishment only increased as they were led through room after room laden with elegantly curved, painted wood framing furniture and paintings. She spoke variations on: "This is someone's house? Jeepers. This place is unreal." all the way through the house.

The butler was a smart man, before the last door, he took hold of the twin handles and announced, "This is the meeting room."

Ginny fell quiet and followed Harry inside where a group gathered around a broad but dainty-legged white desk sporting excessive baroque flourishes.

"Mister Potter, please come in." Freelander gestured at the others encircling the desk and said, "This is Gottfried, Polstar, and Contango. I have retained them to oversee the fund's formation. Ah, and you have a new guard today, one much easier on the eyes."

Harry introduced Ginny, who kept herself back from the desk, hands clasped formally behind her back. The solicitors, two men and a woman in identical Muggle suits, bowed or held a hand out. The men eyed Harry with curiosity. The man introduced as Gottfried said, "A pleasure to finally meet you. My grandmum was a witch but that was the end of the line for our family. She talked endlessly about Dumbledore and Grindelwald when we were young." He sounded wistful, which matched his child-like, but balding appearance.

"It's not necessarily the end of the line," Harry said. "Some families skip three or four generations."

"I've tried to tell him that," Freelander said.

Gottfried appeared ambivalent to thoughts of magical offspring. "We'll see, I guess."

Freelander moved along with business, leading Harry on a tour through a stack of thick parchments that spelled out minute details of how funds would be allocated and how often and under what circumstances they could be withheld.

"For the time being, I think you can decide yourself who best to assign the fellowship to." Freelander held up a parchment. "But this lays out the procedure for the formation of a committee to advise on appropriate recipients."

Harry signed that one first since he understood it and it did not take effect right away. The next one required more time. While he decoded the mile-long strings of clauses, Freelander engaged Ginny in conversation.

"So, Weasley, I recall that name from somewhere."

"There are quite a few of us," Ginny admitted. "My brothers run a shop on Diagon Alley. So you may have seen the name there."

"I'm afraid I don't get down there nearly as often as I used to. I have to admit, you look a bit delicate for a magical guard, young lady, to my old eyes, that is."

With a bright cuteness that made a startled Harry lower the densely arcane legal document he held, Ginny replied, "I'm frequently underestimated. It's one of my best advantages. But if you'd like a résumé, I'll gladly provide one."

Harry feared that Freelander may find this out of line and was surprised when the man smiled, crossed his arms and indulged her by saying, "Go ahead; I am curious."

Harry tried to return to the dry text wallpapering the long sheet before him while Ginny rocked up on her toes and said, "I finished seven O.W.L.s and five N.E.W.T.s. I've fought Death Eaters and Voldemort alongside Harry." She stopped at the exclamations of disbelief and one condescending chuckle from the oldest solicitor.

"No, that's true," Harry said while signing the parchment before him without finishing it beyond a quick glance because the long words were all running together and seemed to repeat just to make the document look longer.

Ginny went on, "I rescued Harry from Merton. I won the first Demise of Voldemort Day Dueling competition."

When she wound down, Harry added, "She passed half the Auror's testing with flying colors."

Ginny fidgeted by rocking up higher on her toes. "That too. Just have to pass the other half now."

"Well, good to know you are on the case," Freelander said, sounding the chummiest Harry had ever heard him.

Harry continued through the documents, asking a few questions, mostly to keep up the appearance that he understood everything he was signing. Ginny filled the time by asking about the plentiful wizard paintings surrounding them, which Freelander, shuffled over to discuss. They made their way around the room, Freelander growing more animated as they went.

While the solicitors packed their things into aromatic leather cases and shook hands all around before departing, Freelander insisted Harry and Ginny remain for dinner. Harry may have resisted the invitation if Ginny had not lit up like a candle at it.

Ginny's eyes glowed as she gazed around the grand dining room where the long, long table barely made an impact on the floor space. The three of them crowded one end of the table and the servants ferried one silver-covered dish after another from far away in the middle of it.

"Beatrice is at her father's this evening," Freelander explained of his wife when Harry asked. "When I married her five years ago, she was not occupied at all. That's why I married her, but she runs three foundations of her own now as well as caring for her father." Sounding wry, he said, "I seem to be last in line on her schedule."

"Maybe you should try polygamy," Harry said without much forethought. Ginny coughed on her soup and started laughing until she managed to stifle it with a napkin.

"Sorry," she said shyly. "Where'd that come from?" she demanded quietly.

"Oh, Vineet. He said there are different laws in India for different groups, and some wizards there still practice it."

Ginny stared at him and Harry wondered if she wished she knew some Legilimency. "Do I want to know what this is in reference to?"

"Probably not," Harry replied. With a glance at their thoughtful host, he said, "Maybe we should find a better topic." He leaned back as his bowl was exchanged for yet another plate.

"No, young man, that's all right. Ten years ago, I'd have been appalled, but I've grown old enough now to find myself uncaring what anyone else wishes to do with themselves."

"As long as witches get polyandry too," Ginny said slyly. "I'd be all for it."

One course later, she asked, "So, your children have moved on?"

Harry gave a warning shake of his head, but Freelander raised his glass to Harry in a kind of toast, saying, "We'll see if they've all moved on."

Harry hurriedly clinked his glass to his host's, confused. He should not have done it, but he was concerned his asking for help may have raised the man's expectations for something Harry did not intend to provide. What he read in Freelander's eyes confused him more. He fell silent and a little panicked through the rest of the meal, which had only two more courses, and passed quickly once conversation lagged.

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On the way down the drive late that evening, Ginny sleepily hooked her arm through Harry's and said, "I love being your guard. That was a wonderful dinner." When Harry did not find a comment, she said, "You have an elf and eat like that all the time, I guess."

"Not quite like that. We never have oyster caviar au gratin."

"Pureed on toast points," Ginny added brightly.

Harry laughed.

Ginny added with a grand sigh, "Man, what a way to live."

The lamps on the gate flickered on as they approached it. In the still air, their voices sounded loud. "It could have been mine," Harry said.

"You're joking," Ginny said, the grip on his arm growing almost painful.

"He wanted to adopt me."

"OH. Well, that explains his odd comment."

"It sort of explains his odd comment," Harry said, voice far away.

"What's that mean?"

"I have to think on it," Harry said, not wanting to speak ill of his patron.

Harry put aside his thoughts of Freelander that evening to worry again about the other dimension Snape. It was a dreading, semi-helpless worry, like the kind he had been a constant companion as a child and he did not like it rearing up again.

To distract himself, he went to see Elizabeth, to whom he had paperwork and good news to deliver. Ginny agreed easily to follow him on this task while Hornisham waited at home, since the nearly retired witch could not even remotely approach passing for Muggle.

Elizabeth came to the door, looking tired. Her roommate was installed on the couch, crisps in hand, watching some Muggle program.

"Ah, the boyfriend," Diane said coyly. Elizabeth cringed. And when Ginny stepped in, Diane said, "Oh, never mind."

"Sorry to call so late," Harry said, ignoring the comments. "But I wanted to bring you these things." With a happy anticipation at her reaction, he handed over the scrolls outlining the fellowship. Ginny stepped back to lean on the wall, tactfully out of the way.

Harry went on, "I have a patron, whom I've never asked anything of. He formed a fund for a fellowship for, uh, people like you to study at university." Very quietly, he added, "Witches and wizards, you know." Then back in a normal voice: "I get to dole it out to whomever I want."

She looked up from the densely printed parchments with round-eyed surprise. "Are you saying it's for me?"

Harry, feeling unusually nervous, jerked one hand out of his back pocket to gesture at what she held. "It's a fellowship for your studies."

She needed a moment to recover and her eyes went wet as she did. "Harry, that's so sweet of you."

Diane approached from the couch and took the parchments. "What odd paper."

Biting her lip, Elizabeth took them back. "I get to read them first," she said. But she did not open them. Instead, she gave Harry a firm hug. "Thanks. I don't know what to say."

"It's all right. I feel kind of responsible."

She pushed him away to arm's length. "You what?" she asked critically.

Harry held back his smile at her return to normal. "Well, I thought that if I hadn't, I don't know, inspired you to do more, er, things your dad disapproved of . . ."

"Harry," she said in a lecturing tone. "I was so overdue to get away from home. My only regret is none of it happened sooner." She unrolled the parchments. "Thanks. God, I don't know what to say."

"It's not his money," Diane pointed out.

"She's right," Harry said.

"And Freelander has plenty," Ginny tossed in.

"Yeah, but it was your doing," Elizabeth clarified. She drooped slightly. "I was in such a state yesterday, and now this . . ."

She sounded teary-eyed, and Harry wanted to hug her again, perhaps more than he really should, so he said, "I have training in the morning; I should go."

"Stop by anytime," Diane said with a knowing wink as she showed them out.

Candide was sitting at the table with Hornisham when they returned. Ginny headed off and Harry took a seat.

"Late evening," Candide observed, which Harry interpreted as her politely asking where he had been. She had been doing that more lately, which Harry suspected was on Snape's orders.

"I had some errands. To Freelander's, where he insisted on dinner, and then to Elizabeth's flat. I wanted to give her the fellowship papers right away."

"I bet she was happy," Candide said.

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering wanting to hold her. He felt vaguely floaty thinking about it.

"What's wrong?" Candide asked.

Harry glanced at his guard, knitting rhythmically as always. He maybe could use some advice. "Can we talk alone?" he asked, and Hornisham, with a formal wave, shuffled out.

Harry hesitated, fearing voicing something that might make it harder to ignore. "Nothing's wrong exactly."

"You looked like something was wrong."

"I do have a lot on my mind." He fell silent and listened to the fire licking at the wood in the hearth. "Well, maybe you can answer this. How bad is it if you feel something for someone you're not supposed to be feeling anything for?"

"Depends on if you let it get out of hand," Candide said. She sounded about how Harry expected Snape would answering that question.

"Well, but, I'm not letting it do anything. It's just happening." He kept the anger he felt out of his voice since it had nothing to do with her.

"Haven't you ever been in love?"

"Er, I don't know," Harry said, sounding difficult. "Maybe."

"Are you in love with Tonks?" She waved one of the bottles from the wall and poured Harry a sip of sherry.

"I like Tonks a lot," Harry countered, flipping the glass in his fingers with out drinking from it.

"I didn't imply that you didn't. There are two different things at work here."

"You sound like Severus. All analysis. No feelings."

She held back a smile. "You don't sound like you are ready to discuss this. Why don't we do it a month from now when you are."

"What do you think is going to happen between now and then?" Harry asked.

She had returned to the newspaper, but put it down again to say, "Do you feel closer to Tonks now than you did a month ago?"

"No," Harry admitted, feeling adrift.

"Well, then-"

Harry cut her off, defensive. "But I'm not allowed to tell her anything. No wonder she's so suspicious." Harry stopped and stood up. He swallowed the sip of sherry and sighed. "Not a surprise then, is it. Any of it."

"You mean that she doesn't trust you and you are no closer?" At Harry's nod, she said, "Doesn't sound like a surprise to me."

"I should tell her," Harry said.

"You should talk to Severus before you do."

Harry scratched his neck. "He doesn't understand."

"Oh, he does. But he wants to protect you more than he wants to make your love life work out."

Harry stalked off to bed, feeling grumpy.

Training the next day only reinforced Harry's worries about the Snape he left behind with no protection. Worse yet, he remembered clearly that he himself had demanded that Fudge arrest all the Death Eaters. Maybe he should not have done that. When he next woke in the middle of a dream of trying to fight without a wand, it felt like a hammer pounding the idea that something must be done firmly into his skull.

Harry rolled over in bed, determined to figure out a way to return and check on Snape, and the dream did not wake him again.

During field work with Rodgers on Friday afternoon, they were called to Diagon Alley for a fire at Eeylops Emporium. The Ministry swarmed in mass numbers onto the scene and put out the fire quickly, rescued the soot-dusted owls, as well as masked the smoke as it rose up into Muggle London.

"Send someone to liaison with the Muggles," Mr. Weasley said to Rodgers. "Just in case. In broad daylight like this, it won't go missed." And indeed, Muggle sirens could be heard, echoing over the buildings.

"Find the owner," Mr. Weasley ordered. "I want to talk to him, at the Ministry. Get an Auror posted at his house and bring him in."

Things were still chaotic when Harry was sent home, to his dismay, right before the shop owner was questioned. Harry had been plotting while he trailed his trainer through the confusion, commands and patrol, and felt calm sitting at home on the couch, now that he had a plan of action for the other Snape. He slept well that night for the first time in a long while.

Saturday, while Vineet was there for guard duty and after Candide had departed for work, Harry said, "I have a proposition for you."

Harry stared at Vineet's grim countenance and plowed on, "I have something I need to do that I don't want anyone to know about and you should go see Hermione. So, this is my idea: I'll do my thing and you do yours and we'll meet back here in four hours."

Vineet replied, "That would not be very dutiful of me, leaving you."

"I'm going to be far out of range of whomever is trying to kill me, believe me."

Vineet stared at him. He wavered visibly.

"Vishnu, at least go and talk to Hermione. She's as unhappy as you are. Half her last letter was spent asking about you." Harry could remember being stunned by Hermione's admission of being in love with a married man, but that was when his marriage was working out. It mattered less now than he would have previously imagined it could. In a more just reality they would be free to be with each other. And Hermione's charms would hold for days instead of minutes. "At least talk to her."

"And when I return and you do not, what shall I tell your adoptive father, whom I have no interest in offending?"

He had him; Harry could tell. He was a beaten man and Harry was pained to witness it. Something had to change, and he trusted Hermione to handle his fellow with her considerate care, whatever the result of his visiting. "Tell him I've gone to Latvia. He'll know what that means. But don't say anything if I'm back here on schedule."

Vineet thought for a minute but then stood and bowed. "I wish to trust that you know what you are doing. And if I am going to break with rules and traditions I feel less obligation to stick with others. But do, please, be back here when you say. I will be unforgiving with myself later, I am certain, even though I am uncaring right now."

"I'll be back here," Harry assured him. "Go and get yourself straightened out." He called out to Vineet before he could make it to the Floo in the dining room. "Oh, don't tell Hermione you left your guard duty. She'd be more dangerous than Severus upon learning that."

Vineet bowed, and stepped through the door. A moment later the rush of the Floo network sounded and Harry went into motion. Up in his room he used the strongest warming charm he could on his hearth stone, he repeated it until the floor creaked as it expanded. He was confident that it would remain warm for the necessary time. He then put out the fire, so he had more space, knowing that if he put it out Winky would not re-kindle it until he or Snape re-lit it.

Harry took a deep breath. He could not resist what he was planning to do. Once he had fixed his mind on this path, he would go mad with ongoing worry if he tried to drop it again. He would end up like Vineet, hopeless at being unable to take action. He closed his eyes and dropped through the floor.

Harry arrived in the Hogwart's dungeon and awoke before a fire burning low in the empty Potions classroom. By the time he could move, he ached everywhere from the cold. Initially, the best he could manage was to roll over to warm his other side, and he only really got moving when he smelled what must be his robes smoldering.

With a creak of his spine and a groan Harry rolled to sit up and slapped at his robes where smoke twined off them. Part of him imagined that at least if he caught fire, he would be warm again, but his better sense prevailed . . . just barely. With ungainly movements, he rose to his feet and swayed before stumbling to the door. He checked the corridor and slipped down to Snape's office, but the door was barred with Ministry Department of Law Enforcement Tape. Harry blinked at this with dread blossoming in his chest strongly enough to paralyze him while he adjusted to the notion. He did not move until voices approached. He slipped into the Dark Plane and stood thinking. He could seek out McGonagall for information, but he wanted to avoid the watchful paintings in her tower. He slipped into Hogsmeade instead.

In the alley beside the Hogs Head, Harry applied a disguise, the best he could do quickly with no mirror and given that he could not quite straighten his cold-stiff spine. He applied a long white beard and hair and aged his face, essentially putting on the Dumbledore disguise he had used the previous Halloween. He stroked his face

and, deciding it felt all right, headed around to the door of the seedy wizard pub to see what he could learn about recent events here.

Inside the pub a burly, bald man stood wiping down the bar, deep-set eyes nearly hidden under his long eyebrows. He stared at Harry along with everyone else. All conversation had stopped when the door opened. Harry limped up to the bar, not needing much fakery to manage this and ordered a butterbeer with a raspy, weak voice.

The bartender laughed mockingly but he fetched a dusty old bottle and opened it with his teeth before plonking it down. Harry tossed two Sickles on the bar, saying, "Use the change to buy a few rags that are only decade old."

Harry picked up his drink and wandered to an empty table, on the way scooping up off the end of the bar what he had come for: a ragged pile of old Daily Prophets.

As he pulled out a chair, nearly unbalancing himself, a smattering of conversation resumed, but before he could sit, Harry had to reach for his wand as his skin prickled with a curse warning. Harry put up a Modulated Block to avoid sending the reflected curse around the room. It had only been a Tripping Curse, but it raised Harry's ire. He disarmed the oversized, hooded man, which brought the man to his drunken feet.

The room's conversations stopped again with a special sound-absorbing kind of silence. Harry tauntingly held out the man's gummy wand with his fingertips as one might a dead rodent. "That was foolish," Harry said, still trying to sound old. The man tossed off his hood, revealing Goyle, Harry's old schoolmate. He had grown a bit in all dimensions, but mostly around the middle. His robes had split at the sides to make room. Harry threw his wand at him and Goyle had to struggle to bend far enough to pick it up.

"Do that again, I'll use it for kindling rather than returning it," Harry snapped.

The conversations resumed immediately this time, attention pointedly redirecting off him. Harry sat down and sorted through the papers, requiring little time to find what he needed because the papers had been left refolded and flattened to the articles most of interest to the locals. A sequence of grim headlines and pictures showed Snape being investigated, then dragged out of the castle. Harry squinted at the photograph of his actual arrest but in the poor pub light could not see if anyone had come to his defense.

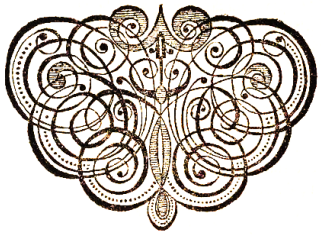
During more flipping through the stack for the most recent issues, Harry learned that Snape's trial was in five days and he was being held in the Ministry dungeon. A

sidebar to this article described overdue Ministry plans to finally rebuild Azkaban after so many years of simply cursing those found guilty of minor infractions so they lost the use of a limb for a year, or simply executing those found guilty of anything serious. The sharp reduction in the wizarding population brought about by this policy was growing worrisome, according to the author of the article.

Harry stacked the papers back together, partly to hide what he had been looking at, partly to stall while plotting. He tossed back the remainder of his flat butterbeer and Disapparated away.

> Author's Notes: Yes, cruel cut-point, but on the upside, most of 17 is written as a result.

Chapter 17.



Reserve Rescue

With wand drawn Harry slipped silently into the Ministry of Magic dungeon. He peered in both directions down the low-ceilinged, dank-aired corridor, at the rows of doors, each with a small barred window set near the top. Harry had to stand on tip-toe, grazing his head on the damp ceiling, to see the whole of the cell inside. He popped up on his toes to look into the nearest two but saw only a white-haired witch and an empty cell. His striding forward to check the next cells was halted by an unearthly chill penetrating his already cold-weary bones. The light dimmed on the crossing corridor ahead of him. Harry closed his eyes and tried to find the Dementor in his mind, but he had long lost the connection to them. Still, he thought he felt some strange presence. Go elsewhere, Harry commanded, hoping that might work.

The approaching darkness held steady. The ice ceased to fork and spread over the wall ahead. Harry quickly checked the next few cells, but retreated when he felt the dismal presence approaching again. Harry ducked around the closest corner where new cells had been installed, resulting in a dungeon far larger than the one he knew in his Plane. The Dementor continued to drift closer. Harry hesitated using a Patronus for fear it would set off an alarm. He tried again with his mind to distract the creature but only encouraged its curiosity, apparently, because it sped up.

Bouncing on his toes as he ran, Harry checked the cells along this wing, putting needed space between himself and clawing unhappiness. He skidded to a halt after peeking in the second-to-last cell on the right, and looked in again. The figure hunched over its knees was painfully familiar. Harry slipped inside via the Dark Plane and stood with his back pressed to the wall beside the door. The occupant of the room did not

stir. Harry raised his wand, preparing a Patronus Charm as the air grew depressing and sucked at the already sparse light.

The Dementor's skeletal hand drifted between the bars of the little window on the door and grabbed hold of one bar. Harry shivered and had to cover his mouth to keep his teeth from clattering. Hopelessness threatened him. Another skeletal hand wrapped around another bar, but the Dementor itself could not enter the cell, apparently, because it approached no more than that. Closing his eyes, Harry found warmth inside his memories. The warmth of being wrapped up in a blissful blanket and kept safe.

Harry opened his eyes. The Dementor still grasped the bars, but the terrible unhappiness had loosed its hold on him. He relaxed a little and studied Snape, his attention caught by one hand twitching where it hung off the stone bench. It was unlikely that he slept deeply because he sat slouched awkwardly, head resting partly on his own propped up knees and partly on the wall. The position did not look at all comfortable. His hair stuck up in strange directions, accentuating his odd pose.

Snape's hand twitched again and he made a small noise of distress. The Dementor rattled the bars and Snape's head jerked. Harry readied a Patronus but tried just a moment more to avoid using it. He closed his eyes and sought out the green world where he had once found the Dementors. Go away, Harry commanded. Feed elsewhere, he insisted, imaging his own hope as a shield in that world where it would go undetected.

One-by-one, the Dementor's long digits released the bars and it retreated, leaving a puff of frozen air drifting in the cell. Relief and warmth flowed into Harry's body.

Harry stepped forward and crouched beside the bench, intending to rest a hand on Snape's shoulder to rouse him, but his hand froze in space halfway there. From this angle Harry could see bruises mottling the side of Snape's face and neck and he could also see that the reason his hair was so matted was it was pressed into shape by dried blood.

Harry swallowed against the sick rising to his throat.

"Severus?" Harry whispered.

Snape jumped, not really asleep, his reaction instantaneous. He squinted at Harry, breath held, but then looked away again, resting his head on his knee. Harry blinked in confusion at being ignored. After a glance behind him and careful listening for any approach, Harry asked, "Who did this to you?"

Still no response.

"Severus?"

Harry shifted his feet where he crouched, thought of only one possibility for being ignored, and said, "I'm not a hallucination."

Snape raised his marred and bloodied head but did not look over, just stared straight at something to the right of the cell door.

Mood fuelled by relief that he had come to this place, Harry continued more amiably, "I'm quite certain hallucinations don't ever bring up the topic of whether or not they are, in fact, hallucinations."

Snape's head turned a quarter of the way in Harry's direction. This showed off the laceration to his scalp that had bled so copiously.

Harry again: "The Ministry must be a corrupt wreck to let this happen. Why did they do this to you?"

Snape swallowed hard in preparation for talking. "I told them. They wanted to know where the Dark Lord was. I told them," he repeated in a litany. His shoulder spasmed. "If this is a trick . . . it does not matter. I've told them."

Harry placed his hand on Snape's shoulder and felt a tinge of aversion through his arm. "Someone used a Cruciatus on you. Did someone from the Ministry do that?"

Snape did not respond. Harry reached a hand to his neck and felt for the tangled heat of the curse. It was not as bad as he feared, but the curse's tiny tendrils seethed, menacing with the threat of never fully letting go, of growing slowly worse forever. Harry pushed the curse down and cooled the heat of it fighting him, pressed it down and cooled it, repeating this back and forth until he gained ground. Snape's breathing grew shallow and rapid, worrisome, but it could just be a reaction to utter release from agony.

The curse ceased heating and reweaving and Harry dropped his hand. Eyes much clearer, Snape stared at him with the same stunned scrutiny he had the last time Harry had seen him. With slow care, Snape straightened and leaned back against the wall to stare at Harry more easily. His left sleeve had been torn free at the shoulder and hung like a crooked cape at his side. Harry noticed that his left forearm had a red X slashed in it.

Harry took hold of Snape's wrist and touched his wand to each of the wounds to heal them. He did not let go immediately after lowering his wand. Something was

vibrating inside of him, something he did not like the feel of. Snape's arm was cursed, but worse than that, it called to something at his core, somewhere just inside his spine. His thumb tingled where it pressed on the cords of Snape's wrist. Harry moved his thumb and the resonance intensified. Harry pushed at it the way he had with the Crucio remnants and Snape's mark flared faint pink before fading to white and disappearing again.

Snape tried to tug his arm away, but Harry held fast.

"Do you regret joining him?" Harry asked.

"Regret?" Snape uttered. "I regret, at this moment, literally everything."

"You wanted him gone though, didn't you?" Harry persisted, feeling for the outlines of the cursed Mark under Snape's skin. Coming here may have been a mistake, if loyalty to Dumbledore was all that had driven Snape's actions. Harry needed to know. "It's better with him gone," Harry prompted.

"Better for everyone but myself," Snape grumbled. "But yes, better. I make a poor martyr, though."

"You told me not to give you away. Maybe I should have. Maybe I could have protected you. I could vouch for you now; it's not too late." Harry was not certain at all that he could arrange to return for the trial, but something had to be done.

"That would not have worked. Not being associated with you has saved me no small amount of interrogation. They tried to question me about you, but they did not know I had assisted you and I could truthfully tell them that I do not particularly like your family."

"Or me," Harry finished for him. Snape's gaze grew wary. "You don't have to like me," Harry assured him. "But you do have to wish you never joined him."

"How could I not wish that?" Snape snapped hoarsely at him. "There have been a few amenities, certainly, but . . ." He diverted his eyes. "Such a mistake I made," he whispered, sounding drained and beaten.

"Don't make any loud noises," Harry said and pressed down with his thumb. Snape hissed and his leg flailed in pain but an instant later the skull and snake image on his arm rose up through his skin and, smoking, faded to ash, which immediately smeared. Harry let go.

Snape held his arm up to better peer at it. "They would hardly notice my screaming here," he murmured. He brushed off the ash and stared some more. Without lowering his arm, Snape asked, "What are you?"

Harry stood and his knees thanked him for it. "I'm part Voldemort, remember?"

Snape flinched at the name and Harry said, "Come now. He's dead. The real question is what do you want to do?"

Snape sneered at him. "And my options would be?"

"I can vouch for you or I take you away from here. Somewhere far away."

Snape swayed as much as one sitting propped against a wall could. "You really are a hallucination. I am finally losing my mind." He swallowed. "If you can take me away from here or, barring my questionable sanity, drive me well enough insane that I do not care that I am still here . . . I would do nearly anything in my measly, miserable power . . . for you. But I have nothing."

"You don't have to do anything except tell me where you want to go."

"Damn you, again," Snape muttered, building to a snarl that transformed his marred face. "Stop giving me hope."

A clang echoed in from far away, interrupting Snape's tormented reply. Footsteps approached. Snape reflexively pressed his back fully against the wall, bracing his hands on the stone bench.

"Recognize the footsteps?" Harry asked, thinking belatedly that he recognized them as well.

"One of the Aurors is coming. Right bastard. His miserable, domineering wife torments him all night and he comes in here most days to take it out on me."

Harry pressed himself against the wall beside the door and tapped himself with an Obsfucation Charm. "Let's do this right," Harry said, thinking ahead to freeing Snape as completely as possible. "Convince him to test for your mark."

Keys sounded in the lock and the cords in Snape's thin neck stood out through his pale skin. He only flinched faintly when the lock sparkled and slammed clear, making Harry marvel at his indomitable will.

Rodgers strode in with a cloying swagger to his step. Snape glared at him, unblinking.

"You're looking better today," Rodgers said with mixed feeling.

Snape said, "I'm finally enjoying the many amenities of your fine establishment."

Rodgers laughed cruelly. "We can change that." His wand twitched at his side, and Harry raised his but waited for a real move.

Snape sneered, restricted from fully showing it by the swollen bruises on his face, "Don't you get tired of this?"

"Tired of getting even with your kind. Never. You're a contamination on the wizarding world and need to be dealt with properly, which means without mercy."

"'My kind'? And what kind would that be?" Snape asked, pulling forth his annoyed professor voice.

"You are an idiot or think me one."

Snape crossed his arms and raised his chin. "No, really, I'd like to hear you say it."

"The Death Eater kind of evil," Rodgers said, leaning forward and speaking low and slow.

"Oh really. And you are certain I am one, are you?"

This gave Rodgers pause. "Everyone knows it. You-Know-Who made no secret of it."

"You were privy to his memos, then?" Snape asked sarcastically, and Harry had to suppress a snigger.

Angry now, Rodgers said, "It is easy enough to check." He used a shackling spell to jerk Snape's arms forward and hold them there, fixed in mid-air. With no gentleness he rolled Snape's left arm over and stabbed his wand against flesh with a Revelatio. Nothing happened so he repeated it, tugging hard enough on Snape's arm to pull him forward off the wall. "It's a trick," Rodgers snarled, stepping back, which canceled the untethered shackling spell.

"Is it?" Snape asked. "I do believe that it is impossible to remove a Mark, is it not?"

Rodgers' shoulders fell and then he whipped his wand up aggressively. "Wait a minute, what happened to the wounds on that arm?" He started to spell something nasty, Harry could feel the cursedness of it. Harry beat him at it, using a whip charm to snag his wand, which sent the half-formed curse sizzling over the walls and ceiling like a firework.

Rodgers spun and leapt bodily at Harry, but Harry had his fist ready and being mostly invisible gave him a huge advantage. He leveled Rodgers with a punch to the jaw.

"Ouch," Harry said, shaking his hand. "Damn that smarts."

Rodgers was rolling to get to his feet. Left handed, Harry put him in a body bind and then tapped himself on the head to remove the Obsfucation.

Chapter 17

Rodgers gaped up at Harry as he stepped over to stand above him. "Potter?!" He opened his mouth wide to shout something more, and Harry hit the door with a Silencing charm, then a series of Impenetrable Charms.

Wary, glancing at the door repeatedly from his ungainly position, Rodgers said, "You think that's the only way to initiate an alarm?"

"It'll buy time." Harry said easily, unperturbed. "Funny, regulations 721 through 724 of the Code for Handling Prisoners states that Magical Suppression Barriers shall not be removed from the Ministry Holding Area except in cases of repair or difficult prisoner movement." Harry waved his wand at Rodgers as though taking him to task. "It's your own damn fault I can do that."

Rodgers blinked at him, caught completely off-guard by having rules read at him. He recovered his bluster. "You don't stand a chance, Potter. . . or whoever you are."

"Oh, I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, bending over him. "See the scar?"

The door rattled.

"He managed an alarm," Snape whispered.

"You're surrounded," Rodgers stated smugly.

Harry went on, "Oh, but what you fail to realize is I'm at my best when things seem bleakest. And I have something to say to you before I go. You talk big about fighting evil, but I have bad news for you." Harry lowered his wand till it touched Rodgers' neck. He definitely had the man's full attention. "You are the evil. You're not an Auror; you're a bully. And if the Ministry is this corrupt there is no hope for it. This man isn't the enemy . . . you are."

The door began to glow and sparkle. "Potter . . ." Snape warned.

Harry raised his hand to him. "Give me your arm." Snape did and Harry grabbed hold firmly. "Brace yourself." The door began to fall inward. Harry hit it with a blasting curse and grunts of pain could be heard on the other side of it when it slammed home into place. Harry re-aimed his wand at Rodgers. "You could be more than this. But all you are is part of the problem. At least get a divorce . . . you'd be happier."

With that, he pulled the two of them into the Dark Plane.

Snape collapsed when they arrived and Harry thought him dead, the way he went so totally, floppily limp. Heart pounding, and berating himself for not thinking about the strain that would cause, Harry Apparated away from the creatures piling in their

direction. He arrived in another area, trying to think quickly. He dropped his burden to the grey, dusty ground and knelt beside him. Snape was breathing, but shallowly, and he was nearly as gray as the dust behind him. Harry did not want to pull Snape through the other side again, worried it would finish him off. He raised his wand and tried a barrier, but it sizzled and cracked. He put his wand away and waited for the creatures to scuttle over, prepared to defend both of them until Snape recovered sufficiently.

Harry did not wait long. The creatures were soon bucking and snarling in a circle about ten feet in diameter. One giant rat-like thing with glistening scales grabbed at Snape's shoe, and Harry had to snarl at it to get it to let loose.

A stand-off ensued. Harry glared at all of the creatures and they glared, circled and crawled over their fellows in an effort to get as close as possible, yet not too close. Harry relaxed marginally and the creatures slowed. Harry froze, breath held. He relaxed more. The creatures, bent their heads and tried to sulk in closer. Harry turned his head side to side and narrowed his eyes at all of them. "Don't you dare," he said. They stepped back slowly and waited, watchful.

Harry sighed. He did not want to take his eyes off the creatures, so he used his hand to shake Snape's shoulder and failing to get a response to that, to check his breathing. Thinking about how vulnerable he was made the creatures move in closer. Harry glared at them again and they backed off again. He sighed into the stale air and held tight to that feeling of superiority.

Harry did not imagine that he could survive sitting there for ten minutes like that, but he did; he managed a draw with the creatures, which counted as a win. Snape muttered something and Harry commanded, "Keep your eyes closed. Feeling all right?"

"I've felt better," came the faint reply.

Harry decided that would have to be good enough and he Apparated them and pulled them through the dust into the only spot he could think of where Snape could have time to recover undisturbed.

A dusting of snow covered cold-stiff grass. Snape blinked in the grey-orange sunlight as he was lifted to kneel on the unyielding grass. "Where the devil are we?" He wrapped his arms around himself as he was released to sway slowly.

Harry moved along the line of huts until he was sure which was which. The snow bore no tracks and no smoke issued from anywhere; the village had been deserted for the

season, as he'd hoped. "In here," he said, tossing open the door of Per's hut where Harry had stayed before on his visit to get instruction from the Shaman.

While Snape crawled gingerly inside, Harry fetched wood and quickly cleared the smoke-hole, adjusting the skin over it for the prevailing wind with practiced ease. Inside he ignited a roaring fire with a twitch of his wand. Snape sat with his arms hitched around his knees, looking only slightly better than when Harry had found him. With surprising force bordering on anger, Snape said, "You didn't answer my question."

"We're in Finland, or Norway, er, north of the Arctic Circle anyway."

"That explains the snow and the exceptionally grim sun," he stated, sounding dubious and fatefully bleak.

"I can take you back to the Ministry," Harry threateningly teased.

"Dying here would be preferable."

Harry was running out of time. "Here, take Rodgers' wand. You can hole up here until you've recovered and then go somewhere and start over again."

That notion appeared to be foreign to Snape because he did not react to it. He stared at the wand in great detail before pocketing it.

"You'll have plenty of time to think about it," Harry assured him, his mind coming up with ideas which might work quickly enough for him to get back before his hearthstone cooled and Vineet arrived. "Let me fetch you supplies. Oh, and if you see a wolf, it might be a shaman. In any event, watch out because they go for the hands first."

Harry stood, remaining hunched because of the roof branches, and Snape watched him with a stupefied expression. "I'll be back," Harry assured him.

Harry arrived a quarter-mile from the Burrow, but what he found astonished him. The same basic house was there, but it had been built onto in all directions, including precariously sideways on the first and second floors, and several outbuildings had been added around it. It was nearly a village. A fifteen-foot wrought-iron fence enclosed the place and it sparkled, heavily charmed. Harry walked around to the front gate and looked for a bell pull. He found a Griffin-head knocker instead and used that. From within the ivy growing thickly on the gate an eyeball popped open and peered around. A pair of lips appeared next, strangely off to the side rather than below the eyeball. "Who is it?" a voice that could be Mrs. Weasley's asked.

Harry stepped sideways within view of the eyeball. "It's Harry Potter, I – " He did not get to finish his request as the lips let out a cry of surprise. The lips muttered

rapidly then fell silent. Harry waited, the breeze blowing his hair around. The eyeball moved again and jerked in surprise and the gate clicked open. Four people approached across the yard as the gate swung wide. Two others came running from elsewhere.

Harry stepped inside a few strides, but given the ivy that slithered to block his path and the way the gnomes crept around with miniature pitchforks, he decided to wait.

He was soon surrounded. "Harry Potter?" Bill asked him in disbelief. The twins slapped him on the back, stiff-armed as though their elbows were unable to bend. Ginny stepped through the pack when it eased. She too whispered his name in a way that tore at Harry for his deception.

Harry quickly said, "I'm sorry I can't stay long. But I need some help."

Mrs. Weasley had arrived, wand out, tied-back hair completely grey. "Out of the way. Out of the way." She gave Harry a quick hug. "Come inside, dear."

Harry wanted to ask where Ron was, but then wondered if he really wanted to know. His question was answered when he came in and found Ron in a floating chair, legs locked straight.

"Cursed, you know," he said, to Harry's staring. Adding: "That incident in the Atrium with the elves . . . maybe you heard about it?"

Rather than answer, Harry asked, "How are you doing?"

Ron shrugged. "I try not to drive Mum crazy. She's got enough on her hands with Fred and George being in and out of curse-punishment." He was about to ask something else. Harry could see in his friend's eyes and knew that he'd have to make up a lie to answer it. The question ballooned in Ron, painful and laden with the past.

Mrs. Weasley turned Harry around before Ron could say anything. "Bill said you need help and are in a hurry, dear; what is it you need?"

Harry shook himself from the notion of a coldly efficient Molly Weasley. "I need supplies. Food and a warm cloak. Very warm gloves, for flying in the cold. And a broomstick if you can spare it. Doesn't have to be fast so much as reliable."

The room went into motion, clearly accustomed to working in a panic as a group. Harry watched, moving forward when a charmed sack was produced, by joint magic of the stiff-armed twins, for holding everything. Cans and jars went into it until Harry lost count. The evening pot roast went in as well as plates and napkins and even the tablecloth.

Harry's deception on top of their generosity was nearly killing him. "I don't know how to repay you for this," he said, pain clear in his voice.

"No need," someone snapped fiercely, and others shook their heads in support.

Harry realized how to do it. He reached over to where Ron floated, holding jars of pickled beets that waited to be packed up. He grabbed Ron's shin and felt the curse coarse up sickeningly up his arm. Eyes watering, he pushed the curse away and Ron's leg bent, limp, and he gave a cry of surprise that brought everyone to a halt. Harry un-cursed Ron's other leg, and shook out his prickling hand. Ron jumped down from the chair and grabbed Harry's arm in gratitude.

"Can't be seen like that," Bill pointed out to his brother.

"I don't care. I'll hide in the house."

"Us next?" one of the twins sheepishly asked.

Household uncursed, Harry bundled the lip of the small sack with the twine handed to him and tossed it easily over his shoulder.

"You can't even stay a little while more?" Ginny asked. "We want to hear what happened. We all thought you were dead. What did Dumbledore do? Where have you been?"

Harry peered around their pale, red-framed faces. "I'm sorry. I can't explain, as much as I'd like to. I miss you all terribly but it . . . it just isn't possible."

"Thanks for getting rid of Ole-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Mentioned," one of the twins said.

"That was the easy part. All of you have the hard part of cleaning up the Ministry."

"That's for certain," Mrs. Weasley coldly agreed, again surprising Harry.

Harry looked them all over again as he looped the cloak over his arm and took up the battered broomstick. "Thanks. I won't forget you."

A chorus of well-wishing followed Harry to the door. "Take it easy, Potter." "Stop in any time." "Don't let the Trolls eat you."

Harry waved several times as he departed, and waited until he was out of view to disappear.

Back in the Arctic, he quietly set the sack down in the stone-floored kitchen area so as not to awaken Snape, who was curled up, sleeping, looking distressingly half dead. Harry rested the broom in the ceiling of the hut and draped the cloak over Snape, which woke him. He sat up quickly, but then winced severely.

"At the risk of sounding ungrateful . . . I hope you have food," Snape said through clenched teeth.

Harry reached into the sack and pulled out the tablecloth, placesetting and the roast. "Here. Compliments of the Weasleys."

Snape had taken up the fork and knife but at this last pronouncement, he stared, eyes glazed, at the food, seeming undone. Something compelled him to move, perhaps primeval hunger and, shakily, he made a jagged slice in the roast. He cleared his throat and said, "I do not think I have ever been brought so low, so humbled, as this moment."

"It's good for you," Harry said. "Builds character."

Snape snorted, but his mouth relaxed as though, minus the bruises, he might have smiled, or at least smirked.

Harry said, "Get better, and move on, somewhere far from England. Forget everything and start over again. Without the Mark no one can prove who you are."

Snape swallowed and cut another generous, juice leeching bite. "Why are you doing this?"

Harry replied, "I have my reasons. You don't need to know them if you are benefiting from them."

Snape took another bite and said, "Benefactors are far more dangerous than enemies. They expect something in return. Enemies just expect you to be yourself."

"I don't want anything from you but that you stay out of trouble so I can focus on what I need to do."

"And what might that be . . . mastering the Universe?" Snape asked.

"I'm just doing what everyone does. Trying to get by, stay out of trouble, learn some magic. Nothing unusual."

Eating had given Snape his old attitude back. "Why do I find that highly doubtful?"

Harry warned, "This time I'm really not coming back."

"I believed you the last time," Snape said, falling quiet and strained again. "Thank you for lying."

"You're welcome. Just make something out of this second chance, all right? Then we're even."

"Third chance."

"Who's counting?"

Chapter 17

Vineet stopped at the base of the steps to Hogwarts castle. The path was familiar from his round of attenuation lessons the previous school year and habit had carried him well until the grass became step.

He was behaving like someone other than himself and rather than finding that alarming, he found it a relief. A gust of wind blew the great front doors against the latch, and that felt like a signal. He stepped up and slipped inside, tugging the door closed hard behind him against the weather. In contrast it was sultry inside. A fire burned vigorously in the Entrance Hall hearth. Students sat on the Grand Staircase, one group sharing notes, another play-fighting over something of value.

"Vishnu, is it not?" a familiar voice said, drawing Vineet from ascending the stairs upward.

Vineet turned to McGonagall and bowed formally, hands pressed together.

"Your lessons with Sinistra have not resumed, have they?"

"No, this is a visit," Vineet said, wondering now if he were breaking school protocol that he had not needed to learn last time. Surely there were rules about visitors, even if no one had mentioned them to him before. Vineet felt dizzy with a remote part of him wishing to be sent away from this place.

She winked at him, dashing the hopes of that last sparkle of righteousness. "It's not a problem, young man. I do keep things a little more secure here than perhaps the school has historically been. I find as soon as I relax the habit for great care, something transpires to necessitate a return to previous security. But Ministry employees and certainly Auror apprentices are always welcome." She held back her sleeve to gesture to the stairs. "Please," she said, sounding eager for him to continue on.

Vineet bowed just with his head this time and mounted the staircase.

McGonagall followed along with him as he travelled through the castle. Beyond the Entrance Hall the corridors held chilly air and he was glad he had not shucked his cloak. McGonagall made slow elegant small talk as they went.

Just before the door to Hermione's office, when Vineet wished for her to be absent when he knocked, she held out a hand to the door latch and held fast. Quietly, she said, "I'm very glad you're here." With that she pushed the latch and slipped away.

The door creaked open an inch and Vineet, reeling from the way the world was conspiring to channel him along this path, knocked on the dense wood of the ajar door.

Hermione's voice sounded higher pitched than normal as she called that whoever it was could enter. She was working at something with a long quill. She looked up and held still in surprise before putting the quill on the stand beside the inkwell and pushing the sheet away by the edges.

"Hi," she said.

"I wished to speak with you; if that is possible," Vineet said, finding refuge in that limited intent.

"Close the door. Come on in," she said, restraining pleasure behind standard words. She fidgeted but then stood and came around the desk.

They met in the middle of the room between the two student desks facing her larger one.

"It's good to see you again so soon," she said, pained but with eyes glowing. She glanced around, perhaps for a normal chair to offer, considered the chairs lined up against the wall, then turned away from them. Instead, she simply pulled him down into a kiss.

His wet cloak hung forward over his shoulders, feeling cold and leaden trapped between them. He pulled away long enough to drop it to the floor and wrap her up so he could feel every square inch of warmth where they touched.

Harry sat up when the latent heat of his hearthstone seeped fully into his bones. He rubbed his eyes and glanced around his blessedly quiet and familiar room. His heart ached a bit from seeing Snape in that tortured state, but he had succeeded, and that let him breathe freely. He sat with his back to the dark hearth, forcing himself to pledge to not return there again. This time he truly had done all he could. Everything else would have to take care of itself. He wanted to believe in his own pledge but felt doubt nonetheless.

When Vineet returned in the Floo, Harry, who had arrived with a comfortable fifteen minutes to spare, was lounging on the couch with tea spread on a nearby tray.

"Hungry?" Harry asked his friend.

Vineet shook his head and took the couch opposite. He appeared a little shell shocked but far more relaxed and present than before.

Chapter 17

"How did it go?" Harry asked.

"I think we reached an understanding."

"That's good. What was that?"

Vineet hesitated, struggled to explain, then said, "I don't have words for it."

Harry rubbed away his instant grin.

"And your errand?" Vineet asked, drawing outside himself in a sign of improved disposition.

"Good. I'm glad I took care of it. It was almost too late. But it's done now."

Vineet clasped his hands together. "May I ask if it involved anything illegal?"

"No," Harry immediately replied, thinking there were no rules about inter-dimensional travel. But then he thought again about springing a prisoner from the Ministry dungeon. "Well . . . it depends on whose rules apply."

Vineet said, "I only ask because I wonder how seriously I need to take making up a story in the future."

"You won't need to make up a story," Harry assured him. "I didn't break any of this Ministry's rules."

"Just those of a different Ministry?"

"Something along those lines," Harry said.

"The Latvian Ministry's rules, perhaps?"

"I helped out a friend who was in dire straits. That's all. You're one to suddenly care about the rules," Harry finally stopped resisting pointing out.

"I am trying to return to the habit as quickly as possible. I should not have let you convince me to leave you untended. I was weaker than I wished to be when you suggested it. But that is no excuse."

"Sorry about that. I think I took advantage of you, even if everything worked out."

Vineet bowed acceptance of Harry's apology and they fell into other topics. They were still sitting there discussing minor things when Snape arrived home early for dinner.

"Candide hasn't returned from work," Harry explained. "We're just having an easy Saturday here."

"Are you? Nice to have friends available as guards." Snape stated this flatly enough to make Harry's brow furrow. "Any other friends around this afternoon?" Snape asked.

Harry only saw the trap after it had sprung. He considered lying, contriving something with Ginny who would back him up in a pinch but could not withstand any Legilimency. Harry exhaled broadly and said, "No."

"Mr. Abhayananda, I will take over for the evening; if you would leave us alone."

Vineet stood and gave a low bow. "It will not happen again."

"I am most assured of that already," Snape stated. "On that note, Headmistress McGonagall wanted you to know that you can visit the school anytime and in fact wishes to know if you would like to teach a session on Asian magic."

Vineet stopped and bowed again before exiting with a clear line of relief to his posture.

Snape stood stock still until he and Harry were alone. "You are not to shake your guard. You are grounded for the week."

Harry frowned. "What does that entail?"

"It means you will be here in this house unless you have official duties to attend to. No pubs, friends who aren't assigned guards, or nights at Ms. Tonks' flat." Snape flicked his cloak and sat across from Harry. "I fear asking what you were doing."

"Don't ask, then," Harry quipped.

Snape's brow arched. "At the risk of sounding the bad parent, you were sloppy about covering yourself as well. I was certain to hear that your fellow was at Hogwarts this afternoon. He made no secret of his presence." He sat back, satisfied with this critique. "Have you shaken your guard previously?"

Harry wanted to be truthful where he could. "Once. To sneak into the Department of Mysteries. Tonks let me off for a few hours when I asked. I wanted to see what was going on there."

"Ms. Tonks as well. Goodness, is there no one to rely on at that place?"

Snape stood with a huff and slipped over to the drawing room doorway. "I hope you had plans this evening . . ."

"You hope I did?" Harry asked, confused.

"Yes," Snape retorted dryly, "So that you must cancel them." He disappeared into the next room.

Chapter 17

Harry sighed, feeling bemused by getting into trouble with Snape after saving Snape. But he was loath to admit what he had been doing. Harry called down his owl to send a message to Ron telling him he would miss Sunday dinner at the Burrow. While he sat with quill poised, trying to decide whether to admit he was in trouble, Snape wandered back through.

He stopped and said, "What were you doing that required you to shake your guard?"

"Will it change my punishment if I had a good reason?"

"No."

"Then I'm not telling you." Harry dipped his quill and started to write out that he was in trouble because it was just easier to admit it instead of making something up. He finally looked back up at Snape when the other moved to lean on the back of the other couch, hands gripping tightly. They stared at each other until Harry looked down again at the letter before him. The quill had splotched ink where it rested, so he crossed out the word "trouble" and wrote it out again. Snape did not move, he stood there thinking for over a minute.

"I have a life to live," Harry said, even though this felt like a lie, given that he had used his free time to live someone else's life.

"Only if you survive to live it."

"Oh, come on," Harry complained. "You're acting like I've never been in danger before. Everyone is. I got less protection when I was eleven."

"That is not technically true; you just were unaware of the protection around you. Is that what this is about?"

"No," Harry insisted, shaking his head and abandoning his letter for the moment because he'd splotched it again. "I just have things I need to do sometimes. Why can't you just accept that?"

Snape formulated an answer before replying, "Because the possibilities engendered by your power are alarming in their scope."

Harry took a deep breath. "It's still my life," he said softly.

Snape kneaded his fingertips into his forehead in a gesture mimicking the one his alternative self used repeatedly while injured. Harry bit his lip.

"I don't mean to make things hard for you," Harry said, which was the truth, even though it did not change his will any to acknowledge it.

Reserve Rescue

Ginny and Ron came on Sunday in response to his letter, forcing Harry to explain in a low voice that he was grounded.

"How old are you now?" Ron asked.

"It has nothing to do with that. I think I'd get grounded for shaking my guard if I were thirty. I'm afraid you can't stay," he said, when Ginny changed the topic to try to tell him something about the twins' shop.

"That's all right, Ginny's got a date tonight with his highness," Ron teased.

A blush tainted Ginny's cheeks. "It's just to the cinema."

"Aaron finally asked you out?" Harry asked, but was interrupted by Snape clearing his throat from the doorway. Harry's guardian glared at them all, arms crossed. "You have to go," Harry said, shooing his friends off.

When they were gone, he and Snape stared at each other for a few breaths before Snape returned to the main hall, leaving Harry wondering idly if he still needed him, really. In his gut he believed he did, but another voice in his head needled him mockingly that he should not stand for being treated like a child.

That evening, Harry sat in the main hall, taking notes from his books with slow, bored, grudging purpose, stalling by doodling in the margins. He doodled his pets and then the Dark Mark, remembering the ashy image of it as it emerged from the alternative Snape's arm, remembering how it had called to something inside of him. If he could shed this piece of Voldemort, he would need Snape less, it occurred to him. Harry casually slipped that parchment under the next as Snape approached. He turned the page in his book and pretended to resume reading.

"I am returning to Hogwarts now," Snape stated coldly.

"All right."

Snape appeared to relent a little. "Harry . . ." he began, with more emotion, but faded out and shifted to frustrated. He sat down, hands clasped as though cold.

"Are you more worried about me than you would be if I didn't still have part of Voldemort in me?" Harry asked, since it was flitting around in his immediate thoughts.

"That has almost nothing to do with it. I assume by now you are accustomed to living as you have most all your life, with him included. No, what I fear is trouble

you do not foresee, and in fact create for yourself out of earnest heroism or simple naïveté."

Harry thought about his previous day's foray and said with a touch of sheepishness, "I'm getting better at recovering from those."

"Practice does help," Snape stated wryly.

Harry wanted to tell him that he was going to inform Tonks of his powers. That he ached to tell her so she would trust him more. But before he could work himself up to it given the tension they already had, Snape returned to a more pleading attitude and said, "I have to do what I can, Harry, even at the risk of alienating you, which I see I am doing." Snape rose to his feet and stepped over to rest a hand on Harry's shoulder for a second before departing with a last goodbye to Candide.

In his absence, Harry sat staring at the doorway to the dining room, wondering again with a prickling chill across his skin if he had again landed somewhere similar but new. This time it was definitely his fault if that had happened. Perhaps every time he left he returned somewhere new. If that was the case, he was lost utterly now. But he could not ask for further reassurance without admitting he had departed once again. Harry shook his head and headed up to his room to take Kali out of her cage.

Ginny sat, happily eating a meal in a white-clad restaurant she could never imagine affording to read the menu of, much less order anything in. Across the neat table and crystal candlesticks, Aaron exhibited his disarming goofy gallantness as they tucked into one course after another.

Aaron gestured at their personal waiter to top up the wine glasses. "I asked Harry for permission to take you out, you know," he said.

"You what?" Ginny blurted, attracting glances from neighboring tables. The waiter, a true professional, reacted not at all. Ginny ducked her head and said, "Why did you do that?"

"He said you were like a sister," Aaron teased.

"I don't need another brother," Ginny insisted firmly. "Especially not a meddling one."

"Does Harry meddle?" Aaron asked.

Ginny drank a gulp of wine. “I don’t know. Depends on what he said.”

“He said he was fine with it.”

Between sips she muttered, “Yeah, figures.”

Aaron’s eyes glittered in the candlelight. “Oh, I suspected your torch for him was still flickering a little.”

“Ignore it. I try to.”

Aaron, who was drinking far more than his share of the wine, held up his glass. “That’s the spirit.”

They lingered over the second bottle of wine and missed the last film of the evening.

Standing before the cinema, Aaron retook Ginny’s arm and said, “We’ll just go to my place.”

Aaron’s flat was a multi-level, high-ceilinged modern home with tall windows garnished by ivy shaped bars. Despite the copious windows and the November weather, the room was pleasantly warm as Aaron hung their cloaks up.

“Have a seat,” he said.

“Nice place,” she said.

“It’s a trap,” Aaron sighed.

“It is?”

He sat down beside her. “It keeps me in my mother’s clutches.”

“I was thinking the windows reminded me of a bird cage, actually,” she said, hiding her grin.

He peered at the windows in turn. “You think so? You know the decorator my mum hired would be just the type of bloke to make a statement like that.” He sighed and slipped an arm around her. “Well, it’s nice to have company when stuck in a cage.” He bent and kissed her fervently. And when she made a noise of surprise, he leaned back and noticed she was pressed ungainly back onto the piled throw pillows. He said, “We can move to the bedroom where it’s more comfortable.”

“Uh . . .” she began, putting a hand up while grasping for words.

Aaron straightened, and said, “Oh. Too soon for that, I see.”

She let out a breath and sat up. “Yeah,” she breathed like a huff.

This generated a raised brow. Aaron stood suddenly and said, "Let's have ice cream instead."

She managed to say, "You can eat again already?"

Aaron was digging around in the stainless steel kitchen, through the drawers and the freezer. He took out a tub of ice cream and began scooping like a man possessed.

"Here," he pushed a bowl over and straightened it neatly before her. "Chocolate sauce?"

"Uh, sure."

He fetched out a full jar and poured out a dollop.

"More than that," she said, pushing her bowl closer.

He made the white scoops swim and she said, "Stop. Thanks." She settled onto one of the tall bar stools and accepted the spoon and ate despite not being hungry.

He put things away and settled on the next stool over, behind his own bowl.

Ginny, mouth half frozen, said, "So, uh, we're having ice cream instead of . . . something else."

Bent over his bowl, he said, "Oh yeah."

"What's the problem?" she asked. "You're just too fast, is all," she added, blushing against her will.

He cleaned his spoon with his mouth and used it to accentuate his speech by waving it. "There is no such thing as slow enough with a virgin," he asserted.

"Yeah, there is," she lightly snapped.

"Not with me. I don't know what to do," he said, now sounding almost helpless.

"If you don't know what to do . . . how in the world is a virgin supposed to know what to do?"

He fell thoughtful, which he wore well because it was such an unusual expression for him. "You have a point there. But nevertheless."

She dropped her spoon into her bowl where it rattled around. "Sorry to waste your time."

Mouth full of white ice cream, he mumblingly said, "I didn't say that. What makes you say that?"

She dropped her shoulders. "I just assumed."

He swallowed and cleaned his spoon again by sucking generously on it, then relocated everything to the distant sink with a wave of his wand. "Not at all," he insisted.

"So," she said, partly to trip him up, "we can go out again?"

"Yeah. Why not. I had a good time." He propped his chin on his hand and critically peered at her. "How did you get through school . . ."

"Don't ask," she snapped, but then decided to kvetch. "It's not like there is a really big pool of possible wizard dates or anything."

"Hm." He pondered that. "I'll admit I find myself extending the acceptable age range as the years pass. So, I guess I'd have to agree. I don't remember that being a problem at Hogwarts . . . lack of opportunity, that is." He sounded debonair as well as teasing.

He then said, "If you are set, I'll take you home."

She started to go, but paused to say, "Hey, does this have anything to do with my dad?"

"What part?"

"Any of it."

"No."

"Well, that's something."

He presented her with an arm to escort her across the flat. "How about Wednesday we do something? If we knock off afternoon studies early enough we can make the kid's matinée . . ."

She cocked her arm as though to hit him with her free hand. "You are so in trouble," she threatened.

He chuckled. "Oh, come on," he said. "Lighten up. You'll be happier."

"I'm perfectly light, thank you."

At the hearth, he held out a crystal goblet to take Floo powder from. "Well, this way I can face your father easily. So perhaps it has a tiny bit to do with him."

She dropped her head, dejected. "Hm."

"Didn't you have a nice time?"

She didn't raise her head. "I had a great time." Then still staring at her shoes. "I like being around you."

"But not looking at me . . ." he teased.

"I'm horribly embarrassed here already . . . can we go?"

Chapter 17

At training on Monday, Harry watched Aaron saunter in and gamely greet everyone. Vineet came in behind him, appearing more his old self, which is to say, unanimated but lacking the sad edge he had been exuding.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked him.

Vineet responded with a simple nod to the side. Rodgers hurried in and set a disorganized pile of books and notes on the front table. His presence sent a chill through Harry.

When he was called up to the front of the room, Harry tried not to show his dislike, but his seriousness generated an immediate comment.

"You don't look happy to be here, Potter," Rodgers said.

"I have a lot on my mind, sir," Harry explained.

"Not in here, you don't. One thing only." He raised his wand and hovered a mirror into place behind Harry. "We're going to try this a little differently today since some of you were a little slow last week in picking this up. I'm going to spell you in the mirror and I want you to block the reflection, not the initial casting."

"Only a few spells will work that way," Kerry Ann pointed out.

Rodgers slid his eyes to her. "I am well aware of that. Thank you," he stated tiresomely.

Harry now found their trainer's slightly obnoxious attitude impossible to ignore, rather than just annoying. And between his turns at practice, Harry pondered how different sets of circumstances could bring out different parts of someone's personality. He could easily imagine this Rodgers torturing Snape under the right circumstances, and that made him feel he already had.

"Still grim?" Rodgers teased when Harry came up again.

Harry felt like hitting him with a blasting curse but he did not so much as let his wand twitch in that direction. "Yes sir. This is serious business, isn't it? That's what you always say."

Mollified, Rodgers said, "I do say that. Well, give it another go. Wand up."

At lunchtime, Rodgers pulled Harry back into the room with the words. "Just a second, Potter."

Harry let Tridant slide by him in the doorway and the door swung closed.

Rodgers said, "You act like I offended you somehow. When I say leave it outside, I mean it."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He avoided the man's gaze, but when the silence dragged on, he glanced up and found eyes more human than he expected.

"Something going on?" Rodgers asked.

Leave it outside. Leave it behind. Harry chanted to himself. It wasn't this man; even if this man seems perfectly capable. "Some stuff. But you're right; I should leave it outside the Ministry."

"Okay, then," Rodgers said. "Just the way you were looking at me back there, like you wanted a real fight."

Harry silently agreed that was true and rubbed his hair around. "Sorry about that."

"I don't mind you getting into the spirit of things, but there is a limit and I've seen that look enough times, but not, I confess, on the face of someone I may have to rely on."

Harry had no interest in explaining. "I'll keep it outside, sir," he insisted. And to himself, he pledged to keep an eye on Rodgers, but for now would stop assuming the worst about him.

"That's fine," Rodgers said. "But as well, if you have something you really need to say, just say it."

Harry hesitated, but said, "I'd prefer you not get personal."

"Hm." Rodgers tapped his wand on the nearby table, letting it bounce. "If it bothers you so when I harangue you about your adoptive father . . . I think that's something you need to work on. Not me." He sounded hard as he said this.

Harry did not really want to argue. This was not the real issue, even if it was something that irked him. "I just don't like it when you're cruel," Harry said, aiming closer to the real issue.

"You think the world is always nice? Oh, I forget. To you it may be."

"You must be joking," Harry said, finding new annoyance with the man before him. "Look, we don't come in here and make fun of you and your ex do we?"

This found the mark. Rodgers eyes flared with something volatile. "You aren't in charge. It's not the same."

Chapter 17

Harry saw no alternative to continuing. "It IS all the same. Why don't you have more respect for others around you?" Harry dropped his gaze, wanting to drop the whole conversation. This tactic was not going to help anything. "I'm sorry if I'm out of line, sir. I just . . . think your not being especially considerate is a sign of . . . something else that may need attention."

"If you aren't hard enough, this world will eat you alive," Rodgers insisted, sounding as hard as anyone Harry had ever heard.

"That's not really true, sir," Harry said, quietly, calmly and insistently. "And I think I have more than enough experience to know if it weren't."

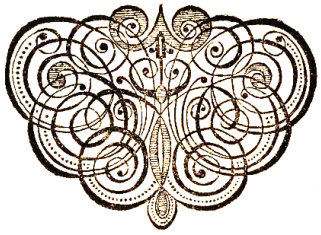
They stared at each other. Rodgers said, "Maybe you're just better than I am, Potter."

Harry replied, "I don't think so, sir. Everything we do is the result of a choice we make."

"Hmf," Rodgers breathed through his nose. With a glance up and down Harry, he said, "Well, it's lunchtime."

> Author's Notes: We may just be getting back to a regular 1-2 week schedule. Hopefully.

Chapter 18.



Secrets Small and Large

Harry was glad when Candide arrived home at a more normal hour and Hornisham decided to leave them alone and knit in the main hall. Harry wanted Candide's advice. She put her things away and joined him at the table, prompting dinner to sparkle in.

"You're home earlier," Harry said to open the conversation.

"Severus insisted I be."

"Hm," Harry said, forking himself pasta. "Because of me or because of you?"

She smiled faintly. "Probably both, but the excuse was you."

"I didn't get you into trouble did I?" Harry asked, prepared to fire off a sharp owl if she said 'yes'.

"No, more a frustrated exchange about none of us having any time to pay attention to any of the rest of us."

"Hm," Harry murmured, concentrating on eating because he was hungry. The fire, burning higher in the evenings due to the cooling weather, shifted, sending cinders onto the hearthstone.

Once he was no longer famished, Harry quietly said, "I could use some advice, if you can keep a secret."

"I can keep a secret, Harry." She wiped her hand and raised a finger. "Unless it conflicts with one of the house rules."

"Our house has official rules?"

"It has a rule at the moment that you are grounded." She peered at her plate. "It probably has others. But I trust you will not shake your guard again."

"I don't know about that," Harry said.

She glared at him in surprise, then laughed lightly. "At least you're honest."

"Honesty is my trouble at the moment. I have a problem with a friend and I don't know what to tell him."

"Well, run it by me. I can keep secrets; it's part of my job to."

"Well, I suspect something about this friend that he really should know and . . ."

"You suspect or you know? There's a world of difference if the issue is a sticky one."

Harry thought about that as they ate. Filling up fast, Candide pushed her plate away, saying, "I'll get a snack later. Can't eat so much at a time this week," she said, patting her rounding belly.

Dinner faded away and herbal tea arrived in Candide's place setting. "Want some?" she asked. Harry shook his head as he laid another log on the fire and brushed his hands off before resuming his seat. He said. "I guess I only strongly suspect this thing about this friend." He shook his head and gave up on trying to be secretive. "Well, let me run it by you. My friend Aaron . . . see, he's from this wealthy family, and . . . well, his father's dead, but . . . erm, I suspect his father is actually someone else."

Candide shook her head. "Back up a bit. What makes you suspect this?"

"I did Legilimency on Lord Freelander when he said something that made me think I'd led him on about something. But I was wrong. See, I thought he may be referring to me because he wanted to adopt me, but I'm pretty sure I saw in his mind that he was referring to Aaron."

Candide shook her head rapidly again. "Okay, from dealing with Severus, I've come to the conclusion that not knowing what others really think is a critical factor in keeping society functioning smoothly. But that aside for the moment . . ." She faded out and propped her chin on her hand to think. "So, Freelander thinks he's Aaron's father, you are saying? He may be wrong."

Harry tapped his fingers beside his fork. "I hadn't thought of that."

She lined her tea bag, sugar jar, and spoon up neatly beside her cup as she talked, as though adding them up. "But, if he even suspects it, then the odds are, well, let's say better than even, probably. Do they look alike?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose. They don't not look alike. Freelander's a little grey and getting up in years, so it's harder to tell than if he were younger. But there are other things. He knew much too much about Aaron's past. See, Aaron was my guard the other day when I went to visit and Freelander was really hard on him, and then really surprised when he found out he was an Auror apprentice." Harry fell thoughtful. "It's like he was trying to get over his own disappointment or something."

"Hm," she muttered meaningfully. "That does support your suspicion. So the question is: what to tell your friend."

Harry turned pained eyes on her. "Yeah. I'm really having a real tough time with this. I know he thinks a lot of his father. Well, the person he was raised by. Even if I was certain, I don't know what I'd say."

"You could stay out of it."

"That doesn't seem right either." Harry sighed. "Freelander will eventually decide something, I suppose, but Aaron's my friend and I feel like I should be open with what I suspect."

"That's a tough one, Harry. I'm not sure I have a clear suggestion for you. Why don't you try feeling Aaron out on the topic, just to get a sense of how he's going to react to the news."

Harry nodded. "That's a good idea. I'll do that. Maybe I can get him assigned as guard tomorrow."

The next day, Aaron followed Harry home at Harry's request.

"Is Ginny coming today?" Aaron asked.

"No, just Wednesday this week, since I am claiming her as an assigned guard and that's a stretch. Why?"

Aaron shrugged. "No reason."

"How'd your date go with her on Sunday?" Harry asked, now wondering, when before he felt he should stay out of it.

"It was fine. It was nice."

Chapter 18

"Is that a bad thing?" Harry asked, trying to read his tone and vaguely stiff body language.

"No, of course that's not a bad thing," he said, mood shifting. "She's perhaps too serious for me, but we have another date. Come on, let's get into the books shall we? I somehow haven't managed to since the last time we studied together."

They settled into the library over tea and biscuits, Harry happy to have a guard who did not feel like one. Aaron frequently stood to stretch, stopping by the window as he did so. Harry heard his pet rattling her cage upstairs and waved an Alohomora in that direction to let her come down, which she did.

"Your purple flying rat," Aaron said, retaking his seat

"Hey," Harry said, feigning insult while stroking Kali's head. "She's been good to me. She helped rescue Severus among other things."

Aaron sighed, and changed books. "I can't read more than three pages of one at a time," he explained.

Harry laughed. "Want me to read aloud?"

Aaron sat straight to peer over the rim of Harry's book. "No. I'm too far behind you." He jerked his head to stare out the darkening window, appeared to consider standing again, but sat back with his book instead.

"What is it?" Harry asked,

"I don't want to sound paranoid, but lately I feel like I'm being watched."

Harry pulled his wand out and ran the spell to check the perimeter of the house. It flared blue with a sputter of red at the end.

"Huh," Harry uttered. "No, don't move," he said to Aaron when his friend put his hands on the chair arms as if to rise. Harry prodded his pet and stared into her eyes. "Out the chimney with you; I don't want to open a window and give anything away."

Kali flew off when released. Harry closed his eyes and tracked her flight up the blackened, gritty flue. Near the top, she pulled her wings in and crawled easily over the rough tile inside. Aaron did not speak while Harry concentrated.

From her perch upon the spindly chimney, Kali peered down around herself over the slate roof and the dark fields behind. A low light beside the garden wall caught her attention. She flapped down and around it. It turned out to be a dark cloaked figure, hunched over a faint fairy light. Kali circled again, diving low, attracting no attention from the target.

For a moment, Harry was back in the library with his hands over his eyes. He felt for the breeze in his wings and was back circling the garden as though a giant rubber band had snapped him back. The figure behind the wall was bent over a notebook and holding an extendable eyeball. Harry wondered at that, since he did not believe the twins sold them.

Kali flapped by too close, indicated by the figure crouching lower and covering the notebook with its cape. The figure did not glance up, to Harry's dismay. Instead, it Apparated away.

"What is it?" Aaron asked, because Harry had made a noise of defeat.

"He or she got away. Someone was spying on us though."

Aaron went to the window and stood there with his arms crossed.

Harry said, "Let's add some traps outside and then move to the main hall where the windows face the road."

"Sounds good," Aaron said.

The two of them, cloaked and gloved, slogged through the dead brush around the property and a corner of the neighbor's property, leaving behind trapping spells that grew more elaborately clever as they went. Harry wanted to say something to Aaron, but had not worked out exactly what. His suspicion that this watcher had something to do with Freelander kept him from calling in others from the Auror's office.

Back inside, Harry threw a few choice logs on the hall fire and they settled in there on the couches. Harry arranged his thoughts and asked his friend, "So, your dad wasn't around much when you were young, you said."

Aaron answered without pulling his nose out of his book. "No. He was off, frequently. He ran a wizard architectural firm for a while, then a consultancy. Most of his clients were on the continent where the laws about expanding wizard property are more liberal." Before Harry could compose a followup question, Aaron volunteered, "You know, he didn't even have to work and for a while, he lost money, but in the end, ended up making quite a bit. But what was the point? He was never home." A whiff of bitterness floated out at the end of this.

"Your mum didn't mind him going off?"

"She said he wouldn't be happy if he didn't get to be his own person, make his own way. So, I decided I should get to be my own person too."

"Do you miss him?" Harry asked, and felt a twinge as he did so, like he had crawled too far out on a flimsy tree limb.

"Yeah. Don't you miss your dad?"

"I don't remember him," Harry said, voice drifting away.

"That's a shame," Aaron said, sounding pained. "I don't think I'd know who I was if I hadn't known my dad at all."

Harry dropped the topic.

Aaron begged off from dinner when Harry's evening guard arrived. After a quiet meal across from Candide, who spent it perusing files, Harry penned a letter to Snape asking permission to come speak with him. Hedwig returned promptly and Harry opened the small missive to find a sharply worded reply saying that he mostly certainly could come to speak with him and that asking was an unnecessary delay if he needed help with something. The pen strokes of the letter spoke of frustration even more than the words. Harry folded the message away in his pocket and collected Hornisham to take the Floo into Hogsmeade, feeling like he couldn't do things right all of a sudden.

Harry insisted that Candide follow along, even after she gave him a disbelieving, tired glare at the suggestion. She stood awkwardly while patting her abdomen, and accepted her cloak.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But I can't leave you here alone tonight. Someone was watching the house earlier."

Hornisham perked up at this. "Next time I can bring one of my pets to patrol."

"Er, we added some spells. I doubt they'll be back. But certainly, as long as it's something small and doesn't breath fire."

Hornisham's lips curled as she nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I know just the pet. Mathilda could use some getting out. She gets cranky and the Ministry said she had to stay in a cage 'cept for official business."

"And what sort of creature is Mathilda?" Candide asked factually.

"Monstrous Centipede," Hornisham proudly announced. "The only registered one in the Isles."

"She doesn't mind the cold?" Harry asked, sort of thinking they should avoid Mathilda.

"Ach. I knitted her a woolly sweater," she replied, patting the sack of knitting hitched over her shoulder. "Took me over a year to do it. Had to knit all the hundred sleeves out of single hairs of wool."

"We'll see if we need her," Harry said. "I think for now we're all right. By the way, have you met Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper?"

"I remember him from school and his name come up in the files often enough, but I haven't been formally introduced, I don't believe."

"Well," Harry brightly said, while reaching for the Floo powder, "why don't I leave you two with him while I talk to Severus. I have this strange feeling you two are going to hit it off." He and Candide shared faint smiles.

Snape, with a sharp wave, sent off the student doing detention and gestured at the visitor's chair. The student, a tall, slope-shouldered Slytherin, lumbered off, head down, appearing to attempt to slink off without Harry's notice.

The door closed and Harry skipped sitting. "So, someone was watching the house tonight," he said. Bringing Snape's hooded eyes to alert. "I left Candide at Hagrid's hut with my guard, don't worry."

"You left Candide with Hagrid and I'm not to worry?" Snape stated dryly as he came around the desk to lean his hip on the front of it.

"Oh, come on. Hagrid is harmless."

"Hagrid tries to be harmless. He rarely succeeds. But you were saying . . . ?"

"So, I think Freelander is spying on Aaron . . ."

Snape sounded hard still. "Whatever for?"

"Because he thinks he's Aaron's biological father; I'm fairly certain."

Snape pondered that. "That's interesting. So, why are you here, then? Ask him yourself."

"Next week, I can do that," Harry pointed out. "It didn't feel like a topic one should send by owl."

Snape straightened the inkwells at his side. "So, you are asking for permission to go speak with him?"

"I was hoping I could do that," Harry said.

"It would defeat the purpose of grounding you to grant exceptions." They stared at each other as the lamp on the desk fluttered, sending oil smoke into the air. "What were you doing when you shook your guard? If you tell me I may reduce the time of your punishment."

"If I tell you; you'll make it a month," Harry said.

Snape turned away and returned to the chair behind the desk. "That illuminates the topic nicely, actually," he said with a hiss.

"Does it?" Harry said.

"You may speak with Freelander on Friday evening. I will escort you there myself," Snape stated. "Was that it?"

He sounded so unyielding that Harry felt a disorienting wave of doubt about where he was. Swallowing, he said, "There is something else." He tried to feel hurt instead of uncertain, but it was a hard battle. "I want to tell Tonks the truth about what I can do."

"I cannot stop you from doing so; I can only strongly advise against it."

"She doesn't trust me," Harry complained.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "And when telling her does not solve that . . . what then?"

Harry honestly considered that despite wanting to rebel. It was possible that Tonks wasn't good at trusting and he was just grasping. But he had to try. "I don't know what then," he admitted.

Silence fell, ruled by the wind rattling at a loose windowpane. Harry concluded with, "That's all I wanted to talk to you about."

With a warmer tone, Snape said, "Thank you for the warning . . . warnings. Is Candide working less?"

"Yes," Harry said. "She's mostly home at an earlier hour now."

"Good." They considered each other during another awkward pause. Snape said, "I'll be home for longer this weekend, if I can manage it."

"I'll see you then," Harry said automatically, and turned for the door.

He was brought up short before he could grab the handle by Snape saying, "Do take care," in a tone that meant it.

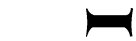
Harry turned back, but kept his head down. Snape went on, "Despite someone plotting to do you harm, I am convinced you remain your own worst enemy. And I am relieved that whatever you were doing, you are safely through it."

"I am," Harry agreed. Thinking more, he said, "But if it isn't Freelander spying on Aaron or the house, shouldn't we know that sooner?"

"Owl him regarding it."

"Not a chance," Harry replied. "I wouldn't know where to start. And besides, I'll need Legilimency to figure it out if he doesn't want to answer."

A brow went up. "Well, at least you have learned that much."



The next day, Harry, after three peeks into the office, finally caught Tonks between calls.

"Can I see you this afternoon?" Harry asked her, thinking he could sneak in a visit before going home.

She glanced up from the report she was scratching out. "Yeah. I promised myself for once to get home at a reasonable hour. I can take over from your guard after dinner, if you want to drop by."

Harry bit his lips. He could use the excuse that he had to fetch her for a guard. Harry noticed that Shacklebolt's quill had stopped moving, indicating he was listening in. The notion that Snape may have informed the Order of his grounding nearly made him laugh aloud. Perhaps it was just the ongoing dating issue.

"Okay, I'll pick you up as a guard then. I have some things I really need to talk to you about," Harry said.

She gave him a fretful glance at that, but when he smiled faintly it went away.

"Give me until seven, and I'll be home."

Aaron followed Harry home, and when Ginny arrived, he stood to take her cloak with a butlerish aplomb. Her face mottled nearly maroon through the process and she took a seat across from Harry without really looking at him, leading him to wonder what he was missing.

She stood back up again quickly, saying, "Let's drill, I have to get home for dinner."

Harry held off on using any Legilimency on her, feeling it to be highly unfair. Wand in his pocket, Harry took up a spot across from her and had to take a step back when her wind curse buffeted him.

"Easy there," he said, tugging his robes straight from them wanting to knot up behind him.

"Sorry."

After a dozen gentle breeze-like spells, Harry called a halt. "I can't work this out," he said of his attempts to block ordinary curses by feel rather than by wand. "And I'm quite tired of standing here getting hit. Let's work on something else."

She lowered her wand and considered him. "Even I'm tired of hitting you repeatedly, Harry," she stated.

"I appreciate that you're trying to help," Harry said.

"Actually, my attenuation has got quite good of late from having to tone down all these curses to harmless level," she said. "The other day, I wanted to heat a single toffee because it had got too cold in my pocket to bite into, and it was really easy. Before, I would have scorched the wrapper."

"I'm tired of dreaming about fighting without a wand," Harry complained, rubbing his hair back and gratefully raising his wand. "Let's just do regular attack-counter drills."

"You're not giving up for good?" she demanded, automatically raising her wand too.

"For now. I'm starting to think it's not possible for me to block any sort of curse without a wand. I can feel the curse, but I can't do anything about it in time."

"You shouldn't give up," she said sharply.

"Well, I won't give up, but I need a break."

Ginny said, "We'll just do less of it, but I'm not going to let you quit. It's too amazing of a skill if you think you can do it."

Aaron, who stood off to the side listening until then, said, "It's not that amazing," a little peevishly. "Someone could still Charm him to death."

"Yeah?" Ginny prompted disbelievingly, blushing again.

"For example, a Snare Charm inside a Water Bubble Charm could drown someone."

Ginny lowered her wand and said, "Only a Slytherin would think of that."

"I'm just sayin'," Aaron returned, arms broadly uncurling as he spoke.

The conversation turned to the topic of countering spells as they fell into rounds of drills. They broke for snacks after Ginny decided dinner with her parents did not sound all that interesting and Harry sat back and watched her engage Aaron in conversation.

Candide arrived some time later and immediately dropped into a chair at the table to sort her post. She did not make a note about Harry having two guards.

Harry took a deep breath and said to her, "I need to run out to exchange guards – " He was interrupted by a tray holding two bowls sparkling in before her.

Candide sighed and picked up the spoon to eat a scoop of orange ice cream. "Just what I wanted: kumquat ice cream."

"What's the other?" Ginny asked, squinting with a funny face at the second bowl.

Candide leaned forward to sniff. "Pickled radish, I think."

"Right," Harry said, backtracking on what he planned to say. "Hm, maybe Ginny will stay with you while I go fetch Tonks, you know, my next guard."

Aaron nibbled on a crisp and said, "She doesn't get assigned as guard much, does she?"

"She hasn't lately," Harry agreed. Candide ate with too much vigor to notice that Harry may have concocted an excuse to leave when he was not supposed to.

At seven, Harry and Aaron waited at Tonk's flat, but she did not show up. Despite Tonks' poor history of punctuality, they went to the Ministry at just past the hour to look for her.

The Aurors office was busy with Ministry staff going in and out.

"Wonder what's going on," Aaron muttered as they dodged out of the way of another fast striding person while trying to listen in at the door.

Mr. Weasley went by, hands full of files, saw the two of them there and said to them. "Good, go fetch whatever Rodgers needs in Interrogation Room Two."

The two of them glanced at each other and headed that way. Inside Room Two, they found Rodgers crouched before a prisoner, who sat against the wall, looking wary and confused. Harry had his wand out, as was procedure, but his thoughts were not quite on standard procedure.

Rodgers said, "Fetch me the Truth Serum Support tray. Either he's immune to Veritaserum, or it needs a supplemental Tongueloosener."

Harry gestured for Aaron to fetch the potions while he took up a position behind Rodgers right shoulder. The man on the floor had an average appearance in his face and hair. The only things out of the ordinary were his boot was scorched and his hand was tucked against his abdomen as if it were injured.

"How'd he get hurt?" Harry asked.

"He won't say," Rodgers said, tugging on the man's arm and it limply flopped outward. His hand showed puckered streaks like a burn. "He and his companion were tied up inside the phone box and lowered into the Atrium anonymously. But I'm beginning to suspect their memories were wiped."

The prisoner's brow furrowed as he took Harry in, eyes flickering with recognition. Harry couldn't read anything in his eyes beyond general wariness, surprise, and an intrepid desire to keep a secret.

Aaron returned and hovered the tray in the far corner since the room had no furniture. He brought the potions Rodgers requested and an empty glass to mix them in. Rodgers used a spell to force the prisoner to drink it, then sat back in his heels to wait for it to work. A trickle of violet potion dribbled from the corner of the prisoner's mouth, making Harry swallow convulsively. This was all standard procedure, but it was making him uneasy.

Rodgers patted the man hard on the leg. "So, there. What's your name?"

The prisoner thought about that and faintly answered, "Francesco."

"Now were getting somewhere. Francesco what?"

"Francesco," came the monotone reply.

They went back and forth a bit, failing to elicit anything meaningful. Rodgers stood to pace and Harry said, "He's got the look of Durumulna."

"Oh, he does. We're going to have to wait a week or three for that to wear off so we can see what he really looks like." He waved at the potion tray. "Let's try the other prisoner next. But I'm not hopeful."

Harry found Tonks sometime later. She said, "I see we are both not getting away from the office."

Harry felt vaguely relieved to be putting off telling her on top of anxious because he would prefer she already know. "I left Ginny keeping Candide company, and I think

she'll not mind staying longer since they get along well enough. I do want to talk to you, if you can get away."

Her eyes flickered with renewed worry. "Sure, I'll finish my reports in the morning," she said, which was unusual for her. "Let's go."

Harry told Aaron he did not need him for a guard any longer, and he gave Harry a wink as he departed. In Tonks' flat, she kicked off her platform shoes and padded, shorter, to the table to set her post down on a teetering pile.

"If it weren't for howlers, I'd sometimes open none of my post," she said. She stared at the envelope on top of the stack and then turned toward Harry, gaze lowered. "I think I know what you are going to say," she said, mouth twisted half into a frown.

"I sincerely doubt it," Harry said. "But first." He pulled out his wand and circled the flat, securing it from everything he could think of, including forcing Animagi to reveal themselves. He returned to where she stood watching him do this, wand out still after taking care of spelling the door while he did the rest.

Harry said, "I've wanted to tell you some things, but . . . well, Severus didn't think it was a good idea for me to tell you . . . anyone, actually," he amended quickly. "But I want you to know." They stared at each other. Harry said, "Why don't you sit down? That way I can sit down."

Tonks pushed back a chair, nearly toppling it, caught it, and sat down, pushing against the table to rock back on two legs.

Harry pulled the other chair around closer and clasped his hands together. "So, the thing is . . . and I do agree with Severus that it would be better if the Ministry didn't know what I'm going to tell you . . ."

"I don't plan on telling anyone, Harry," she stated a tad coldly.

"Good. Okay. It's like this. Well, first of all, you know already how I can call the Raksashas out of the Dark Plane, but what you don't know is that I can go there too." When she stared at him without speaking, he went on, wanting to minimize that. "Er, what that means is that I can Apparate, in a way, practically anywhere, without a sound. That day by the windmill when I followed you and I shouldn't have . . . and you thought I had my cloak. I had used the Dark Plane to travel to you." He stood up. "Watch." Harry went in and out, moving just a few feet.

She let her chair drop with a thud back to four legs. "That's nice," she said, intrigued. Then, confused, asked, "Your going where to do that?"

"Er, the Dark Plane." He waved his level hand over the floor. "It's just below us."

In a neutral confirming voice, she asked, "And this is where those demons live?"

Reluctantly, Harry replied, "Yeah. But they don't bother me unless I don't believe I can overpower them."

She exhaled thoughtfully, seeming to put that aside for later. After a beat, she confirmed, "And you can go anywhere?"

"Essentially. Hogwarts, Department of Mysteries, I assume any vault at Gringotts but I haven't tried that."

She snorted lightly. "You're Harry; of course you haven't tried that." She crossed her arms and raised a hot pink brow. "Fetch something from the Department of Mysteries," she said, challenging him, which made Harry warm straight through.

Harry disappeared straight away, entering the most secretive Ministry department in one of the back corridors he figured to be less trafficked. Being evening, he heard nothing from where he stood between a room holding shelves of books and one holding the glass prophecies, the shelves sparsely occupied since Harry and his friends had broken most of them.

On tip-toe, Harry made his way around to the work room. With the soothing bubble and hum of the Tank of the Ancients lulling him, his eyes sought out something unique that he could slip away with. The deep high shelves over one of the desks caught his eye. He'd seen Merton's cane there, but did not see it now. He stepped closer and spied it, tucked away better, the velvet sacked cinched and knotted. Biting his lip, he carefully drew it out from under some other boxes and packages and disappeared with it.

Back in Tonks' flat, he presented the cane to her with a little bow.

She shook her head and tested the heft of it through the sacking before handing it back, saying, "That is how you captured Fuego. You followed him, when he disappeared the way they tend to."

"Yes," Harry said, relieved that she was catching on quickly.

She stood and waved at the strip of wall beside the door to the sitting room. "You can leave that there, I'll return it later. I could use a drink I think." She rummaged in the cabinets, swearing faintly. "They wouldn't be able to hold you in the rebuilt Azkaban, either," she said.

"The French prison has some special protection, since they can hold Fuego," Harry pointed out.

"Yes. We've had to send them the one other vampire we apprehended a few decades ago because we couldn't hold her." She rummaged under the sink next, coming up with a silver bottle from behind the dusty cleaning supplies. "But we don't have the skill to add that protection, and don't need it normally anyhow. Apparition and portkey barriers are usually sufficient." She sat back, legs wide and casual, and took a swig from the bottle. "Well, I understand Severus' concern. I really do," she said grimly, biting her lips in between. "After what happened with Sirius . . ." She trailed off and frowned worriedly before looking away and holding the bottle out to him.

Harry waved off the bottle. "That's not all."

She froze mid-putting the bottle to her lips. "That was the easy one; wasn't it?" she asked. "You have an annoying tendency to do that: good news first."

"That was the easy one, yes," Harry said, plowing on, "The other thing is that from within the Dark Plane, I can go to other Planes besides this one. Places where other events have happened in the past and the present isn't the same." He waited for any reaction and didn't get one. He went on. "When I disappeared, supposedly to Latvia, I was really in another Plane where I had died as a First Year and Voldemort was headmaster of Hogwarts. I could have come back right away . . . but I wanted to destroy him before I left."

She blinked many times in a row and set the bottle down with a thunk. It was a minute before she ceased to appear stunned and ill. "Another place where things worked out differently?" she echoed.

"Yes."

She leaned forward over her fists propped on the table and said, "Are you certain you didn't imagine this? Like a dream?"

"I'm certain."

"Harry," she chastised. "Really, how can that be possible?" She grinned faintly and continued to sound critical. "Voldemort as headmaster?"

"Well, in one place he was, in the other he was just still alive. See, time is the same in these other places, but the events are different."

She rocked her spiky hair, and still did not appear to believe him. She turned to glance at the cane in the corner. "So, you fetched that using this Dark Plane and you came back here, but you could have gone somewhere else?"

"Well, it takes some extra effort to go to a different Plane. And it is super cold in between, so I nearly freeze to death. Just popping in and out of this one, I've got good at."

Her brow did not un-furrow. "How many times have you done this . . . going to this other place where things are different?"

"Three. A count I'd prefer you not tell Severus."

She picked up the bottle again to gesture at him with it, still disturbed. "You have a lot of secrets going here, Harry."

Harry glanced at the clock. "And another secret is that I'm here at all. I should get back."

She considered pocketing the bottle, but left it on the table. She sighed significantly and stepped up close to him and stroked his arms through his cloak. "I'm glad you told me." Her eyes crossed, before she closed them and held them that way. "Well, I think I'm glad. Yeah." She opened her eyes and gazed at him rather closely, sounding mentorish. She said tiredly, "You are not going to be able to resist using this way of getting around, and you'll need cover."

Harry smiled. "Thanks for that. I need all the help I can get."

"You may need help, but you don't need a guard; that's for certain," she stated crisply, sounding slightly put-upon or jealous.

"I agree. Get Mr. Weasley to agree, please," Harry said. "I'm so very tired of this."

"Well, you are grounded, so let's get you home before you get caught for that."

They arrived in Shrewsthorpe and Candide, without pickles and ice cream as a distraction, was a little sharper this time. "Where were you exactly?"

"I got caught up at the Ministry," Harry said. "Tonks wasn't at her flat where we were supposed to meet."

Tonks smoothly said, "Someone unexpectedly left the Ministry a present and we were shorthanded."

Ginny said with a weak laugh, "Little early for Christmas."

Tonks said, "Strange gift too. Minister is calling a presser in the morning, so I can tell you what happened if you like."

Ginny leaned forward. "Do tell."

Tonks, finding amusement in it, explained about the two gang members being stuffed in the phone box and sent down to the Atrium.

Ginny smiled strangely. "So, what do you think happened?"

Tonks replied, "We suspect they displeased their masters and got punished this way, which is why the Minister is more than willing to make an example of them."

"Huh," Ginny said, sitting back. She bit her lip and Harry tried to catch her eyes, but she kept them elsewhere. She departed soon after and Harry did not want to say anything in front of the others, but he strongly suspected she knew something.

Up in his room, Tonks settled in with a book while Harry penned a letter to Ginny. He wrote simply:

I can understand wanting to keep a secret, but sometimes sharing it can prevent a lot of trouble. Trust me.

Her reply arrived in the morning:

I don't feel like telling. It's under control.

Harry frowned at the message as he tossed it into the fire, remembering with a jolt that the prisoners were burned.

"So, what do you think?" Candide asked a little sharply.

"Huh?" Harry said, spinning around to face her. He had not been listening.

She laughed lightly and glanced at Tonks tucking into a second helping of breakfast. "I said, shall I convince Severus to let us all go out, even though you will still be grounded?"

"Oh. I'd like that, but it's all right. I don't want to push him." He sat down again across from Candide and let the mystery draw burn slow circles in his head.

Candide leaned back from the table with a sigh and distractedly rubbed her belly. Tonks wiped her mouth and said, "Severus ready for a baby?"

Candide laughed lightly. "I doubt it."

Harry put his other concerns aside and listened more closely.

Candide grinned and shook her head, making her hair shift. "He'll figure it out fast enough."

Harry did not feel as certain. "You think so? Maybe."

Chapter 18

"What are you getting him for his birthday?" Candide asked. "I haven't figured anything out yet. I thought it'd be easy, but all I see when I'm out shopping is things for the baby. Which reminds me . . . we have to clear out one of the other upstairs rooms for the cot."

Harry's skin pricked at the thought that she might want to use the room where Snape had performed the dark magic spell to locate Harry the night he flew off. Thinking quickly, he said, "Maybe you should use my room and we can move me over to one of the other rooms." There was nothing but molding furniture in the farthest room on the first floor. Even he would prefer to not sleep in the room where he first felt the Dark Plane, even though he now understood it.

"You wouldn't mind? That'd be more convenient to have the baby's room next door."

Relief softened Harry's limbs. "Yeah. No worries. We can talk about it this weekend when Severus is here." Harry blinked into the distance. "But a present," he breathed. "I forgot about his birthday."

"As long as you didn't get him something fantastic that I have to top," Candide said, "we're fine."

"I have to think of something," Harry said. "And fast."

Friday evening, Harry waited with Vineet for Snape to come home. Harry did not feel like spending Friday reading for training, so he instead read through that week's newspapers. Several days' commentary had been devoted to the mysterious gang members handed over to the Ministry. One letter writer, calling himself Oldetimy Occlutist, stated that he hoped the blokes' parents themselves had finally grown fed up enough to turn them in themselves. Harry hoped that was not the case.

"What time does your adoptive father arrive?" Vineet asked.

Harry glanced at the clock. "Soon." Thinking he heard a tinge of impatience in his friend's voice, Harry followed with, "Have something you need to get to?"

"I am taking Hermione to dinner in Hogsmeade."

"OH," Harry said dramatically, while folding up the paper he had before him and selecting the next randomly off the stack. "Well, we shan't keep you too long, in that case."

"I will remain as long as required," Vineet pledged.

"I'm certain Hermione will understand if you're a tad late."

"Oh, it is not late I am worried about being. I was hoping to be early."

Harry raised the next newspaper up to hide his grin, and found himself faced with a photo of himself and Kerry Ann taken during one of the press visits to their training. His heart sped up when he spotted the byline of Rita Skeeter on the article below the headline Aurors in Love, but a quick read-through revealed only vague innuendo around the vastly male dominated Department of Law Enforcement. Harry folded up the paper, giving up on reading while he still had his temper.

Snape arrived minutes later and sent Vineet off with a bow. Vineet, for him, fairly scampered away.

"Ready?" Snape asked, glancing around. "Candide is not home?"

Harry stood and wandered to the front hall for his dress cloak. He called back, "I suggested she be late, so she isn't home before we return."

Snape waited for him to return to the main hall before acknowledging, "Wise of you."

Harry shrugged, resisting pleasure from the compliment.

On the walk up the drive to the rambling Freelander estate, Harry slowed saying, "I haven't figured out what I'm going to say."

Snape stopped. "Difficult to confront a benefactor," he said, an eerie echo of what the alternative version of him had said.

"What would you do?" Harry asked.

In the gloomy surroundings of the gravel drive with a night bird dashing musically overhead, Snape considered that before replying, "I would choose a framing for the issue that he cannot resist."

Harry said, "Okay. I think I have one," and resumed walking, wanting to have this over with.

Freelander was getting ready for a small dinner party. Servants bustled about, walking awkwardly upright as they rushed across the unnecessarily broad rooms. The two of them were led to a parlor adjoining the main suite and Harry asked Snape to wait in a previous room, thinking that it would be too difficult with him there.

Freelander, bright cuffs and collar undone, came in and gestured curtly at a seat as he selected cufflinks from a jewelry box held out to him by a servant. The dour servant

assumed a waiting position a step back, and Harry said, "Perhaps I should speak with you alone, sir."

When the servant had departed, Harry, keeping Snape's advice firmly in mind, said, "I may be out of line here, but I must ask you something because your answer affects the security the Ministry is keeping around me." Harry took a deep breath and said to Freelander's curious gaze, "Have you sent someone to spy on Aaron?"

A thick, trimmed brow went up and Freelander tossed his other cuff straight to hook it. "Yes. Not that it is any concern of yours."

"Yes, well, it was upsetting the security around myself," Harry carefully explained.

"Oh, yes, well, I told my man to forthwith avoid investigating when Aaron is in your presence."

Freelander stood and tugged his waistcoat over his round frame. "If that is all?"

It was not all. Harry wanted to know what he was up to. "Why are you having him followed?" he asked.

Freelander reddened faintly. "As I said, no concern of yours."

"It is my concern" Harry said, finding a route out of the maze of owing this man. "He's my friend and I don't want to see him hurt."

"Hurt? How could he possibly get hurt, Mr. Potter?" Freelander asked, pulling out his watch to glance at it, clearly ready to be done with this meeting.

Harry could not understand what he had just heard and felt caution slip away. "What do you mean? You're threatening to upset everything he understands about his father and you wonder how he could be hurt?"

Freelander deliberately slipped his watch away into the small pocket at his waist. "You're easy to underestimate, Mr. Potter. Or did you to interrogate my man Young and he just did not want to tell me that."

Harry shook his head. "He got away."

The crinkles in Freelander's face shifted as he reconsidered things. "I expect you to leave it to me to tell Mr. Wickem." This was stated as a dismissal.

Harry said, "I will leave it to you if I can, but like I said, he's my friend. I can't promise you that."

Freelander sighed faintly and picked up his cane. "I have a dinner party to host, I'm afraid. Clydeswayne will see you out." A wave of his wand summoned the butler.

As they were led back through dimly lit room after room, clinking glasses and energetic voices emanated from deeper within the house. In the entryway, their cloaks were returned and the butler hurried off with a quick bow.

"Get everything straight?" Snape asked.

"Maybe," Harry said with a shrug.

"Perhaps not worth granting an exception to your grounding in that case," Snape stated.

"It WAS him," Harry said, feeling anger. "I was right."

"As you presumed," Snape said dismissively.

Harry stared at his guardian, vastly out of place in the white, baroquely plastered entry hall lit by an overhead chandelier. He wondered why they were at odds again, but felt little desire to back off. "Grounding me was ridiculous anyway," Harry said.

"I will decide that," Snape said, taking a step toward the door, but keeping his narrow gaze pinned on Harry. Harry moved to follow, and Snape turned fully on him. "What did you shake your guard for?"

"I went to rescue someone," Harry replied stiffly, thinking that in this strange place that roundabout would be the best way to speak. "Someone who, because of me, had no protection from the law and was suffering greatly as a result."

Snape slowly shook his head.

"What would you prefer I do?" Harry demanded in a harsh whisper.

"You know nothing about the situation in that place. You presume everything."

Harry met his guardian's fierceness with his own. "I knew that he'd helped me; that's all I needed to know."

"You are out of control, Harry, with this power. You have no idea the trouble you could instigate."

"What are you jealous or something?" Harry asked.

Snape's head tilted in a way that told him he had gone too far.

"Nevermind, forget I said that," Harry muttered.

Snape's cloak spread wide as he propped his hands on his hips. "I don't know what to do with you."

"Don't do anything," Harry said. "I don't understand what you're so upset about." A rush of laughter drifting in from far away, made Harry glance around in case they were being watched. He did not see anyone and all the glittery-framed paintings looking on were of the static, Muggle sort.

Snape's voice lowered. "I am upset about the unnecessary risks you take. You do not possess sufficient wisdom to go with your powers."

"I do fine," Harry insisted. "I'm an adult now, in case you hadn't noticed."

Snape bit his lips and dropped his head in frustration. "Let's go. Candide will be returning shortly."

The house was empty when they arrived. Harry dropped onto the couch with a huff and crossed his arms. To himself he had to admit he was deathly tired of being guarded all the time and was taking that out on Snape.

"You're making too much of this," Harry calmly said, looking for a bridge.

Snape faintly shook his head in more a philosophical gesture than a reply. With matching renewed calm, he said, "As the parent, I get to decide what is to be made an issue of."

"You're starting to sound like my uncle Vernon."

"Insults will not help," Snape said.

Candide arrived home during the impasse that followed and stepped into the space between them. "Am I interrupting?" she asked.

"No," Harry replied.

"Well, that's unfortunate, because it looks like you need an interruption." She waved a chair in from the drawing room and took that rather than sitting beside one of them. "So, what's the trouble?" she asked, tugging off her long pointed boot to rub her foot while making a pained face.

Snape pondering her with an air of disbelief before giving in and saying, "Harry does not obey anything I say any longer."

She tugged off a second boot. "Well, that's hardly a surprise, given his age."

Harry shot a told-you-so look across at his guardian.

"Whose side are you on?" Snape demanded of her.

"Neither," she chirped. "That's why I'm sitting in the middle." She shifted her chair and stretched her toes out. "Are your demands unreasonable, Severus?"

"I am demanding that he stick with one universe. And no, that is not unreasonable."

Candide turned to Harry. "You jumped off to some other place again?" At Harry's nod, she tsked a bit.

"I can handle myself," Harry said. "He doesn't trust that I know what I'm doing. I told Tonks what I can do and she's completely on my side," he added smartly. "Why can't you be on my side?" Harry asked, feeling a tender stab as he said this.

Snape sat forward, shoulders hunched defensively. "I am always on your side. Whatever gave you the notion I was not? I refuse to allow you to harm yourself before you learn what you are doing. What part of that is not being on your side?"

Candide's gaze came around to Harry and they both waited for him to speak. "I don't know," Harry admitted, flustered. "It just . . . It just feels like you are seeing trouble where there isn't any, just to tell me what to do."

Snape's voice entered the low dangerous range. "That is not at all the case. Your powers carry unknown dangers . . . " He held up his hand for silence. "About which you are blithely cocky. And you refuse repeatedly to listen to warnings on a number of subjects."

"You don't know it's dangerous; you're just guessing," Harry said.

"As. Are. You." Snape replied. "I want to forbid you to use the Dark Plane or to visit any other Planes, but I suspect you will simply disobey me." He stood and paced.

"You don't understand," Harry said. "If I fear that Dark Plane, it will overtake me. And if I don't fear it, it doesn't matter if I go there."

Snape's brow furrowed and he did not reply, but simply rubbed at the worry lines between his eyes.

"If I may say," Candide said, half-raising her hand like a student might. "I don't think grounding Harry did anything except exacerbate the situation. But that's just my opinion. He's already essentially grounded with a guard all the time anyhow."

Harry nodded eagerly that he agreed with this. Snape tapped his knuckle to his teeth thoughtfully.

Candide slapped her hands on her lap and said, "Why don't we go out tomorrow and do something . . . as a family."

The last word shot through Harry. He did not really intend to make trouble, but he also could not control how chafed he became from his situation.

"An excellent idea," Snape said faintly, trying to sound pleased.

"Harry?" Candide asked. "You have plans?"

"No, I was still grounded. I don't have any plans. Going out sounds good."

Chapter 18

The next day, a glaringly bright mid-November day where the sun starkly angled around every solid object, found them wandering York on a shopping trip. Candide stopped before the window of yet another baby clothiers and bent to take a closer look at the delicate, lacy things laid out on display. Snape wandered ahead, stopping to peer up at a sign promising dungeon tours, complete with instruments of torture, highwaymen, plagues, and Guy Fawkes.

Candide straightened and leaned close to Harry, "Your little tiff yesterday gives me hope that he's ready to have a younger son around the house."

"It does?" Harry said.

"Don't you think?" she said, sashaying slowly on as if to draw out their conversation before they were within earshot of Snape. She took Harry's arm and leaned on him slightly, making him wonder if she needed a break before lunchtime. "Are you ready for a younger brother?"

"Yes," Harry said, thinking that he'd rather like that.

Her voice dropped. "I think you're hoping it will fully distract your father," she accused.

"It might do that too," Harry agreed, not having considered that before.

She peered up at the Dungeon advert when Snape pointed at it suggestively and said, "Here I'm telling Harry to stay out of trouble."

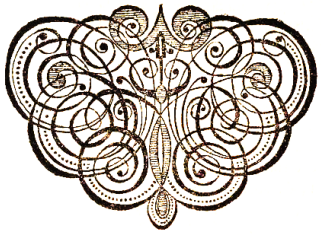
Snape airily stated, "I thought there might be comic value in the Muggle notion of horror."

Candide ducked her head to chuckle. "My feet need a break. Maybe something else for now."

They minced down to the corner where there was a small coffee shop. The bell on the door jangled as Snape held it open for Candide. He gestured at the neighboring shoe shop window with its array of towering, spiked-heel shoes and said, "There's a real torture chamber there."

They shared a grin, which erased most of Harry's unease. They settled around a window-embraced table with their steaming drinks and Harry put aside all the mysteries and concerns he had on his mind and just enjoyed the moment. Over their mugs, Snape and Candide shared abbreviated comments and looks that spoke of unexpectedly deep understanding given how little time they managed to spend together. Harry forced himself to not worry for a time about Aaron, Ginny, Rodgers, Moody, Belinda and his unprovable suspicions about Percy. He put it all aside and with the perspective gained from doing so agreed that Snape probably was right: one universe ought to be enough. At that moment, it certainly was.

Chapter 19.



A Surfeit of Fathers

Sunday morning, the clouds hung as thick as smoke outside the window. Harry encountered Snape on the balcony and followed him down to breakfast, where Candide waited before the hearth in a dressing gown, hair still mussed. She stood in a pose that reminded Harry of McGonagall when she had reached her limit on some repeated transgression. The two of them stopped before her and she snapped out the paper she held, folded backward to show Rita Skeeter's gossip column.

The paper came down primarily in front of Snape, so Harry leaned over to get a better look.

Boy hero now Ministry darling 'Out of control' says adoptive father.

Harry physically jerked back from the paper in surprise. Snape snatched it up and paced away to read it before tossing it on the table.

"She must have been there the other night," Harry said, heart fluttering fast because he had feared they were not alone and had not taken action to check.

Snape was leaning heavily on a hand levered on a chair back, his other hand propped behind his back. He tossed his head once to the side.

"I was careful what I said," Harry pointed out, too stunned to sound critical.

Candide lifted the paper up and read: "Head of Slytherin house states he does not know what to do with Mr. Potter. Did you really say that?"

Snape sharply nodded once, which left his hair webbing his face. He was biting his lip and glaring off into the distance. He pushed away from the chair's support. "I am

losing my edge." He shook his head additionally. "You were smarter than I about how to argue in an insecure location."

"How about not arguing at all?" Candide suggested. "Or at least only at home. Or not at all? I like that idea better."

Snape stared at her without reacting. Harry tugged the paper over and, with his back tense, read the rest of the article and the insinuations about him and his powers, complete with obnoxious I-told-you-so styled flashbacks to her earliest articles about Harry. He felt tainted after reading it and did not want to touch the paper. He gave it a flick to the side and sat down, wondering why his breath was still too quick.

Candide considered the two of them, heaved a sigh, and joined Harry at the table.

Snape strode over beside the hearth and straightened a metal box on the mantel. He was taking his slip hard, enough so that Harry felt compelled to minimize things. "It'll pass. It always does," Harry said, burying a flinch.

Snape turned to him and looked away again, jaw tight.

"Can I make a suggestion, Harry?" Candide asked with enough shyness that he could not help but reply that she could, despite wanting nothing more than a target for his frustration and anger. She went on, "Grant her an interview."

"Are you nuts?" Harry blurted.

"No. I just think it's the only way."

"NO. I refuse," Harry snapped.

"What are you going to do?" she asked gently.

"I don't know. But not that for certain."

Candide raised her chin to peer at Snape. "What do you think he should do?"

"I believe your suggestion to be a valid one, but not until things calm down. Perhaps nothing will come of it." He let his hand slide off the mantel and took the short step to stand beside Harry's chair. His hand landed on Harry's shoulder and he softly said, "Sorry, Harry."

"It's all right," Harry said, his anger stunned away by the rare apology. If he could handle Voldemort in under a week, he could handle Rita Skeeter.

When Harry next arrived for training, he was sent down to speak with Mr. Weasley. Harry wedged himself into the guest chair and tugged the door closed, careful not to pinch his fingers doing so.

A cut-up copy of the Prophet lay out on the desk. Mr. Weasley knitted his fingers in his lap and said, "I would have let this go, but Amelia wanted to be certain that you understand she is not pleased."

"Sorry," Harry said. "It was a mistake. It won't happen again." His mind flittered off to thinking more about things he could do to Skeeter. Trapping her into something seemed like the best plan, but the details of exactly how to do it had so far not solidified. The extra glances he had garnered in the Atrium on the way in had only increased his determination to get even, despite the reactions being milder than feared.

"That's, I suspect, what the Minister wants to hear."

His boss sounded dismissive, but Harry saw an opportunity to ask some questions of his own. "What is happening with Durumulna?"

"You make it sound as if you are being kept in the dark," Mr. Weasley observed. "There's not much new to report that you don't know. We're doing our best to combat them. But it turns out that there is a limit to what we can do without cooperation from the wizarding public at large. Bones is going to use these two dumped gang members to argue for as much public support as possible." He filed the news article in the bin while he spoke. It ignited and drifted to the bottom as grey curls.

"Why wouldn't people want to help?" Harry asked.

"Why not? Because they're afraid, mostly, that the gang will take retribution. That's the standard way they operate. Not everyone wants to be a hero, Harry." He shifted some files around on his desk. "In this case . . ." Here he held out a file that rather than have a name on the tab, per the norm, read DC #12. "In this case, using the lure of a small profit, they got an otherwise law-abiding wizard involved and after that the man felt compelled to do as they said, lest they turn him in to us. You'd be surprised how little crime it takes to keep a good person quiet," he said, mouth wry. "Ironically, it's the desire to appear good to their fellows that is the hook the gang uses on them and their family to coerce their participation in successively worse things."

"So, what about the Eeylops fire?"

A few carefully arranged hairs flopped off the top of Mr. Weasley's head as he tilted it. "That was a strange one. We haven't decided quite what happened there."

And your daughter knows something about it, Harry thought, and decided that he did not want to say anything about that, probably much like a Durumulna victim. "Maybe you need to offer amnesty, or something," Harry said after a beat.

Mr. Weasley nodded. "We've floated that idea." He rocked his chair forward and added, "I'm quite certain you have training."

"Oh yeah," Harry said, standing up quickly, which caused his chair to smack against the door behind him.

"Not that I wish to dissuade you from thinking like a full-time Auror . . ." Mr. Weasley added as Harry opened the door, making Harry stop and realize that his department head had gone out of his way to cater to his questions.

"Thanks, sir," Harry said with feeling.

Mid-week, Aaron sidled up to Harry after training and kicked his toe against the desk leg. "I'm going to ask to be assigned as your guard. I don't like being followed."

Rodgers raised his head at this and flicked his mustache side to side. "What's this?"

"Someone has been following Aaron," Harry supplied, when his fellow remained frustrated and silent. Harry was surprised that their trainer sounded sympathetic, but he was in charge of their safety.

"And you can't catch them at it?" Rodgers then added, canceling Harry's train of thought.

"I tried last night," Aaron said. "They had a repelling charm on them, so that I couldn't snag them with anything. Not a whip charm, a chain binding . . . nothing."

Harry thought that sounded rather expert for a private eye, but of course Freelander could afford the best.

Head still hanging low, Aaron said, "If I can be Harry's guard, I'd appreciate it."

"Put the two hunted parties together, you're saying," Rodgers said, "in the hopes that what? Your stalkers will trip over each other?"

Harry suggested to his fellow, "Ginny will be over for drills this afternoon, so why don't you come over even if you aren't assigned?"

On the couch, pretending to read from a book thick with eye-blurring, Gordion-worthy diagrams demonstrating every last variation of the various blocks they should know, Harry contemplated sending an owl to Freelander that threatened to tell Aaron what he knew. Elizabeth was counting on him, though, so his desire for an ultimatum was bound and gagged before it could even think about where the nice stationery might be.

Beside him, Aaron and Ginny were running drills and Aaron finally rose out of his down mood from earlier. Ginny caught onto the routines easily, but unfortunately had the same resistance to reading as Aaron.

"Maybe you should read something aloud," Harry suggested as Ginny spun on her toes from trying a reverse counter which, were she to get it, would put her up with the rest of the Second Years.

"You talking to me?" Ginny breathlessly asked.

"Either one of you," Harry said more stiffly than intended.

The next day, Freelander saved Harry from any difficult-to-compose owls. During lunch break, Aaron received an envelope of distinctive, creamy smooth paper. Harry focussed on his sandwich while Aaron opened the letter and scrunched up his face in perplexion as his eyes moved over the page. He scratched his head and folded the message away to finish his lunch, vaguely peeved.

Harry caught Aaron before he could leave the tea room but after everyone else had departed. "What was that?" he asked conversationally.

Aaron pulled the letter out again. "Something from Lord Freelygrander," he said, making Harry hold in a cringe.

"A party invitation?" Harry teased, feeling more deceptive than he preferred to be.

"No, or, I don't think so. He wants me to stop by Friday evening. Merlin knows why. So he can lecture me about the proper role for the Select British Wizard, or something," Aaron said, assuming a posher accent as he did so.

"Do you want company?" Harry asked, not wanting to leave his friend hanging out there with a man who did not see any risk in what he intended to tell his long-lost son.

Aaron turned to Harry as they reached the training room door. "You're willing to come along?" he asked in disbelief. "Harry, I would take Draco Malfoy along for company rather than go alone." He slipped inside, saying, "I'll buy you a week of fancy dinners if you will."

Kerry Ann raised her bushy head. "What's this? What's this? Fancy dinners are in the offing?"

"You don't need to do anything in return," Harry said as he slid into his seat.

"Oh, don't destroy the market!" Kerry Ann protested. "I was just about to bid higher than you."

Harry wanted to ask if Aaron's mum was around, but held back on doing so on the theory that it may later tip off that he knew something beforehand. He could feel a more straightforward, perhaps younger, version of himself admonishing him for that.

After training, Harry waited around in the Auror's office for Tonks. He had thought of a possible present for his guardian's fortieth birthday, something that fit in well with recent conversations they had had, but he needed to know if Tonks still had the thing he would need.

Tonks finally hustled by and Harry followed her to the file room, which worked perfectly for a private conversation. Harry ran some security spells just because he felt he should all the time now. Doing this reminded him of Moody and he wondered what had become of the old Auror, as he had not been following Harry for a blissfully long time.

"Hey, Harry," Tonks said without looking up from the ten-foot-long file drawer she had slung out and let glide to a rumbling stop before perusing the labels. Harry's Muggle-raised brain could not help but notice that the cabinet it emerged from was perhaps two-foot deep.

"I was wondering if you had returned the cane?"

"The cane?" she echoed.

"Yeah, the one I fetched the other night . . ." Harry hoped she'd catch on because he was leery of speaking clearly despite checking for anyone listening in.

Her nose was buried in a file. "Oh, I guess it's still there. I forgot about it."

"Oh good. I want to borrow it."

Tonks looked over the top edge of the file and Harry expected a lecture, but instead she said in a more sultry tone, "Why don't you stop by and fetch it? I'll owl you through the Floo when I get home."

Harry smiled and felt an awakening vibration run from his shoulder blades to his knees. "Aaron's my guard, so that should work. I just have to make a run to the sweet shop and I'll be over."

With dread unmatched in the last few months, Harry strode beside Aaron up to the doors of the Freelander estate. As per usual under such circumstances, the journey up the drive, waiting at the door, and being led inside by a butler, took place in a quick blur.

As they stood alone in Lord Freelander's presence, Harry secretly willed Aaron to behave himself, at least until he understood the circumstances.

"Sir," Aaron said and accepted the seat indicated by their host.

Freelander fingered a thick leather binder full of papers before setting it between the three of them on a low, stout table with lion-paw-tipped legs. He began, "Mr. Potter knows why we are here, and I am glad he has arranged to attend this meeting."

"He does?" Aaron said in surprise, glancing at Harry, who neglected to glance back.

Freelander went on, "And I see that he has remained silent about something I thought best for me to apprise you of."

He gazed at Harry, expecting a response. Harry said critically, "I didn't know how to begin."

"Yes, well, I suppose that's true." Freelander reached for the paperwork and flipped it open, making Harry grit his teeth together.

This isn't about official documents, Harry silently berated the man. He felt a wave of nausea and wished he were elsewhere, but then reminded himself that Aaron should not go through this alone.

"Where's your mum?" Harry asked his friend.

Aaron replied, "Paris, at some show or another. She'll be home next week."

"Good," Harry breathed, then pinned his eyes on the side wall in case their host wished to call him on that with a meaningful look.

Freelander said to Aaron, "There are a few things you do not know . . ."

Aaron waved his hand. "There are many things I do not know," he commented dismissively in a stronger accent.

"Hmf," Freelander muttered, but his mood held, thankfully. "As I was saying. There are a few things you should be apprised of, now that I've determined you are worthy of knowing them."

Harry bit his lips to keep from mouthing the word "worthy". Part of him wanted to shout. He would prefer to face Voldemort again than face what was about to transpire and he wondered at his nearly visceral reaction.

Freelander said, "Perhaps we shall get straight to the point. It is like this, Mr. Wickem; your father is not who you thought he was."

"What are you blathering about?" Aaron asked. "What was he?"

Freelander frowned and shot Aaron a judgmental look. "Not what. Whom." He waited a pause. "As in not Bertram Wickem, but myself."

Aaron stood up and backed away from his chair. He laughed uneasily. "You're a nutter. What potions did you confuse this morning?" He glanced at Harry, who was remembering Candide's words of he may be wrong, and could only shrug helplessly. Aaron put his hand around the glossy wood edging the chair back and recovered himself. "No wonder you asked what my mum was doing," he commented to Harry.

"She should be here, maybe," Harry said to no one in particular.

Aaron said, "Yes, she should. Because I don't believe you." The last was directed at their host.

"It is no matter if you believe me," Freelander commented, sounding unaffected. He flipped to a long parchment sporting a widely-bordered rectangle packed solid with flourished writing. "These are my revised wills, for your edification."

Aaron dropped back into his chair, boney arms crossed. "Oh, so, you've deemed me worthy have you?" he asked, voice dripping with disrespect.

Freelander shrugged it off without a flicker. "Yes, I have."

Freelander's impermeable skin disarmed Aaron. His eyes danced down to the stack of papers. "You really believe it, don't you? No wonder you were always riding my

arse when I was younger. If it weren't for you, I may have done my N.E.W.T.s," he accused.

"Just one of the reasons I deemed you a lost cause," Freelander stated. "Would you like to see a copy of the estate's inventory?"

"No," Aaron said. "I've seen the real thing enough times. Is this a bribe of some sort?"

Freelander propped his hands on his silk-clad knees and said, "Well, you may have gained enough drive to make something out of your life, but I see you still rampantly mis-ascribe motivation where your superiors are concerned."

Harry expected a cutting retort to that, but Aaron merely stared at the older man before him, face drained of expression.

"Why don't you speak with your mother," Freelander suggested, sitting up so straight as to put the papers on the table out of reach.

"I will," Aaron said after a beat. "I definitely will."

Freelander leaned elegantly forward to close the leather case. "Why don't we take care of the papers after you have done that. I think it will go better then."

Aaron frowned at this attestation of confidence. He sat forward, hands on hips. "Am I excused from your presence, then?"

Still unruffled and perhaps even amused but hiding it well, Freelander flipped his hand in the air. "By all means."

They did not speak as they departed, nor when Aaron saw Harry home. Snape had arrived for the weekend, relieving Aaron of his guard duty. Aaron managed a passable greeting to his old professor, and with one last pained glance back at Snape and Candide facing each other across the couches while sorting papers, followed Harry back to the dining room to use the Floo.

Harry continued the habit of quiet as he took up a spot on the couch beside Candide, pretending to read from a book he was already familiar with. He felt down and brushed off attempts at drawing him into the sparse conversation.

"Everything all right?" Snape finally asked. At Harry's shrug, he sharpened the edge of his voice and added, "You aren't still brooding about last week's detention, are you?"

"No," Harry tartly replied, and then whispered, "Detention."

"Grounding, as you will have it," Snape replied, but his tone softened and he considered Harry at length before returning to his own work.

Candide glanced around herself in consternation, sorting quickly though the files beside her. "I forgot the Witherhocks second quarter file. Drat." She set everything aside and scooted forward in preparation for standing.

Snape said, "I can fetch it for you. It is just upstairs, correct?"

"Thanks, Dear."

Snape returned with the file, unusually patting Candide on the back as he handed it over. He gave Harry a curious glance before returning to his previous seat. Harry expected that if they were alone, he would have been asked again what was wrong. Harry himself was beginning to wonder what was wrong. All he knew was that he felt vaguely annoyed and adrift, simultaneously in the mood to sulk and in the mood for an argument. Snape may very well have some insight and Harry would reach the point of availing himself of his piercing conversation, he just was not quite there yet. Watching his guardian's growing solicitousness with his pregnant wife eased his most immediate pain for some reason.

Just as Harry was bedding down his pets, Snape rapped on the door and entered without waiting to be called inside. He pushed the door closed behind him.

Said Snape, "You seem quite put-out, Harry, and I am at a loss to guess why."

Harry latched Kali's cage door and watched her burrow under her rags until only a tuft of violet showed, lost among the multi-colored fabrics.

"I'm not really in the mood to talk," Harry said while staring into the cage rather than make the effort at Occlusion. "Anyway, it's your birthday and I don't want to argue – in case it comes to that."

Shifting fabric indicated that Snape had crossed his arms. "It is no matter that it is my birthday," he observed dismissively. "It is more important to understand what is bothering you."

Harry cleared off his bed for sleep and dropped onto it, all the while keeping his gaze averted. "I don't know what it is."

"You deny that you are angry with your punishment-"

"It's not that."

"Candide believes it is."

"Really, Severus, it's fine," Harry insisted, glancing Snape's way. Snape's eyes narrowed and Harry glanced away fast enough to not give anything away.

"Why won't you look at me?" Snape asked.

Harry stared down at his bed where his feet and knees made ridges under the duvet. "Because I'm tired," he said.

Snape dropped his arms and said, "I will give you a bit more time to brood, but not much."

Harry wanted to challenge what methods he planned to employ at that time, but decided that may lead to an argument, so he said nothing but goodnight in response to the same.

The day began with stabs of sunlight but they were soon squeezed off by low, dense clouds. Lunch was to be the celebratory meal, so Harry slipped away well before then to arrange his gifts.

In his room, he wrote out two letters in a careful hand and addressed one to Snape and one to himself. He then laid everything out that he would need on the edge of the bed, all clearly in view, all straight and deliberate. His actions felt ritualistic and strange. Perhaps there was a point to be made with what he was planning, a notion that only reinforced the idea, given how constricted he had been by his guardian's rules, and how sharply he felt the betrayal Aaron was suffering. The letters had been difficult to write, too difficult. They should have been easy, but his mind had drifted off repeatedly while he worked at them. But they were finished satisfactorily enough and lay sealed in envelopes before him, waiting.

Harry took a deep breath, forced his lips to cock into a devious smile at the surprise this would cause, and took up the cane.

Harry stared down at the strange bed before him. The room was strange too, but he had been asleep, dreaming about failing a history examination at school, and was glad to be dreaming of something else. At least, he thought he was. He automatically picked up the envelope addressed to him. Letters were never addressed to him, so this was novel in and of itself. As he opened the letter, he noticed the clothes laid out neatly to the right, a fine white shirt, sweater vest and trousers. They made Harry more acutely aware of the flopping hand-me-down pyjamas he wore, complete with

tears Dudley had inflicted on them while chasing Harry himself around the breakfast table.

The letter made very little sense.

Dear Harry,

This is sort of a strange letter, I realize, but try your best to understand it. You can back out at any time by following the instructions tied to the silver half-cane you are holding. The person who wrote this letter is you, yourself, only a much older version of you, twice as old. The magic cane cuts your age in half, you see. I (or we I suppose) have been adopted by the man who owns this house. He's a wizard, as are you, turns out.

Harry frowned at the letter and flipped it over to check the back of it, just for the heck of it. It was signed by himself all right. He kept reading, smooth, young brow creased deeply.

Well, I won't bore you with everything. Suffice to say you (or us) have got a bit old for having a dad, really, and he isn't quite ready to stop being a dad, so I thought to give him a younger version of us as a present for his birthday today. I know that sounds a bit odd, but I thought you might enjoy that too, as well as getting some nice clothes to wear (they are lying out on the bed) and a decent present, even though it isn't your birthday. Certainly you are owed some past presents.

Harry stared at the letter, finding it surprisingly hard to have his trials so well understood. He was intrigued by the notion of a decent present, given how familiar he was with his cousin receiving them.

I'll keep this short. If you don't mind having the afternoon with a real family, a nice lunch, and little present then take the other letter and go downstairs where the wrapped gifts are laid out on the side table and look for one with your name on the bottom of it. If you are scared and don't want to do this just follow the instructions on the cane and you'll be back to normal.

It was signed in a neater, smoother version of his own signature.

On the assumption that he was most likely still dreaming, Harry eagerly slipped on the nice clothes. He repeatedly stroked the sweater vest, amazed that it fit snugly instead of hanging down to his knees. He gazed at himself in the mirror inside the wardrobe door and thought that probably random strangers would not peer at him in sympathy or with disapproval upon seeing him like this. Attempts at patting down his hair failed, so he closed the door and steeled himself to go downstairs. The room

was chilly so he tugged down the robe hanging on the bed post and shrugged it on, finding comfortable familiarity in having to avoid tripping over its excessive length. He scooped up the letter labeled Severus and pocketed it, figuring the odd label would become clear with time but certain it was not meant for him.

Harry, adept at sneaking silently to avoid his relatives, crept down the stairs and easily located the shifting and colorfully laden table of presents. After deciding the moving figures on the paper were harmless, he leaned close to check each of half a dozen packages from people named Minerva, Hagrid, Jiggers – which gave Harry a giggle, Candide, and Harry himself, until finally on the end found one with no top label, but with his name on the bottom. He sat down on the floor and proceeded to open it with slow relish.

Someone entered the room. It was a lean man with shoulder-length hair wearing floor-sweeping black robes. He spotted Harry there on the floor and stopped suddenly, scuffing his foot. He faintly shook his head and said, "I should not even ask, I think."

Harry fumbled in the deep pockets of his robes and held out the second letter. With confident strides, the man approached and took it from him. He tore and snapped the letter open with one quick motion and proceeded to read it. Harry went back to studying the brightly colored wooden box before him, bearing three giant interlocking cursive Ws on the lid.

When the man did not move right away after reading, Harry asked, "What's it say?"

To his relief the man replied easily, "It says, it is better to be in trouble for something truly harmless." He folded the letter away and stared at Harry rather disarmingly. "I do hope he does not think I prefer you to him."

Harry lifted his boney shoulders and dropped them again, hoping it was all right to not have an answer. With the man towering over him, Harry returned his attention to the box, which opened by sliding the lid rather than lifting. Inside, neatly sectioned areas held all manner of sweets: chocolates, fruit gummies, toffees, bon bons. Harry plucked out a toffee and happily unwrapped it.

Footsteps approached and a bark of laughter sounded. Harry looked up to find a plain, brown-haired woman holding her hand over her mouth as she peered at him. Grinning broadly, she said, "Drat, that's a good present. No wonder he wouldn't tell me what he'd got you."

"Don't encourage him so," the man complained, gliding over to sit on the couch where he folded and pocketed the letter with undo care.

"Encourage him," she echoed, laughing.

With some effort because of a swollen belly, she sat down beside Harry on the floor and examined the sweets.

"Can I have one?" she asked brightly.

Harry nudged the box in her direction and she selected a chocolate with hardy fingers. She smelled sweetly of ginger and powder, not at all like Aunt Petunia.

"Do you want one?" she asked the man, sounding to be teasing. When his eyes merely narrowed slightly, she cajoled, "Oh, come on, lighten up a little." She selected another chocolate and stood with well-practiced awkwardness. "Well, just leave him this way, then," she said, smile ringing in her voice.

The man replied wryly, "Tempting, isn't it? But it won't work. The cane's magic wears off in two or three weeks."

"Shame," she muttered. She shifted over to make space between them and said, "Come here, Harry," while patting the cushion.

Harry peered at each of them. The man's annoyed expression was amplified by his fierce profile. The woman was still highly amused.

As Harry took the indicated seat, she patted him on the back and said, "Come on, Severus, he'll be good practice."

"I doubt that," Snape said.

The woman slipped an arm around Harry, which he wanted to resist, but was not certain would be allowed, given how Dudley was forced to accept excessive affection, even when he wished otherwise.

"How are you doing, Harry?" she asked.

Harry shrugged again and waited until he had nibbled down a chewy licorice before replying, "I'm just dreaming, right?"

She patted his back. "That's the spirit. As long as you don't think it's a bad dream."

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the man, whom he felt very uncertain about. "No, not a bad dream," he said, because there was something superficial about the man's anger, unlike his relatives'. Harry felt like the man just wanted to make a point, rather than truly be cruel.

Harry plucked yet another toffee off out of the slot that had not grown short of any despite the number he had eaten. In fact, far from running out, the top one jostled up to the rim was yet another new flavor.

The woman said, "Hm, maybe you should slow down on those."

"Maybe you should cease until after dinner," the man added more sharply.

"It doesn't really matter," the woman said. "He'll change back before the sweets catch up with him."

The man stood up. "He's always resisted obeying anything," he said in the tone of Harry's aunt and her neighbor friends, proclaiming him a hopelessly delinquent cause.

Harry slid the box closed. The man turned and caught his eye with his piercing gaze, and like a candle melting from rigid taper to amorphous stub, gave in. Harry was not sure how he could tell this – partly it was his eyes and partly it was the way his shoulders relaxed. He stepped back over and stood Harry up and took the seat he had just occupied so as to look him directly in the eye.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, in an insistent and wholly new tone that promised nothing beyond stalwart assistance.

Harry, who had been badly beaten up by Dudley's friends over the last year, had finally learned to avoid them for the most part. He was only mildly bruised at the moment, from one incident where Dudley had run him over on the staircase on the way down to meet his dad, honking from the car for a promised trip to the cinema.

"I'm fine right now," Harry replied. His skin prickled because no one had ever asked him that before, certainly not in that tone.

Harry's shoulders were released, and the man said, using a conflicting tone of caring demand, "If you require anything, you will ask for it, correct?"

Harry nodded. The woman stroked the man on the side of the head once, lips cocked into a painful smile.

"Can I have another toffee?" Harry asked, finding the lure of the rare wooden box to be too much.

"No," the man replied in unison with the woman saying, "yes."

The three of them held still. "It doesn't matter," the woman pointed out again.

The man said, "It does matter."

Harry found them both funny all of a sudden. The man sat back and crossed his arms. "It seems we do have a few things to work out. I will not tolerate that level of pandering."

"But it won't matter in the end. Why bother enforcing discipline when it won't matter? It's just excess sweets. Look how skinny he is."

Harry stood there, trying to look skinnier and perhaps a little pathetic.

The man gave the woman a glare Harry now felt confident he could peg as superficial. This was confirmed when the man uttered, "Fine. Go. Ahead."

"Thanks," Harry said, and set the box on the floor to carefully select what to eat next, just in case the man changed his mind.

"He'll eventually run out," the woman said.

"No, he won't. That is a rather expensive box of sweets that cannot actually be used up."

Harry, sweet held out before his open mouth, stared at the man in surprise at this proclamation. "Wow," Harry said, peering cross-eyed at his fingers sinking into the sides of the toffee he held, thrilled at this magical notion.

The woman said, "I would expect that they could not afford to sell boxes of sweets that never run out; it would seriously cut into future sales."

"They are doing rather well, financially, as far as I can tell."

After a few minutes of silent observation of Harry while Harry studied each moving cartoon on the discarded wrapping paper, the man said, "He is the same as he is now."

"You think so?" the woman replied.

"I sometimes think the Muggles have it easy, raising children incapable of magic."

With too much emotion the woman said, "Do you really feel that way?"

A pregnant silence followed before the man said, "I'm not certain why it matters so," in a somewhat tentative tone. "I was simply making an observation."

"Well, it matters . . ." She faded out and Harry glanced up to see her face struggle while she found words. Her manner shifted to factual and she said, "You have no idea how much pregnant witches fear giving birth to a Squib, that they might inadvertently do something wrong and the child will not have magic as a result."

"I don't think anything you may do or not do could have an impact on that."

"You're rare in that case. Most of Wizardom believes otherwise."

A pause, and then the man said with a hint of accusation, "Have you been worrying about this?"

Her head pulled back, "Of course I've been worrying about this," she burst out.

Harry munched harder on the licorice without realizing it, taking piece after piece.

"Well, cease to do so. It does not matter," the man insisted.

"You really wouldn't mind if we had a Squib?" she challenged.

The man's expression retreated. That was a very hard question, Harry could tell. In a quiet voice the man said, "I'll admit I had not seriously considered that we might, but of course the possibility is always there." He fell silent again. "But rest easy that I would not blame you for it." His gaze shifted thoughtfully far away. "Perhaps partly in the interest of denying everything the bad company I have associated with in the past stood for . . . I will insist that I will not care if the boy is a Squib. I am amazed enough at having a son at all."

The woman gestured in Harry's direction, "Another son, you mean," she said with a hint of tease.

Snape looked at Harry. "Yes. Another son."

This made Harry's ribs hurt and for a second he could not breathe, but this was short lived as his next attempt at pulling forth a licorice felt clumsy and his hand as heavy as the time he had to pick himself up out of an icy cold puddle in his woolen mittens after Dudley dropped him there. Harry looked down and emitted a sound halfway between a squeak and a yelp. His hand was swelling rapidly, so much so that his fingers were threatening to disappear into the balloon of his hand.

"Yah!" Harry said, scrambling away from the box of sweets.

The man said, "And now we know how the Weasley twins can afford to sell boxes of sweets that never run out." He caught up with Harry, who was crabbing awkwardly away from the box with one hand while dragging the other, which now felt glued to a bowling, along beside. He made another noise of distress and curled around the cursed hand protectively.

The woman was crouching beside him as well, and she waved a stick at his hand, sending sparks at it.

"I doubt such a simple counter will reverse it. I expect the twins sell the antidote for even more than the exorbitant price of the sweets." He peered at both sides of Harry's globular hand then slid Harry's sleeve up to study his arm. "I can mix a

curative easy enough, but I will need to fetch something from my stocks at school." He stood with a swish of his robes. "Keep him calm until I return, if you would."

"Come on, Harry," the woman said, lifting him easily to his feet and guiding him to the couch.

Harry's initial alarm was wearing off and he felt a bit silly until he studied his hand again and had to close his eyes at the horrific proportions of it. Her mantra of, "It's going to be all right. Just sit tight," worked remarkably well, especially since Harry had never had anything like it directed at him.

Harry let himself be held in a loose embrace while they waited. A clock ticking occupied the silence. Harry moved his hand slightly, surprised it did not hurt given how far his skin had stretched. He resisted trusting that something was going to be done to help him, maybe it would go away on its own, if not.

The woman stroked his head and said, "You'll be fine and then we'll have lunch."

Harry stomach rumbled at the thought. He propped his grotesque hand on the back of the couch out of the way. "I guess I should have listened to Mr. Snape," he muttered morosely. Harry, who had been sleeping when this whole bizarre thing started, scrubbed at one eye with his unencumbered fingertip and asked, "So, I really have a dad now."

"Yes."

"That's good," Harry replied, feeling too many mixed emotions to contain them all, so he closed his eyes and buried his face in the velvety, mauve-colored robes encompassing him.

She patted his head, "Yup, it is. We'll get you fixed up, have lunch and get you back to normal."

Voice muffled by fabric, Harry said, "The letter said I didn't need a dad any longer. I don't understand that."

"It's true in many ways, and not true in others."

Harry raised his head to say, "Do you consider that a reply?"

She laughed. "You're a cheeky one. Yes, I consider that a reply. How about this: you don't need Severus any longer except to bail you out when you get into trouble . . ." She shook his thin forearm to make his bulbous hand wobble. "Just like this."

"Oh," Harry said, thin mouth turning downward. "But that was that magical box's fault," he pointed out.

"You are very good at getting into trouble using all sorts of magic, Harry," she said in a tone that precluded argument, so Harry offered her none further. "All sorts."

Insistence that Harry was always in trouble came as no surprise to him and even gave him a feeling of rightness with the world. He sighed and rested his head back against the couch cushion.

Someone sitting nearby, jostled Harry awake. He blinked his eyes and tried to remember his strange surroundings. The man in black was sitting beside him. He uncorked an etched glass bottle with a satisfying plomp sound. Harry's heart increased its pace as he realized that had he been dreaming, well, he shouldn't be now, because he had just woke up.

Harry rubbed his eyes and squinted into the cup held out to him. It contained a viscous orange and grey striped slime that clung to the glassy surface of the porcelain cup. The woman handed Harry his glasses, which she must have removed while he slept. Harry did not really want to put them on given how disgusting the substance in the glass looked when he could not see it clearly.

The man held the glass out expectantly. "Go on," he urged. "It will cancel the curse on your hand."

Harry wanted to point out that drinking the offered stuff had to be worse that having bowling-ball hand, but he assumed like all suggestions he made to adults, this one would not fare well and would only bring on retribution.

Harry sat forward and took the cup but moved it no closer to his nose. It sloshed strangely in the cup; the colored layers slid and snaked over one another, refusing to mix. A black-stained, thin liquid swam in between the layers, pooling disgustingly when he tipped the vessel.

"You want me to drink this?" Harry asked, voice croaking.

Candide laughed and put her arm more firmly around him. "'Fraid so. It won't hurt you. It's just a potion."

"A potion," Harry echoed doubtfully, resisting more because the scent of brackish water had reached his nose, wrinkling it.

"We can leave him like this and just change him back," the woman suggested.

The man said in a questioning voice, "I thought we were going to keep him for dinner."

The woman froze, Harry could feel it transmitted through her arm. Then she laughed lightly. Harry glanced her way to find her eyes brightened by gladness.

"I guess, you have to drink up, Harry," she said kindly, but firmly.

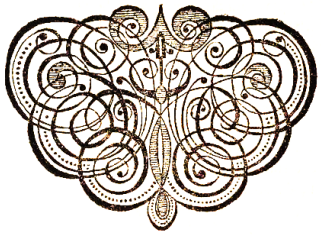
Harry, holding his breath, gulped down the contents of the glass. As the potion slipped and swam down his throat he realized he had not done it to get back his hand; he had just done it for them, mostly for her. They seemed worth the effort, too much so, because if he was not going to stay, as they implied, he did not want the burden of these feelings later when they would be of no use, and in fact threatened to haunt him.

Harry, hand normal, slid off the front of the couch and knelt before the wooden box of infinite sweets, and simply stared at it, not wishing to touch it again right away.

"It's dinner time," the man said. "Come, Harry," he added, expecting to be obeyed, and Harry did.

Author's Notes: Thanks for all the great feedback. It's really nice to have. Hope everyone is having a great new year (for those on the Gregorian calendar, that is).

Chapter 29.



Twenty Years Later, Part 1

Harry, supporting his overfilled stomach, retreated to the couches and dropped on one with a groan.

"You did eat too much," Candide pointed out, sending an accusing glance at Snape.

Snape waved his hand in a manner that replied no matter.

Candide began ferrying the gifts from the table. "You should open your presents."

Snape sat beside Harry and said, "Perhaps we should return this one, before opening the others."

"Oh," she sang in disappointment. "Well, let's get a photo of you two, first." She strode into the drawing room and returned presently, holding a large black camera. With a clack she slid a holder of film into the back of it and said, "Okay, smile."

Snape subtly tugged Harry closer. Harry glanced up at him and the flash went off.

Harry rubbed his eyes, the light had filled the room and made his eyes water. Candide loaded another slate of film. "Hang on," she said, hovering the camera with her wand. "I want to be in the next one."

She sat on Harry's other side and flicked her wand at her side and the flash went off again. Harry peered through floating spots now. When Candide plucked the camera out of the air, Harry said, "More magic!"

"If you wish," Snape lazily said, and he hovered the cane down over the balcony. It came to rest on the floor at their feet where it rolled a few inches before coming to a halt.

"Are you ready to return to nineteen?" Snape asked.

"Maybe. I'm having fun. I don't usually get to have fun. Or have photographs taken. Can I see it?"

"The photograph has to go to the chemists," Candide said. "It doesn't come out right away."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed. "I've never seen a picture of myself before."

She said, "Oh, there's your album upstairs." With a wave of her wand, she brought it along the same path as the cane.

Harry's face brightened upon opening it to the first page. "Is that . . . who's that?" he asked, not wanting to dare believe.

"Your parents," Snape replied neutrally, but he leaned in to give a tour of the photos. "Your parents many friends; they had no shortage," he added dryly. "Yourself at school."

"That's a different school."

"Yes, one you appreciated more than your previous one, I should think."

They sat like that until the album had been fully paged through, including the numerous loose photographs stuck in the back, and Harry blinked, disoriented by everything he had seen and all his questions which had received insufficient answers. "I think it's time to return you to that young man there in that last photographs," Snape said, setting the album gently aside. "Take up the cane if you will."

Harry bit his lip and unfolded the paper tied to the cane. With a last glance at each of them, he worked up some courage and followed the instructions. He grew taller in a small rush of wind.

Harry, at nineteen, glanced between the two of them. Candide spoke first. "Good present," she said. "I had fun. Severus had fun too, but he is going to pretend he didn't."

Harry set the cane on the floor in case it may decide to reassert its magic because he held it too long. "Am I in trouble?" he asked his guardian.

"No," Snape replied softly. "I AM a bit concerned that you decided that was an appropriate thing to do. Up to and including borrowing that from what must have been the Ministry Magic Artefacts Archive. . ."

"It was still in the work area," Harry glibly replied with a small smile. He waved the velvet sack down from his room and began the difficult task of hovering the cane into its narrow confines without touching it. "But I should return it right away."

"Do you think it'd be missed so soon?" Candide asked. "I think it'd be fun to see it on someone else I know." Her sly grin stretched her face.

Harry ceased hovering the cane into the sack and grabbed hold if it through the velvet with the curved handle still sticking out. He gave his overly serious adoptive father a looking over. "That's an excellent idea," Harry said, also grinning.

Snape's gaze bounced between them, disbelieving. He crossed his arms. "Surely, you have lost your minds."

Candide stepped over and tugged on his sleeve. "Oh, come now, Severus; it would only be for a few minutes. I'd so much like to meet your older, I mean, younger self."

"It isn't my fault you don't remember me," he sniped at her.

"I was buried in books from day one. I've told you that. I certainly wouldn't have paid any attention to a grouchy Slytherin five years ahead of me," she teased. "Come on. You're so secretive, and that only makes it more alluring."

"You truly do not know what you are asking for," Snape argued, growing angry. "I was not what most would define as 'good company' twenty years ago; it is unbelievable that you would seriously suggest that I do this." He gestured at the cane with his upper hand without uncrossing his arms.

Harry lifted the cane closer to his reach. "So, get on with it, then," he urged.

Snape turned his dismay Harry's way. "Why in Merlin's name . . .?"

"I'm curious too," Harry said. "I think it's a brilliant idea. Don't you want to be twenty again?"

"NO."

"Well, we want you to be, come on," Harry cajoled. "Just for a few minutes. We promise to be nice to you."

Candide nodded in support of this, showing her broad teeth, she smiled so widely.

"It is not you I am worried about," Snape insisted, but he sounded worn down. "Merlin . . . you will regret this." He held his wand out in Harry's direction. "Take my wand."

"You don't need to do that. I could use a good duel," Harry continued to tease, pocketing the wand. "Sure yours won't just come with you? I had my old clothes on."

"As powerful as this device is, I do not expect it can regenerate a magical item from the past." He huffed and stared at each of them before shoving to his feet. "You truly will regret this," he repeated, angry again. "I am only doing this to prove it to you."

Good natured with anticipation, Candide said, "We'll take any reason."

Snape behaved even more uncertain when he turned to her. Harry interpreted this effortlessly and said, "Really, Severus, isn't it you who told me you can't run away from your past?"

"That would not have been me," Snape stated in a low voice.

"Oh. Maybe it was Dumbledore then." Harry held the cane out invitingly, face overtly pleading, which rendered it years younger.

Snape gestured and commanded of Candide. "Stand back."

Candide moved over, putting Harry between them.

"Much better," Snape said. He reached for the cane. "Fools, both of you," he snarled lightly before a small woosh replaced him with a different version in exactly the same pose.

No one spoke.

A much younger Snape, sallow skinned and thinner, glanced away from Candide and glared at Harry. He noticed the cane he held, still half inside the sack. Candide took hold of Harry's robe sleeve, not so much in alarm as in overwhelming amusement.

"Put it down on the floor," Harry suggested.

Snape did so, slowly, eyes taking in the room without leaving Harry for more than a second at a time. He wandered sideways around the hall in this manner. His robes were reminiscent of Lupin's, patched and faded at the seams. His sulky posture gave him a pronounced vulturish attitude as he took in the details around him.

He stopped in the dining room, the most inviting room in the house, Harry and Candide quietly shuffled in behind. "What is this place, and who are you . . . some Potter cousin?" His eyes narrowed, but Harry had his mind Occluded.

"Something like that," Harry replied. "As to where you are, this is your house."

On his younger face, Snape's brows twisted more starkly in confusion. His eyes danced over the items on the mantelpiece, picking out two for special attention. He did the same on the back wall where decorative bottles lined a high shelf. Harry suspected they were things Snape had owned long enough to recognize them.

"My house," Snape stated. He stalked by Harry, moving faster than expected, while still glancing back to keep tabs on Harry. While he circled the hall again, he felt in his pockets and bit his lip, presumably not finding his wand. He ranged farther, stopping in the library to stare at the shelves, shoulders falling as he grew distracted by the plenty arrayed before him. Harry and Candide stood in the doorway and watched him scan the collection.

Snape finally drew himself from the multitude of books to stare at the two of them again, still generating a glare for Harry. Winky appeared in a sparkle.

"Master is wishing for tea," the elf said, bowed, and left a laden tray behind on the writing desk.

Snape stared down at the tray and his lips moved silently repeating the word "master". Given how thin he was, Harry expected him to take up a currant scone from the pile provided, but he did not.

He looked over at the two of them. "I don't understand this."

Candide slipped in and helped herself to a scone, brushing crumbs off her belly after each bite.

Harry said, "You are twenty years out of time."

There was no appreciable reaction to this. After a glance around the room again, Snape turned to Candide. "Who are you?"

Candide was chewing, so Harry supplied, "This is your wife."

The overly expressive eyebrows came into play again. Snape looked Candide over, especially her clearly pregnant belly. No one spoke, letting him take that in. Candide grinned at him, enjoying this.

"How did I get here?" Snape asked slowly with strange care.

"We didn't use a Time-Turner if that's what you're asking. You can't damage anything."

Snape's attention redirected to Harry. "Twenty years," he repeated. "You cannot be James Potter's brother, in that case."

"I'm his son," Harry said, getting an odd stab from having to provide that information to this man.

This produced no change in Snape's expression. He slipped by Harry and circled the hall as though hunting for something, hands checking his pockets again. "So, where is your father?" Snape asked.

Something clicked decisively inside of Harry. "He's dead."

Again no change in expression occurred in their guest. "Why am I here?"

Candide wandered over by the couches to where Snape's circle would take him. She sent a sympathetic frown at Harry. Snape came up short and stared at her, bordering on undone.

"We just wanted to meet you," she said. "And to wish you a happy birthday. It would be your birthday today, even for you."

He clearly did not find this a valid answer, but his scowl faded as he read her eyes.

"Severus?" she prodded with some feeling.

It was subtle, but Harry caught it. Snape rubbed the front of his left arm. Harry, still closer to the library than the two of them, announced, "Your mark shouldn't be bothering you."

Snape's clear shift from borderline amazement to be faced with Candide to glaring suspicion of him pleased Harry. Somewhere deep inside of him, it irked him to see this Snape believing he deserved a family. The two of them locked gazes.

"Harry?" Candide queried, confused.

"You didn't ask what happened to James," Harry said, approaching them without meaning to.

"I don't care," Snape returned. "Good riddance to him."

"Uh oh," Candide breathed. She stepped between them, but Snape stepped smoothly out from behind her.

"Are you trying to protect him?" Harry asked her, feeling something brackish rising up in his core. "He's nothing but . . ." a Death Eater, Harry held back on finishing but it felt true in a way that could not be denied.

"Harry," Candide said more sharply. "You know who he's going to become."

Harry stepped closer, instinctively thinking he should get Candide out of the way, or at least get between them. Snape stood his ground as Harry came close, but it appeared to require some resolve to do so.

"It's a wonder what Dumbledore saw in him. He doesn't know what he's done," Harry said, feeling angry and like he needed to empty his stomach of a foul meal.

Snape rubbed his arm again, and Harry, without warning grabbed hold of Snape's left wrist. He could feel the taint of the mark under his hand, calling to something deep within him. Harry heard himself say, "He's just Voldemort's servant, nothing more. Just an empty vessel for dark magic." Surprising vehemence powered these words out, holding Snape from struggling despite flinching at the Name.

Candide touched Harry's arm. "Harry, don't hurt him."

"I'm not hurting him," Harry said, even though his grip was quite firm. "He just can't stand to hear his master's true name." Candide let go and took a step back. Harry said to Snape, but not in a reassuring tone, "I took care of your master. He can't bother anyone now that he's a helpless Muggle."

The smug doubt that flickered over Snape's face, made heat flare into flame inside Harry. He put his thumb over the Mark and felt for the foul energy of it, lying dormant. It sang to something inside himself, which made his anger and frustration go white hot. Snape jerked his arm as his mark burned, freeing himself. Now he stared at Harry with open alarm, bent over his clutched forearm, all of which fed satisfaction into Harry.

"Harry!" Candide snapped, stepping into his face. "Back. Off."

Harry, before he could re-assess what he was doing or regain any control of his runaway pain, let slip, "You aren't my mother. Ask him what's happened . . . what's going to happen to my mother. It was his fault."

His statements, which he knew could sting, found their mark. Snape's alarm ratcheted up as he glanced between the two of them.

"Harry," Candide said firmly, teeth clenched, gaze blazing. "Sit down."

Harry glanced at the empty floor behind him.

"Yes, right there," she demanded furiously.

Harry had never seen her in this full on angry mode, and never imagined it would be he who put her there. This jarred him out of angry into stunned. He sat down on the cool wood floor, fingers finding knot holes in the wide boards, which he grabbed hold of with his fingertips. He avoided both their gazes.

"Sorry about him," Candide said. "He-"

"What is he referring to?" Snape asked warily, interrupting her.

"Something that happened a very long time ago." Harry could hear by her modulating voice that she was looking back at Harry frequently as she spoke. "We should switch you back to your normal self now, I think. You're setting him off, which I didn't expect."

"Switch me back . . .?"

She hovered the cane from the floor. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw her catch it awkwardly with the felt-covered end. "Switch you for your forty-year old self."

"Forty?" Snape sputtered, dismayed in a whole new way.

"Come now, it's not that bad," she teased. "You have this house, this family . . ."

He must have been Legilimizing her or she had gestured to take Harry in. "Including him?" he gasped.

"Thank you very much," Harry said, lifting his head. Their glares battled.

"Let's not start that again," Candide insisted.

Snape looked away first, down at her feet. Part of Harry wanted to recognize how very lonely he must be to obey her but residual anger and the awakened spirit of something that only wanted hate battled back at that understanding. He watched Candide walk Snape through the cane's instructions.

Their Snape reappeared and blinked at them. He found Harry on the floor and asked in surprise, "What are you doing there?"

Harry did not feel like explaining. Candide said, "He was being just a bit difficult, so I told him to sit there."

Snape paused in slipping the cane away. "Harry was?" he asked. His surprise boosted Harry's embarrassment. They stared at each other with vastly different emotions than moments before: Harry with confused regret and relief that he had control again, Snape with with curious disbelief. Snape tugged the drawstrings on the velvet sack tight and tossed it aside. To Candide, he said, "Give me a few minutes alone with Harry."

Candide patted Snape on the shoulder with a "welcome back" and went upstairs.

"Can I get up now?" Harry asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

Snape gestured that it did not matter to him. "Have a seat somewhere more comfortable."

Twenty Years Later, Part 1

Harry rose with ease and dropped on the couch opposite the one where the cane lay. He fixed his eyes on the black-as-night, supple fabric sack and waited.

Snape waited too, but finally asked, "What happened?"

Harry filled his lungs with a breath then let it out in a rush. "I got annoyed with him . . . you . . . him."

"Yes, but why?" Snape asked in a tone of seeking facts. Harry marveled how very different Snape seemed, standing there in new robes, posture neutral, face concerned. Harry's anger had disappeared just as quickly as Snape had changed, which worried Harry as much as it let him relax. He felt like a puppet with a string pulled by someone else, someone he did not trust.

Harry did not know what to say that would recover his pride. Needing to say something, and getting more upset as he went along the path of these thoughts, Harry explained, "He didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't care what he was going to do."

"Ah," Snape uttered.

"'Ah', what?" Harry snapped. "What's this 'ah' stuff. Like you could possibly know what the problem is . . ."

Snape displayed only amusement at Harry's exasperation.

With less force and some contrition Harry asked, "What?"

"You cannot alter the past," Snape stated.

Harry clenched his hands together and pressed them between his knees. "I know that."

"Yes, but faced with a version of me from November of 1979, you were facing the future, not the past." He sat down beside Harry, slowly as if concerned Harry may object. He spoke deliberately as he went on, "Since I am quite certain you have forgiven me for that mistake, I think your anger was at your helplessness to change things . . . things which at that instant, for that me, were still to happen."

Harry thought about that. "Maybe," he uttered grudgingly and sighed.

"Are you angry with me now?"

Of all the conflicting things Harry felt right then, including pain at himself for losing control and a hint of fear at the enmity that had risen within him so willingly powered

by something he could not control, he could not list anger at Snape among them. "No."

"Hm," Snape uttered. "I expected my younger self to make trouble, not you." He studied Harry as he thought things over, adding, "Interesting test."

"I think I failed it," Harry said, trying to lighten the mood. He regretted most making Snape's mark burn. Why had he done that? He did not like to think of himself as being that cruel.

"Harry?" Snape prompted after a long wait.

"I'm glad you don't have a mark anymore," Harry said, moving one shoulder in a spasmodic circle. "The feel of it wasn't very nice."

"You sense it directly now?"

"When I touched him, yes." The memory made it even more relieving to sit brushing shoulders with his guardian and receive no tainted sense. "I was . . ." Harry started to say more of what happened, but decided he would rather not.

"You what?"

Why had he been so cruel? "I wasn't very nice to him is all."

Snape leaned away as if to get a more general look at Harry. "I feel safe assuming he was not banking on kindness, believe me."

He responded to Candide, though, Harry thought with a twinge.

Candide returned on quiet feet. "How is it going?" She tossed the sacked cane aside and sat across from them.

Snape touched Harry's shoulder. "Everything is all right," Snape said. "And you?"

"Oh, fine. It was nice to see that you. Harry surprised me, is all."

Snape said with gentle ease, "You had yet to meet Harry in his colors of full temper."

Harry rolled his eyes. He thought they were past the worst until Candide said, "I had never seen a Dark Mark before."

Snape's brow nearly obscured his eyes, it dipped so low. To Harry he said, "You did what?"

"I don't know why I did that," Harry said, thoughts far away.

Candide's face contorted in sympathy. "That was the worst, when Harry made that awful snake tattoo appear, just by grabbing your arm."

Harry held his breath. Snape's hand slid off his back and clasped together with his other. His knuckles went white.

"Without a wand? I did not realize you knew how to do that."

Harry shrugged.

"Harry?" Snape was going to insist.

"I figured out I could do that – when I went to rescue one of the alternate yous."

A thoughtful pause ensued. "Anything else new you are capable of that I should know about?"

Harry leaned back to consider that.

Candide said, "What does it say that he has to think so hard about the answer?"

Snape said to Harry, "I repeat that I would like to hear about such things in a timely manner."

"I'll try to do better about keeping you informed," Harry said quietly.

Candide slapped her lap before standing. She said, "But please, don't discuss it in front of Rita Skeeter . . ."

Both of them looked down at their hands.

That night, Harry received the expected visit from his guardian. He had, in fact, stayed up reading in anticipation of it. The cane, in its sack, stood propped against the wall beside the night stand. Snape's eyes took it in as he sat on the bed. "You can return that without trouble?"

Harry wanted to snoop around the Department of Mysteries after returning it, so he was waiting until the middle of the night. "Yes," he replied.

"Do be careful when you do so." When Harry glanced up at this, his thoughts were snagged. Snape asked, "What do you think you will find there?" with his old kind of cold calm.

"I wanted to look around Moody's desk. If he has one."

"Why would they assign him one, he is dead . . . officially."

"Well then, Percy's desk. I just want to look around."

Snape reached over for the black-clad cane and held it out. "Do it now, so I know you returned safely without having to find out in the morning."

"It will be safer later," Harry insisted.

Snape set the cane back. "At five then? I want to know you succeeded and do not require rescue."

"Rescue? From the Department of Mysteries?" Harry blurted, chuckling enough to let his book slide off his knees. He laid it face down beside him and hitched his arms around his knees. He did not want an argument and really it was fine if Snape was up waiting for him. "All right."

Harry figured Snape would say more, but he did not. He looked Harry over briefly, stood up, and with a "good night", departed the room.

Harry woke from a groggy dream about playing Quidditch on flying carpets instead of broomsticks to find Snape shaking him by the shoulder. The darkened room reeled while Harry took his bearings. "Is it five?" Harry mumbled.

"Yes," came the familiar warm voice out of the darkness before the lamp flared. When Harry leaned over to grab up the cane, Snape asked drolly, "Perhaps you want to not be caught in your pyjamas?"

Limbs groggy, Harry tossed back the covers and fished some well-used robes out of the bottom of his wardrobe and tossed them on. Snape followed him over and held out the long sack that in the dim light could have been a rent in the fabric of the room.

"Thanks," Harry said. He blinked vigorously to clear his vision, swept his hair back again and slipped away.

The Department of Mysteries sat in silence as expected. Harry slid the cane back where he had found it: at the bottom of the deeply piled shelving over a work table. He then hunted around for Percy's desk. After circling the two likely work rooms twice, eliminating desks sporting photographs unlikely to be Percy's or discarded envelopes addressed to others in the nearest bin, Harry decided the decisively neat one in the far corner of the second room must be it. He squatted and checked the floor and found two stray red hairs, supporting this. The desk radiated curse sickliness, making Harry hesitate to use a spell to pull open the drawers. He may have to be satisfied with what he could see without moving anything or try out his curse negation and risk setting off an alarm. He wanted to step away more than anything, not get closer and certainly not touch it.

Harry stood on tiptoe to peer onto the shelf over the desk and nearly leapt into the air in startlement when a voice said, "Find anything?"

Harry patted his chest and turned to face Moody. Calmly he replied, "No."

The old Auror stood with his arms folded, shoulders cocked with swagger. Behind his scars it was hard to tell if he were angry or delighted at his catch.

"What are you doing here?" Moody asked.

"Looking around," Harry replied. He had no right to be here, but he found it easy to pretend he did.

Moody's glass eye roved over the desk behind Harry. "I wouldn't touch that desk if I were you."

"I figured that out. What's he got to hide?"

"His excuse is that his mates don't like him very much and were fond of leaving him little surprises until he resorted to some decent protection."

Harry stepped back and pondered the desk. "What is it that is so blasted cursed?"

Moody sauntered closer. "An amulet. In the top drawer there. I've never seen the likes. It came in on one of the sweeps of Knockturn Alley's less reputable establishments."

"They let him keep it?"

Moody shrugged. "People that work here like to mess with things like that. Otherwise they'd've found other lines o' work."

They gazed at each other. Moody with sleepy eyes that hid his expression. "Go on home, Potter. Isn't it past your bedtime?"

Harry, despite being grateful to get off without trouble, extended his welcome by saying, "You haven't been following me."

Moody strolled away. "Been busy."

"You told Fudge you were following me."

"I did no such thing. What makes you say that?"

Harry did not want to answer that because it would prove he had been sneaking into the Department of Mysteries regularly. In the room beyond, the glow of the lamps brightened, indicating someone else had arrived.

Quietly, Moody said, "I know you can jump in and out of here without a hitch. It's sufficient for the moment that you know that I know you can." This sounded vaguely

threatening. "I see from the papers that your adoptive father has let the veil fall from his eyes as well. Good."

Harry bit down his reply. A desk drawer opened and closed in the next room.

"You're right I have to go," Harry whispered. "Bedtime and all." And fell through the floor.

Back in Harry's bedroom, Snape stood before the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"It's all set," Harry said. He tossed his robes onto the floor and plonked back onto his bed with a groan at the early hour.

"No additional trouble?"

"Less than expected."

"Good."

Snape departed at lunchtime the following day, allowing Harry to invite Tonks over to replace him. Pink hair standing straight, Tonks greeted Candide first upon arriving, before giving Harry a peck. The extra attention Candide garnered continued to grow in proportion to her belly size.

Tonks sloppily saluting Snape that he was relieved, grinning at her own antics even as she toppled an empty water glass on her back-swing.

"I'll trust you are in good hands," Snape stated dryly before disappearing in the Floo. He dropped fewer hints about disapproving of them each time Tonks visited, giving Harry some relief from his previous relentless disapproval.

The afternoon passed in idle conversation, until Harry insisted that Candide put down her work and join them in a card game. Candide put up a fight, but at the end of the first game, insisted they play a second. Perhaps this was because she lost, but any reason was a good one.

Harry held his hand up close since Tonks' eyes had wandered too much the previous game and he did not want her to win two in a row. "Any progress on convincing Mr. Weasley to remove my guard?" Harry asked.

Tonks shook her head, while Candide tsked Harry.

Harry argued, "I'm so very tired of this, and nothing has happened."

"That couldn't be because you've had a guard?" Candide pointed out, accentuating her sharp tongue by snapping the corner of the card down as she played.

Harry still had no good counter argument to that, and he wished he did. He tapped his fingers on his cards and sighed. "If Dumbledore had treated me this way, we'd still have Voldemort around, you know," he complained.

Tonks patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

After the second game, Candide insisted she must return to sorting through the disarrayed files from her client for the next day's work.

"Look at this!" she exclaimed, pulling out the first slip from the file. "They are trying to expense Honeydukes purchases. We told them last year that wouldn't fly, even if they got a Healer's note saying it was medically required." She put that slip aside and with a hand propped on her forehead, peered at the next crumpled and reflattened strip on the pile.

"Maybe we'll leave you to it, then," Harry said, standing up and thinking ahead to having some much needed time alone with Tonks. "It's almost over, right?" he asked. "November is."

Candide's squint remained fixed on her work."One way or another, yup. Except those few who risk swallowing Opix Auctoritatis potion before filing for an otherwise impossible extension."

"What potion?" Harry asked.

"Influence potion," Tonks provided. "Should be banned."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because it can be dangerous if it gives you too much influence over yourself. You know, delusions of grandeur, thinking you can fly without a broomstick, or that you can convince Goblins to show you where the gold is hidden. Stuff like that."

Candide curiously asked, "Why wouldn't that work?"

"Goblins are immune to it," Tonks provided. "As are dragons." She turned to Harry. "Rodgers hasn't covered potions on the Proposed to be Banned List with you?"

"He covered banned ones. There were enough of those already," Harry insisted.

Tonks gave Candide a pat on the shoulder and wandered into the main hall where she sat down on the couch. She picked up Harry's photo album and began flipping through it.

Harry sat close to smell the vaguely peppermint scent of her while peering over her shoulder. She held the album open to an old photo of the Order, finger tracing

along figures. The photo had been taken in the dining room at Grimmauld Place. Sirius caught them looking and hid a large parchment behind his back with a sly smile, making Harry's heart twinge. Moody reached over to take it away, and Sirius relinquished the partly crunched roll and stuffed it away inside his jacket.

"Let's go up to my room," Harry said, torn between sleepiness from his early morning foray and wanting to get closer to her. She made a noise that probably agreed with the former.

Up on his bed, Harry opened the album again to the same picture. His parents stood off to one side, heads leaned in close to discuss something in private. Harry prodded their feet but they just high stepped in place and ignored him.

"I want to see my parents," Harry said, mind latching onto an idea that felt so elegantly easy it made his mouth water.

Tonks sat down beside him, hands clasped together and stretched out before her. "Of course you do."

Harry looked away from the album. "No, I really mean it," he said, excitement budding.

"Harry, please don't talk like that," Tonks pleaded, sounding sad.

Harry closed the album and stared at her. "What's wrong?"

She struggled for words and quietly said, "Please. Let's just talk about something else."

Harry, who wanted time to think over his idea, silently agreed, even though he wanted to grill her about what bothered her so. He pulled her back on the bed and lay beside her, staring up at the ceiling.

She was slithering closer, but Harry's mind was flitting off elsewhere. "Do you ever see Belinda around the Ministry?"

Tonks shot him a disgusted look and climbed on top of him. "What kind of question is that, Moodkiller?"

"I worry about her, is all," Harry said, struggling to find connections in his memory, and wishing dearly he could prove to someone that Percy needed to be watched, or questioned, or exiled, or something.

From her position lording over him, she grabbed the edges of his robe front and shook them. "Harry, all the world and all the witches in the world are not your problem.

Your long-dead parents are certainly not your problem. You have enough to deal with already."

"Will you go talk to Belinda this week?" Harry asked. "See if she'll talk to you."

"Grrrr," Tonks said, rolling off him, but kept one hand fastened to his robe.

Harry rolled to the side to look at her. "Promise her you won't tell anyone what she tells you. Maybe that will help. Well, except me."

Tonks' pink brows dove close to her eyes. "You are very frustrating, Harry. All right, fine. I'll try to talk to her. Take her out for coffee or something. Can we drop this topic now?" she demanded.

The next morning they went into the Ministry together. There was something comfortable about doing so that made him think marriage, as a general idea anyhow, wasn't such an bad notion.

Harry took his seat in the training room beside Aaron and wished he had arrived early enough to talk to his fellow, but his dark mood showed on his face.

"When's your mum coming back, exactly?" Harry asked, attracting the attention of everyone else, keen as they were to learn what had sunk their normally irreverent, smiling fellow into glumness.

"Tomorrow, maybe. I tried to send her an express owl, but she's most likely on the Baden Baden to Paris section of the Magiekech Express, because it came back undelivered. That would get her in late tomorrow."

Kerry Ann asked, "Something going on with your mum?"

Aaron faintly shook his head. "It's nothing. Just something I need to talk to her about," he replied dismissively, confirming Harry's suspicion that he did not want anyone to know.

During drills he returned almost to normal, and Harry switched with Tridant to be Aaron's drill partner. Aaron said, "Oh good, someone I can pound on a bit more." And indeed, he put more behind his attacks than normal, with many flying wild and wide as his emotions scattered his magic.

Harry felt the curses as they flew and bounced around him, but still could not figure out how he could possibly influence them without lifting his wand against them.

Rodgers returned and shouted, "Hey there! What is this, playtime? Let's work on something serious instead. Get out your books again." They lowered their wands and pulled their desks back into position.

Chapter 29

Tuesday, Tonks waylaid Harry in the corridor and gestured that they should slip into the file room.

Tonks began, "So, I dragged your former girlfriend out for coffee this afternoon, so you owe me." She poked him painfully in the ribs.

Harry rubbed the spot and said, "Thanks. Let me know how I can make it up to you."

"Nice dinner out."

"Anytime," Harry burst out. "Tell me when you have time."

"Yeah, I know," she grumbled. "Back to Miss Ex-Harry's-Girlfriend-"

"Why are you calling her that?"

"Don't interrupt me." Tonks slid away to pace between the notice board where the filing rules hung in boldface cracked and yellowed glory and the first cabinet on the row. "She's definitely hiding something and had no interest in saying what it was. If she'd been an ordinary witch I'd have been tempted to slip her something to loosen her tongue, and I'm not convinced that's a bad idea even if she is Bones' receptionist." Her mouth twisted thoughtfully. "I got the sense she thought she should say. More annoyingly."

"Did she say why she wouldn't say?" Harry asked, not wanting to divulge Belinda's fear that she might lose her job if Belinda herself had not.

"She said she's had Skeeter jump out of nowhere on her several times in the last few weeks, asking questions. Said she's afraid she's listening in." Tonks picked at her nails, making a clicking noise that sounded loud in the quiet room. "I insisted I could remedy that for a conversation but she wouldn't budge."

"I can understand her fear," Harry muttered.

Tonks propped her hands on her hips and said, "I hate to say this, believe me, but I think you should take her out and chat her up a bit. I'm suspicious now." When Harry did not comment, she went on, "Consider it your weekend fieldwork if you want."

"I couldn't do that," Harry said, finding the thought distasteful.

Tonks stepped closer until their fronts touched. "Harry, the distance between your private life and feelings and your life as an Auror is like the distance between us right now. None."

"If I decide to make her talk it will be because I care what may be going on. Honestly she's much happier than she used to be back when she was dating Percy."

Tonks leaned in tighter and said, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave."

"It's not like that," Harry said.

Tonks back away and said, "She broke up with you, right?"

Exasperated on several fronts, Harry said, "I was having problems with the Dark Plane. I couldn't control it then. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing I suppose." She stepped back and fluffed her hair back up. "I'm not your guard this evening but I could arrange to be tomorrow."

"Uh, I should probably get Aaron assigned, if possible."

She propped a hand on one angled hip and teased, "Do I have to worry you're hoping to date him as well?"

"Not a chance," Harry returned. "It's our regular night to help Ginny with her drills, and readings so she can get into the program next year."

"That's nice of you, Harry, to do that. She'd do well, I think, and we need some more women around here." She glanced at the door as if she heard something. "Speaking of which, they will notice I'm missing soon."

Harry did get Aaron assigned as a guard the next day after training. Aaron packed his books up slowly, distracted and fussy about how they were arranged in his designer bag.

"Let's go to my place, if you don't mind. Candide won't be back for a while, right?" Aaron said, and despite the question phrasing, was really making a demand.

Harry shrugged to indicate that was all right with him. "And Ginny can keep Candide company if she gets there before us. Women seem to have no problem doing that."

At Aaron's fancy flat, he noisily sorted through the liquor cabinet, before sighing and letting his arms rest limp at his sides where he crouched.

"Did you talk to your mum?" Harry asked, feeling the answer must be yes.

Aaron did not move, holding the pose of a young bird with useless wings as he replied. "Yes."

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"I suppose I don't need to ask what she said," Harry ventured.

Aaron snagged the front bottle without looking at the label and stood straight. He set it down on the glass-topped, stainless steel cabinet, but did not reach for any of the glittering array of crystal tumblers. He leaned on his hands on the cabinet instead and fell still.

"I'm sorry about this," Harry said, feeling he should say something. His words rang true inside him.

"I liked my dad," Aaron said with no preamble.

"Of course you did," Harry said with a spark of defensiveness.

"All this time though . . ." Aaron pushed away from the cabinet without pouring himself a drink. He paced, long neck bent ungainly. He stopped, framed by one of the tall windows full of diffuse afternoon light. "I don't know who I am," he complained.

"I don't think that's changed," Harry said when Aaron had paced back in his direction.

But Aaron gave no sign he heard him. He stared off somewhere or sometime else. Pangs plucked at Harry's chest but he made no further attempts at soothing his friend because his own heart was churning and he could no longer see past that.

Harry fished around for something to say. "What did your mum say? Did you ask her to . . . I don't know, explain?" When Aaron did not answer, Harry said. "Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have asked that."

"No, it's all right. Let's go to your place; I feel like hitting something with spells some more."

Ginny arrived while they were working out the fine points of the Loaded Orb spell they had learned that day. The glowing orbs that erupted when the spell was executed properly could be filled with all manner of things, like smoke or mist. Rodgers promised that they could be filled also with fire or blinding light, but he was waiting to show them how to do that until later. That did not stop Harry and Aaron from trying to work out how.

"Did you check your copious library for a book on the topic?" Ginny asked after observing them producing endless streams of harmlessly popping orbs.

Harry dropped his arm. "I didn't think of that." His friends followed him into the library where the extra books from upstairs were now stacked on the floor, waiting to be properly organized or sorted out to be disposed of.

Twenty Years Later, Part 1

"Gosh, what's this?" Ginny blurted, reaching down for a book with a rail-thin, cloaked figure on the cover sporting a bowler standing with feet widely spaced and grinning maliciously. The title in metallic red that could only be discerned by tilting the book repeatedly in the lamplight, read Vile Virtuosity.

"Watch out," Harry warned too late. The book let out a maniacal laugh when she picked it up, and sighed in deep satisfaction as she flipped it open. "Some are worse than that."

Ginny shot him a look of disbelief at the very notion.

"Oh excellent," Aaron chirped upon picking up Grotesque Grades, oddly by the corner. He held it up that way until it ceased flapping like a bat and fell limp. "I had a copy of this once."

"Severus is sorting through his old things to clear out the rooms upstairs."

"Are you getting pushed aside by the new arrival?" Ginny asked with telling innocence.

"Yes, but it's all right," Harry said, taking up a book too, but one off the shorter "keep" stack. "Is it just me, or is there way more dark magic than good?" he asked.

Aaron said, "There is certainly more interesting dark magic than good. That's why I was so happy to be in Slytherin."

Ginny stared at him. "Maybe I should have been in Slytherin."

"What?" Harry blurted. But after reassessing the way she pondered Aaron, he decided to not pursue it further. Instead, he found a spot on a high shelf for the book he held. That was another thing that had to happen: books that might fight back had to be moved out of reach. The three of them settled into perusing the grim volumes littering the room, while Harry tried to reorganize the books, grateful to have Aaron thoroughly distracted by anything enough to forget he should be moping.

Harry waited until Friday to again broach his plans with Tonks. He had no duties until Saturday evening and she finished up a night shift and paperwork well before lunchtime. It took him a while to get the topic in because as soon as they were alone and the room was sealed against eavesdroppers, she uncharacteristically brought up the subject of Belinda.

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"Did you get a chance to talk to her?" Tonks had asked as soon as she dropped into a chair at her rickety old table.

Harry sat across from her and heated his mug of tap water before hunting around for a less-overused-than-average teabag from those scattered around. "I stopped by Bones' office twice yesterday and once this morning, but she was too busy to talk," Harry explained. "They're having some major meeting with officials from the French Ministry of Magic so the office was full of people both times. She seemed all right, though. Happy enough."

"She wasn't before?"

"No. Percy was always hanging around and would get in my way if I tried to talk to her. She didn't seem to know how to tell him to get lost."

"Well, if they were dating, why would she?"

"Maybe, but if, say, Ginny wanted to talk with me and you were there, I'd just ask you if I could have a few minutes alone with her. There's something wrong if you can't do that." At her raised brow, he replied, "Come on, Ginny has her eye on Aaron, no worries about her."

Tonks grinned and her eyes glittered. "Does she now? I can see the appeal of all that money. Someone might as well be enjoying it."

"I don't think it's that," Harry said. "You think it's that?"

"I think it probably doesn't hurt."

"Enough office gossip," Harry said, shifting his chair to a spot where it would not rock so much. "I want to do something but I need your help to do it."

At first she appeared interested, but her face darkened. "This isn't the find-your-parents thing again, is it?" she tentatively asked.

Harry bit his lip. There was a thicket here that he was going to have to sort out and he feared it may leave a few marks before he broke through. "Yes," he answered, going for straightforward. "Remember how I told you I can go to other places where events have played out differently? Well, I realized that there is probably a place where my parents weren't killed by Voldemort, where they would be still alive."

Watching her face, Harry decided she still did not believe him. She said, "But how old would they be? Would they want to see you?"

"They'd be the same age they'd be now if they'd lived. I can't travel through time. It'd be exactly the same date as today. As to seeing me. I'd put on a disguise. Too much to explain otherwise."

She gazed at him in a way that made him vaguely uncomfortable. He said, "I get the sense you think I'm a bit off my rocker here."

"I don't know what I think. I like that I don't sense that you're hiding anything," she stated with vague glumness.

"I suppose it sounds a little hard to believe."

"A little?"

Harry frowned, rubbed grit from his eye, and sighed silently. "I don't know how to convince you. I can't just jump off and retrieve something to prove it to you. It's harder than that."

She interlaced her fingers and leaned forward to peer at him openly. "You believe you can go to other places that are like the real world, but different?"

Harry shrugged. "Yes. I did it accidentally twice, and once intentionally. I just have to imagine that place and I can go there. Like Apparition, but to another reality." Before she could express the doubt on her face, he went on. "You don't have to believe me, if you trust that I can stay out of trouble and will let me go off for a few hours. I promise I'll be back on time. If I can't find my parents, I won't try again." He was pleading by the end. He loathed to hear it, but with his normal guard schedule it would be nigh impossible for weeks to try, and once he had thought of it, he could not get the idea to leave him alone.

She sat straight, resisting, based on her face. "That's what you are going to go . . . try to do: find your parents? Nothing dangerous?"

Harry brightened. "Exactly. Nothing dangerous."

Her brow went up again, doubtful and perhaps accusing. "It never seems to work out that way, Harry." She gazed at him longer. "You're going to sneak off and try anyway, aren't you?"

Harry gazed with overdone innocence at the floor and then the wall to the left, making her snort.

"I clearly like you too much, Harry," she said, smirking. "If you don't come back, though, what the hell am I going to do? If you are not delusional, there is no way to go looking for you." Her expression hardened. "Maybe you shouldn't go."

"Tell everyone you took a nap – which you need after the night shift – and I went off without telling you." Harry made his eyes sad. "Please, really, you admitted I don't need a guard."

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"Harry you need something more than a guard. I don't know what it would be called." She huffed and crossed her lean arms, tossed her head and said, "I get the sense Severus is giving up on you. I wouldn't have believed it, except you behave like he has."

Oddly, this hit Harry's midsection harder than her disbelief. "I'm not a child," he said, but this was not the issue, he realized after hearing it. He jumped ahead to assuming she would give in, in the hopes it would help her do so. "I need a little help when I return. The space between the Planes is absolute zero or something. Colder than you can imagine. I need warming up when I return."

She gazed at him, trying not to smile. "Oh, now I'm getting some kind of come-on from you?"

Harry laughed. "Like a warmed blanket."

"Oh, blanket. Right."

"I'll also need a disguise. Can I look through your wardrobe?"

"Oh, I don't know. That may be going too far." She grimaced through a smile and stood reluctantly, like one doing something they expect to regret later. "You'd look right awful in pink."

> Author's Notes: Thanks as always for the feedback. Some of you I will reply to on my lj after we get a little farther along. This story is very different from the others in what I'm trying to accomplish and I'll try to explain that in hopes that it will better help me manage it.

Chapter 21.

Twenty Years Later, Part 2

Harry, warmed by the grace of the sun's rays, awoke enclosed by the nodding brown grass of the field adjacent to the Burrow. Painfully, he forced his creaky limbs to push him to his feet, and staggered twice before righting himself reliably. It was a gorgeous day, just like the one he had envisioned, despite the season. He sniffed. The air smelled cold even as it stood still and warm.

Deciding these oddities were the result of whatever magic rendered the weather so lovely, Harry pulled out his wand and put his usual disguise on himself. He wanted to appear non-threatening, so he went with what he was practiced at: a long white beard, white eyebrows, and even longer, flowing white hair. A few strokes of his beard where it met his face left him confident that it was convincing, but his hands were much too young. Harry masked those with a spell for spotting and one for wrinkles. He needed several tries to get the wrinkles right, and only managed it after adding a flesh-loosening hex. Usually, he did not feel jealous of Tonks' Metamorph abilities, but at this moment, they would be wonderfully convenient. He unfolded the borrowed hat from his pocket and smoothed it straight against his leg before adjusting it on his head tightly enough so it would not topple off as he walked.

The Burrow came into view beyond a copse of trees, as tilted, slapdash and unpretentious as in Harry's world. Harry smiled just at the sight of it. Outside the door, between the Ford Anglia and the garden, the twins and Ginny were setting up a second row of tables. One of the twins looked up and spotted Harry.

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"Hullo!" the twin shouted.

Harry approached at a leisurely pace, thinking quickly how he was going to explain himself. The three redheads all stopped arranging tables as he made his way, long robes catching on the unmown grass, which made him even more ungainly.

"Hello," Harry greeted them, forcing his voice gruff, and giving a small bow of his head. "I just got into the country. I heard there was a picnic here." This seemed a reasonable assumption, given the weather and their activities.

"Ay, in a few hours," the other twin said. "You're early."

"Ah," Harry said, disappointed, because he did not have much time. As he fumbled for what to say next, the door banged open and Mrs. Weasley emerged, hovering two sizable covered dishes before her.

"Whom do we have here?"

"Uh, Aaron, Madame," Harry said, knowing from experience that his fellow trainee's name often made him turn his head because it sounded similar to his own. "Totten. Aaron Totten."

"Early for the picnic," a twin leaned over to inform his mother, voice insinuating that perhaps Harry was a bit old and daft.

Harry smiled pleasantly despite the perceived insult. Old and daft was fine with him just now.

Mrs. Weasley was undeterred. "Please, join us anyway since you're here. Been away long?" she asked, keen of hearing, apparently.

Harry helped Ginny hover chairs into place while they talked. "I've been away for a very long time. Years," he said, hoping to explain away his ignorance with something other than senility.

The Weasleys all gathered outside to help get things ready. Introductions needed repeating each time another cluster came out. Bill had two young children, twins. Charlie sported an animated dragon tattoo down his left arm. It appeared to be trying to bite Percy standing beside him. Percy shrank away a bit, as though it might possibly manage it.

Mr. Weasley wanted to know if Harry knew how Muggle strimmers worked. Harry from using one extensively at the Dursley house did know, but pretended that he did not.

"Fascinating and clever things. I had one you know. Still do, 'cept it doesn't, uh, do anything. Hasn't for a while. Makes a rather painful whining noise if you plug it in. You know about plugs?"

"So, where have you been . . . traveling?" Bill asked, letting his father's question lie.

This was not a good question for Harry, who rarely left England. He had to play it safe. "Switzerland. Finland. Around the Mediterranean."

The twins wandered out of earshot and put their heads together to chat in private. They seemed to be heatedly debating something. The remaining Weasleys stood relaxed. The small children played energetically on the large lawn. The whole scene practically bled idyllic.

Ginny leaned in close and said to Harry, "Fred and George are trouble."

What would Dumbledore say here? "Young men usually are," Harry knowingly stated, holding back on a grin at clearly imagining his old mentor saying exactly that. This brought a laugh from Mrs. Weasley, who, after a short struggle, had tapped a pint of ale from a massive wooden barrel under the eave of the house. She blew the excessive foam off the top of it before handing it to her husband, who gave her a reproving look before smiling in thanks.

"So, what do you do?" Charlie asked.

"What do you do?" Harry countered. "No, let me guess . . ." Harry stroked his beard and squinted at Charlie and his tattoo. "I will hazard to guess that you work with dragons."

Unexpectedly, Charlie blushed with pride. "I do. I suppose that's an easy guess." He rubbed his tattoo, which rolled over onto its back to expose its less scaly belly to the attention.

"But what do you do?" Bill repeated.

The tables and chairs were all arranged, so there were no more distractions. "Me? Oh, not much. Things. I get around."

"But you must do something," Bill challenged, accepting a pint and holding it away from himself to let it drip on the grass as the foam surged over the brim.

Harry conceded, "I sometimes hunt dark wizards."

Bill nearly dropped his beer.

"Do you really?" Ginny asked.

"I try not to make a habit out of it," Harry offered in a kindly voice, grasping again for something old sounding. The reaction had been unexpected; it was as though he had said something rude.

"None around here, I hope," Mrs. Weasley said.

Mr. Weasley dabbed his mouth with a napkin, saying, "We get troublemakers around here, Dear."

"Yes, but a prankster replacing manhole covers with an illusion of one is not a dark wizard."

"Have you actually captured a dark wizard?" Ginny asked Harry.

Harry blinked at her. She sounded so . . . naïve. "Of course. Many."

The group again froze as though waiting in tense excitement.

"Well, tell us about a few," Charlie insisted.

"Oh my," Harry said. "I wouldn't want to bore you to death with such trifles." Harry plucked up a biscuit, thinking that he sounded alarmingly like an old man, but he would rather not have to tell a story that might blow his cover with facts in conflict with this world.

Several of the Weasley children were laughing. "Come on, now," one said. "You can't leave it at that!" another insisted.

Harry wanted to point out that Mr. Weasley himself worked in the Magical Law Enforcement Department, but he probably could not be supposed to know that, and it may not be true here. The ruckus continued, and rather than abating, grew louder, his audience displaying a terrible hunger for such stories.

"Well, there was this rather interesting shaman in Finland, in the far north, above the arctic circle. Like all the Shamans there he has an Animagus form of a wolf."

"An Animagus? Really?" Ginny said, clearly intrigued.

"Oh, yes. Animagi are not as rare as you think." Harry let his eyes sparkle as he said this, teasing. "This particular shaman was fomenting trouble by kidnapping young children from a neighboring region."

"So, what did you do?"

"I chased him down as he was in wolf-form, leading off a young girl. I put a serious enough scare into him that he will think long and hard before trying it again."

"But how did you catch him?"

"Like I said, Animagi are not as rare as you think." Harry gave a wink to Ginny this time.

The twins and Ron said in series, "So, are you one? What are you?"

Harry smiled faintly. "Let's just say . . . a wolf is not a problem."

"Oh, come on!" The whole family reacted with dismay at his dismissal of the question. Except Mr. Weasley, who asked, "Are you registered?"

Harry shook his head. Bill grew sober. "Well, better not show Dad then. He's obliged to report you." He shot a glance at his father and bent to setting out the platters Mrs Weasley brought out and charming them to repel flies.

"Why aren't you registered?" Ron asked.

Harry found a lie easily enough. "Because I want to surprise the wizards I am hunting, if need be."

"And are they?" Ginny asked.

Harry sipped the butterbeer he had been handed, dragging the story out because it made them all so antsy. "Oh, this troublesome Indian witch and wizard I chased down once; they thought I was one of their god's own servants."

"Wow."

They all hung on his every word now. "I don't intend to create such confusion, normally," Harry said, sounding his humblest, which elicited a laugh from all around.

"You must be a great wizard," Ron said. "Don't you think, Percy?" he prompted his brother, who had been eating from a bowl of nuts on the end table.

Peanut shell fell from his lips as he said, "There hasn't been a truly great wizard in almost twenty years."

Because he needed to know, Harry guessed, "You must be referring to Albus Dumbledore."

Percy snottily said, "Of course I was." He looked Harry up and down doubtfully. "There hasn't been anyone close in all this time."

"Oh, I agree," Harry said.

"Did you know him?" Bill asked. "I just barely remember seeing him once, at a Quidditch match. You remember that, Dad? You had tickets to the VIP booth and

he was there? He died right after that. Told everyone that with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named gone and things being quiet for a few years that he wasn't needed around anymore." He turned back to Harry with a soft and distant expression. "DID you know him?"

"Yes," Harry said, unable to lie to make his ruse easier. "I knew him for many years."

"Wow," a few breathed again.

"So, you must know a lot of Defensive magic," Charlie asserted.

"I know quite a bit. Don't you?"

Several laughed. "They haven't taught it since Dumbledore died."

"No?" Harry prompted. Voice stern, sounding exactly his fake age. "Why ever not?"

"Don't need it," someone said. "Encourages dark magic," a twin suggested, making quotes in the air with his fingers.

"That's ridiculous," Harry said, getting heated.

"That's the policy," Mr. Weasley confirmed. "There hasn't been any concern about dark wizards since Potter destroyed You-Know-Who as a baby."

"Amazing that," Harry said, hoping for more information.

"Yes," Mr. Weasley agreed, nodding so that his comb-over flipped forward. "No one knows how he did it."

"It's unfortunate that someone didn't see it," Harry mused aloud.

Mr. Weasley chuckled lightly. "Yes, well, James and Lily should have but, well, you of course know about that confusion."

Harry nodded sagely, although curiosity pained him viciously to do so. How could he claim to not know? He took a stab by saying, "Er, yes, Pettigrew and all that."

The faces around him grew grim. "Yes, sleazy one he was," Charlie said, "He's the one whose owl for help drew Mrs. Potter away."

Ron added, "Lucky for her, Who-He had already finished Pettigrew off."

"Now, now," Mrs. Weasley said. "Enough with this dark talk. I need some help in the kitchen."

Much of the family wandered off to chase down small children or to assist. Early guests began to arrive.

Ginny asked, "Can you show me some defensive spells?" She then blushed and admitted, "Some of the other students at school, we got together in secret and taught each other the few spells we knew. But I'm out of school now and we haven't continued it."

"Did that work out while you had the chance?"

"It helped when we had class time with the Slytherins. Removing hexes is really helpful then."

"Certainly I'll show you." Harry started to stride over, but remembered that would look strange, so he pretended his limbs pained him as he moved.

He led Ginny a bit away, over by where the lawn had been rutted by the car rolling in for landings. The ruts trailed off far before the distant road. He pulled out his wand and said, "The most versatile counter, I've found, is a block called a Titan. Take out your wand."

Ginny eagerly did so. Harry showed her how to hold it, flat against her palm, hooked under her thumb. "Hold your palms out like this. Your wand hand builds the spell, but the other helps stabilize it so that it is wide enough to protect you."

The twins were loitering nearby, listening in. Harry said, more loudly, "Perhaps your brothers will help us out."

Grinning, they ambled over. "Can we throw hexes at our sister?" one asked.

"In a moment," Harry explained patiently. To Ginny, he said, "This spell is pushed out through your palms. Let me do it for you a few times so you can feel it. Give us a hex, could you?"

Harry walked her through the spell until she had it. By this time, most everyone had gathered to watch. Even those hitting a Bludger around locked that up and came over instead.

"Show me another," Ginny said excitedly, when she withstood the second hex from her brother, Ron.

"What do you need protection against?" Mr. Weasley asked, sounding half teasing, half dubious. He stood nearby with his arms crossed, vague scowl upon his brow.

"Well, Draco hit me with a Jelly-legs in Diagon Alley last week."

"He must like you," Harry said.

"Oh, please," Ginny muttered.

"I can show you how to counter that one," Bill said. "Why didn't you ask?"

"I did. You said I was a girl and I should find a boyfriend to throw my hexes for me."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did."

Harry stepped in between them, even though they were not all that close together. "There is a useful counter that works on the Minor-Neural class of hexes like that."

"The what of the what?" Ron stuttered.

Harry, keeping with his character, patiently explained, "It helps immensely to know a little spell theory. If you know what class of spell is coming at you, often you can utilize a generic counter or block, rather than learning a different one for every possible circumstance."

Harry had Ron send a Jelly-legs at him to demonstrate the counter, then had Ginny try it. She collapsed on the ground, to a few hidden grins. Blushing, she stood after Harry canceled the spell for her and tried again. She fared no better the second time.

"Let's do a different one," she said, sounding spoiled.

"No, let's finish this one."

"Are you trying to make me look foolish?"

Harry glanced around at the gathered Weasleys. They did perhaps seem more amused than supportive, but they also did not take Defense particularly seriously.

"I am trying keep you from failing. You and I can work on it. The others can go off now." Harry stated this sternly, eyeing each of them. Shrugs and grins greeted his obstinacy and eventually they were alone, except for Ron, who said, "I want to learn it too." To his sister, he insisted, "I wasn't laughing at you, honest. I've been knocked on my arse by that one at Hogwarts enough times; I wouldn't laugh about it."

Ginny gave Harry a pleading look. "Do we really have to work on that one more?"

"You cannot just give up on the second try," Harry said. "I'll show you using a different technique. I have several."

"Did you use to teach?" Ron asked. "You should have."

Harry found this amusing. "I tried once, but I don't care for handing out assignments, marking, and examinations as much as just playing with magic all day until I have it perfected."

Avidly, Ron said, "You sound like a great teacher! I hate revising, reading, essays, and taking tests."

"It is not as simple as I made it out," Harry said, finding the words flowing like a spell he was just getting the hang of. "I study a great deal, life administers the examinations, and the marking can be brutal."

Harry demonstrated the spell three or four times, adding advice as he thought of it. "Why don't we have Ron try it a few times and then go back to Ginny," Harry said, upon seeing the stress on Ginny's face. It transformed into a half-malicious grin.

When they each could produce the counter perhaps a third of the time, Harry proclaimed them done with it for now. The sun had appreciably moved in the sky and the picnic had swelled with new arrivals.

"Show us another," Ginny urged him as he was pondering the sky. "What do you think is most useful."

Harry glanced around, hopeful of seeing the Potters. "I think we should take a break for now."

"We want to hear more about Dumbledore, too," Ginny insisted. She was actually tugging on his sleeve to convince him. She quit it and bit her lip.

"It's all right, my dear," Harry said, finding his old man character easy now. "You flatter me. You know, an old man like me doesn't get many invitations to things."

People began arriving in earnest now, popping in and landing on broomstick and room-sized carpets. The three of them wandered over to where Mr. Weasley was directing something on the roof with his wand.

Charlie said, "Want me to fly up and adjust the Weather Vain properly, Dad?"

"Nah, I think it's all right. Seem warm enough to you? Sunny enough?"

Harry blinked up at the green corroded rooster with glittering ruby eyes perched on a bent grey arrow. Sparkles flickered off the arrowhead now and then. That explained the exceptionally nice day. Harry sighed with a hint of jealousy and surveyed the mollycoddling peacefulness of it all. Blankets were being laid out, the tables groaned under the weight of heaped plates and pots of food, children chased each other on small starter broomsticks.

Harry left his new friends and circled, mixing in easily, gathering only a handful of second glances. He resisted looking at his watch, not wanting to leave when he had come this far. Tonks would wait for him, he told himself.

He didn't see his parents, so when he found the table with Ron and his sister he asked if he could join them. Ginny literally jumped from her seat and found a chair for him two tables away.

"When were you last off fighting dark wizards?" Ron asked, even putting down his fork he was so involved in the question.

Harry said amiably. "Yesterday."

Ron leaned forward, so his elbow went into his mashed potatoes. "Really? Where?"

Harry waved a finger before him admonishingly. Amazingly, that's all it took.

"Drat," Ron muttered.

Ginny laughed. "Dad says you remind him of Dumbledore."

"Your father honors me no end by saying so," Harry said, accepting a butterbeer she had Accioed over. "Thank you, my dear." He gave her a wink.

She blushed and dabbed her mouth with a shredded serviette. "Too bad you're too old for me," she said with real regret.

Harry smiled, thinking idly that this was a side of Ginny he only usually caught glimpses of. She must not behave quite the same with him around. Maybe Snape's proposed match for him was not so unworkable. "I have a formula for a youth potion . . . but it only lasts a few days, alas."

Ron and she both giggled at this, making Harry amazed at how unthreatening he must seem.

"Can I stroke your beard?" Ginny asked.

Harry held it up for her.

"Wow, soft."

"Thank you, young lady, I made it myself."

Ron snapped his fingers. "That's what dad said. He said you liked to joke around the way Dumbledore did. But I can't believe such a great old wizard could be as goofy as he insists."

"Oh, Albus was quite an amusing fellow. Especially if he was forced to give a speech."

Harry recounted a few stories, altering them as needed, or averaging out several different events to avoid specifics. The twins joined them halfway through the storytelling, each bearing plates overflowing with food.

Fred said, "Hey, Ginny, your boyfriend's just arrived." He tipped his head behind him and to the left.

"Oh, get off," Ginny snapped, angry in the way that only a person stung partially by the truth could be.

"What is this, my dear?" Harry asked, teasingly stung, but trying to sooth her. He just embarrassed her more.

"It's His Royalty," George offered. "An old crush of Ginny's. She insists she's over him, but we think she doth protest too much."

Ginny appeared ready to stand up and stalk off.

Harry said, "My dear man, you lack a certain minimally desired charm when you publicly embarrass your sister like that."

Ginny glanced at Harry's old countenance and stayed put, but sulked and drank her butterbeer, double time.

A boisterous group trouped through the picnic, turning people's gazes. Some picnickers rolled their eyes, others stood up to join the pack. Harry froze upon spying his father, leading the assembly, arm chummily around someone, to whom he was speaking directly in the ear. He released that person and turned to someone on his other side. The crowd shifted, parting and re-parting, and Harry caught sight of long reddish-brown tresses, a smiling face, glittering green eyes.

Transfixed, Harry watched the pair of them pass in and out of view through the thickly accompanying robed figures. A trailing figure split the crowd when it stopped at a table to high five some sitting people, Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, and other familiar faces.

Harry watched the vision of himself chummily greeting the table before joining it.

A wadded up sweet wrapper was tossed hard at Ginny by Fred, jolting Harry before anyone could notice how enamored he had become.

"Another butterbeer?" Ginny asked Harry beside her, nearly snarling. "My brother can get his own."

"Yes, please, my dear," Harry said, struggling to sound old and uncaring.

Ginny fetched the fresh bottles by hand. Upon returning, she glanced surreptitiously at the new arrivals, eyes nearly hidden by her hair. But Harry was well-practiced in interpreting glances through a veil of hair. He leaned close and whispered, "You are undoubtedly too good for him."

This had been an attempt to ease what he guessed was bothering her, but her reply was a silent, flat expression. She drank half of her fresh butterbeer down in one rapid set of swallows.

"He's a prat," Ron said, seemingly in support of his sister because it lacked real animosity.

Harry turned to the vision of his best friend, trying to grasp what he had said. He could not pull in a full breath right away.

Fred said, "Ron's just jealous. He wanted to join the Quidditch team, but Potter was the captain, and Ron could never convince him to let him join. 'Course, Ron isn't all that good . . ."

Ron frowned, but then brightened. "We should play a match today, don't you think? It's our pitch, so we get to decide who plays." He grinned slyly.

The twins chuckled. "Nice try, but I don't think you can keep Boywholived from doing anything he wants to. Besides, Dad won't let you upset them, he has to work with Mr. Potter, after all."

Harry let his focus relax beyond their red heads to where the topic of conversation sat, face bright. An animated conversation flowed around his table, buoying him.

Ron was saying, "We don't even have a Snitch. You'd think he'd be happy playing honorary Seeker for Puddlemere twice a season."

Disguised Harry shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. The twins were whispering fiercely to each other. They both stared at him as though maybe they were in trouble. "Uh, we're going to go take care of something."

Harry Legilimized them and found a prank forming in their minds aimed at his other self. "Is it worth it?" Harry asked gently.

"It what worth it?" George asked.

"The trouble you are going to cause?"

Fred's face twisted into a frown. "How'd you know?"

Ron burst out laughing. "You're always making trouble. Pretty safe bet, isn't it?"

Harry was getting more of the plan as they stared at each other. He said, "Such a plan as the one in your mind right now will cause panic, which is always harmful in a crowd of this size. Come up with a better one or wait until he is isolated."

The twins stared at him, showing him their thoughts as plainly as speaking. Harry said, "Yes, I am reminding you of a certain Potions professor." He cocked a smile at their now rather horrified faces. They slid off, at first walking backward to keep an eye on him.

Harry smiled back, holding it longer to display confidence that he could take them down.

Ginny said, "They keep begging mum and dad for Galleons to open a joke shop, but mum, especially, won't go for it. She tells them she might have if they had actually stayed on to finish their NEWTs. They've been selling their services on Diagon Alley, but haven't saved up enough money yet."

The twins finally stopped glancing worrisomely back and disappeared behind a hedge.

Harry idly asked, "What services are they selling?"

"They're installing what they call "security systems" in some of the shops. I'd call them death traps myself, but that just may be my years of living with them talking."

Harry turned to her in surprise and she stared curiously back, saying, "They need a shop of their own. I think it would keep them busy enough to keep them out of Azkaban, which is where they are going to end up when something goes really awry."

Harry rubbed his long mustache, wondering if he had learned something he needed to know for his own Plane. The twins reappeared and slunk off toward the drinks table, glancing back once at him. "If they make too much trouble here," Harry said standing up to better watch them and thinking of the riots that had destroyed the Ministry atrium, "I may have to come down on them. Innocents should never be hurt just because you have your own vendetta." Harry strolled slowly around the table, which also gave him a better view of the people he had come here to see. They were eating, chatting, smiling . . . alive, and he stared at them without breathing.

Ginny came aside him and broke him free by asking, "How often do you have your own vendetta?"

Harry fumbled for words. "I don't any longer. I used to."

Ginny willingly dropped that topic, presumably hearing something in his voice. "Can you teach us some more spells. I read about one that sounds wicked useful, an Expelliarmus, but I need it demonstrated. Ron here can't get it either."

Harry smiled. "I'd love to, but . . . " Across from him, his double was changing tables to sit with some middle-aged witches and wizards that Harry recognized as

working in Games and Sports in the Ministry. Harry glanced around to see where the twins had slipped off to.

"Trying to protect him, now?" Ginny asked, sounding unhappy.

Harry laughed. "He is an interesting person."

"No, he isn't," Ginny snapped. "Thinks he's the best at everything. It's annoying."

"Is he?"

"Is he what?" Ginny asked.

Harry innocently asked, "The best at everything?"

"NO," both she and Ron replied.

"My dear," Harry said, finding that phrasing so easy and natural that it stunned him. "I will gladly show you an Expelliarmus, but would you first do me the pleasure of introducing me to the honored guests; your brothers' reactions intrigued me and I wish to get better acquainted with them all." At her grim turn of disappointment, he reached for a better explanation, and added in a lower voice, "It gives me something to chat about with my drinking friends when I go back abroad. Old men like us have so little to talk about that we haven't already talked about."

Before they could reach any of the Potters, a familiar figure in deep green strolled up to his shoulder. Harry greeted McGonagall with a little bow.

"Ah, I have heard a bit about you, Mr. Totten, from Arthur. I had to admit I have not had the pleasure and I believe I should have."

Harry gave the back of her hand a gallant kiss mid-bow. She could blow his cover if he slipped up while discussing the past, so he wanted to get her off-guard.

Flustered, McGonagall said, "Well, my, that is . . . you must have been out of the country for quite a while."

"Many, many years," Harry stated vaguely.

"Well, please join us," she said, glancing at Ron and Ginny a bit dismissively for Harry's taste.

McGonagall had been sitting at the table with his parents, so he said, "I promised my young friends some spell demonstrations, but I think they will grant an old wizard a little first to reminisce." The two youngest Weasleys reluctantly relinquished him.

As McGonagall stepped toward a group reclining in overstuffed chairs, Harry leaned over to say, "You will forgive me if my memory occasionally fails me. Unlike Albus, I have never availed myself of a Pensieve."

"Of course, Aaron . . . may I call you Aaron?"

Harry merely nodded, unbalanced by the notion of being treated so reverentially. He and McGonagall sat down in great comfort for a picnic, sharing a pink and yellow flowered settee pulled up to face the end of the table.

Harry stroked the gaudy fabric as a way of not simply staring openly at his parents, who from this close were showing their forty years more plainly than they had from across the yard when they resembled a wizard photograph come to colorful life. Harry said the first thing that came into his head to explain his fascination with the upholstery, "This would have been to Dumbledore's liking."

"When did you meet Albus?" McGonagall asked. She now had a cup of tea, which Harry had not seen appear.

Harry took a deep breath and said, "I was very young. It was a very long time ago." He faded out, not sure where to go from there. He decided to deflect the question. "I admit not all of those memories are worth dredging up. They were painful times." True enough.

She squeezed his arm. "I am sorry. Here let me introduce you around."

Harry was introduced to two moldy members of the Wizengamot who vacillated in rockers off to the left. He was then introduced to Lily and James. James gave him a momentary narrowed gaze as though recognizing him, but he then smiled faintly and got up to shake Harry's hand before returning to give Lily a fit of giggles as he grabbed her under the arms before enclosing her in his own. Harry worked on hard on concentrating while shaking more hands, deaf to the names being related. He spent the next few minutes using nearly sport-level tactics to dodge questions he dare not answer. The table went back to previous gossip and Harry used repeated small sips of tea as a means of watching his parents over the rim. They were happy, clearly. And so alive, it continued to make breathing problematic. James teased nearly everyone who passed, until Lily tapped him on the arm as a subtle correction.

Harry stroked his beard to check that his disguise held true. Soul-deep sadness pressed in upon him. He had imagined this to be fun, but instead it felt desperate, and Tonks' concern entirely valid.

James behaved himself until Sirius strolled by, putting his hands on James' shoulders. His features were so much less unlined than expected it made him seem a decade younger than James. Only when he smiled did his eyes wrinkle into their familiar appearance. At Sirius' urging, Lily and James moved on to get seconds on food.

Harry watched them amble over and be joined by Remus, who, of them all, most resembled himself.

A man by the name of Horace Slughorn wandered by and really began giving Harry a grilling. He acted highly and loudly perturbed to not have heard of an Aaron Totten previously. Harry stood to chat with him away from the table, thinking to shake him using the help of a few Weasleys. He glanced over to where Ginny and Ron were standing just outside the crowd, practicing the few hexes and the counters they had learned earlier.

Harry waved away the question about where "Aaron" had trained in Defense. Harry tugged Dumbledore's ideal persona over himself again and said, "I'm terribly sorry Mr. Slughorn, but your question reminds me that I promised these young people a little of my time and they are waiting ever so patiently. One does like to reward them for that."

Slughorn grunted, not wanting to disagree. Harry gratefully joined Ginny and Ron, leaving the unusually wide man frowning at his back.

"I didn't think we would get you back," Ginny said. "Ron thought maybe you had forgotten so we came over to this side to remind you."

"Oh, I would much prefer practicing the dueling of wands to that of dusty tongues. Come, let me show you my favorite disarming spell. It has saved my life more than once, I'll tell you."

He had their full attention then and the lessons proceeded, quickly becoming a game between the siblings. Eventually, a few others made their way around the large furniture, including Harry, Katie and Oliver, who stood like a matched threesome, poses relaxed, faces judgmental.

"Do some others wish to join us?" Harry in his disguise asked.

"No," Ron said. "They'll just want to duel."

"Why, don't you? Sounds like fun," disguised Harry urged.

"I'll duel someone," Ginny said, sounding very much in the mood for it.

This was overheard and Oliver said, "Away from the old-timers." He angled his head off behind the Burrow, which was empty.

"Why, is dueling illegal now outside Hogwarts too?" old Harry teased.

"No, it's not. All right, then," Katie said, stepping up before Ginny.

This Plane's native Harry stepped in with practiced ease and refereed. "Back to back," he told them, deciding where the pace-off line would be. Visiting Harry stepped back to make space for the others gathering to watch, including the Potters. Harry slid slowly over to be three people down from his parents where he could observe them freely. The rules were relayed to the participants, with some corrections because the style of duel was agreed to be freeform rather than regimented. Harry's chest grew stiff again staring at James and Lily, but he could not stop himself. Sirius ambled up beside his father and they shared an amused exchange. Sirius perched his hands on his hips, parting his loose robes. He stood straight and with ease, a pristine, undamaged version of the man Harry held in his memories. His heart ached again.

The duel began with a loud countdown. Katie and Ginny were evenly matched, but Ginny had her new disarming spell and on the third exchange, Katie's wand flew away over the onlookers.

Native Harry fetched it with a flick and held it out to Katie. "Let me try next," he said.

Ginny's eyes grew wider. Disguised Harry saw in them that she truly did not want to duel his double, was certain she would be embarrassingly put on the grass, at best.

Harry stepped up to her, blocking her view of his alternative self. "Shall I handle this round? May I borrow your wand?" She willingly gave up her wand while biting her lip.

"The old man wants a piece of Potter!" Oliver announced, laughing.

Disguised Harry looked his double over. The other Harry was taller than himself, tanned, well-fed and stood with overt confidence. "We can skip the pacing," disguised Harry said pleasantly as he cheated with a little Legilimency. His double's eyes were filled with heat, anticipating the challenge of the duel. The only scar he possessed was the one on his forehead; his mind was utterly clear of any others as though he were merely a Mirror of Erised projection.

A Jelly Legs came at Disguised Harry when the countdown completed, easily countered. An electric eel came next, deflected to vanish in twirling sparkles against the blue sky in a purely stylish move.

"Aren't you going to come back with anything?" Native Harry demanded after two more spells were sent aside. Disguised Harry could see in his mind many rounds of practice with James and faith that he could handle anything as a result.

"I don't want to hurt you," Disguised Harry said pleasantly, affectionately, instinctively knowing exactly how to duel with this young man using words.

"Oh, please. I can take care of myself." Native Harry laughed, slightly mocking because the comment had stung, as intended.

Disguised Harry bowed his head slightly and swung his arm around, wand tip twirling in an elastic mummy hex which, due to the force on it, could not be stopped. Native Harry was tangled helplessly until he curled on the ground, wound up so that only a few black hairs stuck out the top. The surrounding crowd gasped.

Disguised Harry cancelled the hex and watched his mirror image rise up, straightening his hair with undo care. "Huh," he muttered, temper bottled up so that it made his wand tap faintly on his leg. He thought he gave no warning for his blinding curse, but Disguised Harry, due to the risk of being revealed, was still cheating. He had the burst of light blocked with a rubber shield that swallowed it before it travelled half the distance between them. He felt the curse grow and channel, just as he had every other curse thrown at him for months while trying to work out how to block them wandlessly. This time, though, each part of the curse's progress felt accessible. Harry breathed heavily in excitement. He probably could have blocked that one without casting a counter.

"How'd you do that?" Native Harry demanded.

"It is a minor counter. Perhaps you need a new dueling teacher," Harry said, finding that verbal hex rising out of his aching heart without forethought.

Young Harry glanced at his father in consternation, looking for advice. The pressed in friends began shouting encouragement. "Go on, Harry!" "Show him what-for!" and "Stop holding back."

Native Harry tried in rapid succession a Cannon Ball, a Blasting Curse, a Chain Binding, and a Rictusempre which were all handled without disguised Harry even twitching more than his wand and wrist. He obsessively traced each curse on its journey from mind to magic, heart racing triumphantly after so many weeks of useless exercises.

Native Harry faintly stomped one foot in frustration. "You're still not hitting back."

"You want another like the last? I only have so many gentle spells and I truly do not wish to harm you."

"Stop worrying about me!"

Disguised Harry, letting his own jealousy leak into his judgment said, "You have potential, but you need a qualified teacher. Clearly Professor Snape is not allowed to teach dueling or you'd be better than this."

Old Harry felt the next curse before his rival even finished thinking it through. It was a Sectumsempra, borne on a key source of anger inside this version of himself. Disguised Harry squeezed it back into the wand before it could be cast or even finish generating. Since the spell was as close to his own nature as any Forbidden Spell could be, blocking it was as easy as turning off a tap.

Native Harry fell with a shout. He dropped his wand and clutched his arms around himself. Disguised Harry felt anger turn his blood acidic. Still aiming his wand at the vision kneeling across from him, he said, "Don't you ever cast a spell like that . . . AT ANYONE." He took a few steps closer as the crowd murmured. Lily Potter moved in to assist her son and James pulled his wand from his breast pocket and stepped in to guard both of them.

Disguised Harry forced the burning in his veins out through his breath and lowered his wand. Poisonous jealousy crowded around his anger, which did not help.

McGonagall stepped out of the spectators. "What happened?" she asked.

"I turned his own spell back upon him," Disguised Harry said, slipping his wand away, only to find that he already had one, one he had not wanted to reveal the core of. He held the wand out to Ginny instead, whose eyes were as wide as ever. "Thank you, young lady."

Native Harry was getting to his feet with assistance. He shot a befuddled glance over his shoulder before being led away to sit in a comfy chair.

"How many dueling tournies have you won?" one of the twins asked, enthralled.

Disguised Harry chuckled. "I am not allowed to participate. I get assigned as judge."

The twins and Ron chuckled too. They all turned to observe the scene around the chair. Harry felt nothing for his double, who had both parents to help with one painful spell in his entire memory. "You'd think the boy never felt an abbreviated Sectumsempra curse before," he said.

Fred exploded, "He sent that at you?! Even I think that should be on the Forbidden list."

Harry regretted speaking. "Perhaps he would have held off on actually casting it."

"Too bad you couldn't let him. Think of the trouble. Boy!"

"I should not have mentioned Professor Snape," Harry mused, serene now, buoyed by his own amusement at causing so much trouble so easily.

Beside him, Ginny giggled into her hand.

"Good thing you weren't planning on staying around for long," George said.

"True." Harry was very much ready to go home. Jealousy, now released to run wild inside him, threatened to take his own self-control again at the slightest provocation.

"Have one more Butterbeer, or teach us one more spell," Ginny pleaded.

"We are done with spells for now. Perhaps just a Butterbeer."

Their little pack went to the drinks table and Fred and George heated some bottles that were still in the crate on the grass underneath.

As he reached out to accept one, Harry was tapped hard on the shoulder.

"Totten, I'm told your name is," James Potter said. Harry fully recognized the fury distorting the edges of the face before him. It was the same as he had just battled inside himself.

"That's right," Harry confirmed softly, wearisomely pulling out a pleasant voice from a past that had receded into the mists after the duel.

"What's the idea challenging my son like that when you can clearly out-spell him?"

Harry had a hard time facing down his father – it made his chest tight – but he managed to come up with something befitting his disguise, even if it did nothing to express what longed to escape. "I am a bit old fashioned you see," Harry rambled. "In my time one would always step in for a lady in distress."

Ginny rolled her eyes and ducked her head.

Harry found his footing and stepped closer to the familiar anger of his father, close enough to feel the debilitating energy of it along his nerves. "You wanted me to do that," Harry said as if sharing a secret. "If I had let him cast that, he'd have been up before the Wizengamot." Backing off, residual anger flaring up again, he added, "Unless they are so doddered by his fame that they are incapable of it. Perhaps that's the case." More insinuatingly, "Perhaps that's even happened before."

"Oh, get off," James said. "My son would never do anything the Wizengamot would care about."

The surrounding Weasleys all looked away with various amused and dubious expressions. Harry stared at the man before him. James radiated protective instinct to the core – exactly as Harry fantasized about having from a father all those years when he had none at all. Harry could not feel additional jealousy, he had overdosed on it

already. It could have worked out like this, Harry thought. Twisted and conflicting remorse torqued within Harry's gut instead, trying to metamorphose into something that could escape him.

James glanced around the unfavorable audience and snarled, "Stay away from my son," before stalking away.

Harry, untenable emotion clouding his thoughts, grabbed James' robe, his artificially aged hands just as strong as ever. Like in a duel he instinctively struck back at his opponent's weakest spot. When James spun to face him, eyes flashing, Harry said, "I was serious that he needs a new dueling tutor. He has potential."

James glowered and jerked his robe free, nearly running into Sirius, who stood a pace behind him. Harry stared longingly at his godfather, unable to stop himself. Sirius stared curiously back until tugged away by James, who felt less real. The mystified look from a purely compassionate Sirius made Harry starkly aware of how violently jumbled his emotions had become, simultaneously detached and over-involved: a recipe for disastrous distress if there ever was one.

Harry accepted an un-spilled drink and stared around the happy picnic. "You are all terribly spoiled," he muttered, understanding in a flash of disturbed thinking the motivations Svaha had in building spelling devices just to cause chaos. She had accused him, Vineet and their wizarding world of not appreciating the peace they had. She would go wholly berserk should she ever find her way to this place.

"You all right?" Ginny asked, when Harry rubbed his forehead.

"I am, my dear girl," Harry said, finding the persona of kindly old man debilitating now. "I should return home, however." He handed her the bottle back and closed her hand around it when she resisted taking it.

"Don't go because of his His Highness there . . ." one of the twins protested.

"It isn't that. I just have much too much to do." Indeed, Harry risked upsetting Tonks and even getting caught missing the longer he remained. He was happy to get away without any entanglements, and if he left now, there would be none. Tonks would be waiting, he was confident, but bad luck could easily show him to be missing.

Harry made his goodbyes to them, touched by their pleading that he remain. He stepped away, intending to go the long way around the picnic via the ruts in the drive. He was waylaid by McGonagall before he reached the orchard.

"Aaron," she said gently enough that Harry believed the topic was not his double and the duel.

He stopped, clasped his hands together and assumed a patient, in-character, pose only with immense effort.

"Given how well you knew Albus, I was hoping to get your advice on something." When Harry bowed, she led him closer to the orchard and gestured for Griselda Marchbanks to join them. "This is an issue that has been restricted to the Wizengamot and I do hope you can respect our desire to keep it there for the time being?"

"Of course," Harry said, thinking that he was never coming back, so how could it possibly matter?

McGonagall fidgeted before saying, "We have a Divination instructor at Hogwarts who for the most part is a harmless pretender. Albus hired her-"

"Sybill Trelawney, you mean?" Harry prompted, not at all liking the path of the conversation.

"Yes, of course Albus would have told you about her, I suppose?"

Harry nodded knowingly.

"Well, last week she uttered one of her rare true prophecies to me. I would be most appreciative if you could offer advice about what you believe is the wisest course and, more importantly, how you think Albus would react."

Harry breathed deeply and let it out slowly. He should have left sooner. "I'll do my best."

"The prophecy is as follows, and please do not tell another, we fear the damage caused purely by the reaction. A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web. It will shatter half a century of peace so that the time before it will seem as if a dream."

Harry closed his eyes. There was no Voldemort here, of that he was certain, which gave him some relief. He must not have made Horcruxes in this place.

". . . power indescribably heartless will wreak cold vengeance upon wizardom. All will be touched for the worse. The only magic capable of defeating it is contained within the seventh pureblood son who is not."

Harry's pure white brow lowered as he pondered that. He wondered if the prophecy were warning about Svaha and Merton again, or something completely new. If the prophecy had said chaos instead of vengeance, Harry would have felt certain.

Harry said, "I think you need to start preparing the wizarding public for some tough times. If you don't want panic, make up an excuse, any excuse, for better awareness

of danger, of dark magic." Unaware that he stroked his beard thoughtfully, Harry added, "Start teaching Defense to all years at Hogwarts again. And find this person."

Marchbanks complained, "There was confusion last time, too, over whom it may be."

Harry nodded. "The future is not fixed so the prophecy cannot be certain." He stated this with such authority that McGonagall's shoulders relaxed.

"Would you be willing to consult with the Wizengamot?"

Harry said, "I was not planning on staying. I have responsibilities distant from here. I cannot shirk them. I shouldn't even be here. Nostalgia got the better of me," he admitted in a bout of full honesty. "I shouldn't be here at all," he repeated.

"I understand," McGonagall said on automatic, regretful.

"I don't wish to abandon you at such a trying time, but I must. I can offer some advice. Take the worst case plans for the worst case outcomes you can think of and triple them." She stared at him as though he had lost his mind. Harry patted her on the arm, truly saddened and trying to imagine the times they had just been through applied to this peaceful place. "A year from now, you will remember I said that, and know that I was right. I don't say that to be cruel . . . quite the opposite."

He stepped back and tiredly said, "My own responsibilities are equally dire. I was granted a small break from them and I should not abandon them any longer, I'm afraid."

"I do understand," McGonagall said. Harry could see in her eyes that she hoped that if worse came to worse, he would magically reappear to help right things.

"Treat the wizarding public with respect and let them know the danger. They are allies if you let them be or victims if you don't." As he spoke, he felt grateful that this wasn't normally his role. He did not envy Dumbledore's old responsibilities as wizened leader one bit.

Harry made his goodbyes, and strolled through the orchard, where groups of wizarding youths had gathered in their own small parties, a few around magical fires. This meant Harry needed to walk farther away before slipping into the Dark Plane. But the walk allowed him to clear his head before facing the awful transference to his own plane.

Harry woke up on the floor of Tonks' flat, with someone playing with his ear. He giggled because it tickled. "Ger off," he mumbled, but smiled broadly into Tonks' worried gaze. He lay covered with warmed cushions from the couch and pillows off the bed.

Chapter 21

"You were right that you'd return covered in ice," Tonks marveled.

Harry, with assistance, managed to sit up. "Thanks for helping me."

"You were gone a long time."

"As long as I wasn't missed," Harry said, thinking back over what he had learned. The most important thing would take some time to settle in. As to the other thing he had learned . . . "I need to go talk to the Weasley twins," Harry said. "Care to come along?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Harry shrugged. "I'd happily go on my own," he suggested.

As they arrived on Diagon Alley and stepped through the brick wall, Tonks said, "You visited someplace far removed from here and now you need to talk to Fred and George?"

"These other places aren't as removed as all that. Some things are the same."

"Did you find your parents?" she asked, wanting to believe, Harry could hear in her voice.

He nodded.

"Well, how were they?" she asked, teasing as she played along, but also sounding strained.

Harry hesitated before proclaiming, "Doting. Too doting." Jealousy threatened again, muted. "Their son Harry has no idea what he has."

Tonks grabbed Harry's sleeve as he moved to moved to a better spot to Apparate from. "Wait, you saw yourself?"

"Well, certainly. Odds are a James and Lily Potter would have a me; wouldn't they?"

She released him. "That's really disturbing, Harry. You shouldn't be playing around like this."

They strolled in silence past the soot-stained shopfront of Eeylops. At the door to the twin's shop, Harry said, "Can I talk to them alone? I may be far off base, but I have a suspicion about something."

She parked herself on the narrow window ledge of the shop window. "Five minutes."

"Ten."

She peered at him. "This official business?"

"It may be," Harry conceded.

"All right, ten. You owe me dinner, though."

"Any time." Harry reached for the door, setting off a series of jangles, bongs and squawks.

"Tonight."

"You're on."

The shop was shrouded in grim light in contrast to the outside. One of the twins was helping a customer at the counter. Ginny popped her head up from the corner where she was straightening the shelves and tracked him crossing the room.

When the customer had moved on, Harry said, "I need to talk to you and your brother."

The figure across from Harry made no jokes, no faces, just gestured for Ginny to take over. He gave his sister a sharp glance before slipping through the back door to the stairway. Harry pretended that the glance meant nothing to him.

Upstairs, cauldrons were lined up on the long crooked table that had been repaired several times with scrap wood to cover blackened holes or long cracks.

"George!" Harry's escort shouted as he opened the door. "Guest."

George looked up from the parchment he held and spelled the stirring stick he held to keep on without his hand. He stuffed the parchment quickly away in his pocket. "What's this?"

"He insisted on a word," Fred said.

Harry dived right in and asked, "Did you have anything to do with the Eeylops fire?"

The two of them did not move and Harry realized his error. He had left open the possibility of denial. He tried something stronger. "Come on. I know you've been selling security systems to at least one shop down here."

This made them shift from foot to foot. Fred said, "What'd Ginny tell you?"

"Your sister didn't tell me anything," Harry insisted, conscience clear on that specific point. He tried to think ahead as quickly as possible. If the twins were responsible for dumping the gang members then why had the perpetrators no memory of what had

happened? Harry, excitement building with understanding, said, "You wiped their memories, didn't you? Why the devil did you do that?"

George rounded on Harry at this accusation. "Why did we do that? Are you a nutter? They'd have turned us in."

Harry leaned into his disbelieving face. "We needed their memories for the investigation! Did you even stop and think about that?"

George angrily attended to a cauldron that was sending sky blue foam in a sheet onto the table. More calmly, Fred said, "We did think of that. They didn't know anything. Durumulna lackeys never know anything dangerous to the organization."

"You interrogated them?" Harry asked, too sarcastically, because it set Fred off.

"Yes. With stuff we got here, which is at least equal to yours. We're not stupid, Harry. Give us some credit."

Harry made himself back down. "So what went wrong? What happened?"

"What went right?" George asked. "Eeylop was tired of those guys coming around, demanding protection money. He wanted them stopped if they tried anything. We set a trap, but it, uh, backfired. No pun intended."

"Why didn't Mr. Eeylop come to us for help instead of to you?"

"Because he'd be spelled to a state of wishing for death within the hour, Harry. Don't be so naïve." He took a cauldron off the heat and set it in a water bath. "People can come to us for help without risking the gang's wrath. They've been doing it more and more. We can help them in ways you can't."

Harry fixed his gaze on the overcrowded mantel piled with ingredients and half-folded boxes and tried to decide what to do. The twins were thinking along the same lines.

"You going to turn us in?"

"I don't know," Harry said. They all glared at each other. "You shouldn't have wiped their memories."

George grew ferocious again. "Their memories were already wiped. Maybe I didn't make that clear."

"Maybe I only have your word on that," Harry countered.

After a space Fred quietly said, "You can help us help other witches and wizards, but you can't do it officially."

Twenty Years Later, Part 2

Harry felt the weight of responsibility settling onto him like he had in the other Plane. Turns out he could not escape it after all.

"I reserve the right to turn you in if you mess up again." He did not like his options and resisted being hard nosed and getting them into serious trouble if the result was as they insisted. Sounding stubborn he said, "Contact me if you get into a similar circumstance. We can work something out."

George mumbled, "Something you get the credit for."

Harry gaped at him. "I don't care about the credit. I can't believe you said that."

Fred stepped in front of Harry, hand on his chest to hold him back. Harry realized he had overreacted. He needed a break after his excursion to the alternative Plane, clearly. "Sorry," Harry said quietly. "I don't care about the credit," he stated factually this time. "I can arrange for someone else to always get it if you want."

Fred said, "It doesn't matter. Ignore my brother. He's upset we didn't get credit this time. He wanted a medal." It was not clear if he was serious.

Back out on the Alley, Harry put off Tonks' questions, saying with determination, "Let's drag Candide away from the office and take her home."

The accountancy was just a few doors down. When Harry entered, most of the activity stopped. Candide's coworkers looked up in surprise and vague wariness. Deciding to use his bad reputation to his advantage, Harry said, "I'm here to fetch Candide."

"Are you now?" the boss said, striding out of his office. His attitude shifted. "Oh, Mr. Potter."

Harry gave a patently false smile and turned to his guardian's wife, who stood still, hands full of files. "Ready to go?" Harry asked.

She glanced at Mr. Farnsworth and said, "Sure. Let me get a case for these files I have to sort."

Tonks helped her out packing things and they were soon on their way. Outside, Candide said, "Wow. I would not imagined it could be that easy."

"Your boss is scared of me," Harry stated.

"Come by at five every day, won't you?" Candide invited.

Author's Notes: My betas deserve a special call out here. The criticism, especially on this last chapter, was super-useful and the chapter and the story would be a pale version of itself without you guys. So thanks!

Chapter 22.

Twenty Years Later, Part III

Exhausted, Harry fell back on the couch in the main hall in Shrewsthorpe. He dearly wanted to attempt suppressing a curse cast at him by someone other than himself, but he did not, at all, feel like getting cursed right then. Tonks settled in beside him, arm around his shoulders.

"You two are so darling together," Candide said, leaning back with relish on the couch opposite. "It's the contrast with your hair I guess. Harry's dark and short, Tonks' long and upright."

Tonks' hair drooped, darkening until it looked like Harry's. Her face shifted too, nose and brow changing until she was a glancingly passable imitation of him.

"Oh, now, that's just disturbing," Candide said, eyes dashing between them.

"Tell Harry that," Tonks opaquely said.

Candide's face grew curiously perturbed but she withheld a follow-up question and turned to her files instead.

"Still too much work, eh?" Tonks asked.

"After Tuesday it will all be over with, for the most part. That's the end of the month." She looked up at them. "Why don't you lovebirds go out for the evening?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm tired," he said, leaving off explaining that someone should guard her as well.

Tonks said, "I'm looking forward to a proper, elf-cooked meal, I am."

"You wouldn't look so terribly forward to it if you actually bought groceries on occasion," Harry pointed out.

"Like I have time." She glanced around the hall. The tall clock chimed once for the quarter hour. "If I wish for a drink will Winky bring one?"

"You have to want one badly enough," Harry teased.

She sighed and propped her chin on his shoulder. "I thought I did."

Moments later Winky appeared in a sparkle, delivered something tall that smoked, and disappeared again.

With feeling, Tonks said, "Wow, you've got it so good here, Harry."

This gave Harry pause, since it echoed his thoughts from the other Plane. "You think?"

Tonk's propped her drink on her palm and licked the rim. "What? You don't?"

"I suppose." Harry considered that other place. He did not want to be that other Harry, and imagining that he could have been made him uneasy. Dumbledore had specifically made certain he did not grow up that way. So the risk had been real, even in this Plane, without his parents to help him along that path. It was Harry's low upbringing at the Dursleys that had made him choose Gryffindor over Slytherin when the time came to do so. Although, that seemed less important a decision now than it had before. Maybe that other Harry choose Gryffindor because that's what his father would have wanted. That Harry already believed he was "great"; the hat could not use that as bait like it had for him.

Tonks hmed over her drink, savoring it. Harry watched her sip the milky brown liquid that left foam strata rings on the glass as it disappeared. "What is that?"

"Hot Butterbeer milkshake. I just had a craving for one."

"Uh oh," Candide said without pausing in her sorting.

Tonks scoffed. "Not to worry."

Harry's heart found a semi-normal rhythm again, but it took a while to settle down completely. He found Candide grinning at him when he next looked over at her. He let her see his relief, badly needing to share it. The both relapsed into smiles and Candide returned to her work.

Chapter 22

He leaned back and breathed in the familiar scent of home. What was he missing, he wondered. Not much, if anything. Well, his adoptive father was not exactly home often. But he should be home tomorrow. Harry felt an acute need to see him, which had not happened in a while. He was the main reason Harry's life had sorted out like it had and Harry wanted to be reassured of that reality.

Tonks set her glass down and leaned against Harry, who distractedly slipped an arm around her and rested his head back.

"You two are very twee there," Candide said.

"No we're not," they replied in sync.

"Even that's cute," Candide asserted.

The clock ticked, marking the evening out. "You're my guard all night, right?" Harry quietly asked the head resting beside his lips.

"Yep."

"Good."

Snape arrived home Saturday morning while Harry, Tonks and Candide sat in the main hall, each involved in their own reading. Tonks stood up just as Snape strode into the room, tugging his gloves off, a finger at a time. Her quick departure made Harry wonder if she was eager to leave. He was torn between this concern and his pleasure at seeing his guardian.

"I'll see you later?" Harry asked the departing Tonks.

"You have field work tonight, right?" she asked. "I have things to take care of before shift. So I'll see you then, probably."

Snape watched her go and, appearing thoughtful, strolled over before Harry. He shook the Floo soot from his gloves and folded them away. "If you have time, I wish to speak to you," he said to Harry.

Candide lifted her head, jostling her hastily pinned hair so that it fell. She tugged the clip free and held it while shaking her hair loose. "Do you want to be alone?"

"No," Snape said. "Please remain, unless we are distracting you."

Harry could not read him. He wanted to ask him to try some curse drills with him, but that idea slid aside when he fleetingly worried that he may be facing another grounding. "What is it?"

Snape checked the house for bugs and returned to the same spot before Harry. He spoke deliberately. "Meeting your younger self made me realize a few things," he began, snapping his sleeves once before letting his hands rest at his sides. "When you were young, first starting at Hogwarts, I do not believe you were looking for a parent. Nor do I think you would have accepted one. You were far too accustomed to getting by on your own. What I think you needed were friends more than anything, which you found, easily enough."

Harry blinked in surprise at this conversation. After his trip yesterday, he wished to share how he newly perceived his life; how he accepted now that a grim start could work to one's advantage. He had not figured out how to broach this topic without admitting he had journeyed out of this world yet again, but he had hoped to come up with something. To be faced with Snape expressing usually close-kept thoughts struck him as flukish.

When Harry remained silent, Snape paced once, hands clasped behind him and went on. "When I brought you home here, you were marginally willing to accept having a father, partly because you saw it as your last chance ever to have one. That and you were quite worn down and, for the first time, willing to accept a home as well as help from someone older than your friends." When Harry remained stunned silent, mind following too many trails to respond intelligently, Snape prompted, "Do you concur?"

"Yes," Harry said. He thought back to that time when the house surrounding him now was novel and everything about his life felt terribly uncertain. He struggled while piercingly remembering that the hardest thing had been trusting that this help would not be unceremoniously pulled out from under him. Rather than voice this, he resorted to nodding to accentuate his agreement.

Snape sighed and said, "But I think we have come full circle at this point. I think you are back to needing friends, not a father."

"I don't think that's true," Harry countered. When Snape did not argue, just waited, Harry tried to explain. Across from him, Candide had abandoned her work to watch the two of them, tennis-match style. "I still need someone to tell me when I'm messing up."

"Good friends do that," Snape pointed out.

"Yeah, but it's different with a father," Harry said, despite being unprepared to express in what way.

"Oh, it is," Snape filled in. "To wit: fathers expect to be obeyed . . . at least some of the time."

Harry frowned wryly.

"You see," Snape gently said, "you have returned to trusting only your own judgment. You give mine very little regard."

"I listen to what you say," Harry said. "I just . . ."

"Don't follow it. Correct." Snape shifted to cross his arms, but appeared to consciously drop his arms to the sides.

Upstairs, Harry's pet rattled her cage loud enough to be heard. Harry waved his wand in that direction to free her, and she sailed several loops around the room before settling on his shoulder.

"I do not bring this up to disturb you," Snape said, glancing at Harry's uneasy pet. "I think we need to change the situation to something more workable, so I am merely stating things as I see them."

Harry, neck sore from peering upward, said, "Why don't you sit down? Make yourself at home."

Snape pulled a straight-backed chair over between the couches and sat rigidly in it, hands steepled in his lap. "I think you temporarily accepted a father, but that time has passed." He cut Harry off. "Yes, you wish to deny it. Which is fine, really. Touching perhaps even, but it is some residual instinct only, I feel certain."

"Severus . . ." Harry argued. "I like being in this family. I like living here, having your advice and to have you as, er, backup when things go wrong."

Still unerringly calm, Snape returned, "I have not disputed any of these things. All I am disputing is that you remain willing to allow me to act as a father to you."

Hearing Tonks' words echo in his head, Harry said, "You're not giving up on me, are you?"

Snape's face gave the first twitch of pain the whole conversation. "Never. That is precisely the opposite of what this is about."

"Oh, good."

Snape crossed his arms and fell into lecture mode. "This is the dilemma: You are unable to do as I say, but I insist on making certain you come to no harm." He let that lie for a moment. Harry's eyes flickered downward, partly because he had just

the day before done something he knew would strongly meet with disapproval and he was not Occluding his mind all that strongly.

Snape went on, "What I am proposing is a change in how we relate. I will resist my penchant for directing your actions and you will seek me out more often for advice, as well as keep me better informed of what you are doing."

Harry did not feel certain it could be that easy. "You think that will work?"

"I don't know. I think it is up to you."

Candide's papers shuffled as she returned to sorting during the lull that followed. Harry plucked his pet up off his shoulder where she was chewing his hair and propped her on his knee instead.

Snape said, "For example. You returned again to that other Plane where you destroyed Voldemort. That was not wise."

"I didn't have any choice," Harry argued.

"You always have a choice."

"That's not true. I couldn't leave it like that, with your double in bad circumstances. Circumstances I caused." Kali began chewing on his robes as his agitation affected her. "I don't know how you could think I could just leave it."

"You believe you fixed things?" Snape asked.

Harry sensed a trap; it was something about the tone Snape used to ask the question. It reminded him of a dungeon door slowly creaking open, revealing an unlit passageway.

Harry answered honestly, "Yes."

"You received two short glimpses of another world and you believe you knew enough to meddle so thoroughly in that place?"

Now at least, it was clear where this was heading.

"That place wasn't so different from this one," Harry said, no longer arguing. "I had to off Voldemort and I had to rescue that other Snape."

Softly, Snape pointed out, "You did not answer the question."

"I suppose, then, yes, I think I did know enough."

Snape stood at this and produced a rolled leather satchel like a craftsman might use to tie up fine tools. Moving with purpose, he set his chair aside, hovered the couch

Harry rested upon to get it out of the way, and said to Candide, "If you wouldn't mind. I would prefer that you remain at least thirty feet from what I am going to do."

She blinked at him. "Can I watch?"

Snape gestured at the dining room. "From the other side of the room. Certainly."

Candide eagerly gathered up her things and vacated them to the dining room and then stood in the doorway. Snape had already moved the other couch to clear a wide space on the floor. He unrolled the satchel at his feet with a flick. Inside it, caught in neat leather loops were rolls of fine, silk twine, chalk, telescoping rods, candles and other oddments.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

"Without sending you away again, I wish to demonstrate your mistaken belief in what you did."

Harry stood and came around to where Snape was fixing a dowel to the floor with a dab of wax. "How do you know it's a mistaken belief?"

"The world, this world, any world, is far more complex than you are treating it. If I am wrong, so be it. But if I am correct, I will have proved something very important to you . . . without having grounded you, or shouted, or anything of that nature."

"You haven't shouted in a long time," Harry said, feeling sheepish and willing to fall into to a teenage mode. He drew his lips in between his teeth as he watched Snape use twine and chalk to draw a large circle on the floor. Harry had to step out of the way of letting the broad arc of it close off. "What are you doing?" Harry asked again as the dowel was freed from the floor with a quick heat spell and placed at the top of the circle.

Snape took the twine he had used for the large circle and folded it into thirds then twice into halves. He then unwound five sections of that and made a knot. He used this length to make smaller circles around the circumference of the first. He did not answer until he had waxed down two rods at two seemingly random arc intersections and drew a blue chalk line along it, fingers positioned expertly to avoid deflecting the string. "I am preparing a five-sided device, with the expectation that you can use it to see into this place you visited."

Harry's jaw dropped open. He said, "I don't want you to make a pentagram; that's dark magic."

Twenty Years Later, Part III

Snape gathered the twine around his wrist and held up the wooden dowel tied to it. "This is interesting, is it not? You believe this is not the best activity for me to be engaged in, but I think otherwise. I frequently think the same of your activities and you likewise disagree." They stared at each other until Harry backed down by dropping his gaze.

Harry watched as more long lines were drawn between arc intersections, slightly off from the center, forming a perfect pentagon in the middle. "That doesn't look like a pentagram," Harry said, despite seeing how it could be easily extended into one. He felt like being difficult, so the comment came out critical.

"It is actually a much more powerful device referred to as a twenty-vertex snark."

Harry raised a brow and considered making a comment about that.

"Something you want to say?" Snape eloquently asked, looking up long enough to give Harry an opportunity to do so. Harry declined and Snape returned to his attention to the diagram.

As the last of ten long lines were completed, Harry felt the floor vibrate and Kali took flight back to his room. "I don't think this is a good idea," he said. "I can already feel it activating. I don't want you messing with anything dark."

Snape handed him the chalk. "You finish it then."

Was this a test? Harry wondered. He studied the diagram without moving, and Snape said, "You need to make a string equal to the length of the distance between the outer circle and one of the pentagon vertices." When Harry had done that, he did as instructed and made arcs inward of the pentagon. Then he made more long lines, the intersections with the arcs told marked where to draw a perfect inner pentagon to the first. He was not as adept at mounting the dowels and tracing the twine for a straight line, so this proceeded slowly.

"I don't like this, Severus," Harry said again while bent ungainly over the artwork.

"Can you not control the interstice? I thought you were adept at this."

Another test. Harry was tiring of tests. "I can keep everything pressed down where it belongs," he insisted. "But you don't understand."

"Finish the points of the pentagram and we will move on. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can destroy the device." Snape levered himself to his feet, robes streaked with white chalk. "Candide. Thirty feet and if the baby so much as twitches I want you to Apparate away immediately."

Chapter 22

"Severus . . ." Harry said, nearly pleading. He felt like he moved in a dream. He wanted to believe he was in the wrong place but some base instinct screamed that this was exactly right and believing otherwise a lame excuse. He had pushed Snape into this. "Why are we doing this?" Harry asked.

"Is it not safe?" Snape gestured at the nearby wall with his arm. "You treat journeying to this dreadful place as a stroll down the street outside. This is merely a minute gateway."

"There's a difference," Harry insisted. "You don't understand . . . I keep telling you. There's a big difference between traveling there and what happens when the Planes intersect."

Snape stared back thoughtfully now rather than haughtily. "Can you control it?" This was an honest question. "If you cannot, destroy the device."

"I can control it," Harry said. "That's not the problem. I just don't like it."

"I prefer that you don't like it. I wish you equally disliked every aspect of it." After a pause. "Finish the points of the pentagram."

While Harry drew in the last two, exerting increasing force to keep the interstice closed, Snape mounted a small brown candle on a skull and lit it. He handed this to Harry. "Set it in the middle and move aside."

Biting both his lips, Harry obeyed by leaning far over, limbs spread like a spider, careful of the chalk lines. With his fingertips, he pushed the skull to the center. Smoke bloomed from the candle, but it ceased to rise; it parted into five streams which snaked towards the vertices and disappeared, allowing only small spurting wisps of smoke into the room.

"You receive an "O" for this assignment," Snape drawled. "Well, done. Fetch me the skull."

Harry did not want to be anywhere near any of it. It pulsed and vibrated with morbid life or morbid death, or some halfway version of the two.

"Go on. If you can travel there, I do not see how this can harm you. It is the merest cracked window on that place you visit, frequently I suspect."

Harry, stretched long, propped on one knee, one toe and one hand, and grabbed up the skull candle. "This feels much worse than being there," he said, setting the skull aside.

"I think this is the only circumstances under which you truly can understand how foul that place is: when it is placed in stark contrast to this world." Snape fixed a lit

white candle to each pentagram vertex, straightened, and gestured bluntly. "Go on. Step inside or destroy it if you cannot bear to."

Harry breathed deeply, preparing for a dive, and minced between the candles and over the lines until he stood in the very center of the center pentagon. Dizzying colorful sheets of sky and ground sailed up from the floor to disappear overhead, whispering and murmuring to him as they passed. When they passed close, they buffeted him, frosting his skin. Harry pulled his arms in and hunched over against the assault.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape asked.

Harry heard Snape clearly even over the wisps of noise. "Yeah. Can you see that?"

"No. What is it you see?"

Harry tried to better examine one of the fluttering membranes as it whisked by. His attention slowed the scene's course and he glimpsed fields and a city with red banners fluttering on the towers before it slipped away. The next one he focused on bulged with smoky clouds and he glimpsed a gloomy London in a fog thick enough to hide the ground. Glowing street lamps rested atop the grey blanket flowing along the roads between the buildings. On the next he glimpsed witches sharing a broomstick while flying low over winter-bare trees.

"I see all possibility," Harry said, then rethought that absurd notion. "I think."

"Can you see the place you were before, the one you heroically returned to, certain you knew what was best?"

Harry opened his eyes, only then realizing they had been closed. Upward-sailing scenes continued to strike him, visible whether his eyes were open or closed. He stared at his guardian through them. "You really think I shouldn't have done that?"

Snape's pale countenance, floating in the frame of his pitch black hair and robes, was remarkably easy to focus on through the deluge. He said, "I believe it imperative that you understand what you are doing, what you have done, and what you could do. I do not believe for an instant that is true at this time."

Severus Snape slept through the long nights, nursing the last of his wounds, which had gloriously faded to dull throbs that only accompanied sudden movement. The hut he had been set up in felt more like a home than he would have imagined it

could, perhaps the influence of the close, companionable fire that burned nonstop. The green wood he had magically chopped and piled outside smoked terribly, but the hut had been cleverly designed to funnel everything away through the roof when the smoke-hole tarpaulin and the ground vents were given periodic attention.

More healing to his stress-worn spirit was the absolute quiet of the place. After living in dread of his tormentor's boot steps approaching along the dungeon corridor, the deathly, white-dusted stillness acted as a balm. Rarely did anything ever stir, and if it did, its animal origin was always instantly clear. Reindeer trotted by, their hooves a subsonic thundering, felt more than heard. Wolf cries carried from far across the frozen lake. Birds called overhead. These were all welcome noises, reminders that the world had not been utterly drained of existence.

Snape bent to sort through the collection of possible potion ingredients from his last foraging trip. The takings were sparse, but unusual, requiring creativity to make the best of them, an intellectual lure that drew him willingly each morning from sleep deep within the bundled rough furs and borrowed cloak.

Fire stoked comfortably high, Snape sniffed at a dried pine needle, rubbed it on a dark stone, sniffed it again. That was when he heard the strange swish-swish like a sheer curtain being pulled aside and dropped again. Then came a crackle of icy snow, just outside the door. Snape silently put everything aside and stood up, wand out.

Nothing moved. The rushes under the furs that made up the floor were brittle and would snap if he walked across them, but to avoid the fire, there was no choice. Biting his lip, Snape bent low and dashed for the door, hoping to take the person outside by at least modest surprise.

Snape's exit from the small tilted door was met with a low growl. He stood to face a scrawny grey and white wolf showing every last yellowed tooth through its loose gums. It growled hard enough it had to pause and lick up the saliva that dribbled off its jowls. Startled to find an animal bold enough to venture this close, Snape backed up a step and considered retreating to fetch a burning log from the hearth, figuring this would teach the animal better than magic would that it should give the village a wide berth.

The wolf growled again, territorial instinct plain in its eyes, but oddly centered on the hut behind Snape. Snape lowered his wand fractionally. "Are you the shaman who lives here?" he asked, assuming that if he were wrong, no harm in talking at an animal.

The wolf's jaw snapped closed and it tilted its head curiously. An instant later, a man in animal skin breaches, tall rubber boots and long fur tunic stood in the wolf's

stead. Snape, seeing no wand on the man, lowered his own. "I am an uninvited guest, I think," Snape admitted, trying to come up with appropriate human society noises to explain his presence. Seventeen days, by the counting of the low sunrises, he had been alone here, long enough to forget something he rarely practiced at the best of times.

The shaman, pale steel eyes glowing in the blue, otherworldly light, held up a hand to halt Snape's speech and slipped inside the hut, clearly adept at using the odd door.

He stepped over to stand among the things Snape had spread out and stared down at them. Snape waited in the entry area where a wedge of bare dirt was framed with logs. The shaman picked up the leaf parcels of ingredients, examining some of them with interest, and handed them to Snape with a curt gesture to set them on the other side of the hut. Snape did so, spreading out his cloak to set them, as well as himself, on.

The shaman did not speak, and when Snape tried to explain a bit, the shaman waved him off and felt in his tunic for something. He extracted a pouch and pipe, lit the pipe without a match or a wand and began puffing on it. The smoke smelled of nothing familiar, certainly not tobacco, perhaps bark.

Snape waited – for what, he was uncertain. An hour passed in this awkward silence.

The sound of Apparition outside startled Snape, but not his host. The door opened and a middle-aged woman with almond eyes and round cheeks ducked through the doorway. She sat down on the other side of the hut and shared the pipe. Despite the new arrival, no words were spoken for quite some time. Snape, who was grateful still simply to no longer be a prisoner at his guards' whim, had limitless patience for their slow pace.

It was some time after Snape laid down for a nap that the witch spoke, but in an incomprehensible tongue. The shaman replied likewise. Snape rocked to a sitting position and expressed interest even though he could not understand.

Silence fell and stretched long. Snape cleared his throat and said, "I do apologize for my intrusion. The person who brought me here seemed to know you. Perhaps you know him? Harry Potter."

The pair visibly stiffened. The shaman knocked the pipe bowl on a hearth stone and put it away with solemnity.

"Harry Potter brought you here?" the witch asked, disbelief clear.

"Yes," Snape said.

The pair glanced at each other, Snape could not catch their thoughts over the brightness of the hearth flames shielding them.

"Why?"

"To recover. I was injured."

Another impenetrable burst of conversation, then, "But why here?"

"You don't know Mr. Potter?" Snape asked, knowing well the best way to combat uncomfortable questions was with more questions.

Unsatisfactory silence met his query and nothing more was said.

Meal preparations commenced in equal silence, the only chatter coming from the implements used. By the time a wooden board with food was passed over to him, Snape was beginning to really like these people and especially their lack of incessant prattle.

After the meal, Snape's hosts began packing up amidst abbreviated back and forth conversation. The witch said, "We can just make it tonight. We will take you."

"Take me where?"

"To Potter."

Snape revealed more surprise that he liked when he blurted, "You're going to take me to Harry Potter?"

Nods from his hosts as they shrugged on their coats and shuffled out of the hut. Snape grabbed up his satchel of ingredients and his broomstick and hurried to follow. Outside, the two of them were strapping on skis. A pair was put down for him, which he balked at. He hovered his broomstick instead, and sat upon it. The shaman pointedly bundled the abandoned skis together and held them out. Snape perched them on his shoulder since he could not argue, as they shared no language in common to argue with.

Off they went, at a surprising pace given the age of the expedition. Snape flew along behind, sometimes holding the bundled skis out as a tow line to speed up long ascents. The first time this offer was made, it was turned down, but not the second time.

Hours glided by over the snowy, rocky landscape. In the distance to the left, deep valleys opened up, green with pines, but ahead of them the ground grew increasingly rocky and barren beneath the hissing snow.

Eventually, the broom gave out. It simply settled to the ground. Snape stood and brushed the snow off his cloak and stared down at it. The shaman gestured at the

skis, which Snape reluctantly donned. The journey progressed far slower after that, especially since rather than pulling others uphill, Snape had to remove the skis and walk. An hour into this and his breath filled the air before his face with panting fog and he could not draw relief into his lungs no matter the effort he put into it.

Snape called for a rest and sat down on a rock, not caring that the cold of it sucked the heat from him. He remained hunched there until his breathing returned to normal. With a clearer head, he took in his surroundings. There was nothing here but blowing humps of white: the Sahara desert of snow. He peered at each of his companions in turn, but could detect nothing in their minds of concern to him, just a desire to move on and return home quickly.

Legs quivering, Snape stood and began breathing heavily to get ahead of it in hopes of not immediately falling breathless again. They continued their slow progress until the light began to fade, rendering the snow a slate blue-grey that masked large dips and buried rocks. Snape fell repeatedly, so he removed the skis and used them as walking sticks until the next downhill where he waited for both of them to reach the bottom and utilized the deeper of their two trails to follow.

The sloping ground met a rocky incline too steep to climb. The shaman pointed along this cliff-face and the witch said, "You'll have to go on alone."

Snape's tired brain did not allow him to do more than than stare at them. The skis were taken from his unresisting hands and the woman said, "Up around that way. Just a kilometer more. Go on. You cannot miss it."

"Miss what?" he asked, but they were already moving off with haste and glancing sharply around themselves, then up at the sky, which gave the distinct impression of apocalypse the way it fell in tumbling, torn flakes.

Snape pulled his cloak tightly around his body to block the wind and leaned into the path, picking his way carefully along the rugged join where the ground met cliff. The curving slope leveled off and the going became much easier even as the snow began to fall blindingly thick. As he parted the swirling wall of flakes, Snape kept the steep hill in view on his right to avoid losing his way in an endless, fatal circle.

The snow gusted first one way, then the other, alternating pelting and pushing, and then within a span of feet it slowed and trickled off to a few drifting flakes. Snape stopped and glanced behind him where the wind visibly corkscrewed the snow along the barren cliff.

Feeling more optimistic about finding something, Snape walked forward and stopped again when a glittering fortress trickled into view through the low-lit gloom, nestled

in a dry gorge. At first glimpse it appeared to be a magnificent soaring ice replica of a castle, but closer in, deficiencies appeared. The turrets had melted and refrozen many times and in between had been re-grown with less skill than the original maker possessed.

Snape huffed in and out, fogging his view as he considered the scene. A sloping entrance had been cut in the side of the cliff and ice wall, leading to a high door, but below this, another door, a crack in the rock, really, led inside too. That way promised safer exploration of this strange place.

Snape made his way under the looming ice castle's gaze and slipped inside the crevice beneath it. The scent just inside alarmed him with its misplaced familiarity. He tossed a Lumos out of his wand and reeled back from what it illuminated: raw flesh. Catching himself on the wall of ice behind him, Snape gazed around at another hanging figure, half-butchered, thigh bone protruding. The thing swayed on a hook, antlers grazing the uneven stone floor. Snape patted his chest – a gesture he would have been appalled to be conscious of. Moving the wand, he examined the next figure, also partly butchered, but half-encased in the ice growing out from the wall. Beneath the glittering frozen surface, endless blood red figures hung in long rows, fully entombed.

Snape shook the spell from the wand and made his way back outside where the castle's splintered glow lit the gorge opening in a mockery of welcome. There was nothing for it; he could not stay down here and there was no other shelter. He could Apparate away, but the only destination in range was the place from which he had just been evicted.

Snape made his way gingerly up the icy path arcing along the cliff-face, wand at ready. At the top, the path broadened to a platform, framed by the ice columns of the doorway. There were no doors, so Snape slipped inside, shaking off the Lumos spell.

A wall blocked the entrance and, by design, the wind, but passages curled around it on either side. Snape slipped to the right, lured by a flickering hint of flames catching on the rippled, wet wall. Snape hesitated long enough to reassure himself that if this were Potter's house, he could be safely presumed to be hospitable, given his recent actions. Having seen the young man in battle, Snape had no desire to face his ire unleashed. He hesitated longer, even after establishing this logic, before reminding himself again that he had no choice.

Around the bend, indirect light mutely flooded a grand hall of ice, complete with facing ice hearths holding merrily crackling fires. The cathedral-like ceiling arched

high above, interrupted only by the cliff face flattening it preemptively like a wound. A figure sat on a pile of furs, bent deeply over some sewing. Snape stood as frozen as the walls framing him as he took in the bizarrely familiar lines of the figure. The woman moved, sending clearer auburn hues off her hair. Snape ceased to breath as he watched, transfixed. Finally she raised her head to tug her work-piece around ninety degrees, removing all doubt besides that of lost sanity.

The woman froze as well and raised her gaze, alert. She stared at Snape, who could do nothing more than stare back. Lily Potter slipped her feet under her and stood straight with lean ease, showing alarm in her pose, even as her voice held something quite different. "Severus?"

Snape managed to shift one arm, the one holding his wand. He must have fallen in the snow, fallen and had lost his mind to the cold. That would explain the conflicting hallucination of ice and fire – he was hypothermic, dying. He could not bring himself to care about this conclusion – to spell himself with a heat charm to recover; he feared the vision would fade if he did and that would be another, less palatable death.

Lily stepped closer and repeated his name. Snape glanced down at himself. He wore the cloak Potter had given him – the cloak of humble acceptance. What a thing to die in.

"Severus, what are you doing here?"

Snape blinked at her. Up close she no longer appeared a vision of twenty years before, but a more reasonable one of grey-sprinkled temples, crudely pampered hair, and faintly lined eyes. Why would he hallucinate her that way?

"Come over by the fire," she invited, tugging on his arm, which snapped him from his doomed revery.

By the time they traversed the fur-carpeted floor and reached a fur-clad ice block before the seemingly glass-enclosed fire, Snape bumblingly managed to ask, "What are you doing here? What are you doing alive?"

Her face fell at this, which was not rational; how could it be? She touched his cheek to check his temperature and he nearly fainted at the contact, barely catching himself on the unforgivingly hard edge of the ice chair. He crouched over his quivering arm, trying to comprehend what was happening, trying to establish what was real.

She hovered another ice block close by, tossed a spare fur from the floor over it, and said simply, "I asked you first."

Snape raised his head to stare at the closest set of homely flames, at the surrounding hearth, which perpetually melted and refroze he now noticed. "I can't possibly explain

that," he said, wondering where reality left off and his delusions began. He had to admit, it could have left off a long time ago and he just had not noticed until the small changes added up to such undeniable absurdity.

"Nothing today, Mum," a voice announced from the doorway. "No game for miles."

Snape stood and spun around to face the familiar voice and found himself swaying again. It was Harry Potter all right, but not at all like he expected. This young man had a boy's stature, and correspondingly oversized head accentuated by his mop of dark hair.

Harry came to a halt and gaped at Snape. "Professor?" he blurted in sheer surprise.

"Potter," Snape greeted him with a nod, trying to gain enough time to connect dots that had no relation to one another. He gave up.

"What are you doing here?" Lily asked Snape, emboldened by having backup.

Snape answered, "I was led here by the shaman in the village. I came looking for . . . well, for Harry." That was a good enough story, he thought.

"Does Voldemort know you're here?" Lily asked.

Snape removed his eyes from the elvin-like green ones of Harry. They were too dark as well as too large. He fixated instead on the identical feminine ones peering up at him in concern.

"Voldemort is dead," Snape said, and started when Harry exclaimed, "I told you, Mum! I could tell."

"He's really gone?" she whispered. "What happened?"

"A powerful wizard came and destroyed him," Snape stated slowly, glancing back to Harry, who jumped down to cling to his mother's hand, kneeling beside her in a gesture that struck Snape as Victorian.

"So then you came." Lily said. "Did you know we were here?" Her brow furrowed as her mind worked, as sharp as ever.

"Not exactly," Snape said. "Before I can reasonably explain, I need to figure out some things for myself." He stated this with some authority, hoping it would keep the questions at bay. "But, what-" he began, but locked his jaw when she held up her hand.

"Harry," she said fawningly to the young man resting on one bent knee beside her ice block. "Can you go fetch more wood for the piles in here, please?"

Harry bit his lip and nodded eagerly, fairly skipping from the room. The wood piles already teetered near the ceiling, two to three deep.

Lily said, "You were going to ask again how I am alive." She sighed sadly. "I don't want to repeat it in front of him. It tears him to pieces."

Snape held his breath as her jewel-green gaze faded and she explained, "Years passed before Harry could even confess it all. Voldemort, using one of his weakest servants, had defeated Harry. He had offered Harry us, James and me, in exchange for the Philosopher's Stone. Harry said he wasn't certain how he ended up with the stone; it just fell into his pocket when he looked into the Mirror of Erised. After that he was defenseless. Voldemort's servant subdued him with a spell and took the stone. But after having promised him us in exchange for retrieving it, Voldemort believed he was bound to the contract of his promise or risk the stone being of no use. So he brought us to life using what Harry describes as rather gruesome Dark Magic executed in the graveyard in Godric's Hollow."

She drifted off, gaze pained. The lines of her face grew deeper and Snape needed time to build up the cruelty needed to prompt for more. "But, what became of James?"

The change was barely perceptible, but a shadow darkened her features. "He could not take being here. He insisted upon challenging Voldemort." Another long gap, but she restarted on her own. "He lost of course. Voldemort dumped him here . . ." She gestured at a spot on the floor nearby. "Making it clear it would not be tolerated again."

Snape tried to imagine the scene. The headstrong James Potter sitting still in an ice cage. "But he did it again?"

She nodded, drained by doing so.

"That was selfish of him," Snape said. "Abandoning the two of you here like that."

Nearly inaudible, she said, "It broke the rest of Harry's heart." She turned away, as the object of her statement, returned, hovering a load of wood before him.

Lily was biting her lower lip and fighting for control, so Snape stood and approached the young man. "How about there?" he suggested, picking an area with a small gap between the pile and the ceiling.

Harry responded to his attention with strange shyness, and moved quickly, and therefore clumsily, to comply. Snape gave no notice to the banging of logs while he occupied his time examining the ice hearth. The spells must be renewed regularly he suspected.

Chapter 22

Smoke had blackened the ice blocks, visible through the wall all the way up to the roof.

Harry glanced at his mum, brow twitching low. Snape had been watching for that. He asked, "Who renews the spells?"

"Mum, usually. Me, sometimes."

Lily stood and came over to help hover the excessive wood to other open spots. She had recovered but the strain showed in the rigid lines of her neck and back.

"Shall we have a roast?" Harry asked as he hovered more wood into the nearest roaring hearth. He turned his large eyes on Snape. "Are . . . are you staying for dinner?"

"If I am invited," Snape said, pretending he had an option.

"Of course. There's plenty to eat."

Snape knew for a fact this was true. "You must hunt a lot . . . and successfully," he observed, pulling out a flattering tone with some effort.

Harry leaned in a little, eyes sparkling for just an instant. "I can sneak up on them in deer form and catch them by surprise."

This time effort was not required. "You're an Animagus?" Snape asked.

"Mum taught me," Harry said, turning shy again, but then in a blink his face lit up. "I learned quickly, she thought. Isn't that right, Mum?" he blurted loudly.

"Yes, of course, Harry," she said calmly.

The evening passed with copious meat served in the high open space between roaring fires. Snape repeatedly shook himself from a reverie to find, yet again, that this unexpected place, and unexpected people, were as real as himself. While extracting the marrow from a heavy bone, he pondered the mystery of the two Harrys. By this time he had expected at least a sketchy theory to have manifested itself, but the facts refused to find any arrangement, even an implausible one. His expectations still jarred him when he studied the young man on his left. This Harry rarely met his gaze and when he did, he demonstrated clearly that he knew nothing of Occlumency. Snape took advantage of the glimpses he got, finding a wounded and straightforward boy, whose ego spent most its time trying to guard against utter self-loathing through distraction or servitude to his mother.

Snape tried his best to be nice to him, limited in this by his resistance to sounding false. The boy gobbled up any nibble of kindness sent his way.

Twenty Years Later, Part III

"Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked, when Snape quartered and cored a half-desiccated apple with one wave.

"Certainly."

Harry grinned eagerly and drew out his wand. Snape said, "But there are far more interesting ones I could teach you."

The short remainder of the late evening was spent on spells. The radiant walls of the hall rendered night into endless twilight. Harry proved to be an impatient student, but given Lily was the audience, Snape found patience enough and with firm but light prods of chastisement, Harry fell into better behavior. He was like a child seven years younger than his calendar age. Removed from his peers and faced with nothing of solace, he had stagnated on maturing.

To keep the wild spells from disturbing Lily, the lesson proceeded on the other side of the long room.

"You have a partial grasp of that one. Perhaps that's enough for tonight," Snape said after Harry managed to transfigure a cup into a capon's wing, rather than a whole, live capon.

Harry's eyes turned blatantly hurt, so Snape firmly said, "We will do more tomorrow. Do not worry yourself."

With an unskilled surreptitious glance at his mother, Harry sidled closer to Snape and whispered, "How long are you going to stay?"

This was an excellent question. "As long as I am welcome." He left out that he had no place to go. He had planned to begin a long journey, possibly to Australia, but traveling untraceably it would be a lengthy journey. Other options, still half formed, had begun to occur to him. Whispering as well, he asked, "Do you wish me to stay?"

Harry's lips trembled, immediately overwrought. "Mum hasn't been this, well, happy in a long time."

Snape resisted glancing behind him. He swallowed hard, finding additional old feelings rising to life. If this was happy, he loathed to see how she was normally. He dreamed of staying, so to be begged to stay made it hard to control his voice. "If you feel that is true, I shall stay," he stated primly.

Harry nodded, equally sober, eyes radiating gratitude. Snape put aside the cups and stones they had been using for spell work, catching Lily's gaze when he turned. She did not practice any Occlumency either.

Chapter 22

"Will you go hunting again in the morning?" Snape asked, thinking of when he would next be alone with Lily.

"Do you want to come along?" Harry brightly asked, keen on the topic.

Snape let his lips twitch, thinking how ridiculously naive the question was. "I am certain I would only slow you down and lead to failure. I just inquire because there are potion ingredients I could obtain from a fresh kill, and there is some brewing I would like to do." He sized Harry up. "For example, would you like to be a bit taller, perhaps?"

Harry grinned. "Am I small?" He peered up at Snape with his deep green eyes. "Compared to you, I guess I am."

Snape shuffled forward to better compare. "Yes, I think you should be about my height. And we'll work on spells when you return from hunting. Lots of spells." The eyes would be hard to fix; they would have to do.

Harry's smile held pain it so pressed itself upon his mouth. "I'd like that!" He rushed over to his mother to share the news.

Under his breath, Snape said, "I'd like to return to England, eventually. And with Harry Potter, powerful wizard and defeater of the Dark Lord as an ally, I might just be able to."

Harry flew his mind over snowy ranges, flat lakes of ice, tree-covered slopes, until he found Per's village. The ground around the huts showed trampling, but there was no life about and no smoke. Not skilled at steering, Harry veered one way and then another, trying to see closer in. He found the ski trail departing the village accidentally while trying to better tune his vision. He could freeze the scene well enough, and he did so now, pondering the two tracks leading away. Uphill they split into two and downhill merged into one.

Harry swayed on his feet. He ached to quit this task. His mind had rapidly exhausted just finding this place, and now all he wanted to do was release what he struggled to keep hold of and step out of the maelstrom whipping by him. With a deep breath he leaned forward, instinctively using broomstick motions to fly, but this did not work. He had to concentrate in a wholly new way, and each time he managed it, he grew increasingly worn raw by the effort.

The ski trail rambled up and down, suddenly splitting into two with a less skilled third veering between them. He cared little for this mystery, and flew past the last of the trees and into a sharply hilly area. Harry followed mindlessly, casting ahead with dead reckoning in the spots where the trail had blow smooth, until he blinked and froze at what he saw in the crux of two sharp cliffs. Glittering in the sunlight was an ice castle as tall as Hogwarts. This time his curiosity drew him forward without will, which was fortunate because he could not have expended even one more ounce of effort to move himself within this place.

He passed through the walls of the castle and looked down upon the ice floor. Ice-hearths rose out of the floor, facing each other, glowing yellow-orange with flame. One long wall was lined three-logs-deep with fresh wood. Ice blocks formed furniture, some draped with hides to make them livable. Upon one, two figures were curled around each other. The hair and beaked nose on the taller one was instantly recognizable. The other . . . Harry nearly staggered and lost the scene while he caught himself. The maelstrom buffeted him helplessly again.

"Harry?" Snape's voice prodded in concern, disturbing Harry's fragile reality all the more.

Harry waved him off and finding renewed strength in determination, grasped that scene out of the flow and forced that place to return to view. Determination worked well and moments later he was facing the same icy architecture. He passed through the glowing outside wall, lower down where the view would be clearer. Startled again, this time by finding a vision of himself sitting on a skin on the floor, cutting up something with a knife. Well, it was sort of himself. Almost a simultaneously younger and older version. So his counterpart had not died in this place, and his mother was alive. Harry puzzled that, stiffening in distressed surprise as Snape ran his fingers casually through his mother's hair. When his mother rested her head on Snape's chest in response, Harry let the scene go and simply floated there, battered without will in the surf of possibility.

"Step aside," Snape commanded through his stunned paralysis. Harry could barely concentrate on his guardian beyond. Given the tone he used, Snape may have repeated himself several times and Harry only now heard him.

Harry rotated his head to peer down at his feet. He stood in a nearly solid upwards tunnel of rushing scenes. They felt natural now, in tune with his being, the same way one feels after floating in water too long. But his mind was dissolving, losing track of itself. If he slipped through to the Dark Plane now, he felt he could slip into all places at once and cease to exist. He was too tired to even feel alarm at this daunting

prospect. Harry took one step to the side, scuffing the inner pentagon, and the scenes faded and fluttered, releasing his focus to find on the perfectly normal room beyond. Another step and he was freed from the deluge.

Snape destroyed the device with one sweeping Scourgify. Harry stumbled to the closest couch, disoriented from being released from the sensory confusion into stark solidity. He gripped the edge of the couch cushions and breathed deeply.

After several minutes of this, surprise took over that Snape had not spoken. Harry glanced up at him. His guardian stood, gaze watchful, arms across his front, wand held horizontally to the side. "Are you quite all right?" he asked in concern.

Harry rubbed one tired eye and nodded despite his shaking hand. "You were right; I didn't understand what was happening there." Overwhelmed again by what he had found, Harry flopped back and tilted his head up to stare at the chandelier, noting that the unlit candles mounted on it were all of varying lengths and that long drips of wax had formed beneath the stubby ones. This was not important, but he could not stop himself from observing it. Also the daylight from the upper windows cast broad ovals on the ceiling. He had never noticed that either.

"Safe to approach?" Candide asked from across the room.

Snape turned on his toes. "Yes."

Candide strolled over and stood beside Snape, putting an arm loosely around him. Harry watched them in the edge of his vision. The scene reminded him of another, which he thought best to wait on discussing until Candide was absent.

"What did you find?" Snape asked.

Harry pulled a dismayed face. "Let's just leave it at: I didn't understand what was going on." He turned to the two of them. "But I don't regret what I did. It still worked out," he asserted, but felt another ripple of surprise. "But, it's true I didn't really understand," he reiterated yet again and sighed.

Harry's muscles quivered from being over stressed. He pillowed his head on his arm and shut his eyes, intending to just rest them for a moment.

Candide whispered, "You didn't set him too hard a task, did you?"

Snape took a step to the side to better study Harry who was lying on his arm with his hand hanging out into space, half-closed around something invisible. Dismissively, Snape said, "He's young; he will recover."

It was Ron and Ginny's arrival for lunch that roused Harry from a light doze where he dreamed that he was arguing with a vision of himself about which of them should do what.

Twenty Years Later, Part III

Ron slapped Harry hard on the shoulder as he tried to clear the stray threads of the dream from his thoughts.

"Ouch," Harry complained. "Wotcher, Ron."

Ginny said, "I thought you had the late shift tonight, not last night."

"I do." Harry said. He pushed himself to his feet and felt for his wand, but then realized he did not need it out for what he wanted to try. "Ginny, feel like a few curse drills?"

Sulkily, Ron complained, "You never ask me to help with those."

Harry still felt weak and if he got hit with some wild thing Ron sent his way, it may knock him out. "That's because your attenuation is non-existent."

Ron tossed his hands out, fingers spread. "I work with Trolls, Harry. Do you know how much spell it takes to get a Troll's attention?"

Ignoring his sore body, Harry took up a position opposite Ginny, whose face was already deep in concentration. When she sent a weak Jelly Legs his way, it did not feel the same as when he had been casting at himself in the other Plane. But, of course it would not be the same, he told himself, holding frustration at bay. But he still knew now how things worked, even if he could no longer touch the spell all along the way. He could feel a curse being generated at the beginning, and he could see it come out of the wand. Maybe he could just guess on the timing in between.

Ginny changed to a blinding curse. "No," Harry said, "go back to the other one." She obliged without comment. Harry thought through the steps. He could feel the curse forming, then it had to be cast, passing down the arm and into the wand, where it was focused and modulated, then it came out. If he wanted to crimp the curse off as it entered the wand, that was about three quarters of the way along.

For several rounds, in the manner of a musician, he counted out the rhythm between generation and emission, estimating the stages and on the forth time, he squeezed down, blindly it felt like, on the spot where her hand met the wand.

Ginny dropped her wand, habitually stooped to reach for it, then brightened and left it for a moment. "Harry! That was excellent. My fingers went limp."

Ron bounced off the couch. "Can I try?"

"Let me try a few more rounds with Ginny. Same spell."

Snape wandered out of the drawing room and leaned on the doorframe to observe. The extra audience was a distraction, and it required to more tries to get the timing

right again. Too early and the spell still came out as if his crushing it down failed because it met no resistance. Too late and he still got hit, but with less power, and Ginny could still hold firm to the wand.

Harry's heart beat faster and his focus grew farther inward as he counted and crunched each casting. When he had that spell stopped reliably, Harry said, "Try a different curse."

He counted again against a Blindness Curse, feeling like he had it just right, but he missed, and his vision flickered out. "Drat, that one's different." He asked her to repeat it until he could find the right timing on that spell as well.

After uncountable dozens of rounds against both his friends and many dropped wands, Harry waved them off and looked over at his guardian. Daunted by the task before him, he said, "I need some help on spell theory. I don't want to have to learn them all individually."

Snape stood with his arms half crossed, thumb thoughtfully grazing his lower lip. His expression was inscrutable. "Of course," he said.

After lunch, Harry and his friends walked around the village to take advantage of a warm shift in the weather. Harry thought about that other, unbelievably peaceful place where the weather could be nice all the time with the right magical device. Ron and Ginny argued half the walk. This proved a distraction to Harry, who wanted more than anything just some quiet time to think.

When they were approaching the house again, Harry said, "You know, I have a ton to do, and-"

"Ah," Ron interrupted. "Harry needs to assemble his plans for world domination, now that he is unstoppable."

"I, uh, what?" Harry rolled his eyes. Trouble was, really, which world, a darkly humorous part of his mind supplied. "I have field work after dinner and I can't take over the world if I haven't done my readings."

"I understand," Ron said. "Plus, Ginny's got a date to get ready for and if she doesn't start six hours ahead of time . . ."

It was Ron's turn to rub his arm where he had been struck. "It's true," he argued, veering out of range.

Despite Harry's prior insistence that he needed to do his studies, when he returned alone to the house, he sought out Snape instead of his books.

Twenty Years Later, Part III

Snape stood over the small trunk he used to ferry things home for the weekend. He was sorting things out of it into either a pile or the low-burning hearth. "Do you want help with curse negation?" Snape asked.

"I do," Harry said. "But I have something else I want to talk to you about."

His glance out the door prompted Snape to say, "Candide has gone to the office for a few hours."

"I'm surprised you let her."

"She insisted that you could liberate her on your way into the Ministry, if need be."

"I'd be happy to," Harry said.

Snape gestured at a chair and set the trunk aside on the floor, giving Harry his full attention from the seat behind the desk.

Buying time, Harry said, "I'm still thinking about what you said, about you acting less like a father." He stopped, startled by how hard it was to hear himself say it. "I wish it didn't have to be that way."

Snape gave a marginal, crooked nod of acknowledgment and waited for Harry to go on.

"But you are probably right." Harry rubbed his fingers together and fell silent. Snape was correct that Harry could no longer find the will to obey him.

Snape said, "I am quite curious what you found in that other place and I am wondering if you will tell me."

A prickle went through Harry. He looked up again and tried to gauge how to explain. Words failed him and he snorted lightly. Diving into the safer waters of this topic, he said, "Well, that place's Harry wasn't really dead."

"No? Previously you were confident on that point."

"That was based on Voldemort's reaction. But he knew something I didn't know: that he had that Harry helplessly under his thumb."

Snape's brow rose and his chair creaked as he leaned back and steepled his fingers before him. He waited.

Harry hesitated. Finally, he said, "I once accused you of having a thing for my mother and you said you didn't."

Snape's expression did not change, but he fell into stillness. "I did say that."

"But was that true?" Harry asked, finding he could not let this question lie unanswered.

Snape's face shifted an iota into confusion without losing an edge of hard challenge. "What does it matter?"

"It might," Harry insisted dramatically. "You never know."

At this, Snape's brows came down and he stared at Harry with obvious scrutiny. Trouble was, every time Harry thought about this issue, his emotions landed somewhere else. He was starting to feel that he should not let them settle anywhere, for fear of where that may be. If Snape had lied, maybe that was why: to simplify things.

Snape hmfed. "Perhaps I withdraw my question."

But Harry's emotional merry-go-round had just stopped somewhere else, and without thinking he said, "So, if you liked my mum a lot, why were you so cruel to me when we first met?"

The answer to this came easily. "Because you were nothing like her."

"I wasn't?" Harry challenged.

"You were just like your father," Snape insisted, voice snapping lightly.

Harry, who knew for verifiable fact that this was not true, hesitated for fear of revealing his evidence. Given how much he resisted that thought, he felt stung. "Are you certain of that? I don't believe it."

He was hiding his thoughts, so something must have come out in his voice. Snape backed down. "Perhaps not," he conceded softly.

"I don't think I'm anything like him," Harry muttered, dismayed.

This brought the edged eyes back again. "I fear you speak from experience."

The chill returned along the flesh on the back of Harry's neck. "So what if I do?" he replied with a cocky edge of his own.

Snape pointed at him, dragging his broad sleeve over the loose papers piled on his desk. "That's your father, right there."

"Oh."

Silence fell. Snape sat back again and did not take his eyes off Harry. "Are you speaking from experience?" he asked outright.

Harry stared down at his fingers. They were young fingers. "Yes." And then before he could be interrupted, he added with feeling, "But I learned something super important."

"Shall I hazard a guess what that may be?"

"Er, sure," Harry said, awkwardly derailed from speaking something from the heart.

Snape leaned forward and said, "You learned that it is highly unwise to jump around into different existences?"

"Um, no."

Snape sat back yet again. "Pity," he snipped.

Harry stared at Snape, who was holding firm on his display of disapproval. Harry found himself grinning and unable to stop. The man sitting before him was responsible for most of the difference between himself and that offensive version he had dueled.

Snape sighed audibly. "What in the world is that about?"

Harry shrugged knowingly. "It's just that . . . I wouldn't have wished for things to turn out a certain way. How could I? But nevertheless, they may have turned out for the best."

Snape lost all of his edges in the face of this. He pondered Harry openly. After a time he sighed again and asked, "So during the time that I was plotting how best to prove to you that your actions in leaving this Plane were unwise, you had already left to visit yet another place?"

"Yep," Harry replied.

"For what precise purpose?"

There was nothing for it. "I wanted to see what my parents would be like if they'd survived."

Snape closed his eyes for an instant while he took that in. "And?" he reluctantly asked.

"They were all right. But I didn't like what I'd become, at all. I was spoiled and miserable and not friends with the people I care about here."

"What . . . had you turned into your father?" Snape immediately returned.

Harry held back on a retort. Oddly, despite agreeing, he still yearned to strike back at that.

Snape said, "Sorry," with real feeling. "I should know better. Tough to compete with such endless possibilities."

"Merlin, don't be jealous, Severus."

A harder tone now. "Did I say I was?"

Harry smiled faintly. "There's no reason to be." He stared far away, feeling a painful metamorphosis churning inside him. "It all worked out for the best," he stated with certainty this time.

"Very odd to hear you say that," Snape said, undone.

"I saw them," Harry explained. "All three of them. Not a care in the world. And . . . well, my dad – James was raising his Harry like some kind of Dudley. I didn't want to be him, or even change places with him. I wouldn't've traded for anything." The truth of that freed up something in Harry's midsection and he took an easy deep breath. "Although I wish my mum . . . but never mind."

Quietly, Snape said, "I will always be sorry for your mother, Harry."

Harry knew that to be doubly true now. "I know that."

Harry turned what he had seen at the picnic over in his mind. "But, you know, she let James spoil their Harry terribly. He didn't have to take care of anything himself. And his friends, well, they were all right, but not my friends. My friends didn't even like him." Far away, Harry said, "Can you imagine, not ever having a single bad thing happen to you?"

"No, I cannot." They stared at each other. Snape slowly and clearly said, "Harry, do please come and warn me that you intend to do these things, whether it be trying out a new magic, or . . . simply running off to find a place where Dumbledore still lives. I have given up on punishing you for exploring your skills. If you are going to learn better it will have to be learned the hard way. I want to keep you from harm, not force you into a box too small to contain you. I reserve the right to advise you, but in the end you may do what you think best. I have no power over you in that regard – I admit that now. But I wish to know, to be kept informed. Is that equitable?"

Harry stared at him. "Do you think there could be a place where Dumbledore is still alive?"

Snape closed his eyes and rested his forehead on his long fingers in a pose of defeat.

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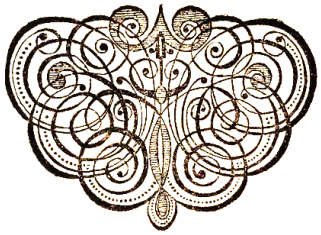

Worth a Weight of Gold

Ten minutes ahead of schedule, Harry checked into the Auror's office for his field work. The office exuded a quiet intensity, the kind where it was so busy only one highly engaged person was left to man the office. Tonight, that assignment was covered by Shacklebolt, who stood hunched over the log book, sorting through the assignment slips with fingers too large to easily handle them.

The sight bolstered Harry, who was hoping to get out on a real assignment. He was feeling confident due to partly working out how to squelch curses and hoped to make himself useful rather than going out on regular, usually mindless, patrol. Harry slid over beside the stand holding the log book. When Shacklebolt put down the slips and glanced up, Harry asked, "Can I do anything?"

"Who are you assigned with tonight?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

Vineet stepped into the room, hands clasped behind his back. He stopped just inside the door, the picture of innate patience until the Auror said to him, "Tonks said for you to meet her in Scunthorpe. You know how to get there?"

Harry's heart sank a smidgen that this instruction was not directed at him.

Vineet said, "I have knowledge of an Apparition spot in Dragonby . . ."

Shacklebolt, keyed up by the busy night, did not let the Indian finish. "Good, then take a broom." Harry watched his fellow depart, remaining as patient as possible.

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There was nothing beyond filing for Harry to do until Rodgers arrived at half past the hour. He rubbed his hands together vigorously and said to Shacklebolt. "You called me in. Luck for you, I didn't have a date."

"Things are busy. Do you ever have a date?"

This made Rodgers' eager gaze slip into insulted.

Shacklebolt rubbed his eyes and sorted through the slips from the beginning. "Busy weekend. We sent Mr. Wickem and Ms. Kalendula home late last night, both complaining about being late for dates. In their case, I believe it was honest."

Something thumped against the stand. Shacklebolt picked up the small chalkboard chained beside the log book. "Tonks has requested backup before forcibly going in to investigate an MCC."

"I get Harry?" Rodgers asked.

Shacklebolt shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'm assuming."

Harry jumped up from Tonks' desk, eager to go. "What's an MCC?" he asked.

Rodgers took his arm. "A mysteriously charmed construct."

A minute later, they arrived in a world of twilight and looming piles of twisted metal parts. Upon arriving Harry, with a thudding heart, imagined that they had leapt into the Dark Plane. But the ground was pitted tarmac rather than dust and the metal stood in sorted piles.

Before Rodgers could slip out of view, Harry ducked down to follow, leading with his wand and enjoying being out in the night air. They crept a long way down an aisle cutting between piles large and small, crossing similar rows that stretched to the sides as far as the dim light could reveal.

A building came into view and Rodgers gestured over his shoulder for Harry to halt. Harry crouched low a few steps behind his trainer's back and glanced around the greyness, instinctively training his wand on a spotted cat that darted stealthily between an old railroad car and a double stack of sagging lorry trailers. He exhaled hard, glad he had held back on a spell that would have given them away.

Rodgers made a nightbird sound and a count of ten later an answering call came from two stacks over. Two figures approached and crouched beside them, both with dark-skinned faces, one with rusty-red hair standing up in a Mohawk.

Tonks whispered, "Nothing on the grounds, but the large metal shed is sealed."

"Magically?" Rodgers asked.

With an air of gripe, Tonks said, "Any other kind of seal would not present a difficulty." She relented on her attitude and said, "The large sliding doors are around the other side. Should be easier to get open."

Following along her lead, Rodgers said to Harry and Vineet. "You two watch the back. Don't make any moves unless the fireworks start, you're signaled, or someone makes a break for it."

They crept off, melting into the background with what must be Obsfucation Charms.

A minute later, Harry, feeling confident, said, "Let's get a little closer than this."

Harry was glad he could not see his fellow's expression in this light. He did not wait for a reply, just slipped ahead to hide behind a pile closer to the small rear door. The painted metal of the long shed glowed in the ambient light of the nearby city. It looked quiet and innocent enough. Harry felt nothing ominous.

When Vineet came aside him, Harry asked, "There was no guard or anything?"

"The dogs sleep most soundly with some assistance," Vineet stated.

Crickets chirped. A car rolled by on a nearby road, its headlights appearing to float.

"How are things with Hermione?" Harry asked, mind wandering after ten minutes of waiting.

He heard rather than saw Vineet swallow hard. "As good as could be expected under circumstances of this nature."

"You don't talk to her like that, do you?"

A pause. "She seems to appreciate this."

"Yeah, I suppose she would."

Far off a dog barked. Another car floated by, stereo thumping. A breeze that threatened to grow chilling drifted through.

"Why this place?" Harry asked, wishing they were kept a little more informed, annoyed that they were not.

"This location was given up by one of the prisoners, after sufficient potion was applied to him."

Harry heard a noise, or he thought he did. His attentive imagination was straining to sense things.

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"Did you hear that?" he asked.

Vineet nodded. Harry rocked forward off his heels onto his toes. "I wonder what's going on."

Vineet said, "We could not get in."

"Even with you helping?"

"It was not an ordinary barrier. It was something else."

The small noise came again, still too low to give a hint of what it might be.

"I can't stand this," Harry said, gauging the distance to the door in the side of the shed. "Hey, was that open before?"

Maybe it was a trick of the oblique light, but the door appeared to be hanging a few inches open now, based on the wider shadow it cast against the ridged exterior wall.

"It was most definitely not open previously."

"All right, I'm going to stay here," Harry announced in a whisper, wishing he were trusted enough to actually do something directly. He felt more eager tonight than usual, and his wand responded to this, electrically charging his hand. But he may not need it, he thought with excitement; he could squelch two curses for sure, although an angry organized crime wizard was unlikely to resort to a Jelly Legs.

"We were instructed to remain here," Vineet said. "This is a strategic location. We will see anyone depart and will have warning of attack."

"Not if they're invisible. Oh, shit." Harry dashed forward, mind spinning to bad possibilities, such as the perpetrators slipping away under cloak, leaving a deadly booby trap behind.

Harry reached the door and pressed his back up beside it. This made the side of the shed creak just at the edge of hearing. Harry used the tip of his wand to push the door open farther. It swung easily. Vineet had moved to cover him from behind the closest stack, composed of tangled, ropey wire.

Harry pushed the door open further, listening hard to the echoey inside of the building. Their multi-person coordination training made him resist going in. The others would not know he was there. He made himself wait where he was, listening with the door completely open. Inside, loomed ceiling-high racks, barely discernible in the red light glowing from the light switches.

A crash sounded from the other end of the shed, and Harry immediately imagined Tonks had tripped over something. But then a small voice came, speaking something

he could not understand, followed by another crash. A high-mounted light flicked on in the distance, outlining the building roof in shadow over the scrap yard.

Harry felt a touch on his arm and found Vineet beside him. Harry, in the lowest voice possible said, "Maybe stall the Muggles if they are coming. I can guard the door." Harry would have offered the other a choice if Tonks had not been involved. Vineet moved off and Harry was just stepping in when something darted in front of him. He had a vision of uplifted, low but oversized palms facing him and then he was airborne. He struck the door and landed in a half-roll, half-skid on the tarmac outside. There had been no warning at all.

Harry scrambled to his feet and pressed himself beside the door, noting with accented stabs in various places that the light metal door hung crooked now, still swaying from his body striking it. He used his toe to move the door out of the way and stood waiting with his wand out. A small, light figure moved inside, and Harry instinctively cast a Netting Charm, followed by a full force Mutushorum. The dim light made it hard to tell, but it seemed like the netting bulged over something.

There may be more than one. Harry thought he should wait until the Aurors inside swept the space. The freezing spell would hold for a while. Content with that mature decision, Harry held his wand at ready and waited for a signal.

A few minutes later, Vineet reappeared and from inside, Tonks said, "Did you do this, Harry?"

Harry stepped inside, guided now by a Lumos from Tonks' wand.

"Yeah."

Under the net lay an elf, albeit a strange looking one with unusually coarse, long hair and black finger nails. Rodgers crouched close and examined it. "Looks like a Caspian elf, or a close relative."

"They don't have the same restrictions on elf powers, I take it?" Tonks asked, rubbing her elbow and frowning painfully.

Vineet interrupted, "The Muggles are delayed, not stopped."

Rodgers stood and waved his wand at their prisoner. "Let's go then. That back door looks like an ordinary break-in, so we are covered."

In the light of the Ministry department, Harry's injuries even attracted the attention of the busy Aurors.

Tonks said, "Take yourself to St. Mungo's, Harry. Skip the next call."

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"I'm okay," Harry insisted, using a damp cloth to gingerly soften the caked blood gluing his brow hairs together. His skinned knees stopped hurting when he used a quick healing charm on them. The skin covering his kneecaps looked strangely mottled after the spell, which he was not so adept at. He ignored it till later and tugged his torn trouser legs down. Candide was good at clothing repairs of that sort, so Harry did not attempt to fix them himself.

His body complained when he was summoned to head out again, and he wondered how he could have started the evening so eagerly.

This time they were called to a brawl in a wizard pub in Maidstone. Tonks walked through the melee and straight up to the red-nosed owner. "Why didn'tya close down sooner?" she asked over the noise of smashing chairs and sizzling hexes. The abandoned Harry and Vineet pressed back against the heavy door, partially protected by an alcove, hoping for an opening in the confusion to get across to join Tonks.

Harry stunned a rough looking middle-aged man about to throw a curse at someone two tables away whose back was turned. The stunned man's friend turned and shouted, shaking a fist at them. For a moment the crowd noise eased and the apprentices made a clean dash for the bar.

"It's opening day of Quidditch tomorrow, I can't possibly close down early," the owner was explaining.

The spells and projectiles started up again, bouncing around the hard stone walls like a pinball game. Harry's bruised limbs flinched every time one flew near. He and Vineet took up positions guarding Tonks' back while she talked to the man behind the bar. The man was arguing against arresting everyone since they were his best customers.

A short figure was hurled across the room, and Vineet caught him, or possibly her, with a Hover and lowered the person to the beer-sopped floor. A large wizard muttered, "Bloody Pakki," and rushed at Vineet with no wand in sight. The man was on the floor an instant later, no spell needed. Harry adjusted to better cover Tonks while Vineet set this person aside out of the way. The room had divided itself by colored accessory, mostly scarves and hats: yellow and black on one side, blue and gold on the other. Harry tried one of the crowd control spells they had learned, putting up a wall that stretched to the door. His wand shook as he held the spell and the door across from him rattled in a rich low tone. He should have aimed the spell at the solid wall, he realized, shaking his head at forgetting the rules of a spell they had learned half a year ago. The fighting eased as the parties drunkenly sensed they could

not penetrate the barrier to get at each other. One large wizard pressed his forehead against it and futilely swung his arms in loops.

A young man with hair like unmown hay staggered over someone else and pulled his wand on Vineet, who was checking someone draped like a broken doll over an overturned chair beside the wall bench along that side. Harry shouted a warning. Behind him, he heard Tonks spin around. Harry, wand otherwise occupied, scrunched the curse down just as it sputtered from the troublemaker's wand. The man shouted and tossed his wand, holding his sparkling hand, then running around holding it away from himself as though it were on fire. He ran in a panicked circle until he met Harry's wall and then knocked himself out striking it.

This scene shook the crowd to its senses. They all stopped to stare dully at the fallen wizard, so Harry dropped the barrier. The room remained quiet, until someone else staggered and fell. This was a cue for the conscious to start hunting for their possessions amidst the rubble.

The owner came around and cast a Reparo at the first broken thing on the floor. Parts flew in from everywhere to reassemble into a table. Harry had never seen anyone better at that spell. He was sure that was a footstool moments before the parts were so small. Someone cursed and held a shin that had been struck by a flying table leg. The owner said, "Get on out then! I got work to do here and yer in the way."

Tonks stepped down the bar and Harry turned and found her filling a mug from the tap by leaning far over the bar in an unladylike manner. She poured out an inch or so and slid back down to the floor and handed the pint to Harry after taking a gulp. "Vineet?"

The Indian shook his head. Tonks took Vineet's share and gesturing with the mug, said, "You were lucky that pillock's wand backfired."

Harry turned to her a little sharply. Snape's instructions to him about seeking advice and keeping him informed bled over into that moment. "I did that."

Tonks grew hard. "Was that a Forbidden Curse?"

"No, just a . . . what was the incantation?"

Vineet said, "I believe it was a Morey Eel Curse."

"Something minor," Harry assured her.

"Depends on where it latches on," Tonks stated with insinuation. "So, you're getting better at blocking things sans wand," she said. "You been practicing during training?"

"No. I can't always use it on someone I like, since the spell backs up into their arm."

She appeared doubtful and with a snort, said, "I think any spell someone is willing to throw at me, I'd be willing to make them eat."

"We shall keep that in mind," Vineet stated.

Harry shed the heaviest of his clothes and dropped into bed. His shoulder and several other spots complained bitterly when he shifted, as if they had been holding back on their grievances until just that moment. He rubbed his eyebrow and found it tender and stinging and crusting over with a scab. Perhaps he should not have resisted suggestions that he see a Healer. Had it been daytime he would have willingly visited the Ministry's own Healer, but he could not avail himself of that after hours.

The late hour and the release from stress let him fall into sleep despite his aches, which followed him into his dreams. He dreamt that he again stood before his own defeated double, wand held out, his mum and dad attending to his rival. In the dream he wanted to argue that he was hurt too and deserved some attention, but his mouth refused to move. He stood frozen in place, wand aimed, peering out of locked eyes as everyone diverged around him like a rock in a stream.

Someone shook Harry's shoulder and with a flinch of pain he was back in his room, blinking in the glaring lamp flame. He rolled to sit up and reached for his glasses, only to have them placed in his hand.

Harry wearily fitted his glasses onto his head and looked around. The world was still well inside night beyond the window. He asked, "What time is it?"

"Half past four. What is in your nightmare?"

Harry had only been asleep an hour. The Monitor did not rest on the night stand. "How'd you know I was having one?"

Snape remained still an instant before tugging the night stand drawer open. The half globe of swirling glass threw its eerie light around the contents of the drawer.

"Ah," Harry muttered. "Don't worry; the nightmare is nothing."

"No?" Snape prodded doubtfully. But he distracted himself from that line of questioning with, "What happened to your head?"

"I got thrown out a door. I was a little overconfident, I think." He frowned, remembering getting hit with no warning. "Here I thought I had worked out something really useful, but it turns out elf offensive magic is something I can't sense, even it if feels like a curse when it hits."

"You were battling an elf?"

"A strange elf. Rodgers said it looked like a Caspian elf."

"Interesting," Snape said. He reached to prod Harry's forehead, making Harry flinch away. Snape continued talking as he held Harry's head steady. "They are bound to their masters differently than our own elves. I have heard it theorized that this is because they have more rogue power than our own elves, since they were domesticated more recently." He tapped Harry's brow with his wand and let him go. "And even in this day are sometimes taken from the wild."

Harry rubbed his brow, finding only a faint sensitivity there. "Thanks," he said, trying not to feel chagrin.

"Need a Healer?"

"Not anymore."

Snape slipped his wand away into his dressing gown. "So, you learned this evening that understanding the limits of your power is more powerful than having new and unusual powers?"

"I did better at the pub brawl."

"Busy night."

"Yep."

Harry settled back under the duvet, undisturbed by dreams until the scent of breakfast drew him from a deep slumber.

That afternoon, Harry found a few books on elves among Snape's collection and took them to his room. In the back of his mind he thought he behaved too much like Hermione, but such knowledge did not seem trivial anymore. Perhaps no knowledge seemed trivial to Hermione. It was not until Hornisham came for her shift, that he realized how long he had been reading. He arrived downstairs just in time to find Snape making his goodbyes to Candide.

"You're not staying for dinner?" Harry asked.

"McGonagall prefers I make an appearance on Sunday evening. Remus fares well enough as a backup Head of House, but he is too easily fooled by those who do not wish to put in the effort to complete their assignments for Monday morning."

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Snape accepted a peck on the cheek from Candide. "Owl me, Harry," was the last thing he said, before stepping into the Floo.

Hornisham was pleased to join them for dinner after some urging. She had unlimited stories about magical animals and tonight told them one about an old wizard who brought in a boa constrictor to Control insisting it was the spawn of Nessie. The boa ate a fire chicken and burped hard boiled eggs for weeks after, which one of her colleagues insisted tasted fine.

With Candide suitably engaged and thinking sheepishly of unfinished assignments for Monday morning, Harry headed up to his room to start his readings. He stacked the elf books aside, amazed at how far he had read into them based on the bookmark locations. If only he had started in on his assigned readings instead, he considered with a long exhale as he leaned back onto a stack of pillows. Hornisham joined him a short time later, and the ticking of her steel needles made for an accelerated marking of the time.

A light tick sounded against the glass, nearly lost in the clicking of knitting needles. Harry thought it must be his owl, but Hedwig was already asleep in her cage. The sound made her ruffle her feathers. The noise came again. Harry stood to go to the window, but Hornisham gruffly gestured him back.

Harry backed up with a roll of his eyes, head lolling to the side in frustration. Hornisham levered the sash open and leaned out. Ginny's voice came floating up, "I need to talk to Harry."

When Harry moved to the window a second time, his guard's rough hand blocked him. Used to handling large animals, he had no chance. "How do ya' know it's her?" she growled.

Harry ducked as close to the window as he was allowed to. "Ginny, fly up here," he shouted down to the figure in the road.

Seconds later a redtail hawk alighted on the sill and hopped inside, transforming smoothly back into the youngest Weasley.

"See," Harry said. "Has to be her, no one could fake that."

Hornisham gave in with hmf of approval and resumed her seat.

"Why didn't you come to the door?" Harry asked.

She peered at him in disbelief. "Do you know what kind of night-activated spells this place has on it? I didn't even dare touch the gate."

"I didn't think of that," Harry said. "The spells don't bother me." Harry glanced at Hornisham who was enjoying watching them. "Er, what do you need?"

Ginny paced to the wardrobe and back, fitfully. "I had a date . . . I was supposed to have a date with Aaron last night, but he stood me up."

"Oh," Harry said. "Sorry about that."

"Why? What's going on?" Ginny demanded.

"I don't know," Harry helplessly said. "I just thought I should apologize for him."

She appeared confused by this, but went on. "So, I thought, fine, his loss. But today, I thought differently and went to go see him. But I can't find him anywhere. I sent an owl to his mum and she sent me this reply. See."

She held out a letter, which was strangely crinkly. It basically stated that she could not reply. "That's odd," Harry said, turning the letter over to stare at the blank back of it in case there was more.

"Those are tear stains, Harry. I checked."

This gave Harry pause. "You have a spell to check for that?"

"I have drops from the twins that check for that. They didn't sell the same stuff to the boys at Hogwarts as they did to the girls."

Harry stared at the letter. "What's going on, I wonder?"

"I was hoping you knew her well enough to go over and ask."

Harry vividly remembered his luncheon with the worshipful Mrs. Wickem. "Yeah, I think I do."

After some negotiation and a quick chat with Candide, Harry convinced his guard to let him head off with Ginny while she remained behind. "After all," Harry said in a whisper. "Who needs more protection, me or the woman with child?"

Hornisham nodded sagely and returned to the hall where Candide sat working. When Harry turned to face Ginny, pleased with the results of this argument, he found his friend fixing him with a glare.

Arms locked across her chest, she said, "Oh, a 'woman with child' needs more protection?"

"Er, well, I convinced her, didn't I? Come on, it's getting dark."

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Harry Apparated them both to the empty stables, which he remembered from the Ministry party the Wickems had hosted. Unlike that cheerful night, the lawn beyond the stable door lay in impenetrable darkness canopied by old, long-limbed trees. A light glowed deep inside the rear of the house. Harry took Ginny's hand and led the way across, tripping repeatedly on half-buried bricks used to border the trees and lines of shrubs. He almost pulled Ginny down with him one time.

"I'll just fly, thanks," she said after that, and assumed her hawk form, changing back to wait for him beside a white pillar topped with a carved capital that held up an overhang on the side of the house. Harry changed to his form and tried to follow, but the trees were too closely spaced, forcing him to tuck in his broad wings and canter, but at least he did not trip again. He came up beside her and changed back after a windy flap for good measure and perhaps some showing off. He decided that the nearby door would work enough for an uninvited guest, so they knocked there, finding no bell.

The light came on over the entryway and the butler came to the door, dour as usual. His expression shifted as he recognized Harry, his unexpressive face doing a complex dance of twitches. "Come in, sir," he simply said.

"This is Ginny Weasley," Harry said as the butler held the door for her to enter as well. Ginny sheepishly slunk in, eyes taking in the grand foyer with its domed ceiling and plaster accents.

The man took a step and turned. "Are you expected?"

"Not exactly," Harry said.

The man hesitated, but appeared to come to a decision and led them farther in, footsteps echoing. Ginny remained quiet, even falling behind as she craned her neck everywhere, stutter-stepping when they passed two Chinese vases taller then her. She came to herself and plowed on with purpose after that.

Mrs. Wickem sat in consultation with someone Harry did not recognize, a witch whose dress reflected the style of Trelawney's robes. They had little metallic stars scattered on the fabric and overlapping layers that floated about her. They both blinked in surprise as Harry was introduced by the butler.

"Mr. Potter," Mrs. Wickem said in the mode of an accusation.

"We're just looking for Aaron," Harry explained.

Mrs. Wickem shifted her substantial frame in her chair and looked about the papers before her, flustered. "Oh, I uh . . ."

The other woman clasped her hands before her and serenely stated, "He isn't here."

Ginny asked, "Do you know where is?"

When no reply came right away, Harry held up a hand before his friend to stall her next comment. Ginny had the letter in her hand. She pocketed it and huffed.

Calmly, in the voice he had heard the Aurors use in countless similar situations, Harry asked, "What is going on, Mrs. Wickem?"

Mrs. Wickem raised fleshy arms, her elbows like indents, rather than points, to blow her nose daintily. Harry held up his hand again, since Ginny had twitched, threatening to approach closer.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do," Aaron's mother muttered into her hanky.

"Is there a reason you can't explain?" Harry went on still as smooth as glass with his speech.

Despite his calming voice, this triggered something. Mrs. Wickem's beefy fists came down on the small table with a bang, making the papers upon it jump in unison. "I cannot explain; don't you understand? Terrible things will happen if I do." She buried her nose and mouth in the hanky again, the picture of misery. "Terrible things. The letter contained a curse they said, just reading it seals the spell."

"What letter?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Wickem gestured at the white lacquer box beside her. Harry walked over, prompting the other witch to put her hand on it. "Why are you interfering when you are clearly not welcome?"

"I don't think we were introduced," Harry said.

Mrs. Wickem lowered her hanky to her breast long enough to say, "Heather Feyther, this is Harry Potter." She covered her hiccup with her hanky.

Ginny had slipped up beside Harry, "Don't you write a column for Witch Weekly called Portents and Providence?"

The bob-haired woman gave a stiff little bow. "Yes, I do young lady, and what would your sign be? No let me guess . . ."

"Don't we have more important things to worry about?" Harry interrupted sharply. He pointed at the box, which was now unprotected. "Can I just see the box? I won't open it."

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Mrs. Wickem handed the box over. Harry held it out before him and emptied his thoughts to concentrate. "This isn't cursed."

"How do you know?" Feyther asked.

"I can tell when something is. Like your bracelet there. That's cursed."

She held out her jingling arm and demanded, "Which one?"

There was quite a choice. Harry leaned close and pointed at a black and white one that resembled a chess board stretched long.

"Really?" she asked. "Rita gave that one to me for my birthday."

Ginny snorted and had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. With a jangle, Feyther tossed her arm to her side and glared at them.

"Please, Hettie," Mrs. Wickem said. "You mentioned you could help."

"I expect I can. I need a lock of hair and something he kept with him often."

Ginny said, "Where is Aaron?"

Feyther turned on her in a huff. "If we knew that we wouldn't be trying to scry for him, now would we?" She put her hand over her mouth, eyes wide, showing the whites all around.

Harry put the box down. Mrs. Wickem started to speak and Feyther said, "Mitzy, you can't. They explicitly said not contact the authorities."

"We're not the authorities," Ginny said. She glanced at Harry. "Well, not really."

"We're certain the house is being watched," Feyther insisted primly.

Harry turned to Ginny. "Let yourself out an upstairs window and circle around to see if anyone is skulking around."

Ginny strode off to do this, and Harry was glad for her absence a moment later when Mrs. Wickem opened the box and held it out to Harry, hand shaking. Inside was a letter, spotted with red and an ear, just beginning to shrivel. Despite all the death Harry had seen in his life, he still shied from it. He used a spell to make the letter float out of the box and unfold. It was a ransom note, signed with three vertical lines in the shape of an upside down triangle, like the slits in the masks worn by Durmulna. He waved the letter back away and gestured that he was finished. She closed the box and set it down, then rested her face on the table, arms outstretched, still holding the box.

Harry had thought taking responsibility for the twins by not reporting them was too much, this was ten times more difficult a predicament. What would Dumbledore do? he wondered. He repeated the question again, like a mental mantra.

His brain latched onto the letter. "They demanded how much . . . five-hundred thousand Galleons?" Sad affirmation followed. "That's rather a lot."

Mrs. Wickem nodded with more tears. Harry asked, "Have you contacted Lord Freelander?"

Feyther perked up at this, gazelle-like neck stretched out in curiosity. Harry realized he should not have said that in front of her. He quickly amended, "He has been generous in the past with me. Of course that was a pittance compared to this . . ."

More tearful nodding, but Mrs. Wickem had fallen thoughtful, which was an improvement. What would Dumbledore do? Harry thought again. Then he answered himself, he would be very prudent, not rash in the least unless death were imminent. He would wait to see what everyone would do. He would observe everyone's reactions and even their thoughts until he had a good picture of the situation and who could be counted on to help and who not.

Ginny returned. Quietly she said, "There are two watching from a house two doors down, though at the moment they are playing a card game and not paying so much attention. Should we nab 'em?"

Harry shook his head. "We have to be very careful. If past prisoners are any indication, they probably don't know enough to help, and it will tip off the leaders." Harry cast his mind ahead, finally finding some purchase in his thoughts rather than just spinning helplessly. To Mrs. Wickem, he said, "Aaron will be missing tomorrow at the Ministry. I want you to send an owl first thing in the morning to the Department Head, Arthur Weasley, telling him Aaron is . . . I don't know, ill or something, or his uncle in Albania died. It much doesn't matter what you say as long as it sounds convincing."

Ginny broke in, "But why don't you-"

Harry cut her off by touching her arm and holding it. "The owl is for your watchers to intercept."

"Ah," Ginny said, and Harry felt her relax through his grip on her.

"I'll talk to Arthur myself in the morning, Ginny, if she thinks it's safe to, can explain tonight, but I think no one should do anything unusual tonight. I think we slipped in here unnoticed, hopefully. I'll explain in a second," Harry said to Ginny.

Chapter 23

To the Witch Weekly astrologer, Harry said, "If you find anything scrying . . . let me know by sending an owl through the Floo from your house, not from here." He could not generate any faith that she would find anything, but he could not justify turning away any help, and he did not want her accidentally tipping off Durumulna if she believed she had found something.

Feyther nodded and kept her gaze down, making it impossible for Harry to see if she had any faith in herself.

"If you think you know where he is. Don't tell anyone else. Just me. I can fetch him if I know where he is." Harry said this with such force that all eyes came his way and held there. To Ginny, he said, "If we slipped through any barriers undetected, it's because we were in Animagus form when we crossed them. Let's leave that way from the window you just used."

Harry turned back to the lady of the house. "I'll be back tomorrow Mrs. Wickem."

She nodded. Her tears had dried, or perhaps she had run out. There was nothing else to say. Harry could not think of anything else that should be covered so it could not go more wrong.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, he and Ginny huddled in Harry's room, scheming. Harry explained what he had learned and mentioned the ear, only because Mr. Weasley would need to know.

"Oh, Harry this is awful," Ginny said, sounding very much like Aaron's mother.

"I expect your dad will know what to do. I don't have very many ideas right now." Quite the opposite, his mind was going in spirals, imagining his friend subject to all manner of horrors, some of which he had personal experience with.

"Half a million in Galleons," she muttered several times. "Harry, that's insane."

Harry said, "Go on, your dad needs to know."

Ginny stood and said, strained, "Hopefully he doesn't do anything daft that gets Aaron killed."

"Your dad was in the Order, Ginny, and he is department head. He knows what he's doing." She disappeared, and Harry breathed, "I hope."

Harry called down from the balcony that he was home and was going to bed. He dumped his books on the floor and quickly got ready for sleep. He needed rest now while he could get it. He may not get any again for quite a while.

Sleep did not come right away. Harry kept thinking that Aaron was most likely not in a comfortable bed like he was. He could only imagine he was huddled anxiously on the floor somewhere, wishing he were anywhere else.

The next morning Harry was awake and ready to leave more than half an hour early. But he should not break his routine, he knew, even though it wrung his heart to not get started. He used the time to write an eyes-only letter to Snape that he felt confident added no risk to the situation.

Harry read the letter over while stirring the ash-stained wax he would use to seal it. The letter had stretched long, the facts written out stark and cold, interspersed with guesses that Snape did not need to read but Harry had needed to write to make himself feel better. Harry assumed Snape would ignore them, and he need not start again. His suppositions, upon a re-read, painted a pretty accurate picture of his current frantic state of mind, which Snape would like to know, Harry was certain.

Harry sighed and magically charmed the letter before burning it and casting the spell to reform it, locking in the destruction that would render the letter unreadable to anyone but the intended recipient. Of all the people Harry knew, Snape would never make a wrong step for having been informed of what was going on. Harry fingered the rolled parchment, checking that the ring of fouled wax was intact, thinking that there really was no valid excuse for holding back with his guardian on any matter.

Harry arrived at the Ministry five minutes early. Before he could step into the training room, Rodgers gestured out of the office door for him to come that way.

Rodgers led the way to the tea room and closed the door. "Did you hold back anything from Ms. Weasley?" When Harry shook his head, Rodgers said, "Drat it all, we were hoping for a little more. All right." He rubbed his mustache back and forth before smoothing it down, a rare nervous gesture for him. "Your training is cancelled for now."

"Are we being allowed to help search, then?" Harry asked, hopeful his black thoughts could be eased by action.

"You four are going to help Rogan cover the calls while we investigate and search . . . with great care."

"We can search with great care," Harry said.

Rodgers shook his head. "More care than that."

Harry's settled into an open desk in the Auror's office, glad to be helpful in any way possible. Tridant was assigned to him as a partner for the day, which Harry took as

a compliment implying that they had confidence he could cover for their youngest apprentice. Before their first call, after Tonks joked about sending the babes out, Harry aged Tridant to appear something around late-thirties.

"Wow," Tridant said, peering in Tonks' small mirror. "Is that what I'm going to look like? I better find a bird and get married, right quick."

"If you don't come on . . ." Harry said from the door. "Next time, I'll make you look like a crone."

Harry's last glance back revealed Shacklebolt and Rodgers grinning at him with more confidence than expected. It buoyed Harry's heavy spirits just enough to get him through the day.

Their calls were easy ones, as if fate intended to help them recover Aaron. Harry and his partner only had to cast a spell once against a wizard who insisted on continuing to argue, wands out, with his business partner in the back of a Muggle shop, long after it had attracted the attention of passersby.

While they made their way along the pavement to find an Apparition spot out, Tridant said, "Are most days like this . . . with just useless calls? Old witches who forget that their money tin was always cursed . . . wizards who don't trust each other and decide to duel in an office the size of a closet?"

"Most stuff is pretty lame," Harry agreed, feeling like he had been doing this longer than a year and a half as he went on. "Showing up for these things isn't useless; it reminds Wizardom that we're here. And there are times like these when you want easy calls, because you already have too much to take care of. But this easy stuff can be bad, too: you lose your edge and one comes along where someone is intent on killing you and you aren't expecting more than drunken Quidditch fans playing with a Bludger on some Muggle High Street at three in the morning."

The day passed quickly and, to maintain appearances, two of them were sent home for the night, including Harry, who would have complained louder, but he wanted time to think and to make his promised visit to Mrs. Wickem. Harry contemplated dropping by the Burrow to bring Ginny along, but decided his visit would be quick.

Mrs. Wickem flowed over a divan in a dim room surrounded by windows letting in the late sun and the street lamps which had just flickered on. Harry hung back, not wanting to be seen from outside. Feyther perched across from her friend on the edge of a chair, bony knees out to the sides, long neck bent. Behind her sat a collection of crystal balls and a heap of shiny painted bones.

"Any news?" Harry asked.

Feyther shook her head when it became clear she was the only one willing to respond. Mrs. Wickem did not take her eyes from the window. "And what of the Ministry?" Feyther asked.

"We are proceeding very carefully, but there is no news yet. You haven't received any more letters?"

Mrs. Wickem did not turn. She said, "We have until Thursday, Mr. Potter."

"I know that, ma'am. Believe me, there is nothing I wouldn't do to get him back."

At home, it was difficult for Harry to settle into his books, so he settled into the last week's worth of Daily Prophets, hoping for any kind of clue. He wanted to go out searching, anywhere, even just from one horse barn to the next, but the risk of tipping someone off and triggering retribution by Aaron's captors was too much, even for the impatient Harry to risk.

Feeling like a prisoner himself, Harry planted himself on the couch across from Candide and went through each paper, every line. He learned all kinds of things, such as the fact that the long-whiskered owlet had won best of breed in the Eastchester Cage Club Show. It was a tiny owl, bred by South American witches to carry messages through crowded barrios without being seen. It escaped into the wild in the seventies, to the delight of Muggle bird watchers.

Harry put the paper down with a disgruntled rustle, wondering how anyone could worry about such trivialities with so many terrible things going on. This attracted Candide's attention, which he had not meant to do.

Harry said, "I thought I'd catch up on the papers, but it's . . . boring."

Candide bent back to her work. "It's tough when people at the office are talking about some recent event and you don't know anything about it."

"Er, yeah," Harry said. He eyed her tall piles of files. "Last night before deadline," he stated. "Can I help you out?"

She peered doubtfully at the wave of paper washing over her lap from tall piles on the left to shorter ones on the right, with a side creek lapping onto the floor. "I suppose you could sort one of these. If you really don't mind."

Harry would be happy to do anything to keep his nervous hands occupied but leave his mind free to wander.

Harry did just that for many hours on end, beyond midnight when he probably should have insisted Candide go to bed. He stared at invoices and receipts, numbers and more numbers, all but a few rare ones stretching for four digits or fewer. They needed a hefty six to ransom Aaron. It seemed impossible. It had never occurred to Harry to think about money at that scale before. It was enough to buy every item Harry had ever seen for sale in a shop, put together. How would one get that much money in one place even if one had access to it?

Harry had been staring at the same small receipt for Never-Out quills and Ink 'B' Gone for many minutes. Candide leaned over in question, and Harry put it down on the wrong pile before correcting his error.

"You should go to sleep," she said.

"You should too," Harry countered, blinking to moisten his eyes to better read the exceptionally decorative cursive columns of numbers on the next slip.

But Harry gave in soon after, knowing his duties could grow to twenty-four hours a day without warning. "This is your last night of poor sleep?" he confirmed before departing for his room.

She smiled at his tone and nodded. Harry sighed. If Snape could not intimidate her, how did he imagine he could possibly have a chance?

The next morning, while filling out the fourth report of the day and thinking wryly that Auroring and Accounting bore remarkable similarities to one another, an owl arrived for Harry, delivered by a grand old bird that Harry recognized as belonging to Lord Freelander. Harry accepted the letter and pocketed it until he had finished. It reminded Harry that he had not received a reply from his guardian.

Harry stared at the long form before him; he really needed a file out of the file room to look up an address and case history, but he was the only one left in the office so he could not fetch it. He sighed that files were charmed so as to not be hovered out magically. Mr. Weasley wandered in, heading immediately to the log book. Harry thought of asking him to cover, then decided it could wait.

"Any news, sir?" Harry asked

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "Rodgers thinks we should limit contact to Mrs. Wickem through you. Feel like heading over there to get a report?"

"I can go when my replacement comes, or right now, if you prefer. I assume I can go without a guard?"

"This afternoon after Ms. Kalendula returns with Mr. Abhayananda you can go." He peered at Harry with underslept eyes. "It feels like we need to guard all of you. But I think you are safe to go without a guard, Harry. No one should know where you are going."

Harry opened his mouth to say he felt confident it should be no problem and decided that was completely the wrong thing to say. "I'll be careful, sir," he said instead, garnering a nod and small smile from his boss.

An owl caught Harry as he crossed the Atrium, thinking to make an exit from somewhere tracked less carefully by Transportation. Harry uncurled the letter from Snape. It simply said: you can not be too careful, nor too wise.

"Thanks Albus," Harry muttered before stashing the letter in his pocket with the other one.

Lunches felt like snippets of immorally stolen time. Harry ducked low over a bowl of soupy Asian noodles heated unevenly with a distracted wave of his wand. His mind had been in overdrive all morning and despite having no work before him, it kept working at high speed. "The seventh pure-blood son who is not," he murmured.

"What?" Tonks asked, holding out a soggy chip left over from someone's take-away order from the night before. "Is that a puzzle?"

"Sounds akin to prophecy," Vineet said. The only thing he had volunteered all day.

"Know something we don't, Harry?" Tonks asked, sounding quite concerned.

"It's nothing important," Harry said, "Just something I was thinking of." He bent back over his loudly-printed styrofoam bowl, thinking that he knew who that must be. He wondered if he should owl McGonagall to double check that there were no new prophecies in this Plane. He hoped not. He especially hoped that someone would tell him if there were. Just in case, for the future, he should ride Ginny harder to make sure she got into the Auror's program next year. All of this flitted through Harry's mind in two eye blinks.

"If you say so," Tonks remarked, doubtfully assessing Harry's far away expression. With a loud crackling, she bundled the brownest bits up in the grease-spotted basket liner and tossed it in the rubbish bin. That was the cue for everyone to get up and return to duty.

Chapter 23

At the Wickem residence, Harry found Lord Freelander, hat in hand, speaking with the lady of the house.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. You did get my owl."

Harry resisted patting the pocket where the unopened letter rested. He greeted Mrs. Wickem and asked if there was any news.

Freelander shook his head. "We cannot possible come up with the requested funds by Thursday. Mitzy's holdings are even less liquid than my own. Properties in far flung places would have to be sold or put up as collateral, holdings in corporations divested, carry trades unwound . . . A month would be unreasonable, let alone four days!"

Harry who had been doing accounting the night before, almost followed along with this tirade. "How much can you get together?"

"Ninety-thousand, perhaps ninety-five."

Harry thought that quite a lot of money for being so far short. For the first time he resisted the notion of giving thugs that much money for any reason. There must be another way.

Freelander said, "I expect we could negotiate down to three-hundred thousand or a quarter of a million . . ."

"I will not barter over my son!" Mrs. Wickem burst out, her arms spasming in anger.

Freelander's shoulders slumped. Speaking in a hush, he said, "I did not intend to devalue Aaron . . . I am trying to be realistic."

The air showed no sign of warming after that, and Harry took his leave after spouting more of what felt like empty assurances that everything was being done.

At dinner time Harry's department again insisted that he go home. When he resisted, Tonks said, "Harry, of all of us, you are the most likely one to be watched. Things have to look normal."

Harry thought ahead to going home, knowing Candide would not be home until after the midnight deadline.

In a commanding manner, Tonks said, "Harry."

Harry stood up. "All right. All right." He stared into her changeable eyes. "Are you going find him or not?" he asked, finding that his patience with how things were supposed to work had run perilously thin just over the course of that day.

She rested her folded hands over her crossed knees and said, "We hope to. We intend to."

Harry remembered so many years of empty help from the Ministry when things were desperate for him. He tried to shake that off by reminding himself that he was part of this now and knew better what the department was up against.

"Harry?" she questioned, sounding quite concerned. "If you have ideas you should tell them to someone rather than going off on your own."

Harry bleakly shook his head. His only ideas involved dark magic and he did not think he need share them.

> Author's Notes: Sorry for the delay, had to finish 24 before posting this. So we are on track for 24 to be posted at the regular time.

Chapter 24.

The Ransom of Red Twin

Snape looked up from his notes; Harry stood with his back pressed to the door, arriving with no sound, but nevertheless choosing to arrive near the entrance so as to not interrupt too rudely, and to have a chance to pretend he had entered the normal way if Snape were not alone.

Harry's voice came out strained as he asked, "Can I talk to you? Do you have class soon?"

Snape backed up his chair and stood. He cast a silver streak through the ceiling with a blurred motion of his wand, and slipped out from behind the desk. He gestured crisply for Harry to approach. Harry had remained still, already sucked back into his relentlessly circling thoughts. He made his feet move until he stood before the desk, unwilling to relax and take a seat.

A knock came on the door and Lupin put his head in. The knock jarred Harry from his revery. His eyes narrowed at the Muggle book on Snape's desk. The brightly printed and shiny paper cover made it stand out from the hundreds of hand-sewn books in the room. Musings on Existing, the title read.

Behind him Snape said to his colleague. "Can you take my next session?"

Lupin said, "Yes, of course. Seventh Years, right?"

Snape did not reply aloud. Harry assumed he had nodded. Harry felt bad making Snape rearrange things and turned to Lupin to see his judgment on this. But Lupin appeared only pleased. He gave Harry a nod of hello and an understanding smile before departing.

"I want to do the Beacon Spell," Harry said the moment they were alone.

Snape took the two steps to the window and peered out rather than reply.

Harry went on, "I mean, we may not know for certain who Aaron's father is, but we certainly know who his mother is."

He watched Snape exhale slowly, face and shoulders lit softly by the cloudy day.

"That is extremely unwise," he stated without turning.

"Why? You had McGonagall run it when I went missing again," Harry accused, unable to contain any sharp edged emotions.

"I should not have allowed her to do so. She insisted the spell was not so dark to put her at risk, given her past avoidance of blood magic. Afterwards she agreed it was not wise." He crossed his arms, still peering out. "I'll confess, I find her a better manager of the students since she has done the spell. She yields to pity less than she used to."

Harry took in that notion, wanting to argue against it, but Snape's judgment of people's behavior was generally spot on. "But what about Aaron?"

Snape turned with a snap of his head. "If you do this spell and succumb to dark magic there will be a thousand Aarons."

Harry's shoulder's fell and his eyes burned with moisture. In a lower voice, he said, "I have all this power, but I can't even rescue my friend. It's useless!" He waved his arms in a helpless gesture. "You keep insisting how potentially dangerous I am, but I can't even do this one simple thing!"

Calmly, Snape suggested, "Come over here."

Harry stared at him, arms limp at his sides. There was no reason to deny so basic a request. He joined his former teacher at the tall window. Snape took his shoulder and made him sit on the stone sill.

"Look out there."

Harry hitched his knee on the sill and twisted to look out.

Chapter 24

"What do you see?" Snape asked.

Harry wanted to resist, but he said, "Hills. Clouds. Trees."

"That's all?"

Harry shrugged. Snape looked out too, his expression implying that he saw something else.

Snape spoke, sounding like one quoting, "The world waits, appears to slumber, but she is awake and riotously plotting, simply doing so on a scale too broad and patient for the small mind of man to grasp."

Startled, Harry blurted, "What's that?"

Snape crossed his arms tighter. "I have spent my life thinking only of immediate things, partly because my survival depended upon it, and partly because I felt derision for such broad views. But your explorations of parallel worlds has forced me to re-evaluate my limited perspective. I think that you may benefit from broadening yours as well. McGonagall lent me a few dubious books of poetry along those lines and I have been forcing myself to read them."

Harry took Snape in. "Are you sure you are you?" Saying this made Harry slump additionally, burdened further.

"I'm quite certain about myself. How about you?"

Harry could hear he was being needled, so he did not answer, just sighed. He stared back out at the mountains. Something large flapped clumsily from one tree to another in the Forbidden Forest. A light mist pooled in the deeper gaps in the thin foliage.

Harry said, "What are you hoping I'll conclude . . . that even if Aaron is suffering, it doesn't matter because people are suffering all the time? That I can't save everybody, so why try to save anyone?"

Snape's brow furrowed. "No, that is not where I am going with this. That is an even more worrisome viewpoint than your usual penchant for sacrificing the future for the present."

"What?" Harry demanded, cutting Snape off.

"Short term thinking is a product of your short years. That was not a personal criticism." Snape turned back to the window, tenser than his pose indicated. "I have been contemplating these other worlds. All of those small decisions and random chances that tally up to form a completely different place, every jagged path drawn along spindly branches resulting in its own existence."

"Maybe you should write poetry," Harry criticized, feeling uneasy with this conversation.

Snape let the bait lie. He said, "There are many places where Voldemort never existed. There are places where Hogwarts is a Muggle school. There is probably at least one place where you really are my son."

This notion drew Harry to the present. He scoffed in amusement, but it lightened his mood. He added, "There is at least one place where you end up with my mother."

After a pause, Snape began, "Undoubt-" and stopped, eyes slitting.

"You wonder if I speak from experience?" Harry needled back, glad to get even.

Snape shook his stringy hair. "We have a here and now to worry about that already exceeds our abilities." Snape touched Harry on the arm. "I know it is a lot to ask of you at this age, especially since you have had more than your share of responsibility for the state of the world, and most certainly deserve a break from that, but you must keep the larger picture in mind." He pondered Harry intently before saying, "At the risk of suggesting another use for a five-sided device, I wonder if you could see where Aaron is using your abilities to peruse alternative Planes?"

"I already tried that," Harry admitted. "I couldn't find him that way. I saw him all right, but only in the kinds of places I already know him in." After a pause, he added, "I did find Dumbledore still alive, in one place."

"Did you? And what, pray tell, was he doing?"

Harry gestured at the glass before them. "Sitting in an old tower. Staring out the window, like you are now," he added critically.

Snape laughed through his nose, then grew grim again. "Please, Harry. No blood magic. I cannot forbid it, so I am reduced to pleading with you to forgo it. There must be another way. The darkness does not care that you perform the spell for the right reasons. It will take something away from you that you, and the world, cannot afford for you to lose."

Harry drew in a breath past a constricted ribcage. He felt sadder and even more helpless than when he had arrived seeking help.

"There must be another way," Snape repeated. "You are clever. You have many friends who would do anything for you. Think of something else. If it falls short; you did the best you could."

Harry swallowed hard. "I can't fail," he pledged. But it was true that he had not asked for much help from his old friends beyond jokingly suggesting Ron steal enough

gold from the vaults in Gringotts to suffice. He could steal it for himself, in theory, if there were that many Galleons to be had in Gringotts. Aloud, Harry said, "Why did they ask for so much? It's an unreasonable amount of money, even Freelander can't come up with that much. There may not be that much to be had in all of England. They want us to hand over the full wealth of the wizarding world."

"Has anyone attempted to negotiate a lower ransom?" Snape asked, his clear concern a salve to Harry's frayed nerves.

Harry nodded and swallowed hard before saying, "Mrs. Wickem finally did. They sent her his cursed-off nose in response."

Snape bowed his head over his crossed arms.

Harry said, "If this goes on much longer, I'm going to find someone safe enough to do the Beacon Spell."

"That will not fully exempt you. Dark magic is a entwining and clinging pollution that leaves all involved touched in some way, no matter how remote they be."

"More poetry?" Harry asked.

Snape shook his head, "More experience."

Friday had arrived and the quiet intensity of the Aurors' office had turned to frantic. Mrs. Wickem and Lord Freelander had missed the deadline to collect together the necessary funds and had been punished for doing so. Harry was beginning to believe that at least part of the purpose of all this was to sow fear in the Ministry, to make a point about who had power over whom. This point was not lost on anyone Harry encountered that day. The language had degenerated and nicknames for their opponents sprang up as fast as others could learn them.

"Bloody hell," Rodgers said while reading a memo.

"Sir?" Harry prompted, not wanting more bad news but unable to hold back.

"Scant help from our foreign offices is all. Potter, weren't you supposed to go home hours ago?"

Harry stared painfully at his trainer. It was true that he did not have field duty until the next day. "I can't do that, sir. Don't you think they realize by now that we know?"

Rodgers frowned. "Possibly. But when we make it clear they will most likely punish everyone by cutting something else off their prisoner. Go on home."

Harry tossed his head but he obeyed. At home, lunch was just being served and the scent of it filled his head like a spell. His mood brightened more when he found Ginny and – even less expected but welcome – Hermione had joined Candide at the table.

Hermione said, "We were just starting a pool on whether you'd make it. "

Harry took the last open seat, more grateful for their presence than he would have imagined. He accepted a steaming cup of tea, but merely stared into it, at the oil playing on the surface.

Hermione hesitated before saying, "Ginny caught me and Candide up."

Harry tossed his shoulders up and down uncaringly. He now felt numb to the ruse that had so driven them early in the week, yet had come to nothing with their adherence.

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked.

"Cast a blood magic spell," Harry replied, not having decided until that moment, but confident of his plan now.

Hermione dropped her cup, spilling her tea over her rice. "Harry, you can't."

"That's what Severus insists. I need to find someone less dangerous to actually cast it." He stared at Hermione. He trusted that she could remain untainted for one spell.

Her eyes went wide. "Harry, really," she snapped.

Ginny leaned forward with her hands gripping the table edge, her food untouched before her. "What spell is this? I'll do it." She ignored Hermione's sharp look.

Harry, thinking of prophecies, shook his head. "No. Not you either."

"Why not?"

Harry felt more like Dumbledore than he ever had in his life when he was forced to reply, "I have my reasons."

This reply stunned Ginny into silence. She pushed her food around with her fork rather than throw her disappointment back as anger.

Harry put his forehead on his fist, saying, "There's got to be another way."

Candide, sounding grim, said, "You really need half a million?" When Harry nodded, rocking his head side to side over his fist, she exhaled in a rough whistle. "That's a lot."

"Is there even that much in Gringotts?" Harry asked her.

She studied him a long time before replying, "Probably."

Harry guessed that she knew what he was contemplating. Ginny bit her lips. "Thinking of stealing it?" she asked.

Hermione juggled her newly freshened cup of tea, burning her hand. "What is going on with all of you?" she demanded.

"I think there's a better way," Ginny said. "I was talking to my brothers this morning about an incident where they had far more money than they really had."

Harry shut down his chaotic thoughts and turned all of his attention to her.

Ginny said, "No one can say anything though." Everyone readily agreed to this, so she went on. "When my brothers wanted to start up their shop, they got some money from Harry, but it wasn't enough. It was enough for the lease on the shop for a year, but not the ingredients, which were ten times that just to get going. They didn't have any collateral, so they . . . they went to Gringotts for a loan to buy ingredients. They showed them twenty-five thousand Galleons that they already had, and lied and said they needed that to buy the property for the shop, which they were actually only letting. Gringotts gave them the loan, so then they had real Galleons for stock ingredients."

"They used the property as collateral, but they didn't own it?" Candide confirmed. "Glad I'm not their accountant."

Ginny tried to cover. "They own it now. They just needed more money to get started, and the Goblins will only give money to people who already have too much already. That was their excuse for pretending they had more."

Candide said, "They managed to fool the Goblins with fake coin?"

Ginny nodded.

Trying to feel hope, Harry said, "How did they do that?"

Ginny replied, "You need some real Galleons to make the spell work, and metal disks of the right size for the fake ones."

Hermione, eagerly rising forward in her seat said, "It's some kind of Metamorphic Protean Charm? So each real coin can have its qualities pressed onto maybe twenty others?"

Ginny nodded. "Fifteen was all they thought safe, and even then some refused to hold for more than a few hours. It was your Dumbledore's Army coins that made them think of it."

Harry said, "If they were convincing enough to fool the Goblins, who are very hard to convince, then they should be convincing enough to fool Durumulna."

Ginny said, "We need tons of metal disks."

Harry thought back to his field work of last weekend. "I think I know where we can get some."

The four of them skipped finishing lunch and went into motion.

Harry asked Hermione to stay with Candide while he and Ginny went to speak to the twins.

They found Ginny's brothers in a meeting with four AWOL Hogwarts students who sold their wares inside the school. The students had not even removed their uniforms, but had pulled their cloaks firmly around themselves. They glanced nervously at each other when Harry appeared.

They shuffled to their feet and the Slytherin, biting her lip asked, "Are you going to turn us in to Professor Snape?"

Fred put an arm forcefully around Harry's shoulder. "Nah, he wouldn't do that. Would ya', Harry? This is our second-best sales channel here."

Harry glanced at the four of them, memorizing their faces. "I don't care what you're doing as long as you don't get hurt doing it. But right now I need to talk to Fred and George."

The students hurried off, fighting to get out the door. Harry glanced at those remaining. "Ginny, can you watch the shop while we talk?"

She nodded grimly, and rubbed one tired eye as she took a seat behind the counter.

Upstairs the twins paced nervously before offering Harry a chair, a cup of funny colored tea and a deluxe box of BouncySweets: an excellent gift for pet owners.

Harry set the box aside. "Look I need a favor . . ."

George swooped the box away back to the shelf. "In that case . . ."

Harry laughed, then fell sad again. "I need your help. I need to fake a lot of money, really fast."

The twins gaped at him. "What business are you getting into?"

"The wrong business," Harry said. "But other than filching the money, I don't see any other way."

Chapter 24

"We need slugs, you know," Fred said. "You can't make money out of thin air."

Harry nodded. "I'll get those. Can you help me?" He held off on informing them that Ginny had informed on them.

Fred, arms swinging loosely – a sign he was feeling up for a challenge, said, "How much do you need?"

"Half a million."

Fred fell to his knees in shock. George burst out laughing and had to support himself on the litter-strewn mantelpiece to stay upright.

Harry said, "If I get the slugs and thirty-three thousand Galleons, will you help me?"

The two of them fell completely silent, eyes goggling. "You are a nutter. You're serious!"

Harry spent the afternoon collecting things they would need. He borrowed a triple-expandable magical trunk from Freelander, already containing the necessary number of real Galleons. The man behaved surprisingly insistent about the trunk as if driven by guilt that he wanted to be rid of along with the money. He stood distractedly while Harry verified that he could figure out how to use the trunk's magical compartments. Before he departed, Harry wished he had something hopeful to say to the grim man, but he could dredge nothing up out of his own worries.

While he waited for night to fall, Harry sent another letter to his guardian, but this time thought it best to simply speak in code and make the letter seem innocent. He wrote: There is a Lumos Charm in the darkest part of the forest now. Trust that I'm going not going to do anything you advised me not to do.

After dark, Harry went to the scrap yard and carrying a real Galleon, found fat rods of the right diameter. Moving stealthily so he would not have to deal with the dog, he used a welding spell to split them in half and silenced and hovered them into a neat bundle so he could Apparate into the Wheezes upper room with them. The bundle regained its weight when he arrived, landing with a deafening, thudding crash on the floor. No one complained about the noise, including Ron, who had covered his ears and winced. Everyone remained serious, barely speaking as the chopping began. They argued briefly over what chopping spell would work best, finally settling on the one used by cooks for root vegetables.

On long, cleared tables, real Galleons were laid out along one edge and fresh, hot disks of iron were laid out in long lines beside them. Fred, with much flourish, performed the spell to make them all sparkle golden and the process was repeated.

Long into the night they did this, until everyone's head nodded despite a dozen pots of tea. Ginny went to change places with Hermione guarding Candide and in the end they all returned to help. Even with the efficiency of magic, the process proved laboriously long. Like some reverse sorcerer's apprentice spell, horde after horde of golden disks were swept up in flocks and dumped with a rich clatter into the fancy trunk and more iron slugs laid out in long regiments, headed by a gold captain.

Early the next morning when it became clear how long the project would take in total, Harry headed off to Mrs. Wickem's house. It would be Sunday around five in the morning before they had the right number of Galleons, and the ransom would have to take place quickly after that. After the first missed ransom drop, the second had been left unscheduled, as far as Harry knew.

Harry flew in an upper window that was left unlatched for him. Downstairs he found Mrs. Wickem alone with the butler standing off to the side, looking like he wished he could provide more than the usual silence.

Harry skipped the niceties beyond a quick hello, far too tired for them. "Have they given you instructions for a second drop?"

Mrs. Wickem sniffled and handed over a letter. The deep red ink used to write it out did not bode well. Harry swallowed and asked with a wince, "Did they send anything else?" When she nodded, Harry muttered, "Oh dear."

"Just a little finger," she said with a gasp into her hanky.

Harry breathed out in relief. "Could be worse," he heard himself say. He really needed to sleep. "It says one of your servants is to come at noon to Down Street tube station. Just one, who will be magically verified as being in your employ." Harry handed the letter back. "That's easy enough. Write up an employment contract and I'll sign it. I want to make the trade myself."

Mrs. Wickem peered at the letter, her face sagging with the weight of sadness. "I'm afraid the Ministry is going to try something and my Aaron will come to harm."

"The Ministry isn't going to do this, I am. I'm just going to fetch Aaron, nothing else."

"But we don't have enough . . ." she stated slowly, as though he were the dim one.

The twins were adamant that the more people who knew the money was fake the shorter time it would remain convincing. Harry doubted that, but it was easier to say, "We have the money. Just don't ask where it came from."

"Alfie must have . . ." she began.

"Lord Freelander helped a lot," Harry confirmed, eager to get away again to help so they would be finished in time. "I have to go. Write up the contract and I'll be back in a few hours to sign it."

They each in turn took a three hour break that day when nerves took over and patience grew short. The room, with only one heavily-curtained window, remained the same night and day, giving the place a relentlessly timeless feel. When Harry closed his eyes he saw only fluttering gold coins. Eventually they sparkled across his vision even when he kept his eyes open.

Candide insisted she had done nothing but rest since Tuesday but Harry insisted she take a break before him. Her help was invaluable, as she was one of only three of them, including Hermione, who could get the entire table worth of iron slugs to change, everyone else needed several cancellations and re-tries, which often left a handful ruined and in need of sorting out.

Candide returned at dinner time to replace him. When Harry arrived in the main hall in Shrewsthorpe, the first thing he noticed was the silence, the disturbing absence of clattering coin. The second thing was the fresh air; the work room of the Weasley twins was not exactly lightly scented. Harry fell into bed, with an alarm spell added to his pocket watch set for exactly his alloted three hours of break time before he had field work for his apprenticeship. With his pocket watch tucked against his breast where its shaking would certainly rouse him, Harry dropped into a hard sleep.

Harry's watch woke him to a dream of the Wheezes work room full of swarming cold metal and a shadow skulked around the edge of the walls holding forth a dark wand trailing smoke. Harry snapped awake and groggily rubbed his head. He felt more tired than when he had laid down, but his rumbling watch insisted that three hours had passed.

Harry yawned and rocked forward and back to gather the momentum to get out of bed. He had not taken off his robes, for which he was glad because he could not raise his arms to change his clothes, he was certain. With a sniffle, Harry wondered if it would have been better to not sleep and simply taken more of the twins' strange wake-up concoctions.

The stairs down nearly defeated him because his toes seemed numb to the notion of walking. Perhaps the twins' concoctions were the problem. Harry caught himself with the bannister and descended slower after that, unwilling to take a fall on limbs that felt sleepy and brittle. He found Snape in the doorway to the drawing room,

peering at him in surprise. He wore a heavy robe as though the fire were not burning high in the hearth behind him.

"Oh, you're home," Harry said, scratching his head.

"Yes," Snape replied. "I thought I would . . . see to some things." He appeared dubious of Harry's state.

Harry's mind was not working well, only half of it had come even partially awake and the other half was mired in dark thoughts about his friend. He did not feel like trying to explain what was happening, but he should say something, for backup at least. He strode around the hall, running a few eavesdropping prevention spells. When he came back around to the drawing room door, he said quietly, "I'm going to fetch Aaron tomorrow. Alone, because that's what they insisted."

Snape stood with his arms crossed, looking strained and a mirror of Harry's poorly slept state. "All right," he said, studying Harry intently.

Harry had expected an argument, and he was glad he did not have to hold up his end of one. "I've got it all arranged, I think," he assured his guardian. When Snape did not reply, Harry slumped slightly, feeling increasingly frustrated and angry as he spoke. "This has to work. Mrs. Wickem keeps receiving body parts. Pretty soon they are going to be major ones. It's really terrible." Really, Harry thought, he should have had the power to do something before now and that helplessness gnawed hard on him, making him want to lash out.

Snape glanced away, and Harry wondered suddenly if he had not at sometime in the past been a witness, or worse, to the other side of exactly this. Harry felt forceful ambivalence about that possibility. He bit his lips to keep from saying something he may regret. Feeling antsy on top of sleepy, Harry said, "Well, I won't be back until tomorrow. Will you be here?"

Snape stared at him. "What time?"

Harry shook himself. He should have said. "Noon, or right after."

"I'll be here," Snape stated flatly.

"Good. We may need your help."

A pause and then a nod. Harry felt uneasy but could focus on nothing beyond getting through his field work and then getting all the gold finished. So much gold . . . an inconceivable amount. He Disapparated for the Ministry with a groan.

By ten the next morning they had everything finished. Harry had sent Candide home hours before even though they missed her help almost immediately. The remaining

six of them knelt around the trunk and peered down into the vast, cone-shaped pile rising from the depths.

"Mother of Merlin that's a lot of money," Ron said.

"It is," Hermione agreed, sounding disgusted.

Harry picked up on that and said, "I'm glad we're not giving them that much real money."

Hermione raised her head to look at Harry. "Did you tell the Ministry what you were doing, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. The other five glanced at each other. Fred said, "I wouldn't tell them."

Ginny said, "This is dad we're talking about, though . . ."

"All the more reason," George agreed.

Harry had been half-planning this morning to tell someone at the Aurors' office what was happening, but at the moment, he felt very much like going it alone with no interference. In fact, he wondered now why he had intended to tell them at all. He could do this better alone.

Fifteen minutes before the prescribed meeting time, Harry wheeled the trunk along Down Street, toward the blood-red brick façade marring the shopfronts. He peered inside the grimy window and tugged his mitten off to pretend to fix his laces until the road cleared of Muggles. The road was most likely being watched by someone from Durumulna, but Harry could not sense it if it was. He checked one more time to see that it was clear before Apparating inside the station.

Harry immediately pulled his wand believing he had been struck by a Blasting Curse. He caught himself from completely tumbling over the trunk and levered himself up against the brass edge of it. It was only the wind howling up from the staircase before him. He shook his tired head and jumpy body and hovered the trunk to tackle a flight of stairs, only to then be faced with a dauntingly deep spiral staircase.

Harry considered and then dismissed using a Silencing Charm as he went; he had no need of stealth and in fact did not want to surprise the other party. Realizing he should have left more time, Harry jogged downward, the endless turning rubbing raw his overwrought mind in the same way the endless repetitive spells of the last few day had.

The trunk bumped along ahead of Harry, carried by magical momentum to the concrete floor at the bottom. The lights glowed brightly down here, providing pretend

normalcy rather than abandonment. With a wave the trunk leapt airborne again. Harry jogged along a tiled tunnel until he stopped to blink at a carefully painted sign that read Enquiries & Committee Room with an arrow below. A rumble built and receded, vibrating the floor, moments later a gust rushed through the shiny confines of the tunnel. Harry looked both ways along the old tube station corridor, but he could not piece together what the sign might mean so he hurried on, following the wind. The fanciful Way Out signs provided much-needed reassurance. Harry wanted to imagine leaving again, as soon as possible, with his friend safely in tow.

Harry proceeded from tunnel to tunnel until he met another staircase up, this one darkened, the electric lamps doused. Shadows shifted and slipped out of view around a bend at the top.

"Remain there," an echoing voice commanded. Harry let the trunk drift. Another rumble built and receded as if the very earth were sliding by, seconds later a rush of air lifted his hair and robes one way and then the other, as though he stood before the gaping maw of a great animal.

"Touch the railing. If you are not in the employ of the Wickems this will render you senseless."

Harry rested his hand on the iron pipe railing that split the stairs, amused as well as worried to think that his trunk was full of the same cheap material, and he was going to ransom a life with that.

"Send the trunk up."

Harry had not taken the time to think ahead. Instinctively he said, "I want to see Aaron first."

More shadows shifted, outlined by a weak light somewhere on the other side of the tunnel bridge. Another rumble passed by, teasing Harry's toes with vibration and sucking at his clothes a breath later.

A hunched silhouette careened toward the wall of the tunnel, manhandled into stopping at the lip of the top step. A single electric lamp came up for an instant before darkening again. Harry blinked at the afterimage smeared on his retinas. He had received a glimpse of a shiny stripe of blood red tile and a hooded figure that certainly resembled Aaron.

"Not much of a look," Harry sharply complained, one part of him thinking he should get on with it as another thought he should try to punish these criminals as much as possible by being difficult.

Chapter 24

"We can simply take the money and kill him."

The hooded figure fell to its knees, or was pushed, it was hard to judge. With a malicious grin Harry said, "I'd like you to try that," with a tone that caused murmurs to slip along the hard walls from beyond the bend. Harry leaned more casually on the railing, wand flicking playfully, and added, "It certainly wouldn't be the first time I was the only survivor."

More murmuring.

Harry jumped ahead of their thoughts. "Aaron knew the risks when he signed up to be an Auror. I'm sure at this point he'd be more than happy to know his death let me take you out. Every. Last. One. Of. You."

Things moved along faster after that and more cooperatively, Harry was pleased to see. He could find no patience for their games. An unmasked figure with the typical generic look of the organization came down the steps to escort the trunk to the top where another figure waited, wearing their trademark netted mask. Harry followed, hoping to get a closer look at Aaron. The figure restraining Aaron lifted a wand to Aaron's ribs, so Harry diverted to face down the figure who seemed to be in charge, noticing the person wore platform shoes. Harry glared up at the slitted face and said, "Let me guess, costume shop was out of Death Eater masks?"

The figure took a physical swipe at him. Harry caught the figure's arm, and found less muscle there than expected. Many wands came in out of nowhere and aimed at his heart. Aaron, left to lean against the side of the tunnel, made a rather pathetic sound of distress. The sound shook Harry out the derisive mode he had slipped into.

He let go of the leader's arm, noticing the person wore something cursed around their neck, under their cloak where he could not see what it may be.

The unmasked man verified the money, dipping far into the magical cavern of the trunk for samples of coin and running spells upon them before dropping them into a colorful liquid with audible plops.

Aaron made another noise and slid farther, unable to prop himself up with his hands bound behind him and his returned guard offered him no help. "We're almost there, Aaron. Hang in there," Harry said.

"They're good," the man kneeling beside the trunk declared after drawn out minutes of testing.

Harry worked very hard to not release the breath he held. The eyes of the leader were certainly fixed firmly upon him and he wished to give nothing away when he was so close.

"Take him. Get out of my sight."

Harry grabbed up Aaron and helped him quickly down the steps and around the corner before trying to Apparate him away. Harry fell to his knees instead, struck by a barrier, and pulled his wand and waited to make sure he wasn't followed with the notion that he may stupidly try just that. Watching behind him, he helped Aaron along the tunnel. A chorus of pops reverberated over the hum of another train passing. Two bends later and many spells laid behind him, Harry stopped and started untying the hood hooked around Aaron's chest. But Aaron fought him doing this, making noises like talking through a gag.

"You don't want that off?" Harry asked.

The hood shook its head.

"Aaron, I have to know I've got you and not someone else," Harry insisted, even though he knew his fellow's lean physique well enough that he had not doubted who it was.

Harry untied Aaron's clutched hands, noting that his friend had a fresh stub where the ring finger on his left hand should be. Again, Harry tugged at the hood and his friend resisted. Aaron pushed away with an elbow and reached under to untie the gag. He tossed the wet thing away on the dusty floor, where it left a clean smudge.

"It's me," Aaron said, voice breaking, hand still holding fast to the edge of the hood.

"All right," Harry said, giving in and taking his arm. He Apparated them both to the main hall in Shrewsthorpe.

Ginny, Hemione, Ron and one twin waited for him there. Harry guided the blinded Aaron to the couch, where he promptly curled up, one arm around his covered head and the other hooked on his knees, seemingly chased inward by the rush of voices welcoming him.

Harry waved the others away and forced Aaron to give up the hood. His sense of cursedness was bothering him and he wanted to remedy that. "Come on, Aaron, it's all right." Aaron ducked inside his arms, turning away from them to hide his face.

Ginny said, "I'll go fetch Mrs. Wickem."

"No," Aaron moaned piteously, "I don't want to see my mum. I look horrid."

"Aye," Ron breathed.

Ginny moved in closer to sit beside Harry, who was trying to figure out how to best handle this. Snape slid over behind the couch, observing with a hard expression. Harry considered that as a last ditch effort, they could potion Aaron into cooperating.

Chapter 24

"Aaron, come on," Ginny urged, tugging lightly on one arm.

"Aaron, we're just trying to take care of you," Harry said, trying to sound patient.

Muffled, Aaron replied miserably, "No, it's cursed. I'll be like this forever. I look like bloody Voldemort," he added, voice breaking.

Ginny shot Harry a look of dismay. Harry leaned closer, moving Aaron's hand so they could see where he had lost an ear.

"That's not cursed off," Harry said.

Eagerly, Ginny said, "I can give you an ear. Let me see your other one."

Hermione leaned on the couch arm. "Maybe you should take him to a Healer . . . ?"

Aaron ducked back down into his vice-like arms. "No . . . I don't want to be seen."

Harry gave his old friend a dissuading glare, and she stood upright, realizing her mistake.

Ginny half teased, half criticized, "Your students must love you at Hogwarts."

Snape's robes rustled as he glanced at his colleague, who visibly sighed. At the attention, Hermione said, "I'll get some stuff to purify the wounds with. You shouldn't heal them if they aren't clean."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said to her back as she departed for the toilet. They had grown too snippy with each other and that needed to stop.

Harry pried Aaron's arm free again so they could see the uneven hole with a curved red ridge that was all that remained of his ear.

"I need to see the other one," Ginny said. Still ineffectual at getting cooperation.

Snape leaned over the couch from behind. Sharply, he said, "Mr. Wickem, shape up and act your age. I am quite certain your friends are only trying to help, which you are fast losing any deserving of."

Harry froze and stared at his guardian, but he did not have much chance to react because Aaron had shifted his long legs to sit properly on the couch, head bowed and limp, but cooperating now. His nose did resemble Voldemort's, just two high slits between his eyes. Harry fought a cringe. Aaron kept his hands at his sides, tugging nervously on his robes. Apparently a sharp word from a former Head of House was exactly what he needed, as much as it stunned Harry under the circumstances.

Ginny turned Aaron's head one way and then the other, gauging the spell. Hermione handed over a cloth smelling of disinfectant and with much gasping in pain, Aaron

let that be used on him. Face laden with concentration Ginny checked Aaron's right ear one more time and tapped, wove her wand in quick loops then tapped again.

"Nicely done," Harry said, surprised how perfect the new ear looked.

Aaron jerked his hands up to feel both ears all over with no little desperation.

Ginny said, "Yeah. Remember my long unicorn ears at the last Halloween party? I learned a quick spell to make them and then I did some serious damage getting rid of them later. By the time I got my own ears on right, I had the spell perfected, that's for sure." To Aaron, she said, "I can do a nose too. At least a temporary one." She tapped between his brows with her wand but the spell fizzled.

"It's cursed off," Harry said. "I can take care of the curse. But you're going to have to hold your breath or breathe through your mouth while I do." Snape leaned over the back of the couch, interested in the procedure.

Even after Aaron's cursed nose was replaced by one that did not quite look like his old one but worked well enough, and his hand was de-cursed and bandaged, Harry could still feel something accursed about him.

"Do you have anything on that they gave you?" Harry asked. "Jewelry or anything?"

Aaron shook his head. He sat up straighter now, but his face still hung long and disconsolately. "I could use a bath. Maybe that's what you're noticing."

Harry laughed lightly. "Maybe. We have to take you to your mum's before you'll get a chance."

Whinging instantly, Aaron said, "I want to go home. To my flat."

"Yeah, all right," Harry said. "But mum first."

Aaron, visibly cringed, which Harry could understand. Mrs. Wickem was a lot to take even whole and healthy. Half broken, she would be a painful experience.

"I promise it'll be quick," Harry said. "Then your flat. You weren't kidnapped from there, were you?"

Aaron shook his head. "Tricked by my date."

Ginny theatrically rolled her eyes.

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, we'll take you home, then I have to go to the Ministry." He stood and tugged Aaron to his feet. "And get reamed, I expect." A glance at his stony guardian made him wonder if he was not in trouble on two fronts, as usual.

Harry had a thought. "Ginny, can you go into the Ministry and tell them what happened, then meet me at Aaron's flat?"

Ginny nodded. She glanced around at the rest of the crew, dismissed each of them in turn until she reached Hermione, and said, "Mind going with me?"

Hermione pulled herself straight. "Of course not."

Harry took one last eyeful of his guardian, standing behind the couch, unreadably grim. Harry had tried to keep Snape informed this time, as much as possible under the circumstances. Feeling at a loss, Harry sighed and Disapparated for the Wickem residence with an arm firmly around his friend in case he did not land perfectly.

Fortunately, Mrs. Wickem attacked Harry as much as her son. Aaron withstood a lengthy, cheek-pinching inspection with stoicism.

"Oh, my baby, you look fine. A few good meals and you'll be good as new."

Harry, who could still see the haunted depths to Aaron's eyes, thought that a bit optimistic.

"Look at you . . . is that your nose, or Harry's nose?"

"It might be my nose," Harry said.

"Does it look funny?" Aaron asked his mum, rubbing it.

"No, it looks fine, Dear," Mrs. Wickem said falsely. "We'll get that straightened out. Don't you worry."

Lord Freelander, who had remained beside his chair at the small tea table, finally approached and shook Aaron's hand. "Good to have you at liberty, young man," he said.

Aaron nodded broadly. "I have to go," he said, before his mother could swoop in again. "I have reports . . . and things."

"Long debriefing," Harry said in support. "I expect."

Mrs. Wickem said, "My poor dear. Why can't they leave you be?"

Aaron put a hand out to stop her approach. "It's all right," he said with the most strength than he had shown yet. "I want to get it over with. Let's go, Harry."

"But . . . you aren't going to stay?" Mrs. Wickem exclaimed.

"I need a bath and some sleep," Aaron pleaded. "I'll visit tomorrow, when I'm rested."

"Well, a bath for certain," Mrs. Wickem said with a twitch of her nose. "Well, all right. Just don't be a stranger to your worrying mother."

Aaron rocked his head away. Harry grabbed hold of his arm and took him home.

The serene silence of the flat was accented by the sun beams angling in through the tall, pointed windows. Aaron made his own way to the leather couch and fell on it, on his face.

"You all right?" Harry asked.

Aaron nodded.

Harry said, "You want me to get a bath ready?"

Aaron's head cranked down to peer at him, upside down. "You are offering to draw me a bath?" he asked in disbelief.

Harry chuckled. "I don't mind."

Aaron levered himself to half sit up so he could stare at Harry with a tilted head hooked to a tired neck. "If you would. You're rather tall for a house-elf, you know," he added to Harry's back.

Harry wandered the large open flat until he found the bath, which was a veritable Greek temple of marble tile. Harry started the gold plated faucets running and returned to check on his friend.

"Really nice place you have here," Harry said.

"For now." Depressed sounding, Aaron said, "You gave them all my money. From both my parents."

Harry said, "The hell I did."

Aaron stared at him, strangely free of expression. Harry did not leave him waiting long for further explanation. "We tricked them," Harry said. "I have friends with dangerous knowledge, like how to fake large amounts of Galleons."

"They checked them," Aaron said. "I could hear them running the spells."

"There was just enough real money to magic the fakes to pass the test."

"How much for real?"

"Thirty-three thousand, three-hundred and thirty three, or four. I don't remember how we decided on that in the end. Hermione and Candide argued about it for a

while, but I don't remember how it turned out." Memories of the last few frantic days swooped over Harry, leaving behind overwhelming exhaustion.

Aaron moved aside and patted the couch. Harry accepted the invitation and collapsed beside him. "Still some serious coin," Aaron said, "but not half a mil, thank Merlin. I'd like to take half a mil out of their skins, personally."

Harry rubbed his tired eyes. "You may get the chance. When they discover what happened, they'll probably come looking for us. Or me at least."

Aaron's eyes filled as he grew hotly angry and his neck leaned outward. "I relish the chance . . . just as soon as I get a bath and some sleep in my own, much-fantasized-about bed."

Harry could feel the extreme anger in his friend, like a poison that dimmed the light of his bright demeanor. He put out a hand to restrain Aaron from rising, and said, "Taking revenge will hurt you more than them. Really it will."

Aaron pulled free and glowered down at him. "What are you on about?" he sputtered, so unlike himself, it hurt to watch.

Carefully, Harry said, "I'm not belittling what happened to you. I'd be the last person in the world to do that." Harry stood, trying to sound older and wiser and, hence, more convincing. "Justice is fine, Aaron. Revenge is not." Aaron merely stared at him, so Harry added, "I've been where you are, right now, more than once. You've been hurt, but you're not letting the damage stop. The damage going on now is caused by you. The kind of emotion you were feeling just now – it's like a curse. It poisons you from the core outward. Whatever happens, it's not worth losing yourself to."

Aaron sighed, perhaps accepting this for the moment, perhaps falling victim to his own over-tapped spirit. In the distance the sound of the tub overflowing drew them both that way.

Aaron tip-toed over the overrunning stream and stretched out to tweak the faucets off. Harry pulled his wand, but the excess water was neatly heading for the drain in the corner. Aaron sat on the wide, square edge of the tub and scrubbed his eyes.

"I'm glad for the break from Rodgers and Mr Weasley," Aaron said, slipping off his shirt. "I'm getting the notion that this wasn't a Ministry operation."

Harry shook his head. "I was off probation," he said teasingly, garnering a painfully quick smile from his fellow.

Aaron finished stripping and slipped into the tub, sending more cacophonous sloshes onto the floor. Harry saw quite a few bruises and gashes before the water engulfed them, and Aaron washed with trepidation.

"I'll wait for Ginny out here. Want me to make you something to eat? You look like you could use it. Something light or heavy? How much did they give you to eat?"

Aaron dropped the arm he had been scrubbing into the water with a splash. His gaze slipped off into the distance. Voice low, and swallowing often, he said, "They wanted me to beg for scraps." He pulled himself together after saying this and more calmly said, "So I haven't eaten much. It depended on who was left guarding me."

"Something light, then," Harry said easily, leaving him to his bath.

Ginny waited in the kitchen, sitting on one of the tall stools beside the counter. "How is he?"

"Doing better. He needs to eat."

Harry went to the fridge, but Ginny's deadpan voice halted him, "You need to go into the Ministry, Harry."

Harry closed the fridge and said, "Yep. You didn't get into trouble, did you?"

Ginny nibbled on a gilded chocolate from a dusty, five layer deluxe box on the counter and said, "I told dad if he wanted me to work within the Ministry that I couldn't do that unless he made me an Auror." She gave up a tired grin.

Harry sighed. "It's tough to work inside the system. Useless sometimes." He gestured at the range. "Can you make Aaron some soup or something light and easy on the stomach."

She jumped down off the stool. "Yeah. 'Course."

Harry strolled down the corridor to the Auror's office with far more confidence than he felt. Trouble was, he had lost track of why he had gone it alone. He had planned to say something that morning, but completely changed his mind. Perhaps exhaustion had something to do with that.

As he stepped into the Auror's office, Rodgers directed him down to the tea room and into a chair. Harry obeyed silently. Moments later Rodgers returned with Mr.

Weasley. Harry fortified himself by imaging that he was delaying Aaron from facing this.

Rodgers stood with his arms crossed, studying Harry curiously. Mr. Weasley seemed at a loss for words. He leaned on his palms over the table and angled his head at Harry, disappointment clear in his gaze.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley started, but stuttered to a stop.

"What Arthur is trying to say, Potter, is what the hell were you doing?"

Harry decided stating the obvious would be childish, so he said nothing. Rodgers went on, "I might have to reassess whether you really are just a glory freak, even though you convinced me otherwise."

"I don't care if I don't get any credit," Harry assured him. "Really I don't."

"Why Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Harry wondered if he could use the notion of a security leak inside the Ministry as an excuse, even if it had not really been a reason for his behavior.

"I actually don't know, sir. We got sort of caught up in it all. It's not legal to make fake Galleons . . ."

"The Galleons were faked?" Mr. Weasley said.

"Er, didn't Ginny mention that?" Harry asked, wondering if he should have held that back. He decided he did not need to. "Yes, your sons worked it out," Harry said, feeling confident in that not going any further than it had to.

Mr. Weasley sighed musically. Rodgers said, "That's better. The Minister nearly had a aneurism believing you'd given Durumulna that much money."

"We gave them thirty-three thousand. We needed those to fake the rest convincingly."

Rodgers appeared vaguely amused. "There's a spell I'd like to see."

Mr. Weasley rubbed his eyebrow. "Maybe we shouldn't tell the public that Galleons can be faked."

"What?" Rodgers blurted. "There are lots of ways to fake Galleons. Nothing new."

"It'd be nice to have a few weeks rest before Durumulna realizes . . ." Harry shyly suggested, not hopeful for any favors.

Rodgers grew increasingly interested. "What will they turn into?"

"Disks of iron that we cut."

"Ah . . ." Rodgers said, excited. "We can track the bastards this way, by how they spend those Galleons."

Mr. Weasley glared at Rodgers. "Are you encouraging him?"

Rodgers shrugged. "He was on full duty, remember? We changed their status temporarily."

Harry's spirits lifted at that. Firstly because his trainer was not angry with him, and second because he did not want to be back on probation.

Mr. Weasley leaned over close to Harry again. "Did you tell Tonks what you were planning?" When Harry shook his head, he challenged, "Really?"

"No, I didn't tell her. Why?"

"Well . . . because she insisted she was not involved and I didn't know whether to believe her."

Harry leaned back in the hard chair and stretched his arms out before him, palms flat on the table top. "I meant to say something this morning . . . I'll be honest, after it would be too late to change plans. But I just, got caught up in things, I suppose. I don't know why I didn't. I meant to. What's going to happen?"

"Well, you are certainly back on probation."

"With Aaron," Harry clarified.

"He's at his flat?"

At Harry's nod, it was decided that Rodgers should accompany Harry back for a debriefing. Mr. Weasley stalked from the room, shaking his head in grand disgust. Rodgers asked, "How is Mr. Wickem?"

Harry replied, "Not so good. But he may bounce back quickly . . . it's hard to tell. I do hope he bounces back." Harry silently pledged to avenge his quick-witted and gentle friend if he turned out to be permanently damaged. Harry did not think that a fair thing to steal from someone.

Aaron reappeared from the bath wrapped in and trailing a regally cut maroon dressing gown. Ginny slid the hot soup on the counter over before one of the stools.

"Or do you want to sit at the table?"

"This is fine." Aaron took up a spoon and stared into the bowl. "Nothing nasty floating in it. That's good."

An owl came to the window, and Ginny fetched the letter it carried. "It's from your mum."

"Wonderful. Read it to me."

Ginny opened it, but before she could start, Aaron corrected, "No, never mind, just tell me what it says; I've been tortured enough for one day."

Ginny read over the neat hand writing. "She wants you to come to dinner when it is convenient for you," she quoted aloud. Ginny moved her lips, holding back on an opinion.

"No, go ahead and say it," Aaron growled.

"I was going to say your family is nuts, but I thought I shouldn't say that."

Aaron bent back over his soup, managing to eat it in complete silence. Ginny had not seen him use a spell and wondered how he did it. He paused to say, "That would be a fair assessment."

Ginny took a slouched seat on the couch and closed her eyes. Aaron said, "Are you staying for a while?"

Ginny jumped forward as if to leave. "Do you want to be alone?"

"Not really." Aaron pushed the remainder of his soup away.

Ginny came around to the kitchen side of the counter. "Are you done already? Do you want something else?"

"You're behaving like my mother," Aaron accused.

Ginny froze on going to the fridge again, dropping her arms. "I really don't mean to." She remembered the surprising way Aaron had responded to Snape's tough commentary and said, somewhat stilted, "Well, if you want something. I expect you know where to find it." And went back to the couch.

Aaron felt in his pockets and then put his head in his hands. Ginny felt at a loss how to deal with this new mixed message. "I lost my wand. Those bloody losers kept my wand."

Ginny normally would have offered the use of her own, but that might be mothering. She looked around at the well-appointed flat, full of all kinds of extra, high-quality things. "You don't have a spare?"

Aaron rapidly raised his head. "Yeah." He looked about the broad room thoughtfully and pointed. "In there."

Ginny went to a fancy little darkly varnished desk and pulled open the incredibly light drawer. A ceramic wand case rested inside along with other odds and ends. She brought it over, feeling it too bold to open the strange thing.

Aaron slid the long top off the case and lifted out the diminutive wand. It was a narrow wand with an amber hue to the wood. "My dad bought this for me on one of his trips." More sadly he added, "One of his many trips. It's Egyptian."

He hovered the teapot over and poured some out. "Works just fine. I'd forgotten all about it. Thanks for the reminder."

Ginny resumed her spot on the couch. "You're welcome."

The doorbell chimed and Ginny, wand out, went to answer it. She escorted Harry and Rodgers inside. "Didn't expect you to use the door."

"Mr. Rodgers wanted to be polite," Harry said, in a high-minded tone that could have been poking fun.

"How are you doing, Aaron?" their trainer asked with about as much kindness as he ever used. He gestured for Aaron to retire to the couch, which he did with an obedient dip of his head. Rodgers pulled a chair around to face him, leaning his elbows on his knees. He tugged out a notebook and said, "It's storytime now, I'm afraid."

Aaron nodded bleakly as memory sucked him in.

Harry left Aaron in others' hands and went home, hoping to catch Snape before he departed for Hogwarts for the week. His getting out of trouble easily at the Ministry made him want to make sure there was no trouble at home. But Snape was already absent.

Candide sat at the dining room table in a dressing gown, sipping from a vast mug of tea.

"Hello, Harry," she greeted him vibrantly.

"Wotcher," Harry said. He was tired, but he took a seat across from her and nibbled on a triangular mini sandwich from the platter in the middle of the table. "Severus left already, it looks like."

"Yep," she said, brow furrowing. "He seemed eager to go." She shook her head.

"Do you think I'm in trouble? I haven't got used to this new setup we have. I tried to keep him informed, but everything moved too fast. And you got dragged in too. I hope you didn't get any flack." The last was a question.

Candide shook her head and flipped the page of her magazine. "He was quite surprised to find me asleep in the middle of the day, but then he didn't even mention it again."

She put the Better Gnomes and Gardens Winterfull Wonderland issue down and said, "Where's your guard?"

Harry's eyes moved around the room. "I don't seem to have one now." The prospect of losing his guard relieved him greatly until he considered that lately he had been maneuvering to get his guard shifted to Candide, whom he believed should have one.

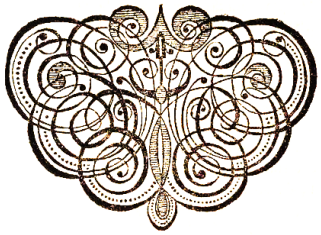
Candide said, "Is Aaron going to be all right? You didn't leave him alone, did you?"

"There were people there when I left. Our trainer and Ginny. I'll check on him in the morning." Harry nibbled another sandwich. "I don't know how he's going to do. He seems . . . fragile. I don't know what to do about that."

"You can't give someone else strength, Harry."

"Well, Severus knew how to brow beat him out of feeling sorry for himself. Not something I would have tried. We'll have to do whatever works, though."

Chapter 25.



Exchanging Glances

"He probably shouldn't be left alone," Rodgers said after Aaron's back had disappeared into his bedroom.

Ginny swayed on her feet, certain that she would collapse any second. "I can sleep out here on the couch. Tell my dad that I'm here, okay?"

"Keep your wand close at hand," Rodgers stated in a voice of serious instruction.

Ginny's wobbly brain could not decide if he were teasing, or not, or implying something, or what. She chose to treat it seriously. "I always do," she returned as though to suggest otherwise was ridiculous.

Rodgers had turned to go but he stopped. "You're hitting the books, right?"

Her mouth worked before she replied. "Trying to."

"Good."

The Auror Apprentice trainer was gone, then, with a pop! and a flash of gathered cloak. Ginny had somehow forgotten who he was while he was here. Her insides warmed at the thought that he wanted her to get into the program. "That's a treat," she muttered happily to herself.

She decided to check on Aaron and maybe try to get him to eat something more. He had twice turned away his soup after just a few bites. Now she worried he may be ill and in need of a Healer.

Chapter 25

Aaron lay on his front, bare-backed, clutching his substantial pillow around his head. The room smelled of wood finishing oil and something floral like a laundry scent from the bedding. Ginny doubted he was asleep already. She said, "Do you want something else to eat?"

Aaron rolled over and scratching his new ear. The covers made a crinkling sound as he shifted his legs. "Mmm, no."

"You must be hungry."

Aaron propped his head up with an arm behind his head and glowered into the dimness of the room.

Ginny asked, "Why don't you want to eat?"

Aaron gave a huff while exhaling through his nose. "You wouldn't believe the stuff they tried to get me to do for food."

Ginny pushed aside the overflowing duvet and sat on the edge of the bed. "Yeah, but you aren't with them any longer."

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be a prisoner like that, at the whim of some mad wizard or another?"

"Yes."

Aaron's breathing fell quiet. Ginny went on with some reluctance at dredging up old memories. To her own ears she sounded remarkably detached. "I was Voldemort's prisoner . . . inside my head."

He stared at her, mouth twitching side to side like a rabbit. "That's right. We all blamed Harry for that." He laughed lightly.

Ginny felt a smile twitch at her own lips; Harry may have deserved that, she thought now with dark humor, but the scent of Aaron from the bath pulled her back to the here and now when he shifted his knees and neatly folded the edge of the duvet at his waist. Training had put muscle on Harry, but Aaron's chest and arms looked merely wiry from what must be comparable routine. He was lean enough that his ribs stood out the way he laid.

"Let me make you something. I noticed the panini press in the kitchen. I can probably work out how to use it, even though it's electric."

"You don't have to make me anything. I ate enough; I can wait for breakfast."

"Change your mind, let me know. I'll be on the couch."

Aaron snaked his loose hand around her wrist. "Why?"

Ginny could not straighten out her lips; they might as well have been hexed into a silly grin. "Aren't you tired?"

His hand slid up to her shoulder. He closed his eyes and said, "I can't imagine sleeping. My mind is stuck in a loop." When she did not move, he added, "Bed's big. Come on."

"I will admit . . . I have not seen larger."

"Well," he huffed, feigning affront, and holding the covers tight up to his chest. "I did not expect you to be so forward."

"What!?" she balked, but her complaint was muffled by his pulling her down for a kiss.

His spasming hands fell limp within moments and Ginny lay resting across his chest, which rose and fell without rhythm. Voice distant, one finger trailing through red strands, Aaron said, "I didn't think I merited you before, but . . . it'd be nice if you stayed . . . here, close."

"Merited?" she echoed, lifting her head. "Was that why you leapt away last time?" When he shrugged faintly and looked away, she added, "That's silly."

"I was too silly," he stated grimly, shifting his shoulders jerkily. "Too shallow to be someone's first time."

She climbed up to better meet him eye to eye with him averting his gaze. "I like that you don't take things seriously. My whole life has been nothing but fear and responsibility and since I've met you, I've been trying to enjoy things more. Things are much nicer that way." Boldly, she ran a finger over his prominent collarbone. "I like you the way you were." She put her head back down on his chest, flooding her nose with intriguing layers of scent.

"You are much too serious," he said sternly.

"Well," she said with a sigh, "I'm trying."

He said factually, "You'd be much less serious with those clothes off."

Chapter 25

The front door chime woke Aaron and Ginny from deep within dreamless sleep. Ginny raised her blurry eyes and looked around in confusion.

"It's Harry," a voice said, echoing clearly over the top of the partition wall of the bedroom. Daylight from the windows poured into the white-walled sleeping area even with the door closed.

"Eep," Ginny squeaked and leapt up, but then had to grab the covers.

Aaron stretched an arm and rolled over, bare to the raw air. "Ah, yes, Harry won't get nearly as much entertainment out of seeing me in the buff as you . . ."

Ginny, with some fumbling, found Aaron's dressing gown from the night before and had just wrapped herself in it when Harry knocked on the bedroom door and immediately opened it.

"It's late, so I . . . uh," Harry stopped, fingers still clasping the door handle. He took in the scene of Aaron stretched out under the skewed duvet, of Ginny fast reddening, holding an oversized dressing gown around herself.

Ginny straightened her shoulders and it became Harry's turn to blush nearly as fierce a red. "Sorry, I didn't think . . ." No one spoke. Ginny's brows had risen up under her hair; Harry held the door handle for balance; Aaron looked to be falling back to sleep but with a sloppy grin. Harry pointed behind him, over his shoulder. "I'll be out here. I'll make some coffee."

The door closed. Aaron sat up in bed and ruffled his hair so that it stuck up equally in all directions.

"Oh Merlin," Ginny whispered.

Snapping from curled grin to overly concerned, Aaron asked, "What's the matter?"

"Uh, nothing, I suppose." Gathering the crumpled gown closer, she said, "I'll just go shower and dress." In a more reassuring tone, she added quickly, "Nothing's the matter, Aaron."

Aaron slid onto one of the stools at the counter bordering the kitchen, wearing grey jeans and a shirt which he buttoned as he said, "For someone who's faced Voldemort multitudinous times, you sure stun easily."

Harry stopped what he was doing and turned to meet Aaron's mischievous gaze, relieved to see it, even as short lived as it proved to be. Aaron's brow furrowed and he rubbed his shoulder in a manner that clearly pained him. His next glance at Harry was wry. "Can't kvetch to you, really," Aaron pondered aloud.

"You may if you like." Harry set a small cup beneath the spout on a rather large, boxy, and mysterious coffee maker with just a few buttons marring its smooth brushed-metal face. He had seen Aaron use it before, but his memory of it blurred too much to glean the details of how it worked.

"Need rescue from that?" Aaron asked a minute later when an angry hiss of steam made Harry leap back. Aaron sat with his arms crossed, appearing wearily amused.

"I grew up in a Muggle household," Harry reminded his friend.

"Not the right kind. That cost more than your uncle's last car, I bet."

Harry took the cup away and cradled it in his hand. "Well, I definitely don't want to break it, then."

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's been worth every pound already, watching you."

Harry normally would have glared at this, but he did not think Aaron was quite up to taking it the right way. "Well, as long as you don't want any coffee . . ."

"Good point." Aaron slid down off the stool and came around the floor-to-ceiling column that anchored the end of the counter.

Seconds later two steaming cups were set on the counter and a third placed beneath the spout. Harry stared at it and then noticed the shower running. He had forgotten about Ginny. "Er, sorry about barging in like that. I didn't think . . ."

Aaron, in a corrective tone, but with a flash in his eye said, "That much was obvious."

The coffees went down in silence, with Harry lost in thought over what Durumulna's reaction may be to having been cheated . . . or cheated as they would see it. Harry's thoughts darkened at the notion of holding someone hostage. No one deserved money for that, only punishment. If he expected and prepared for their retaliation, maybe he would get a good chance to get even.

Ginny was a long time appearing, and when she did, she kept her eyes on her coffee cup more than anything else. Harry too, found the objects on the counter more interesting than before. He touched a letter that had been left off to the side, then realized he should not read it and pushed it away.

Ginny said, "Oh yeah, Aaron, you have to go visit your mum today."

Harry, thinking Aaron did not look ready for stress of any kind, said, "Do you want someone to go along?"

When Aaron hesitated, Ginny added, "Someone who could help distract her?"

Aaron stalled replying. He refilled Harry's cup before setting it down with a waiter's flourish. He said, "I'm not sure the Wimbledon Boys' Choir would be enough to distract her today."

Ginny said, "And how many of your birthday parties did they sing for?"

"Eh, just one."

Ginny shook her head.

Aaron slipped his hand into hers and leaned over to peck her on the cheek. "They ate two pieces of cake each, so mum didn't have them back."

"Big cake," Ginny said while blushing again. "So, who's making breakfast?"

Harry slid around into the cooking area. "I will." As he assembled things, he glanced back at the two of them.

Ginny shifted the topic and asked Aaron, "Are you going into training today?"

Aaron pulled a gold watch from his dressing gown pocket and tilted his head to read it. "Harry must be skiving off this morning."

Harry came over with toast on plates and said, "You should take today off."

"That the official word?" Aaron asked a tad sharply.

Harry, familiar with the rapidly sea sawing emotions that followed bad experiences, said calmly, "Not exactly. Rodgers said to ask what you preferred. You can have all week off if you need it." Harry watched Aaron for any reaction. Aaron stared through the cabinets on the floor behind Harry, still clutching his shoulder. With care, Harry said, "I think it'd be better if you went back tomorrow if you are at all up to it."

"I'm not really in the mood to get knocked around," he stated distantly.

Harry, despite not having been informed of such, said decisively, "You can sit out the defensive drills. You shouldn't sit here alone, even if all you do is work on readings at the Ministry."

"I'm not alone, I have Ginny."

Ginny snapped her toast off sharply, setting off an explosion of bread crumbs. Harry gave her a single waggle of his eyebrows when she glanced his way in shy surprise.

Harry had indeed lost his guard, it seemed. No one was assigned to follow him at lunch, so he took himself off to the Minister's office. Belinda glanced up at him in surprise and dropped her gaze immediately.

Harry had other things on his mind today beyond wondering what her secrets may be. Perhaps when he finished with the Minister. He asked, "Is the Madame Bones in?"

"Her lunch was just sent in." Belinda waved at the door without looking up. Harry took it as an invitation and slipped over there to knock.

"Harry, I don't think . . ." Belinda was saying as Harry opened the door in response to a muted summons from inside.

Bones left her fork standing upright, puncturing layers of salad piled in a plastic box, and wiped her hands. "Mr. Potter, what a pleasure; what can I do for you?"

Harry shut the door behind him. He felt a clarity of purpose today that he could not resist the call of. Surely a band of random ruffians could be brought to heel; how hard could that be? He asked, "Is absolutely everything possible being done to combat Durumulna?"

She took up her fork again. "Ah, a business call." When she finished that bite, she said, "Yes, Harry, it is." She waved for a chair to set itself closer and indicated it with a flat palm. "Please."

Happy to be treated with such automatic consideration by someone so high, up, Harry took up the chair and sat upright with his hands interleaved. Finding the words easily, Harry stated, "It seems insufficient, the Ministry's actions to date."

She spoke through her napkin. "If you have any ideas, Harry, please share them and we'll consider them."

Her tone came across too pat to believe her. Harry took her in, wondering what the best approach may be. He felt more calculating that usual, and remembered with a jolt sitting in precisely this spot across from her, analyzing her and her office under the influence of Voldemort. Stroking his hair back, Harry composed his thoughts. "You are not making the best use of the public. The average witch and wizard do not wish to cooperate and they should."

"Of course they don't," she said, setting her lunch away. "The cost is too high. Curse and hex treatments on patients at St. Mungo's are up forty percent this quarter already and we have another month to go." She pulled out a file. "Magical Fire Equivalents up thirty-five percent."

Harry cut her statistics short. "But if you made it clear to them, through some kind of campaign, that they would get protection if they helped us . . ."

"Trouble is, Harry, people remember the previous leadership all too well. They are hard to convince."

"But you aren't even trying," Harry came back firmly.

This gave her pause. "Your department is part of the outreach, I'm quite certain, Harry. Every wizard shop in Britain is supposed to be contacted personally by someone from Enforcement by the end of the year."

"Yes, but that's just as secret as Durumulna. They survive in the shadows, on secrecy, so it plays to their strengths." Masks, cloaks and whispered threats, Harry thought with a strange thrill of comfortable familiarity. He composed himself again, covering his unease. "We need a public campaign of . . . shaming or something. Make the public resist them harder. People who hide behind masks, slinking about, lazy and conniving, taking what's not theirs . . ." Harry had built to a crescendo and found he did not recognize himself. He backed down. "It just seems . . . not aggressive enough," he finished weakly, feeling slightly dizzy.

Bones had stood to pace, which Harry only now noted. She picked up a long white quill and ran her fingers over it. "Are you here at the behest of someone in your department, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, wondering belatedly if he should have come only at such behest, but then putting that concern aside as unimportant; something had to be done. This had gone on long enough; someone had to take charge. Such minor thugs could be brought to order by simple enough application of bait, whispered words and threats of pain and humiliation. He could not understand why that hadn't happened already. It would be so easy – the cloaks and masks would make it even easier, keeping everything in the shadows.

She said, "Your rescued fellow is faring well enough, I am informed."

Harry focused on her words. "He's . . . not quite himself."

She smiled sadly. "I expect not, for a while at least." She sighed. "I'm afraid, Harry, that I have meetings to prepare for this afternoon . . . and if you are here on your own initiative, then perhaps you should sneak back before you have gone missing." She gave him a wink.

This understanding shook him from his introspection by cutting through his confused concerns to the clearer core of him. He felt humbled: jarringly the opposite of moments before. Why was he thinking this way, he wondered with suddenly clammy hands.

In the outer area of the suite he strode to the door deep in thought. With a half-wave at Belinda he headed for the back stairs at a shuffling, distracted pace. A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web, the prophecy came back to him. Minutes ago he was imagining how childishly easy it would be to bring Durumulna to heel. Maybe he should stop imagining that.

As he made his way back to the training room, he considered that Durumulna was not exactly slumbering, but this was little consolation. Harry pulled out his books, wondering if he should go speak with Snape that evening. Something seemed to be waking that chunk of the Dark Lord he still carried or, at least, he expected that was the explanation.

Harry forgot about his half-planned visit to Hogwarts when Ginny and Aaron arrived for dinner that evening, followed closely by Ron, who did not hide well that he was only checking up on his sister.

In the corner of his vision Harry noticed Ginny leaning away from Aaron, and putting her hands in her lap. Ron ambled over and took a seat beside his sister, sitting far forward to half turn toward the two of them. He appeared to want to speak, but could not find words.

Harry filled in the silence with, "How are things at the bank, Ron?"

"Er, less trouble, and a lot fewer customers, with the new security schemes. Quiet."

"Too quiet?" Harry prodded, simply to distract him.

"No. Er . . . whatcha mean by that?"

Harry was not certain what he meant by that. He looked over his friend, his mussed hair, the spray of freckles across his nose, fading with the onset of winter. He would be an easy pawn, some inner instinct told him.

Harry stood suddenly. "I'm just going to make sure that Winky knows you're staying for dinner."

Ginny laughed. "I'm sure she's already doubled everything she's cooking," she called over her shoulder to Harry.

In the darkened corridor leading to the kitchen, Harry stopped and leaned on the wall. Ahead of him, through a low doorway, he could see the cookfire fluttering hot, casting pots and cauldrons and baskets into gilt-edged silhouettes. What was happening to him? He had not dreamed of Lockhart/Voldemort in a long time. On the other hand, what was wrong with trying to get things moving at the Ministry?

Chapter 25

The masked figures of Durumulna again passed before his mind's eye. It would be so easy. Each of them would have a weakness or two; something they would do anything to get. It started out about money, but it always turned into something else. Harry could taste taking charge of them as an astringent stain on his tongue.

He pushed away from the wall, heart speeding. If this was the prophecy, was he trapped into following this instinct? It couldn't be the prophecy, he assured himself. That was for another place. Or was it?

"You know Ron is here for dinner, right?" Harry asked the house elf.

Winky turned her large, slowly blinking eyes on Harry. "Winky is knowing this, yes."

She looked concerned. Harry managed a small smile and said, "Thanks," before turning away.

At dinner, Harry snuck extra glances at Ginny, unable to shake the implications of the prophecy. She played expertly coy with her brother; even Harry, if he did not have absolute knowledge otherwise, would not have known how close she and Aaron had grown. Aaron for his part would become lost in the conversation for longer and longer periods of time. But every time he bordered on a flippant comment, he fell quiet and rubbed his shoulder or his arm, turned again inside himself.

At the end of the late evening, after Candide had retired, Ron nixed the idea of Ginny taking Aaron home to guard him. Harry intervened before it could grow ugly between the siblings.

"I'll take Aaron home, Ginny, if you stay here as guard."

Ginny looked around, seemingly for the first time. "That's right. Where's your guard?"

"Don't have one. And I'm glad for it enough to not ask about it. But I'd feel better if someone is here with Candide."

Ginny hesitated, lips twitching with the desire to argue more with Ron. "All right," she agreed.

Ron glowered at them in turn, reluctantly mollified.

Harry took Aaron home where he plunked down on the couch with a groan. Harry wanted to allude to his clearly feeling better, but held back, remembering how much he always hated that comment in similar circumstances.

Aaron stretched and with a weak attempt at humor, asked, "So, am I getting a massage from you tonight or are you trading at some point?" He lowered his arms and rubbed one shoulder, face pained, head angled away from Harry.

Harry swallowed. "You seem to be avoiding being funny."

"What good's it do?" Aaron snapped at him, eyes brightening. "Pathetic anyway."

"No, it's not," Harry gently disagreed. "You're always so cheery and lighthearted. People need that."

Aaron did not reply, and Harry sensed he should wait and push on the issue later. Harry sat back with a sigh of his own. Caring about Aaron's state of mind had freed him from darker instincts, another bad sign. Harry shook his head.

"Wha's that?" Aaron slurringly asked.

Harry decided to be honest with him as he had in the past. "Something's going on with me. Like I'm thinking like Voldemort again . . . in a minor way. It just started. Maybe I should ask Mr. Weasley to check that nothing is happening with Lockhart in prison."

"Happening like what?"

"I don't know." He looked at his friend, glad he had pulled him out of his funk. It felt good to feel like himself, so when Ginny arrived at one to change places, Harry was a little disappointed, but he left the two of them and went home.

Harry immediately went to Kali's cage and released his sleeping pet. She happily crawled onto his arm and investigated his pocket, finding nothing amiss with him.

Relieved by this, Harry crawled into bed, but found sleep elusive. He kept thinking about the Ginny he knew and the other Plane's Ginny. The prophecy could not be about him, Harry assured himself, but that meant the other Ginny was naïvely living with dark fate stalking her, failing to prepare properly.

Harry turned himself over and pulled the duvet tighter, forcing his mind to clear so he could rest.

Harry repeatedly told himself that he had far and away enough to worry about in his own world without traipsing off to involve himself in another one, but by mid-week he began to have second thoughts about this. He considered that once Durumulna discovered the ruse about the Galleons, he would have approximately zero chance to get away. He also found it reassuring to worry about his friends, since it kept other less savory notions and instincts at bay.

Chapter 25

Wednesday evening, Harry sat across from Candide, who now spent her evenings buried in bawdily-covered romance novels rather than accounting files. The miniature novel she held up to her nose tonight had an animated picture of a hunchbacked and tattered young man stretching up into a prince just in time to catch a swooning woman in a tall white hat and veil.

Harry decided he should do as he was instructed and ask for advice from his guardian. He dearly felt he should warn the other Ginny. Just warn her. After that it would be her responsibility to see to getting prepared. Relieved to take any action, even just planning, Harry liberated a clean parchment by tearing a used one in two and penned a couched letter.

Dear Severus,

I believe this is my only chance to take care of something I feel I must complete. I expect you to object, but things will only become more busy soon enough after more is discovered. I feel strongly about this and don't believe it will take long to resolve. What do you think of this?

Harry sent his owl off right away bearing the letter. Later that evening as he straightened his room, he heard Hedwig scratch at the window.

The reply was short and on the back of his own letter.

Do as you will, it read. Harry peered at it, tried a few revealing spells, read through his own message and again pondered the reply. Was he giving in, despite his earlier insistence that he never would? Was he expecting Harry to fail and therefore learn on his own? Whatever Snape was thinking, it surely was making Harry think a lot more.

Hermione brushed her hair from her eyes but it immediately fell back, catching on her eyelashes. She bounced her knuckles on the smoky finish of the Defense Against the Dark Arts office door and entered when a voice sounded from inside.

But what she had heard might not have been a request to enter. Hermione stopped in the doorway while taking in the slightly heated conversation between Professors Lupin and Snape.

Lupin barely glanced up before going on. "Severus, we've been over this before. I don't mind your deciding what is taught as part of OWL preparation, but I'm already

in the middle of Wee Nettlesome and Vexing Creatures and I want to finish that before moving onto a new subject." He wound down and turned to Hermione. "Ah, you have a meeting."

At his desk, Snape lifted the dark brown cover of his large desk journal and glanced into it before letting it fall closed.

Lupin turned back to Snape, arms conciliatory. "It's true; I'm here at your convenience, but I put a foot down at changes mid-lesson."

"As long as it isn't a paw," Snape muttered. "Ms. Granger, I believe we have a meeting."

Lupin, taken aback by the comment, hesitated moving, as did Hermione.

Snape sighed audibly. "Fine, Remus. But I do want to go over the syllabus before we get any closer to the end of the year."

Lupin gave Hermione a wide-eyed glance of disturbed surprise as he passed her. Hermione, feeling more like a student than she had since becoming a professor, took the visitor's chair.

Snape, as usual, was right to the point. "And your last week of teaching went how?"

Hermione dove right in, upbeat. "Better. Things are feeling more natural."

Snape glanced over parchments that she assumed to be notes of their previous sessions. "You aren't just saying that because you have Sixth and Seventh-Years immediately before this meeting, are you?"

"No, sir," she said automatically. "They actually aren't easier. Well, they are easier to teach, but the expectations are much higher, so really, success is just as difficult to achieve. The younger students, well, they can be maddening at times, but one good session can catch them right up."

Snape tilted his head as though acknowledging this observation and Hermione relaxed marginally. She was trying too much to please, but knowing this did not make it easier to stop doing it. Remembering Snape's uncalled-for comment to Lupin, she put down her own notes and took a closer look at the man across from her. He seemed hard and withdrawn. Well, he always seemed that way, but it had an edge to it today. It was true that something had gone magically awry in the Slytherin Dungeon two nights before and quite a few students were in detention. Even Hermione had been assigned two young Slytherin girls for the next weeks' late evenings. They were the most well-behaved students she had ever had in detention, subdued into keeping their

noses down in the books she had assigned them, and answering her followup questions about the reading with undo care.

When they finished discussing the best means of occupying the brightest students and Snape was putting away his notes, Hermione asked, "How's Harry?"

Snape did not exactly glare, but he gave no indication that he may answer. Hermione said, "Yes, I know: Owl him if I want to know."

"I should think."

Her papers gathered to her chest, she hesitated beside the desk. "I think you were a little harsh with Remus, Professor."

With a flickering of his lids, Snape rolled his eyes. "He turns into a werewolf approximately once a month. If he hasn't accepted that yet, there is nothing for it." He pulled out other papers and files, needing to rearrange his unusually crowded desk to do it. "As his potion brewer, I believe I am at liberty to be snide about his situation if I desire to be."

"Still," she said, finding herself on better ground once she had begun to stand upon it.

They stared at each other. "Anything else?" Snape demanded.

He looked busy. "No. Thanks for the review. When's our next meeting?" she added with less than relish.

Snape opened his desk journal again.

Harry spent much of the rest of the week trying to decide what to do. Aaron had returned to full training, even if he had not returned to his usual joking self. Perhaps as a way of avoiding traveling to that other place until he had thought about it longer, Harry invited all of his fellows over for dinner Friday.

Kerry Ann, Ambroise in tow, arrived early because she would depart early for field work. Ambroise held an armful off flowers and a magnum of wine.

"Those are for us?" Harry asked. "You didn't need to do that."

Ambroise bowed with a crinkle of the plastic cradling the flowers and held them out.

"Thanks," Harry said. Winky arrived then with a vase full of water, and Harry handed them on without hesitation.

"What a lovely elf," Ambroise said, perhaps regarding the timing, but Winky squeaked in surprise, and flushed purple around the edges of her ears.

Kerry Ann gave Harry a kiss on each cheek and then Ambroise did the same.

"Erm, why don't we have a seat," Harry said, hoping he wasn't blushing too, and gestured at the couches.

Kerry Ann made a circuit of the room while her date stood patiently beside the couch, refusing to sit before she did. Harry found himself observing all of this, wondering if he should be trying to emulate any of it if the occasion called for it. Ambroise's natural, alien gallantry and style he probably could not copy. His hair looked as wild as Harry's but it was parted far on one side and cut in a wedge that suited his deferential posture.

Kerry Ann finally sat, with a delicate assisting hand from her beau, asking, "Where's Candide?"

"Still at work," Harry replied, thinking that these Frenchmen would spoil the women and good thing there were not more of them about.

Vineet arrived, also bearing a gift, and the table by the couches began to resemble a birthday. After five minutes of sitting across from the attentive couple, he stood and said, "I'll return shortly. Excuse me."

Candide came home, and Harry tried to get her to join, but she said she needed some quiet time before dinner. Ambroise saw her to the stairs like one guiding an invalid, and released her there with a bow and a quaintly accented, "Madame . . ."

Candide looked them over Ambroise's shiny haired head and said with certainty, "I'll be back down for dinner."

Aaron and Ginny arrived and again the gift pile swelled. "Let's open this," Ginny said of the magnum. Ambroise stood up to do it, tying Harry, who also got a hand on the bottle. Winky arrived in a sparkle and made a small ehem. They relinquished the bottle to the elf at the same moment, staring at each other, and Harry realized only then that Ambroise was also competing here.

Tridant arrived and Vineet returned, from the Floo in the dining room, tugging Hermione along by the hand.

"Harry, I didn't get an invite," she complained from inside a hug.

"It was last minute. I didn't know you could get away so easily."

Hermione casually transfigured the spare end table into a chair and sat upon it beside him when he offered his spot on the couch. "Minerva insists I work too hard. And in case I end up as Head of House next year I should take advantage now while I can."

Harry introduced Tridant to his friend and Tridant complained about not knowing he could bring a date. Kerry Ann from across the room, over the din of conversation, said loudly, "Oh, yes. By all means. We'd love to meet her."

Tridant looked around the room. "Well, maybe not. We've only been seeing each other a few weeks and she's from out of town and . . ."

"Not a friend of Aaron's evil date, I hope," Harry said.

Aaron looked over and levered himself off the tightly packed couch, pain backstopping his gaze. "What's this?" he asked quietly.

"Maybe you should bring your new girl over sometime," Harry said.

Hermione said, "Aaron had his troublesome date over for your Halloween party and no one noticed her."

"Oh, we all noticed her," Ginny chimed in, then wrapped her hands around Aaron's elbow.

"I have to have my dates approved?" Tridant said in annoyance. "I don't have a wealthy family, what would anyone want with me?"

"I don't know . . ." Kerry Ann said knowingly. "I think you should bring in her vitae for us to check over."

"You are such a gossip," Aaron said.

Tridant held up his hands and backed out of the group that had gradually surrounded him. "I can take care of myself, really." And from someone his size, this sounded reasonable.

Harry plunked down on the couch with, "I've said that before."

Kerry Ann pressed on, leaning closer to Tridant, "You're the only one dating someone questionable, you know."

"Yeah, you're tight with the French-Flaired Foreign Lege-wizard, here." Tridant stepped up behind Harry and towered his large frame over him. "And Harry's dating another Auror, which he's not supposed to be." He then gestured at Aaron, still with

Ginny attached to his arm. "You're dating the boss' daughter . . . are you supposed to be?" he asked in disbelief.

Harry sipped his wine and gave a wink to the two of them, standing there, clinging together like lost puppies. "I don't think the boss has acknowledged it yet."

With a swish of her robes, Kerry Ann returned to her seat and proclaimed, "You're safe for a year, at least. Mr. Weasley is always the last to know anything."

With that, Winky arrived in a sparkle and announced that dinner was being served.

Harry made the mistake of sitting across from Ginny, who was trading whispers with Aaron in a way that helped to keep the other's spirits propped up and involved in the party. Harry had no problem with this. He was pleased that someone had taken his fellow's mental health into attentive care. His difficulty came from the constant reminder of the plight of the other Ginny, a plight that stemmed from an ignorance that would be easy to fixed.

At the end of the night, after his friends had departed, Tonks arrived from her late shift and cuddled up with Harry on the couch where he had been sitting, thinking.

"Kerry Ann does well on field work. She knows just everybody, and people she doesn't know personally, she still knows something about. Bloody useful."

"She was giving Tridant the third degree about the strange woman he's dating."

Tonks stretched, changed her hair to flat, and found a comfortable spot for her head on Harry's ribs. "She's clean. We already checked her out."

"Already?"

"While Aaron was still missing. We're not taking any chances."

Tonks felt pleasantly warm pressed against him in the cooling air of the hall with the scents of the guests fading. Harry said, "I need to take care of something quick in another Plane . . ." He stopped because Tonks was pounding her head against his chest. "I just need a warm up when I return. Come on, I just have to go talk to someone."

She raised her head to look at him, eyes slitted like a cat's, but it faded to normal. "Harry, going to see your parents again is not a good idea."

"I wasn't going to do that," Harry argued. "I have to go talk to that Ginny, to warn her."

"Hm." Tonks put her head back down, wiggling around to find a good spot to rest it.

Chapter 25

"Tonks, do you think a prophecy in another place like that could have any bearing in this one?"

She reached up to scratch her head. "I have no idea. What's the prophecy?"

Harry quoted, "A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web. It will shatter half a century of peace so that the time before it will seem as if a dream . . . power indescribably heartless will wreak cold vengeance upon wizardom. All will be touched for the worse. The only magic capable of defeating it is contained within the seventh pureblood son who is not."

"Seventh pureblood son who is not? Oh, that does sound like Ginny. Have you told her?"

"That's what I'm going to go do."

Tonks lifted her head again, "No, I mean, this Ginny."

Harry stared at Tonks, the tips of his fingers going numb. "I didn't think it applied."

"Well, but you know it. You're here now with it. Doesn't that make it apply?"

Harry's unblinking eyes widened more. "Do you think that could be true?" he asked in alarm. "Wait, we haven't had a half century of peace," he argued.

"Oh, true," Tonks said, putting her head back down. A moment later, her voice drifted up, "Well, but the Muggle world has."

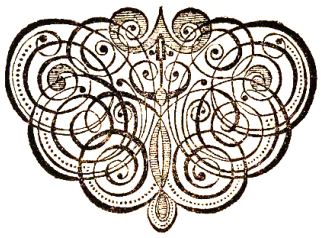
Harry held his breath. "It can't count," he insisted after a minute. Tonks shrugged in his arms.

"At least you know it's Ginny. We have to get her into the program," she added with confidence.

"Yeah, I was thinking that. Just in case."

> Author's Notes: Yes, very very late. Driving cross-country took out more than the week required, I had to then catch up on work. We are back on schedule though. 26 is more than half done.

Chapter 26.



Ensnared by a Ruse

Early the next morning, as if fate had decreed it, Candide gathered up her cloak and bag and announced she was spending the day with her parents.

"Severus isn't coming home?" Harry asked.

Candide ducked her head to free her hair from the collar of her cloak. "He hasn't owled saying he will. I'm not going to wait around. I didn't have time to visit at all before the accounting year closed."

She wore fuzzy warm robes under her cloak, and tugged on thick woolen mittens, just to travel by Floo.

"Going to be warm enough?" Harry asked of her gear.

She held up one tan and grey mitten, which flopped off the ends of her fingers. "Frankly, I used these to breath through. Floo dust is bad for people who are pregnant."

Said Harry, "Floo dust is bad for everyone."

She took up her handbag with a chuckle and said, "Yeah. Funny the things you don't worry about until you're pregnant."

"Are your parents excited?" Harry asked. "I would think they'd be."

"Eh, what's one more grandkid? This will make five."

Chapter 26

"Are they all magical?"

Candide rested her handbag on the table, still hooked on her shoulder. "Mostly. There is one still in question, the youngest. We'll see when he turns eleven at the latest."

"I can probably tell," Harry said. Then thinking back to the crowded tent and all the guests added, "I don't think I noticed at the wedding."

"We'll have to have them over for dinner, then, so you can." She patted her belly. "I hope this little one is. But it's all right if he's not," she added quickly.

"'Course it's all right," Harry said.

She sighed, "Well, if you get an owl from Severus, owl it along to me. Maybe my mentioning wanting to visit my parents is the reason he isn't here."

Harry replied, "I don't think that's it; he knows that he wouldn't let you talk him into going."

She bundled her cloak tighter and stepped into the Floo. Harry thought that if he were going to travel to this other place, he should do so soon too. He went to his room to prepare a warm landing area, just in case he was gone long enough to worry that Tonks may be on duty.

Harry arrived in the other Plane, and discovered a major downside to traveling in the morning: the weak sun did not warm him much. Harry lay on the cold, matted field, barely able to breathe or move except in spasms, fumbling with his wand to warm the ground beside him so he could roll over onto it and remain alive. By the time he was able to stand, his bones ached and his head pounded. He could hear Snape in his snidest voice telling him he had been overconfident.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry replied to the empty air.

Harry applied his disguise and needed no acting to hobble, bent-backed, up to the hedge surrounding the confectionary architecture of the Burrow. The Weather Vain on the peak of the roof must not be operating today since it was bone cold and damp like only December could be. Harry did not particularly desire to rouse the whole household.

Stretching his stiff shoulders back, Harry transformed into his Animagus form and took wing for the roof just above where Ginny's room should be. He may be guessing wrong, but with his keen sense of animal smell he expected he could tell just by getting close.

Three long flaps brought Harry to a delicate landing on his knuckles because he feared knocking shingles loose with his claws. The roof beams creaked with his weight but not loudly. Harry unfurled each foot in turn and placed them carefully where he could lean over the peak and look down into the window. It smelled of Ginny, and many other things, like mice and bats and faintly of illicit potion ingredients, which must be something of the twins'.

Harry scratched on the window frame, then scratched again. The second time, the bedspread used as a curtain jerked aside. Not wanting to scare Ginny, Harry took flight and landed just on the far side of the hedge where he could quickly check his disguise and step out.

Mouth agape, Ginny leaned far out of her open window, the makeshift curtains draping out beside her hands. Harry waved. Her head popped inside and a minute later, she emerged on broomstick and swooped down beside him.

"Hi!" she greeted him warmly, adjusting her hastily thrown on cloak. "You're an early riser."

"It's around nine, I believe," Harry said in his older, plodding voice.

"That's early for Saturday. We always sleep in."

"You have it very easy here," Harry commented. When Ginny shrugged, Harry said, "I need to speak with you. If you would accompany me on a short walk?" He held out a hand to invite her to lead the way.

She flipped her broomstick over to use it as a walking stick and stepped through the hedgerow. Harry followed along beside, remaining quiet until they found a trail bordering the orchard and followed it.

"Has anyone spoken to you?" Harry asked.

She seemed younger than the Ginny he knew. Her hair trailed a strawberry-scented haze and she walked with an unnecessary bounce to her step. "Lots of people talk to me. Like who?"

"Minerva McGonagall or someone else from the Wizengamot?"

She choked a laugh. "Are you joking? No, no one like that has talked to me. I'm not sure they know I exist."

Harry stopped and she turned her freshly curious gaze on him. He stroked his beard, mostly to keep it from blowing around in the wind so much. "Then they haven't

realized the truth then," Harry thought aloud, setting Ginny back on her heels with a quizzical expression.

Harry said, "There's been a prophecy about the good times ending here. That a dark wizard . . . or witch is going to start making trouble and lots of people are going to get hurt."

"A prophecy?" The wind had a hold of her thick hair, tossing it back and forth behind her.

Patiently, he said, "Yes, like with Harry Potter and Voldemort you know."

"Huh," she muttered. "And why are you telling me this?"

Harry recited the prophecy to her and gave it time to sink in. He closed his eyes and felt for the shadows. There was no Voldemort, but his followers certainly were all there, scattered like dark stars around Britain. "See, I think the seventh pure-blood son who is not, is you." And I think the slumbering followers are Voldemort's old Death Eaters, long since forgotten.

Her face twisted into a humorous expression that Harry had no desire to laugh at. She giggled uncomfortably. "What is this magic I am supposed to have?"

"I don't know. No one knows. It's likely not something obvious or expected." He took her shoulders. "But you must prepare for this, or you may not survive to fulfill the prophecy."

Harry miscalculated badly with this. Ginny stepped back with a jerk, out of reach. With a hint of distaste, she said, "I think Harry might be right, that you're a doddering old showoff."

Harry drooped slightly, chastising himself. He had rushed things and now faced a poorer prospect for convincing her of what he believed should be done. With more emotion, he said, "Ginny, look . . ."

But this made her back up another step. He could see in her eyes she was recalculating being there at all with him, alone, could see her memory of the duel with his counterpart, flashing before her mind's-eye. Her wariness ratcheted up and she was preparing to Apparate away.

Harry stepped back, hands out in plain view. "I don't mean to alarm you," he said in his humblest tones. She gradually relaxed as he held that pose, head slightly bent. Harry was considering that it was no wonder that Dumbledore had left him to his own devices for so long without telling him the truth.

"Ginny, I cannot stay long. I should not be here at all. You must ask Minerva McGonagall for advice. Tell her I believe you are the one in the prophecy. Will you promise me that you will do this?"

Ginny's flexible face twisted into series of unlikely shapes that did not promise much.

"Please, Ginny," Harry said, pinning his beard down with one hand on his chest in entreaty.

"Why are you doing this? Saying these things?" she demanded, recovering some spunk.

Gently, knowing with ironic pain that he sounded like his old mentor, Harry said, "I'm not doing anything. I'm trying to help you." He needed a new tactic, as her eyes indicated imminent departure again. "You enjoyed my lessons in Defensive magic, right?" he asked, as though of someone much younger. How was she ever going to survive without growing up?

"Of course. They never taught us any of that and it's fun to learn stuff the teachers don't think we should know."

Harry's mind worked fast. "All right then. What if, just in case, you were to find an instructor in Defensive magic." He laid the endearing salesman mode on as heavily as he dared. "Someone who could teach you all kinds of things that are not generally known and in some cases are forbidden?"

He had her attention, so he went on. "You could learn all kinds of spells brothers have never seen. You don't have to believe in the prophecy to find that appealing, I'm sure."

She crossed her arms and considered that. "But why can't you teach me, then, if this is so important?"

"I cannot remain here. For reasons that I cannot tell you, but believe me they are real and dire."

She frowned, but appeared to yield. "So where do I find this great teacher?"

"You know him already. The person I have in mind is Severus Snape."

She physically stumbled backward upon hearing this. She righted herself slowly as though expecting attack and laughed in a nervous burst. "That's nuts. I'm not going anywhere near that slimy dungeon bat, not for all the Galleons in Gringott's." She took a few steps away, back down the trail. "Take your crazy ideas somewhere else. What an awful thought."

Harry called lightly, "Ginny, this isn't about gold, this is about surviving. It's about making sure everyone you know and love survives."

She stopped, shoulders bent. "What if I don't believe any of this?"

Harry resumed his earlier placating pose. "You may simply ask Minerva and she will confirm it."

Pained, she stared down at the ground. Harry tried to decide if he had accomplished enough here. It did not feel very settled, and he did not want to return again. He needed to be done with this for good.

"I'm not going anywhere near that greaseball of a Potions teacher," she stated firmly. "The best thing about finishing at Hogwarts was never seeing him again." She shuddered for effect. "He hates me. He hates everyone, really." She laughed.

Harry's mind ruffled through his options. He wanted to personally put Ginny in Snape's hands. If he did that, then he could leave in good conscience. "I wonder if Professor Snape is at Hogwarts," Harry said.

With clear disdain, she said, "I have no idea. It's not something I regularly contemplate. Quite the opposite." Relenting slightly, she said, "Many of the teachers go home on the weekends."

"They do?" Harry couldn't imagine it.

"So do loads of the students. If they want."

Harry stared at her. "What an odd thought."

She did not understand his confusion and sounded corrective as she said, "Why not? It only requires a few minutes to get home by Floo. And wouldn't you rather be home with your parents than stuck at school?"

Harry rubbed a hand through his beard and took her in. Growing strategic, he said, "You know, Harry rather hates Professor Snape. If you got lessons from him, you could face Harry down in any duel and imagine his annoyance when you beat him. Every time."

Ginny wavered and bit her lip. Unrequited, adoring love, grown poisoned by time showed from her eyes. She appeared strategic too. "He won't take me as a student, you know." Her lip curled unattractively as she spoke. "Not that I could stand to be within ten miles of the overgrown Slytherin bat."

Airily, Harry said, "I'd recommend finding a better title for him. At least until you learn to counter more curses." She expressed mocking amusement at this, but then

seemed to find it genuinely funny. Seeing the best opening he was going to get, Harry said, "Wait here, all right? I'll be back in five minutes."

"You're not bringing the Dungeon Dungbomb back with you, are you?"

That one Harry almost could not let slide. Stiffly and with his annoyance clear, he said, "No. I'm just going to check where he is."

Harry, wanting to impress her, slipped silently away and arrived moments later in the Hogwart's Dungeon, inside the Potions office. The room sat in stillness, hearths and candles cold. Harry walked around to check the classroom. Two students were brewing something on the floor, whispering. They panicked when Harry approached, tripping on robes and nearly upsetting the cauldron.

"Just looking for the Professor," Harry said kindly to the Ravenclaws.

The boy's Adam's apple bobbed rapidly as he swallowed between words. "He's. . . .he's supposed to be home." Both his and his friend's eyes glared out as big as saucers. The potion smelled like Memory Magic.

Harry gently said, "I'm assuming you're selling that since, given your house colors, you certainly shouldn't need it yourselves. And it's frothing over, so you should get back to it."

They dropped back to a crouch and returned to brewing. Chuckling lightly, Harry stepped out and slipped away to Shrewsthorpe, wondering if in this perfect place Snape did not live somewhere nicer. Unwilling to invade the privacy of the place by slipping inside, Harry arrived beside a hedge across the street. While he waited for the cars to clear, a woman came by, walking a pug. Harry asked her if she knew who lived in the house across the way, and she replied, "The Snapes: Professor and the missus."

The Snapes, Harry thought with a small grin as the dog's claws clicked in retreat. He returned to Ginny, who abruptly said, "How do you do that? Not make a sound?"

Harry gave her a finger to the lips and wink. "It took me such trouble to learn that. But let me take you for a visit and make a proposal. I think with a little illumination of the situation, the good professor will see things my way."

He took her elbow, but she raised it. "Where are we going?"

"Professor Snape's house."

"He has a house? He doesn't just live in a hole somewhere?"

Harry corked his anger, but each time it grew harder to bottle up. "Let me give you a little advice, for your own good. That mouth is going to get you taken down to about an inch high if you use it that way in front of Professor Snape."

"Good reason not to go," she commented, but lowered her arm into his hand and slouched. "This is all on your head, you know," sounding honestly blameful and a tad spoiled.

They arrived at the garden gate. "I know that, my dear," Harry said, returning to his more raspy voice, which he had let slip while arguing with her.

A knock on the door made it open almost instantly by Tidgy's hand. Harry gave the elf a small bow and asked, "Is your master at home?"

Tidgy did not have a chance to reply before a familiar voice brought an instant smile to Harry's lips.

"Who is it, Tidgy?" Candide came into view, mauve robes filling the corridor as she approached, moving like one not in the least pregnant.

Harry gestured for Ginny to answer. "Uh, I'm a student of Professor Snape's, er, I was, I'm, er, wondering if he's here?" She sounded as unpleased at the prospect of a yes as she possibly could.

Candide smiled wryly. "Why don't you come in for tea, and we'll see if we can rouse him from his books."

Ginny strode in behind Candide with a pose of defeat and wary hostility. The main hall was brighter and cheerier than Harry was accustomed to. The wood had been stripped and re-varnished in a lighter shade and woven hangings adorned the outside walls. While Harry admired this, Ginny sharply whispered through clenched teeth, "I don't know how I let you talk me into-"

"What is this?" Snape hissed from beside the doorway to the drawing room. He hadn't made a sound coming into the hall.

Pleasantly, as if this were a game, Candide replied, "Your former student and . . . I didn't get your name?"

"Aaron Totten, Madame," Harry said with a bow that he tried to make look creaky and painful given the eyes upon him.

" . . . and Mr. Totten are here for tea." She turned to the elf. "Tidgy prepare some tea in the dining room."

Snape eyed Ginny suspiciously after a sharp glance at Harry, who had his mind Occluded. Harry, wanting to explain things himself, turned Ginny's eyes away by taking her arm to lead her in the direction indicated by their hostess.

As they settled at the table, Snape stood in the doorway and said to the elf, "Tidgy, the smallest teacups, mind you."

Harry, in his best Dumbledore impression, said, "Ah, that will make the pot require even longer to consume. Such gracious hosts."

Snape's eyes narrowed, and Harry had to swallow a laugh by biting into a biscuit.

"Severus," Candide said in a long suffering but superficially annoyed tone. "I don't mind at all if we on rare occasion have someone over for tea. Frequently would be even better." She sat down across from Ginny and clasped her hands nicely. "So, you must be a Weasley."

"Yes," Snape answered from his cross-armed position by the mantel as Ginny opened her mouth. "One of far too many of them."

Candide asked, "Severus, are you going to sit down, or are you just going to loom?"

"He prefers to loom," Ginny said at exactly the same time as Snape said, "I always prefer to loom."

Harry bit hard into his treat and had to scrunch his eyes against a laugh. But he quickly fell more serious when he considered what he had to accomplish.

Snape tugged out a chair and sat on it, arms crossed. "To what do we owe the displeasure of this visit?" he asked in a falsely genteel manner.

Harry glanced at Candide. "We have something we need to discuss." He considered that the Candide he knew was the model of discretion, partly because of the habits of her job. Lips cocked, he said to her, "My dear lady, you must be an accountant, am I right?"

This drew newly vigilant, narrowed eyes from Snape. Harry went on, "I only suggest it from the ink stains on your hand and a bit on your sleeve, almost removed by your elf, but not quite, and the strength of your hands, presumably from moving the rolls and files around the office."

Unlike Snape, she found his guess less than surprising. "Yes, I am."

"Well, then," Harry said, sipping his tea. "I think I can speak before you." He turned to Snape, who was analyzing him more closely than the disguise would probably

withstand if not for the backlighting Harry had intentionally chosen when he picked this seat. "Professor Snape, I wonder if you are aware that Professor Trelawney has prophecized again."

Snape's attention fell into a strange stillness. His head tilted to the right and held that way, like a giant parrot.

"I was not certain if you would have been told." Harry slowly recited the prophecy and, as he finished, Snape reached out two long fingers, which he placed on Candide's shoulder.

"This is to not leave this room," he said to his wife.

Vaguely stunned, but more curious, she replied, "I understand."

Snape sat back, clutched his hands together and touched the steepled index fingers to his nose as he sank into musing. His eyes drifted over to Ginny. "I see where your thoughts are leading," he said with little enthusiasm.

Harry nibbled his fifth biscuit, not because they were particularly good, but because they rekindled memories of when Tidgy was still alive. "I am here with the suggestion that you train this young lady in Defense."

Snape turned a baleful eye on Ginny. "Oh, are you now?"

Harry had thought this would be easy. He expected Snape to see the wisdom of the idea and agree without argument. Snape was not giving any indication of that, quite the opposite.

Snape said, "You think I have time for such things?"

Candide said, "You don't think it is a good idea, Severus? The prophecy does pertain to Ginny, does it not?"

"Who knows?" Snape muttered coarsely. "And in any event, she was one of the most horrid students I have ever faced. I certainly do not want her back again."

Ginny tossed her hair and crossed her arms to match his. "For the record, I don't very much want to either."

Snape turned to Harry, "And what is your interested in this?" he asked with suspicion. "I have never heard of you, yet you come in here setting things up like you expect to be next in line for Minister."

"I'm an old friend of Albus'. I've been out of the country for rather a long while." They stared at each other, Harry certain his disguise was not going to cut it if Snape's suspicions were roused for long. "Are you refusing to do this thing?"

"Yes. Are you as doddered as you appear?" Snape returned.

Candide rolled her eyes and sighed. Ginny pushed her heavy chair back with a noisy rumble and stood. "Well, I guess that's that," she said happily.

"Sit down," Harry commanded.

"Why should I?" she retorted, her voice pitching higher. "I hate this creep to the bottoms of my feet. I always have. He did nothing but mock and secretly ruin the assignments of anyone who wasn't Slytherin."

Harry, wanting to regain her attention in one go said, "Dark wizards do not play nice, so you might as well have got used to it. If you don't sit down, you are going to wind up dead."

This bluntness shocked everyone. Chastened for the moment, Ginny sat, but she pinned her eyes on the wall beside her.

Harry huffed in frustration, sounding old to his own ears. He did not feel like playing nice anymore, himself. "Professor . . . like I said, I am an old friend of Albus'. . . " Harry glanced at Candide. "Perhaps your lovely wife has errands or something she needs to take care of. There are few things I want to say and they should perhaps not be said . . . in the presence of a lady." It was the best excuse Harry could come up with; he was tiring of this role.

While Candide glanced to Snape for advice, Ginny said, "What about me?"

Harry turned to her. "You've proven you're not a lady with that mouth of yours."

When Snape gave no signal to Candide, Harry said, "Professor, I think this conversation should be between you and me. She's heard a lot already. Prophecies being what they are . . ." he trailed off and sent Snape the most meaningful look he could. And the first crack in the man's stalwart attitude appeared, for just a flicker.

"You said you needed to run to Diagon, did you not?" Snape asked Candide in a far less cocky voice.

Harry helped her along, "He can fill you in later, if he wishes. You can make an old man's visit easier . . . my brains don't always plan ahead as well as they used to."

With a grumble, she gathered up her cloak and baskets with a wave of her wand, and moments later disappeared in the Floo after terse good byes.

Snape's fingers traced a whorl in the tabletop. "You were saying?" he prompted with zero warmth.

Chapter 26

Beside Harry, Ginny shrunk down in her chair to make herself smaller. Harry said, "I thought I could convince you amicably, Severus, but was mistaken."

"Dumbledore was often mistaken as well," Snape stated.

Harry suspected the comment was a test. "Yes, he was. You think I'd argue with that?"

Snape tossed his tea back and poured out more for himself. "Well?"

Harry struggled to find the best tactic. "You of all people should understand the position wizardom is in right now given the prophecy."

Sneer in place, Snape stated succinctly, "I didn't even know there was one."

"This time," Harry returned with ease.

Snape's fingers began to vibrate as they stroked the lip of his teacup. This was a deep secret Harry was hinting at. There was not time to work at this slowly. Moments past. Snape said, "So, this is blackmail?"

Ginny's head snapped to Harry, drawing Snape's unnerved glance.

"That's such a dirty word," Harry said.

Snape spoke in rapid fire. "I do not wish to do this. Why me? If you know so much about me . . ."

"That is precisely why you," Harry countered. "And I do know rather a great deal about you. For example, you look in need of a drink and I believe that silvered bottle up there has sherry in it, does it not?"

Snape froze. Of all the personal things to have revealed, that one caught him utterly by surprise. When he held still longer, Ginny asked, "Does it have Sherry in it?"

Sounding drunken already, Snape asked, "Yes. Would you like some?"

"'Course," she replied bluntly.

Snape slid out of his chair, which was easy to do since he had not pulled it to the table fully. "Why don't we have a round, then?"

Harry felt a bit bad for Snape; he sounded rattled and like everyone else here, he had grown soft, even if he kept up a convincing front otherwise. Harry talked as Snape polished small crystal glasses and poured dark red liquid into them. "You're the perfect choice, Professor, because I believe the slumbering followers to be Voldemort's former associates."

The decanter hit the table hard. "Do not speak that name in my presence," he hissed through his teeth with a threat that Harry did not doubt.

Harry sighed. "His name is meaningless. But if you insist. Fine. Dark Lord would be your preferred term, then?" Harry tossed out, knowing it was the preferred term for a Death Eater to use.

A ripple ran along Snape's jaw. He sat down and downed his sherry in one shot.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Ginny said, while tugging on Harry's sleeve.

It seemed very right to Harry; things were so unfinished. "Fate has not unwound here so I think there is no choice but to at least try this. Professor Snape is unequaled at Defense and other things you will need to know, like Occlusion."

Sounding unconvinced and wanting to talk out of nerves, she asked, "What's that?"

"The skill at hiding your thoughts from others who might see fit to penetrate them face to face or even in your dreams."

"Who can do that?" she blurted rhetorically.

"Professor Snape can."

Ginny turned an alarmed gaze Snape's way. Snape raised his head and snarled faintly, "That's why I know exactly what you miserable Gryffindors think of me. You get exactly what you deserve in my class."

Ginny's shoulders were pulled back in surprise. Harry said, "Now, now, we'll have to have less of that if this to work out."

"This is not going to work out," Snape growled at Harry, and pounded his empty glass once sharply on the table.

Harry ignored him, as Dumbledore had often done when he stubbornly stuck to his own track. Harry asked the ceiling, "So, I'm curious, how many Death Eaters are roaming free, outside Azkaban?"

"I don't know," Ginny answered.

"I wasn't asking you." Harry lowered his eyes. "I was asking someone who would know."

Snape did not stun this time, nor did he grow warier, he just stared through Harry, thinking.

"Why would Professor Snape know?" Ginny asked.

When Snape still resisted, Harry saw a way to set this up better. “Professor Snape knows too well, in fact. That makes him invaluable, as I suspect there are Death Eaters in all kinds of bad positions, even in the Ministry. At Hogwarts even.”

Ginny blinked a few times and shot Harry a questioning look. “Uh, you sound like you’re saying . . .”

“Shut up,” Snape said.

“That’s pretty plain vanilla from you,” Harry said, concerned by Snape’s lapse into the mundane. “Usually you go for something subtle and twisted.”

Snape rose partly out of his chair. “How do you know what I would usually ”go“ for? We have never met.”

“Oh yeah, true,” Harry said, going for old and fickle again to cover.

Ginny was tugging on Harry’s robes again. “You aren’t saying . . .” she whispered.

Harry addressed his comments to Snape. “People forget, don’t they? Especially things they don’t want to think about.”

“I definitely don’t want to think about this, or do this,” Ginny said. “I’m backing out.” Unconvincingly, she added, “I think I hear my mum calling me.” She scooted her chair out farther.

Snape’s fingers were tracing the grain of the wood again. “Severus?” Harry prompted.

Snape regained himself and said, “I will do it on two conditions. Sit down, Weasley, or the next time your dear mummy is calling you it may be from beyond the veil, and you will hear her everywhere.”

Ginny did not sit, but she did not move either, even to breathe. Harry said to her, “Ginny, things are going get very bad before they get better. Death and violence are new to you, I realized, but you are going to have to get inured to them to survive this. Sit down, please.”

Ginny sat, appearing very sad and alarmed, hands locked under her arms, shoulders nearly touching the table edge she slouched so.

“What magic could she possibly have?” Snape pleaded with Harry.

“It could be anything,” Harry said, “Loyalty to her family perhaps, or simply a resistance to evil’s pull. I would tell you if I knew, but I don’t.” Not wanting to dwell there, Harry asked, “What were your conditions?”

Growing vaguely angry, Snape said, "First, I expect full cooperation. When I assign reading and practice, I expect it to be done, memorized from start to finish, and impeccably fine-tuned if it is a spell practice assignment. None of this half-effort nightmare of your schooldays." The first he addressed, to Harry, but he turned to Ginny as he went on, a good sign.

His voice softened as he added to Harry, "And the second thing is, I want to know who you are. You have on an expert, but hastily applied disguise, and you look vaguely familiar as well as act familiar." He sat back like a man who finally won a round and said, "Those are my conditions."

It was Harry's turn to freeze and try to quell his panicked thoughts. Swallowing, Harry said, "I can't do that."

Snapping quickly into heated anger, Snape said, "Than I cannot either. Take it or decline it. I do not honestly care which."

Harry bit his lip. "Ginny should go," he said, thinking that was the very least.

"I do not think so," Snape said with a note of triumph at gaining the upper hand. "You have been acting as manipulative of her as my old mentor at his worst. I think she deserves to see who you really are."

Harry schemed quickly, wondering if he could layer on a different disguise as he removed the first.

"Come, come, it cannot possibly be that difficult a decision. Have another drink."

"Thanks I've had enough," Harry said, thinking that he had not seen anything get slipped into it, but he would not put it past Snape to do so.

Harry had trapped himself, he saw now. And he could not see a way out of it. Ginny had recovered slightly and peered at him worriedly. He gave in, thinking he would just have to explain. He had explained once before and nothing bad had come of it; he could just do so again. He stood and said, "All right then. We have a deal. You will train her and help her along."

Ginny sat up and grabbed at Harry yet again. "But, I don't want training from a . . . didn't you say he was a . . . a Death Eater?"

Harry calmly took her hand from his robes and held it loosely. "Yes. You have a better suggestion for who can help?"

"Wha . . . well . . . uh . . ." She choked a bit more, then shut her mouth.

"He's the best for now, and when he ceases to be, should you have the luxury of doing so, he should find you others to help as well." He glared at Snape. "Right?"

Snape nodded crookedly, once, and waved down a different smokey bottle to top up his drink. "I am still waiting for your half of the bargain."

Harry stepped back and ducked to apply some quick wand taps. When he straightened back up as himself, Snape leapt up as well, and faster than Harry could have ever imagined, had the hover spell canceled and his wand re-aimed. The abandoned bottle shattered wetly on the floor. The hand aiming at Harry shook with rage.

"Potter!"

"Harry?" Ginny blurted in utter confusion.

"What the devil are you doing?" Harry spouted at Snape, alarmed at his attacking him. "You're going to what, curse me? I'm not who you think I am."

"I know exactly who you are you conniving little bastard." Snape sent a curse his way.

Harry had not reached for his wand, too surprised to be faced with this man threatening him. Harry didn't managed to scrunch down the whole Leather Slap Curse, but he cut it short, enough that he held his feet. Snape's wand struck the ceiling then clattered to the floor. Snape clutched his hand and stared at Harry.

"Why did you do that?" Harry yelped, rubbing his face and feeling something rising in him, responding to the man before him. Voice low, Harry demanded, "What makes you think you could get away with that?" Stung by a vision that generated such strong feelings, Harry couldn't contain his wounded anger, not with this thing inside him reaching for it, stoking its energy. The light in the room dimmed slightly. Snape retrieved his wand and Harry had his out in the next second. Ginny dove under the table and crawled to the other end of the room under its protection.

Snape and Harry exchanged spells, nasty ones that sizzled along the furniture before dissipating. "You always were bright only when it involved being a obnoxious brat," Snape accused. "If you had applied that a little better, you could have made something out of your pathetic fame."

The light dimmed more, Harry felt something sucking away at his core. He felt dizzy. The next curse he Squelched again, wand lowered. Snape held onto the wand exploding with magic in his hand, but he doubled over, clutching his middle.

Angry beyond what was safe, Harry hoarsely said, "You don't know who I am. Or what I can do." It was half a plea for the other to stop and half a threat should he

not obey. Snape had not recovered enough to aim his wand. Harry readied something to take him down, but hesitated using it on a defenseless Snape.

"I don't know how you are doing that . . . but . . ." Snape finally straightened and held his wand out, uncertainty clear in his pose, head tilted with suspicion and hate.

Harry shouted, "Stop it! You don't understand anything."

The light dimmed even more and the others noticed it, noticed that the corners of the room were in total darkness, that the sunlight filtered in the window as yellow-grey beams. Ginny glanced this way and that, trying to find the source of the problem. Harry willed it to stop, but could not find the shutoff in his mind. Snape lowered his wand, glancing around with his eyes, head fixed.

Harry leaned on the table. "I'm not who you think I am," he said, grappling with what had risen within him – this need to control others, especially one of his Death Eaters, by force if necessary, by manipulation, preferably. He shook his head broadly between his propping arms. They weren't his Death Eaters. Trouble was he could feel something within Snape calling to something deep inside Harry and his part knew it dominated, or should.

Snape glanced at Harry's wand, then at his own.

Ginny said shakily, "Why don't we both just sit down, hey?"

Harry did so, woozy from something, perhaps just lack of control over himself. He rubbed his forehead, found he still held his wand, and set it down. Ginny scooped it up and asked with shaky politeness, "Professor, may I have yours too?"

After a long pause where he searched her gaze, he relinquished his as well. Harry said, "He'll have another."

With one brow cocked, Snape pulled a wand out of his sock and gave that to Ginny, who dangled it out like it were a drowned rat until a sharp look made her bundle the three together and take a seat too, wands clasped in her lap.

Snape spoke first, to Harry. "You are correct. You are not who I think you are. The Potter I know doesn't have a tenth of your magic. Perhaps less."

Ginny said, "Yeah, and at the picnic you dueled Harry, yourself, um, you dueled someone who . . . oh, I don't know how to explain it."

Harry sat forward just enough to pour a splash of sherry out for himself before sitting back again, holding it shakily. He still wanted to punish Snape for his actions and the desire sickened him.

Asked Snape, "How did you do that . . . counter a curse without moving or even taking out your wand?"

Harry said, "The answer to that wasn't part of the bargain," and part of him cheered his regaining ground. "But I'll tell you anyway . . ." He put the glass to his nose, making himself smell the thick, rotted fruit essence within. Nauseated by it and remembering it was probably doped, he pushed the glass forward out of reach. Tiredly, he said, "I'm not a wizard . . . I'm a sorcerer. And you made me angry, which is not a good idea."

Snape and Ginny considered that until Ginny asked, "Can we get the light back. The sun?"

Her childish plea snapped him out of the spiral. "What? Oh." Harry leaned his head back and let go of his distress at being attacked by the vision of his adoptive father while simultaneously craving control over him as a follower. The room brightened.

"Thanks," Ginny said.

"How did you do that?" Snape demanded.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "That just happens sometimes. I think I'm pulling another reality on top of this one without really trying. A reality where there is no light."

"Oh, right," Snape said, sounding unlike himself by his mockingly friendly tone. He and Ginny shared a glance.

"I didn't know who he was, honest," Ginny insisted, but then ducked when Harry looked her way.

"I didn't mean to make trouble," Harry said. "I was trying to fix things. It's so peaceful here and it won't be for long and no one understands what's coming. I thought I should do something."

"Well, you definitely sound like Albus Dumbledore," Snape muttered. "But who are you?"

"I'm Harry Potter . . . just not the one you know." He stared at Snape to see if he understood.

Ginny said, "I don't get it."

Snape considered that at length, giving away nothing of his musings. "You travel that way, do you?" he asked Harry all of a sudden.

"Sometimes. I should quit it. I really should. It does me no good." Harry stood up. "On that theme . . . I need to go." He started to walk by Snape, then stopped, realizing it did not matter if they saw him slip away. "You are going to take care of things here?" he asked Snape.

"As best as possible. You have exposed me," he added, with a slit-eyed glance at Ginny.

"I didn't mean to make trouble," Harry repeated, too mentally deficient to say anything else.

"You have a very odd way of not making trouble," Snape said, standing as well. He looked Harry over from close range. "Those eyes from playing around with raw magic, I suppose?"

Harry nodded.

"They are going to be white if you keep it up." He gestured for Harry to exit. "You are my worst nightmare, a Harry Potter I cannot hope to fend off, so if you would prefer to be on your way, I would not complain."

Ginny followed behind Harry to the main hall where he stopped and looked over the decor again. The bright, almost fashionable room held promise. He turned back suddenly and closed the gap with Snape. "You know; there is redemption for you, if you want it."

"I don't care," Snape stated.

"Yes, you do," Harry countered.

"And you would know that too?" Snape asked mockingly.

Harry cocked a smile at him. "In my world, you're my adoptive father, so yes, I would know." He turned from Snape's re-rattled expression to Ginny and said, "Good luck. And remember that you can't be too careful. Good luck to you too, Severus . . . Dad." With a chuckle, Harry slipped away.

Harry woke on the floor before his own hearth, after deciding it was best to use his magically warmed hearth stone given how long he had been absent. Tonks could easily have been called away to the Ministry and he did not fancy struggling alone on the floor of her flat.

Feeling vaguely unsettled but warm enough to move, Harry sat up and brushed off his robes. The hearth had only recently gone out from the overnight fire and his movements induced floating curls of ash to lift into the air. Harry rubbed his head,

which ached just behind his eyes. He really had to limit this kind of travel. Leveraging himself to his feet, he promised his aching body that he would do just that. He had done all he could in that place; it would have to take care of itself from here on.

Too stiff to lift his feet properly, Harry scuffed his way over to Kali's cage and raised her to his shoulder since she too creaked when she tried to climb. "Sorry," Harry said to her. "Didn't mean to make you suffer too."

With evening fieldwork looming, he really should do a little exercise to loosen his muscles, but instead he fell onto his bed with one of his assigned books. Kali curled up under the hair on his back collar as he read, making him loath to move. Her sleepiness infected him, and in the middle of a page listing potions to detect magically arranged dust, Harry fell asleep.

Harry woke to a familiar voice, in the middle of a very strange dream where he was arguing with Snape about Ginny, but in the dungeon at Hogwarts back when they were both still students.

Ron strode into the room just as Harry raised his disoriented head. "Hey, do you know where my sister is?"

Harry shook his head while combing his hair with his fingers. "Nuh, haven't seen her." He sniffled and blink broadly, feeling tethered still to his dream. He closed the book he had left open on the bed, feeling regretful that his intention of finishing his readings early looked to be falling short.

"Help me go look for her. I want to find her before dinner."

Harry pulled a muscle jumping in surprise at what time it may be. "I . . ." He fumbled hurriedly for his watch. It was only four. Harry stashed his watch back away and imagined Ginny planning on dinner with Aaron. "I'm sure she's fine."

Ron kicked the bed post. "Where's that smarmy bloke in your program live? I want to make sure she's not with 'im."

Harry stood up and slipped by his friend, not wanting to give that information away.

Ron went on, "It's not a listed address."

"No, and it's got a lot of protection on it. What does it matter if she's there . . . she can take care of herself."

Ron poked Harry in the chest when he next came in range. "She's my little sister that's why it matters. I don't like that bloke much."

Harry pushed Ron's finger away, finding a little agreement with the first part. "Look, Ginny's like a sister to me too. But what are you going to do? She can do what she wants. And Aaron's okay, if that's who she's with."

"You know what Dad's going to say when he finds out?"

Harry worried a bit about that too. "Don't tell him."

It was early by two hours to leave, but Harry said, "Look, Ron, I gotta go. Training, er, field work. I'll see ya." With that, he Disapparated.

Tonks was manning the Auror's office when Harry arrived, scratching out a report with a battered quill. Since they were alone, she stood mid-word to give him a kiss. Harry tugged a chair over and sat near her, knees bumping.

While she wrote, she said, "Quiet night so far. Kingsley's out on an easy one. Seems our friends in Durumulna are taking a holiday." Then a minute later: "Getting by without a guard?"

"For now."

She stopped and looked up. Harry explained, "When the gold starts to turn back to iron, I worry a bit what they may do. I liked having a guard for Candide."

Tonks tugged over a sheet covered in cross-outs, arrows, and sideways writing and made a note in a slice of white space. "I can have Hornisham assigned on nights when you are here."

Sincerely, Harry said, "Thanks, Tonks."

"I want to reward you for not only being on time, but early."

"I had to escape from Ron."

Winking, she said, "You're afraid of Ron, now?"

Harry snorted tiredly. "I'm afraid of rampaging older brother of sister who is seriously dating my hard-to-judge friend, yes."

She laughed aloud. "I'd think Ron would be happy about that. Aaron's no slouch in the gold department."

Harry chewed on his lips while he considered how grumpy Ron could get about these things. "I think that makes it harder for him, actually."

"Hm."

Chapter 26

After a long evening of patrol, Harry thought he would sleep solidly, but he woke at least twice from an odd dream of masks and chases where at one point he finally captured a black-cloaked Durumulna member only to discover Snape skulking beneath the disguise.

Kali rattling in her cage roused Harry from his sleep-drunken stupor. The glare of mid-morning light from the small window made him blink, so despite his heavy head, he thought it best to rise for the day. He had to fumble around the teetering stack of his assigned books to find his glasses. The cloaked shadow slipping around him in his dream followed him to the wardrobe while he pulled out clean clothes and tugged them on. Harry tried to shake the impression of the dream as well as the fresh memory of desiring to control the Snape in the other Plane.

On the stairs Harry knotted the sash of his dressing gown against the chilly air and stepped into the dining room. A familiar, stringy-haired figure stood bending over the sideboard, sorting post. Harry stared at Snape's back, a vague dis-ease washing through him, making his feet tingle. Candide poured Harry coffee and handed it to him.

"Didn't sleep well?" she asked.

Snape glanced backwards sharply and Harry felt a jolt of utter wrongness, but he covered it quickly. With a rumbling rasp of wood on wood, he pulled out a chair, but merely leaned on the back of it. "Yeah, tough night . . . at the Ministry," he lied, trying to gather himself. The steam of the coffee burned his face, so he set it down and verified that he had his wand in his pocket.

Harry watched the man sorting through the letters on the sideboard. He exuded the taint of a Dark Mark.

Candide, dripping concerned, said, "Sit, down, Harry. Or maybe you should go back to bed."

Candide's gentle worry made Harry risk sliding into a seat out of a more defensible standing position. Harry rested his forehead on his palm, thinking frantically. He must have returned to the wrong place . . . a place where his guardian was still Marked.

Snape collected his post and sat beside Candide to open them. Harry tried not to stare at him doing this. He instead stared at Candide's hands, wrapped around her

cup, wondering with a tractionless circling of thought what he should do. If Snape and Candide believed him in the right place, and there were not two of him here, then his counterpart – and clearly he had one as skilled as himself – was in his Plane. Was it possible they would both recognize the mistake at the same time and both decide to switch at the same time? Was his counterpart sitting in exactly this place, thinking exactly the same thing? Or was he unaware that his guardian could be unmarked. Surely if he had the same Plane-jumping power than the other would be aware of the Mark or lack thereof.

Too many thoughts. Harry calmed his heart because the discordant thrumming of it was not helping his thinking one bit. He tried to sip his coffee and coughed on it.

"Harry?" Candide prompted, sounding disbelieving.

Harry put on a false smile and pretended all was as it should be. He did not want to reveal what had gone wrong, it just wanted it sorted out as quickly as possible. "I'm just thinking," he said. "Lots to worry about."

"Like what?" she asked, sounding the kind inquisitor.

"Well . . ." Harry struggled and plucked the first thing that came to mind. "Ron isn't happy that Ginny and Aaron are together."

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. Breakfast appeared in a sparkle, and Harry decided to eat it because that was what he would normally do – on a normal morning where his appetite had not fled due to transcendental panic. How had he messed up, he wondered? He had done exactly the same as every other time he had returned. Well, except he had taken for granted this time that it would just work out and had not been trying quite so hard. Should he go back and try again?

Harry's cold-sore bones resisted the notion with a dissuading twinge. But he had little choice. If he did find home and he found another Harry in it, he would just have to explain. As he ate, suddenly voraciously hungry, Harry promised himself he would stay put after this – for certain.

Harry felt Snape's gaze return to him yet again over the letter he held up. Harry needed to behave normally, but could not manage it. He was grateful when Candide asked, "How is Aaron?"

"Better. Ginny seems to be, er, helping him along."

Candide chuckled, almost a giggle, at this, and Harry thought: is that really true here too? He had to be careful, not everything was going to be the same. Patrol had

been the same, and Tonks had been the same . . . perhaps even unusually attentive. That made Harry wonder what his counterpart was doing differently and he felt a bizarre jealousy of his counterpart. Harry gulped his coffee, antsy to get home again, refusing to dwell on the worry that he might not manage to.

Stalling while he gathered his meager strength, Harry poured himself more coffee and put his cold-stiffened hands around the mug. So many things about this place were right.

"My sister says hello, by the way," Candide announced.

"How are your parents?" Harry asked, hoping that was safe.

She smirked. "Non-stop nagging about this and that." She glanced at Snape beside her. "Just as well, I didn't insist you go along, Dear," she said, and reached to pat his nearest arm. Snape jerked out of reach, immediately relented, and sat rail-stiff until the petting withdrew.

Harry, who had been avoiding looking directly at Snape, froze while fixing his attention on him out of the corner of his eye. Harry waited for Snape's laser-vision to divert down to the next letter. Harry swallowed hard. Candide shot him an uncomfortable smile and returned to the Prophet. Harry sat back and stared openly at the man sitting diagonal from him. What if it wasn't he who was in the wrong place? He needed a test to find out.

As soon as Harry pondered taking the upper hand, his instincts fell in line behind it. The last piece of Voldemort sang within him at the opportunity.

"How was your week, Severus?"

Snape lifted his bored eyes and said, "Same as the others."

"Surprising," Harry softly returned. And when Snape's eyes narrowed, Harry backed off this direct attack and added with a casual smirk, "Well, I don't remember it ever being uneventful. The students saw to that."

Snape rubbed his fingertips together, put down the letter he held and folded the stack away to give Harry all of his attention. "The Gryffindors were their usual obnoxious selves, the Slytherins exceptionally creative, to their lasting regret."

Harry's mind churned over several times. The man before him was so wrong, and everything else so right. "Maybe you'd help me with some spells," Harry said. "You said you would when you were home next."

Candide sighed loudly. "Good thing I've never had the chance to redecorate in the hall."

Harry gave her a sympathetic smile. "When we move my room, we can do more to the hall. I'd like that. Something bright and flowery."

"Please," Snape sneered.

"You're never home," Harry prodded, baiting Snape and enjoying it immensely. A ripple passed over the man, aversion or possessiveness suppressed.

Snape's coffee was empty. Harry stood and invited, "Spellwork?"

Snape followed him out. Harry would have expected him to pat Candide on the shoulder, but he did not. Far too aware of the cursedness of the other, Harry waved the main hall furniture aside and spun to face Snape.

They exchanged a few basic drill spells and repeated them in a sequence, building in power. Candide strolled in to watch. Harry, preferring her not to be there if his suspicion was correct and he had to confront Snape outright, said, "Why don't you go to Diagon and get some tapestries for the wall in here? To hang between the upper windows. And for the walls of the nursery."

"I suppose I could."

Harry did not modulate his next block, so that the rebound rattled around the room.

"If I do, will you stop this for the day?" Candide asked. "I'd hate to see them burned to a crisp right off."

"Sure," Harry eagerly said, glad that had worked.

"I'll be back later then." On her way out with her cloak and basket, she said, "You two should take that to Hogwarts; it's built for it, unlike this creaky place."

As soon as the Floo faded, Harry waited for Snape to reach the Blasting Curse in the drill sequence. He lowered his wand and Squelched instead of blocking it. Snape's wand went flying and he gaped at Harry.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" Harry asked crisply.

Snape took a step in the direction of his wand but stopped when the room darkened. Night dropped over the house and the air grew dank. Snape glanced around, but Harry's wand still hung at his side. Chattering sounded from the nearby wall. Snape glanced at it, not comprehending that either based on his posture. Harry waited for his eyes to come back around to him as the source of the shift in the environment. His eyes held wary surprise.

Harry helpfully stated, "You should be yelling at me about now."

Snape's shoulders fell an iota, supporting Harry's suspicion about which of them was displaced. He opened his mouth, but Harry filled in with, "Too late." He snagged Snape's wand from the corner.

"You have another?" Harry asked. "Let's see it."

Snape reached into his robes for another wand. He hesitated with it half pulled out. Harry said, "Try anything and you will regret it."

A draw ensued. The light darkened more and the stones of the house groaned like an animal in pain. Winky appeared in a sparkle. "Master Harry is doing bad things," she said, hunched over to make her plea.

"Master Harry is almost finished. Hand it over," he demanded of the man across from him. "And don't think I can't follow you if you Apparate away. You taught me how."

Snape put the wand away back in his robes. "I'll keep it, if you don't mind." He glanced at the windows and his brow lowered as he noticing now that they were not darkened but that the sunlight itself had gone slate colored where it struck the floating dust.

Harry let a little light in. "Better? Sit down."

"You are doing that," Snape stated, resolve fading as he took a seat on the arm of the nearest couch. He sat with his hands propped beside him, tense. He stared at Harry. "I didn't . . . realize how powerful you were."

Harry paced behind the other couch, keeping one eye on the alien wizard sitting tensely across from him. Winky, hands rubbing over one another squeaked miserably, "Master Harry . . ."

Harry let the light in. It was like turning off a source of anger inside himself, and he felt giddy in the wake of it. "Bring us cocoa, won't you, Winky?"

Winky hurried off.

"I asked you a question," Harry said, re-channeling his anger and feeling the thing inside him happy to sop it up.

"And I don't feel like answering," Snape returned, eyes challenging, pushed beyond care.

Harry felt around himself for the focus of the cursedness and pushed at it. Snape grabbed his forearm with a cry, making Harry smile faintly. If someone was going to invade his home, they were going to pay for it. "You continue to underestimate me."

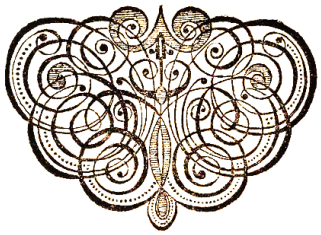
Snape had bent partly over his arm, but he straightened with a snap of his spine and glared at Harry. "You were not like this . . ."

"I was not what? Have we met?" Harry had not considered that this stranger may not be so strange after all.

Snape clammed up, and Harry realized who he was, recognizing the depths of despair the man slipped into with such ease.

"We have met," Harry said, filling in for his guest. "I saved you from Voldemort in Weaver's End; didn't I?"

Chapter 27.



Tangled Threads

"Where is my father?" Harry demanded, flicking his wand at his side impatiently, itching to take action.

"Your father?" Snape managed with a single sharp sputter. "Unimaginable. This whole place is unimaginable."

"Where is he?" Harry demanded again, raising his wand and staring along it at the impostor before him.

Snape's lips twitched. "Do you really need that magical stick you are holding?" he said mockingly.

Harry smiled. "It's hard to limit the damage if I don't use it."

Snape's gaze faded at this. "I assume my counterpart is where I departed from. That was how the gateway was purported to work."

Harry stilled his wand, thinking fast. He would have to fetch him back, somehow. "Where is this gateway? How does it work?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Harry stepped closer, wand still held out, angled down, arm arched, because Snape was sitting on the couch arm. "Because that place is where you belong."

Snape crossed his arms, but they slid down until they hugged his torso. Voice low, he said, "It is hopeless there. I could not do as you asked; I could not get close to Potter

let alone get him to forgive me. Beyond Aberforth, I have no allies of any kind. I was hunted by my associates and tormented daily by my master." He scrubbed at his forearm. "Just as you just did." His bluster disappeared as quickly as it grew.

"I can do that again," Harry pointed out.

Bleakly, after a long pause, Snape said, "I could not stop thinking about the place you had described, where the Dark Lord was no more, where I did not have so many enemies. I remembered a partial, half-burned book from Dumbledore's collection, believed to be written by a deranged and delusional wizard who raved for thousands of pages about portals and gateways to parallel realities."

Snape straightened his robes and lifted his chin, gauging Harry before continuing. "And when you told me where you were from, I realized he was not, in fact, a raving lunatic, but a genius. So, I constructed a gateway by piecing together instructions from his ravings. It was supposed to take many moon cycles to open, but it latched on easily to the Inbetween, anchoring the book called it, to that horrible grey-skied place you took me to escape. Once that was set, the mirroring of the spell cast into this place was simple repetition. Then it was a simple matter of waiting for my alternate to step into the gate to engage it." He glared, hunched and grim, at Harry. "I am not going back. Only death awaits me there and I am not ready to die."

Harry considered the worn man before him and contemplated threatening to kill him, but he could not find it in himself. "You are going back," Harry insisted. "And in the meantime, not a word to Candide. I don't want her to know what's happened."

Snape's chin rose again at this.

"What?" Harry queried. "You like having a wife?"

"I would not have thought so . . . before."

Harry perched his fists on his hips and said, "You didn't make this place what it is. You don't deserve to enjoy it."

Snape retorted lightly, "If I had made this place, I certainly would not have put you in it in your current position."

Harry did not take affront at this. "No, I don't imagine you would have. If I'd told you, would you have come?"

Snape rocked back and forth slightly. "I would thought harder about it, I admit. I also did not comprehend what you really had become."

Harry paced away, slapping his hand on his thigh in frustration. He had to check on his guardian as soon as possible, make certain he was all right. His bones groaned

at the thought. But from the other place, it should be clearer how to arrange for them both to return to their rightful place. He would have to try taking something alive through with him. Perhaps he could just drag both of the men to where they belonged, one at a time. He considered taking Kali as a test, but her dislike of the Dark Plane made him decide otherwise.

He glared at Snape, and said, "Be nice to your wife while I'm gone."

"I need to depart for Hogwarts soon, anyhow."

"Be nice to my friends then," Harry corrected.

Snape's lip curled into a sneer. "If they are Gryffindors, not a chance."

"Typical," Harry muttered.

Snape matched him. "Slytherin is not much better. My counterpart has grown dangerously soft. That and frequently leaving the house in Lupin's hands, of all people, has rendered my House unrecognizable."

"You must have left it in Remus' hands, to come here now."

"I realized I was expected to go home," Snape replied, bored sounding as he pulled a desperate haughtiness around him.

"You still are," Harry snapped, and Disapparated.

Harry fished agitatedly in his pocket for his coin purse as he strolled with overcharged energy along the narrow shopfronts of Diagon Alley. It was Sunday, so only every fifth shop was open, and the chill wind swooping through the length of the alley left the pavements clear of loiterers.

Eeylops was still being repaired from the fire, so Harry walked down further to A.J. Furriers, a far less savory animal dealer. Several warped cages had been parked out on the pavement. The animals inside them were crowded into the corners for warmth, their fur blowing backwards in the wind. One cage full of young chickens had a wired-on rusty sign reading Python Poulets. The next cage held small white Hat Rabbits Guaranteed to Hide as Required. Harry bent down to look more closely at these. One of them had a crooked black stripe along its snout, parting its oversized pink eyes. Harry put his finger through the bars and prodded it in the haunch and it shuffled closer to its peers.

"You don't even wear a hat," a familiar voice said from behind Harry.

Harry straightened and slipped his hands into his pockets. "Hello, Belinda."

"I saw you from the window of Phantasmic Phoot Phasions," she said with a nod farther down the alley at the glittering new shop which had a bay window display crowded with dancing pairs of patent leather shoes in a variety of gaudy colors. Harry could not remember what shop had been there before.

Belinda glanced up and down the alley, in a behavior that gave the otherwise occupied Harry pause. A little nervously, she asked, "So, I was wondering if you wanted to do something, come over for tea or something. It's Sunday, you know, and we haven't had time to get together."

"I don't have time right now," Harry said. "I have something I really have to take care of."

She sighed and appeared frustrated or strained. Harry did wish to know what was troubling her, but he could not delay in finding out what had happened to his guardian.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "Some other time."

Belinda stepped closer and straightened his robes for him by shaking the collar out and turning the lapels out. "That's better," she said. "We should take you shopping sometime." She started to let go, then stepped closer, making Harry take a quick glance up and down the alley, expecting Skeeter to jump out any moment. "You're certain you don't have time?" she asked again.

Harry gently plucked her left wrist off his lapel, skewing his robes again. "Yes. Positive."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "I need help with something," she said quietly, then bit her lip. "There is so much going wrong right now."

Harry tried to Legilimize her but she glanced away. A trio of generic looking, dark haired wizards strolled by and Belinda stepped closer again, executing a dance move so she was partly behind the cages. When the strangers had passed through the gateway in the wall to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry took Belinda's wrists again, but this time did not extract them from his robes. "Are you mixed up with them?" he asked, disbelieving.

Sounding overly casual, she pushed away and said, "No, of course no- Who do you mean?" She backed up more, glanced back at the shoe shop, and then down at her feet. "I know that you are serious with Tonks now, really. I just thought, you know, tea or something."

What Harry got was that she was really in need of help. "I'm willing to help, just not right at this moment. I really have a personal emergency I have to take care of."

She nodded without looking up, and Harry added emphatically. "I'll call as soon as I can, all right?"

She nodded again and stepped away, bony shoulders bent forward, head low.

Harry did not have time to review this conversation in his head as he liked. He slipped into the shop to buy the smallest Hat Rabbit they had. The shopkeeper plopped the snow-white animal down on a sheet of vellum that read Certified Bunny Obscura and slid it over in exchange for Harry's four Sickles. Harry pocketed both items and strolled to Knockturn Alley. Once he stepped down into the dingy, crooked place, he lifted his cloak and spun a half turn as though slipping an invisibility cloak over himself, and before he stopped moving, he slipped away into the Dark Plane.

The creatures there must have smelled the rabbit because they followed Harry in parade formation at a respectful distance as he wove along between hillocks, kicking dusty grit up onto his shoes. Harry needed the walk to gather his memories of the place he wished to return to and to clear his thoughts from all other worries. He remembered the place clearly, even though he had, upon first returning, assumed it to be a hallucination of striking his head.

He went along until he stood opposite his own house in Shrewsthorpe, and stopped beside a tangle of saw grass and vicious rusty wire. He glanced down and stared at the pentagram in the grit before him. He had made that pentagram with his foot as a focal point for returning home from that other place. But he was home now, or opposite of home now. There was only one Dark Plane, it seemed, and how one left it depended upon how one entered it. Harry stepped carefully around the Device and a little away so the throng of following creatures did not muss it. Although, now that he studied it, the lines of it looked far cleaner than he would have managed with the point of his shoe. Harry stepped closer, crouched down beside it and touched it with a finger. The grit forming the pentagram felt like sandstone, and it definitely had a straighter structure imparted to it since his trainer toe had scratched it out.

Harry growled lightly. He himself had left the gateway open that let this alien swap for his adoptive father.

The rabbit, despite the hordes wishing for its sweet flesh, sat calmly in Harry's hand when he pulled it from his pocket. Alert life shined from its dilute-blood colored eyes but it gave not a twitch of a white whisker. Its far-set gaze focused on nothing and everything at once in the grey light of the underworld. Harry took close hold of the creature and imagined a place he wished he did not know.

Severus Snape came to dulled awareness in an oppressive haze of hot beeswax. Quivering, icy pain radiated dully but insistently out from his joints to his fingertips and toes, and a burning sensation sizzled on the inside of his left forearm, filling him with alarm that somehow his Mark had returned. He twitched his arm and the pain faded to a dull ache and trailed around the top of his wrist, catching on the hairs of his arm. When he moved farther the new pain faded to the same persistent throb as the rest of him.

Snape raised his head. Angled rows of glowing, off-white candles filled his vision, their glaring radiance warming his chilled core. He rolled over as far as he dared and peeled the translucent blob of beeswax off his wrist and tossed it out of the pentagram of candles surrounding him.

Careful to avoid igniting his robes, Snape stood and stepped out of the Device and onto the thoroughly dilapidated rug. He lifted his head and stared around the hall, at the boarded up broken windows, the sagging balcony, the white-edged stain down the wall where the roof had been leaking for some time. Cobwebbed desolation encased him. It felt like a bad dream except for his complete wakefulness. It was as though his long-term memories were a lie, or a delusion. He breathed in the dusty air and lowered his head to consider the illuminated pentagram. No decent meaning offered itself up to him and he was desperate for any, no matter how unlikely. Had he attempted some dark magic to escape from the past into the future, for reasons he could not recall? Or had he simply forgotten, at some point, the clearly dismal present in a hallucination?

Confusion and alarm swirled through him as he paced, shaking the cold-stiffness from his limbs and, finally, movement exercised his faculties and he knew what had happened. Somehow, Harry's journeys through alternative Planes had come to snag him, and he suspected with slowly gathering dread that this empty, decaying house was just the first glimpse of a miserable, dark world.

Vaguely heartened that the home attached to his memories most likely still existed, Snape made a search of the house. What had not been removed had been chewed away by rodents, who had left their droppings in the mildewed drawers of the desk, the one remaining piece of furniture, although it sat crooked because one corner had been sheared off.

"Master?" a faint voice prompted, giving Snape a bad start.

A small ghost floated beside the desk, feet bent behind it so that it hung, half kneeling, but not any higher off the floor than it would have been if it were standing.

Chapter 27

"Tidgy?" Snape said to the small apparition, whose long ears hung to its shoulders. "What happened?"

"Bad people is coming, Master."

"Yes, I perceived that. Some time ago, it looks like," Snape dryly stated, tracing each line of dark spell burn on the drawing room wall facing him. His mind worked quickly, trying to narrow in on the likeliest possibilities. "Was someone here recently? Who set up the candles?"

Tidgy cocked his head. "You is having done this, Master. Is Tidgy being tested?"

"Hm. Did I?" Snape's eyes narrowed and moved side to side, taking in the room for clues. "Did I have a book I was working from?"

"Yes, Master."

Hope swelled where there was none previously. "Where is it; do you know?"

Tidgy's ears swung as he shook his head. "Master is taking it away somewhere."

Snape swore, making Tidgy put an arm up for protection. "I am too smart for my own good." To the elf-ghost, he said, "No one can hurt you, Tidgy; you're dead."

"Tidgy is knowing this," the elf said sadly.

"Well, I best go look for the book. Fortunately, I know where I would be likely to hide it. Unfortunately, I was presumably aware of that when I hid it. What did it look like?"

"The book is being large, Master, with purple ink. And half burned."

"Purple ink? I know another author who favors purple and the Dark Plane. Very good, Tidgy, thank you."

Tidgy wiped away a ghostly tear with the corner of his ragged towel. "Master is thanking Tidgy?"

"Yes. Why not?" He waved the elf away. "Go and haunt the kitchen why don't you."

Snape returned to the hall and extinguished each of the Device's candles with his fingertips, careful not to disturb their positions. He would need the Device to return home, if hope of that were rational, and he could not risk damaging it. He paused, crouched before the arm of the star where one of the candles had spilled wax onto his forearm, rousing him with bad memory, if not pain. Circumstances threatened to suffocate him along with the dust and mold of the rotting house. Raising his eyes to

the poorly lit, damaged hall did not help. Grey sky showed through the gaps in the planking over the windows and through the hole in the roof.

Snape gathered a lifetime of plodding, yet vigilant, attitude about him and stood straight. Survival was the first order, and he needed to understand his situation better to manage that.

Out on the road, a ragged newspaper had plastered itself to the neighbor's chain-link fence. The usually welcoming house beyond the fence had a neglected air about it. The next house over appeared occupied, but had a pair of vicious dogs patrolling behind a crudely erected sign warning about same. A quick survey of the houses within view confirmed his fears that the magical population had departed Shrewsthorpe or wished make it appear as though they had. Snape gathered up the loose newspapers from the neighborhood with a broad, powerful spell and rolled them roughly. They made a sound not unlike fine parchment except for the film of pervasive grit that rubbed off onto his hands.

Snape crushed the newspapers under his arm to rub his left forearm where the wax burn stung with momentary eye-watering pain before easing. The rusty-hinged door squeaked tortuously as stepped back inside, leaving the neglected, dusty garden to the wild ivy intent on taking it over. Inside was slightly more appealing than outside, mostly because it was out of the wind. Out of a stash of spare Device-making materials dumped in the corner of the hall, Snape pulled out a candle stub and a torn rug and took them to the center of the floor where the light was best. Unable to bear sitting at the damaged desk, he folded the rug and sat cross-legged upon it to read the collected papers. Tidgy's ghost floated in and out of view, hands clasped in the mode of waiting for instructions.

The first two broadsheets were from the same Muggle newspaper edition and at first Snape thought the weather page would not be useful, but the article occupying a full half of the sheet spoke of a resurgence in extremely rare derecho windstorms along the coast off Yorkshire and East Midlands. Various experts were quoted discussing stationary warm fronts and dismissing as mass hallucination, sightings of giants tossing trees and electricity pylons aside as they rampaged through the affected countryside.

The torn pieces of Wizard paper, titled The Irreproachable Intelligencer but carrying the layout of the Daily Prophet, spoke of rules and edicts about what spells and topics of public discussion were additionally limited by the Ministry. Snape frowned most deeply at an interview with the Hogwart's Headmaster on the eve of his one year anniversary in the position: Lucius Malfoy. The last triangular corner of the most dilapidated page explained the newspaper's name change – prophecy had been

declared an illicit word both in public and private. And the staff at the paper Formally Known as the Daily P___ could not responsibly continue under that banner given the risk to their staff.

Snape gathered the papers up and laid them in the hearth before holding the candle flame to a corner. The flame hesitated before it took hold, forced to burn through the dirt coating. Snape set the candle on the hearth and sat close to watch both burn. He was in one of those places Harry seemed always to end up in – one where Voldemort had not been defeated.

As the fire burned down and the thin black ash limned with orange glow crinkled away, Snape pondered the remaining light of the sagging, distorted candle stub. If this Plane's version of himself had changed places and was now in his home, Harry would eventually notice given his counterpart's likely active Mark. At that point Harry would come seeking him out. How long this would require was not clear. If Snape were lucky it would require mere hours; except that Harry had not been at home – he had been busily working day and night on plans to rescue his fellow apprentice. Snape fancied himself rather good at hiding where he did not belong, and he expected his counterpart to be the same.

Snape shifted to lean back against the wall beside the hearth as the candle melted lower.

The wind picked up through the broken windows, fluttering the single flame. Snape roused himself, stiff again with cold. It seemed Harry would not be arriving immediately. He stood and paced until his limbs ceased to creak. Somewhere out there were Voldemort and Malfoy and all the others, free to generate misery as they wished. Snape wondered where this Plane's Potter was. Given the ban on discussions of prophecy, it seemed unlikely Potter was dead. And if he was not dead, he must be most desperate by now.

The candle faded to a tiny blue orb hovering over a pool of clear wax that shed no discernible light. Snape stood in the murky light filtering through the holes in the ruined roof. He better appreciated Harry's desire to assist in these situations. He too felt strained imagining how the Harry here may be faring. Snape stared up at the grey sky, which seemed unnaturally bright to his dark-adapted eyes, and wondered where this Harry may be.

Snape wondered hard enough that he finally simply Apparated away to the Leaky Cauldron to consult with a long-time reliable associate on Diagon Alley. The Cauldron fell silent upon his arrival but gazes quickly turned back to their hushed conversations. The room felt as normal as ever, if a tad edgy. Strange to imagine this was not his Leaky Cauldron, but another, one of an infinite number.

The wall in back opened onto a smaller Diagon Alley than Snape knew. The shops leaned inward along a narrower passageway, and brown grime covered everything, including the windows. Snape turned toward the Apothecary shop and started when figures melted out of the brick wall behind him and one put a restraining spell on his arm.

The wizard, a thuggish man with cratered skin stretched thin over his cheeks, said, "You will submit to a check. You are not carrying proper identification." He wore bright green robes sporting a patch with interlocking Ps.

Around him, the shoppers that had been approaching the wall diverted with an attitude of suddenly remembering they needed to make one more stop, far at the other end of the alley. Others approached timidly with intent eyes, drawn to the promise of spectacle.

"Name," the second wizard demanded, pulling a thick scroll out of his robes and preparing to open it.

"I don't have to give you my name," Snape said, thinking that if his counterpart saw fit to exert such effort to depart this place, there was most likely a good reason for it.

The first man bodily threw Snape against the wall and placed his wand under his nose. "We can do this the 'ard way, Mate. I was gettin' bored anyway. Give 'im the test Herbie."

Handling the heavy scroll made it difficult for Herbie to manage his wand as well. Snape saw this as a possible opening for escape but decided to let it pass given the wand nearly up his nose.

"What test?" Snape asked. "Who are you?"

"We're the Pureblood Police, we are. Where you been?"

Dryly, Snape replied, "I don't get out much."

"Well, then, yer overdue," the wizard said. "Give me the doohickey, Herbie."

Herbie gave up on managing his wand to pull a silver cylinder out of his pocket, which he handed over. The Police Wizard snapped it open with one hand and extracted a balance. The mechanism unfolded neatly and swayed in the breeze.

Herbie leaned closer and whispered helpfully, "You should give up your name, that's easier." He glanced at the scales teetering in the wind a little nervously. "If you come up short in the measure, it'll not go well. Just give us a name, eh?"

A figure sauntered over, blonde hair flashing over a smug sneer. "His name's Snape, but finish the test anyway."

Beyond Draco Malfoy hovered two bulky, dark-robed figures, faces invisible in their deep hoods, wands out and aimed. Herbie bit his lips at the sight of them, agitated.

The policeman took his wand off Snape's nose to stack translucent squares on one side of the scales. Transfixed by curiosity and the additional guards, Snape did not move.

"Little finger, left hand right here then," the Policeman commanded, indicating a little platform on the scale's base. Snape obliged while he looked for an escape. Apparition would be traced in a place like this, departing would only buy him a very short time. The metal under his pinky warmed and the empty tray of the scale shifted of its own accord.

Herbie had found the right entry in the scroll. "Says here halfblood." He tsked with his tongue sadly.

The scales clanged, the cubes rising to the maximum they could. The first policeman said, "Scale says pure."

Draco's smile faded. "That's not right. Father said . . ."

"And your father of course knows everything," Snape stated, bored. He retrieved his hand.

Herbie helpfully said, "You should get your record set straight, you should. Bad confusion. Mudbloods 'n' halfbloods only allowed on the Alley here after ten and before eight."

Draco leaned in closer, pointing emphatically. "The record is straight. Look, Muggle father: Tobias Snape."

The first policeman disregarded this as he carefully packed away the scales. "Book's no matter, scales 'ave the final say. Come one, Herbie." He stepped back into the brick wall and melted away.

Herbie extracted himself from Draco and hurriedly set himself to rights before following his fellow. In the absence of the police, the hooded figures approached. Snape waited until just the right moment and used his off hand to spell Draco with a Blasting Curse so that he flew into the other two. Then he Disapparated for the countryside and Disapparated again for yet another spot of equally remote countryside, before landing in a Waterloo station cupboard and stepping out into the crowd after applying a quick disguise. His care turned out to be fully warranted; he could hear the

pounding on the supplies cupboard door he had sealed shut even before he got out of earshot. He continued walking the same as before, keeping to the thickest stream of passengers heading for the tube lines. He didn't Apparate again until he was stepping into the Leaky Cauldron. This time he headed directly for the Apothecary, arriving in the back corner of the shop.

Content with hiding mere feet from where he had first been chased down, Snape waited calmly for the hunched witch in a battered hat to scuffle her way from the counter to the door before approaching the shop owner. Jiggers did not hide his surprise at seeing him there after he removed the disguise.

The Chemist glanced avidly around the empty shop. "Severus," he whispered. "What is it you need?"

"Information," Snape said.

Jiggers did as he always did when he got nervous, pulled out a stained rag to clean the mixing and pill molding area of the counter. "Don't have much of that, I'm afraid." He glanced sharply at the door, but it was just a passerby causing the light from the window to flicker.

"Is Harry Potter still alive?"

"Far as I know," Jiggers replied, falling mystified. The rag smoldered under his hand so he rinsed it out and hung it up more neatly than the holey and stained thing deserved to be. He leaned in, right eye giving a twitch. "You aren't thinking to patch things up with You-Know-Who by capturing the Prophe-" He stopped, bit his lips, and swallowed hard. " . . . the Devined One, are you? I've known you a long time, Severus, and I could never see you stooping that low, given what's at stake."

"That wasn't my intent," Snape said. "I would like to assist, in fact. My loyalty has always been to Dumbledore."

"Hm. Right." Jiggers straightened his board and pestles. "You got a funny way of showin' it," he muttered, turning to shelve a bottle of white powder. Without turning back around, he said, "Potter's hiding himself well, behind magic stronger than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can break through."

"Dumbledore's magic, you mean?" Snape stated, knowing exactly where to look. "Thank you, Jiggers."

Snape Disapparated for 12 Grimmauld Place, landing lightly on the porch in the waning evening light. Safely out of view, he scrutinized the surrounding alleys and

shrubs, looking for watchers. Only a few crooked or flickering street lamps glowed on the square, providing for numerous hiding places. Snape expected that the house was watched, it certainly felt watched. If it was, that would be to his advantage if an argument were to start when he knocked on the door; the occupants would feel obliged to keep things contained.

Snape composed himself before pulling the bell cord. He had a feeling his presence was not going to be welcome.

Ron Weasley, his face as doltish as ever in stupefaction, tried to close the door, but Snape put his foot in the way.

"You should hear me out," Snape stated succinctly to the hunched over young man, who was making small surprised noises with each breath. They glared at each other. "No wonder Potter is getting nowhere with Voldemort," Snape muttered.

Ron finally tried to spell the toe impeding the door, but the hex was blocked easily. Snape let the young man keep hold of his wand, for now. Ron's freckled face shifted from startled to astonished. "You said his name."

"Did I?" He regrouped. "Don't you even have an alarm to raise to bring others to help you?" Snape asked, disbelieving.

Ron's head ducked inside slightly and then back out again while he pushed harder on the door.

"Oh, you are alone then," Snape stated. "I see."

Ron's face fell into stillness, a sort of giving in to fear.

"Look, Weasley . . . let's be reasonable. I don't intend to do you any harm."

Ron grabbed the edge of the door and stopped pushing so hard against Snape's toe. "Well, what're ya doing here then?" he demanded.

"I am hoping I can assist."

Ron peered at him, utterly mystified. "With what?"

"With what else?" Snape snapped. "With the destruction of the Dark Lord."

Ron puzzled this as a breeze caught his hair. "But . . . why would you do that?"

This was going to be a little harder than Snape first thought, and that was saying a lot. Perhaps he should just retreat to Shrewsthorpe and await his Harry's arrival. It was hard to give in so utterly, though, to a fight that was woven so firmly into

the fabric of his being. While he pondered this, a pop! announced the Apparition of Hermione Granger, who, due to space limitations, teetered on the edge of the porch. Snape grabbed her arm and tugged her to safety, spelling a block as a nasty disemboweling curse came sizzling out of the darkened shrubs across the way.

Hermione gave a yelp and Ron gave a tug and the three of them tumbled inside the house. Hermione recovered first and stood against the corridor wall with her wand aimed, brushing her hair nervously from her eyes. "Professor . . . I mean . . ."

Snape picked himself up and dusted off, making no move for his wand, which he had stashed away as they fell rather than risk losing it. Ron stood to lock the door, but hesitated, hands seized around the brass knobs, clearly not wanting to be locked in with him.

Snape displayed his empty hands and said, "You should most certainly lock it, given that it strengthens the spells on this place."

Hermione inched her way along the wall. "What are you doing here?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I've come to assist."

"With what?"

"Are you as daft as your boyfriend here?" Snape demanded, glad at least that the direct approach was getting him a hearing.

Ron said, "He says he wants to help bring down You-Know-Who."

Hermione with a breathy huff, said, "You have a funny way of helping with that."

This gave Snape pause, given that it was the second time someone reasonably intelligent had said that in just the span of ten minutes.

Fortunately Ron, the slow one, believed the obvious needed to be stated, "Harry said you killed Dumbledore, and I know others don't believe it, but I believe him."

Snape turned to him and the young man shrank back against the door. When all else fails try Socrates . . . or Dumbledore. "And why do you think I did that?"

Ron, clearly panicked as always by a question from Snape, shook his head overly much from side to side. "I don't know."

Snape dearly wished he understood the situation himself. He had committed a Harry-style error of charging in without proper preparation.

Hermione, wand still trained on him, steady now, said, "He always trusted you."

The truth of that still felt like a weakness. Snape turned to her and said, "And I never let him down. Ever."

Hermione's wand wavered. "Ever?"

"Well, I did not do so well teaching Potter Occlumency." He waved his hand. "But that is in the past. For the present, Potter has a task to finish that he can't seem to get on with. At risk . . ." He indicated Hermione's wand. "To my own life, I am here to help."

"But why did you kill Dumbledore?" Ron asked, distress in every line of him. At least he had his wand out now, but he was not aiming it very well. Snape considered chastising him for that. He wished he knew the answer to the question. The mystery of it made his personal worries much more acute.

Hermione answered for him, "Well, he was really ill."

Bolstered by that, Snape took refuge in the easiest possible answer. "There are things I do not expect any of you to ever understand."

The three of them stood there in a stalemate until Kreacher came slinking down the stairs, muttering to himself. He spied Snape there and, with one eye twitching, said, "Mistress will be pleased with this visitor, yes . . ." His shadow lengthened as he crept around the banister and headed to the back of the house. " . . . not like those worthless Mudbloods and, mistress forbid, Werewolf . . ."

Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth before blurting out: "Remus, I didn't find Remus! I completely forgot when I came back and . . ." She raised her wand at Snape again, who gave her a tiresome roll of the eyes in return.

Snape stood with an attitude of disregarding the threat she represented. "And what trouble has he got himself into?" he asked.

Hermione replied, "He didn't come back last night, and I need to . . . I need to meet someone else now. And Ron has to stay here . . . we don't want to leave the house empty."

"Wise plan, given the history you have with this house elf," Snape said, trying to ingratiate himself a bit, and seeing the only possible chance at gaining some trust, he asked,"Do you want me to go look for him?"

Sounding threatening in a way only long-term strain could have hardened her, she asked, "Do you know where he is?"

"I have no idea where he is. So, if you wish me to fetch him, I will need some kind of clue as to what his mission was."

Hermione chewed her lip and glanced at the horribly ugly clock skulking halfway along the corridor. "What do you think, Ron?"

"What do I think? I say we throw the git out. What's to think about!"

Hermione did not appear to take this advice very seriously. "I'm worried about Remus, he's not been well and he really wanted to find . . . well . . ." She glanced anxiously between Snape and Ron.

Snape crossed his arms. "Suffice to say, I know more than you think I know. But if it makes you feel better to pretend I don't that is fine with me. What was Lupin looking for . . . in general terms, if you must use them."

"He went to look for something Bellatrix was rumored to have. But I'm afraid he may have been caught looking for it. I just went looking for him and he wasn't at the ruins of the Lestrange estate where we thought the . . . this thing would be."

Snape gave a small bow of his head. "With your permission, then, I will see if I can locate him."

"And . . .?" she asked, pained.

Holding in his temper and a snide tone that fought for a hearing, Snape replied, "And . . . bring him back here. Is that not what you wish?"

"Yes." She nodded emphatically.

"You have nothing to lose," Snape pointed out.

"Harry's sanity," Ron offered. "When he finds out."

"One thing at a time," Snape breathed as he swept out the door.

Snape applied a disguise and Apparated for York, to the edge of the wizarding area. The Ministry could not trace exactly who had Apparated, but they could certainly trace where, precisely. The only way to shake a trace was to get lost, by broomstick or on foot, in an area where there was more Apparition activity. As he strolled, Snape tried to settle his thoughts. He was getting involved against his better instincts. Surely, Harry would not be more than a few days in seeking him out. Snape would have to leave a clue behind in Shrewsthorpe, so Harry would know where he had ended up.

Each in turn, Snape systematically checked Bellatrix's hiding places. On the sixth destination, he found her in a Muggle-inaccessible cave branch of Llethryd Swallet.

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All but a narrow corridor of the twisting and branching cave was Apparition blocked, and the noise of anyone arriving would be heard throughout the connecting chambers, so his arrival would not be by stealth. But because of the obscurity of the location, Bellatrix had laid no traps and expected only friendly visitors, so Snape had the advantage of surprise.

By the time Bellatrix raised her wand in his direction, Snape had already struck out with a Blasting Curse, sending her toppling over a stalagmite-mound, which also shattered the brighter of two lamps that had been hooked there. Taking mental note of where the miserable lump that must be Lupin was resting, Snape moved to his right, to get into position for a clear shot when Bellatrix stood up. He peered through the bars of slick rock sheeting from the wall beside him. A deadly blast of green shot by Snape's ear, making him duck.

"So, you dare show your ugly face, Severus?" Bellatrix taunted. Her voice echoed too much to localize it and the room's many shadows moved with the quivering lamp flame. "Master will be pleased when I present your severed head to him, which is the only way you will leave this place, Severus." She laughed heartily and another blast struck the rocks behind Snape, sending shards of limestone into his back.

Snape crawled on his elbows to a better position between two high mounds of glistening, veiny rock. Hoping he correctly remembered where Lupin lay, or that the man had managed to crawl away, Snape used a narrow, invisible Cutting Curse on the domed roof of the cave. Then spelled a basic Blasting Curse to force her to defend forward. The faint whistle of plummeting missiles accompanied Bellatrix's next taunt about what she would do to some other sensitive area of Snape's anatomy. This was cut off by a fleshy thud and a sad sigh.

Snape, fearing her faking injury, waited in silence, listening to his own breath in the trapped air. In the distance water plonked rhythmically into a resonating pool. Snape searched silently around on the floor of the cave for a loose rock, which he tossed towards the wall to see if it attracted attack. When it did not, he crawled carefully toward the flickering light, keeping to the shadows. Lupin's head was raised, his strained face peering into the gloom beyond. Snape gave him a silencing gesture and crawled on.

He found Bellatrix in a heap, impaled by a spear of rock. Not dead yet, but looking close to it. Snape raised up the lantern and found that the stark shadows were not from the light, but from the blood. Dizziness rocked him as he stood there, the angled cave floor tilting more and then back again. He stood on a precipice of choice for a world in which he had no meaning. If he stood here reeling in that long enough the

choice would be made for him and knowledge of that only made him dizzier. What was he doing here, messing about with such things? He must be mad.

Snape eradicated the spike of rock and crouched to tug Bellatrix's robes aside and seal the twisted wound that made a mockery of ribs, sinew and humanity.

"What are you doing?" Lupin asked. He had dragged himself closer and clung to a fleshy-formed mound of slick rock to pull himself upright.

"Would you prefer her to die?"

Lupin had always been too soft hearted, but the question nevertheless stumped him. Snape used the silence to seal off the bleeding, but without a Healer it would only matter temporarily. With a swish and flick, he hovered her toward the narrow cave branch where Apparition was not blocked. Her robes snagged on stalagmites as they went, tattering. Lupin did not follow, and Snape turned to find he had collapsed, dull gaze reflecting the lantern light as it moved away.

"I'll return shortly," Snape said to him, noting grimly that Lupin failed to react to this promise. He set the lamp on the cave floor and Disapparated.

Snape abandoned Bellatrix on the floor of the lift inside the casualty entrance at St. Mungo's. Her wild hair had tangled hopelessly over her face, which saved him from a last sight of it.

Uncaring about being tracked at this point, as long as he evacuated Lupin quickly, Snape returned directly to the cave. Lupin lay where Snape had left him, ashen faced in the lantern light. "You came back," he said, voice weak.

"I said I would." Snape hovered him as well and Apparated him through a misdirection sequence that did not include a crowded wizarding area, but would have to do. Next trip out he would have to carry a broom, which would make interrupting Ministry tracking much easier.

"Remus!" Hermione squeaked in sympathy when she opened the door.

Snape supported Lupin more fully as he swayed, half dragging his toes over the threshold and inside the door. Hermione efficiently led the way up the stairs and Snape followed after getting a better grip on his burden.

Lupin's room was lined with disorganized brewing apparati but it sat cold. Between the two of them, they had Lupin cleaned up and laid out in bed in short minutes. Hermione rushed off to fetch soup and soda bread, while Snape remained behind, carefully tracked by bloodshot eyes as he perused the potions tables.

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"Looks like you tried to brew Wolfsbane and failed."

Lupin cleared his throat. "Fred and George attempted to brew it for me. They halfway succeeded." Then after a beat. "What are you doing here, Severus?"

A very good question, Snape thought like a bell tolling through him. "I don't feel like explaining myself to you," he replied, moving to the shelves of ingredients, taking stock there, mind working out what could be made as a means of ignoring the broader question. It was the kind of answer that felt natural to an older version of himself, but it did not make him feel good to use it. Somewhere along the line he had started to care what others thought.

Snape was contemplating backing out of getting involved. He had already changed too much. If he were using a Time-Turner the world would have snapped already, gnarled into a ball of twitching, twisted fate and collapsed into itself, and that notion made him ill and uneasy.

Lupin sank back, exhausted. Snape sat on the stool beside the bed and checked his health with a Indificator, making Lupin's eyes open in surprise. "It was rumored that you had a falling out with Voldemort, that he believed you a traitor." Lupin stopped to clear his throat and gather some strength for his voice. "Everyone assumed you'd been killed."

Snape pulled a veneer of cold around himself. "Yes to the first. No to the second. Obviously."

"After everything that's happened, hard to believe you are not just changing sides because you have no choice."

"Believe what you wish. It is no concern of mine."

Lupin coughed lightly, expressing pain at doing so. "It's not quite that simple."

Snape stood and mixed a quick palliative, which he brought back in the stone cup intended for the Wolfsbane – the only clean cup in the room. Lupin took a sip, and the next second the cup thudded hard against the wall as a curse shot across the bed, knocking Snape to the floor and ricocheting around the space, shattering glass potion bottles.

"Harry!" Hermione's voice rang out.

Snape, trapped in the corner anyway, dared to raise his head over the edge of the bed. Glass tinkled and liquids dripped behind him, sizzling as they mated randomly on the floor. Harry stood in the doorway wand out, gaze wild and furious.

Snape raised his wand in time for the second blast. He held his ground, but did not retaliate.

"Harry! Don't fight in here, are you mad!" Hermione shouted. The rug began smoldering acridly and the air grew smoky. Lupin ducked away from the line of fire as best he could, cringing. Hermione moved in to help him, still yelling at her friend. "Harry, Lupin is hurt. Stop it."

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione breathed, gazing at the destruction. "Tincture of rose petal mixing with sea wasp stingers." Headless of getting in the way of the battle, she moved around beside Snape's feet and shifted things in the broken glass, spelling piles of ingredients to hover in the air in cycling globes of reddish brown and bubbles of glittering liquid.

Harry's grip on his wand eased, given that his friend was in the way, but the hatred pouring out if him did not. "What the hell are you doing here, you murdering bastard?"

"Trying to help," Snape replied calmly.

Harry snorted. There wasn't even the slightest sign of good nature in him. "Get away from there so I can kill you properly."

Hermione froze and turned. "Harry, he rescued Remus."

"A trick," Harry snapped. "Easily planned." He waved his wand. "Get out of there, away from those two."

Snape glanced at the floor and stepped around Hermione, taking care not to trail any ingredients into any others. Before he stepped completely around the bed into the open, he said, "Killing me isn't going to accomplish anything."

"It gets me a lot of satisfaction," Harry said.

Snape hesitated on the verge of safety. "Maybe you've forgotten the prophecy."

"Maybe you don't know the whole bloody thing," Harry snarled. He was in full on, temper-lost mode; Snape recognized the headlessness of it.

In his local persona, Snape did not have enough room to placate this young man. "I do most certainly know the whole bloody thing," he stated, letting some heat through, since he was well aware that interminable calm simply drove Harry further over the edge. "That's why I am also well aware that the prophecy would be null and void if the Dark Lord never heard it. Our joint mentor Dumbledore would have had to tell him himself, if I had not. He was saved the sin of doing so himself."

Harry stared at him, anger trying to derail on this new idea. "Is that why you killed him?"

"NO," Snape returned as though Harry were a First Year.

"I saw you kill him. Don't deny it," Harry shouted, pained. And Snape saw it too, in sketchy memories flickering over Harry's eyes. Snape pinned him there with a whispered spell, trying to get a better sense of what had happened.

A tower and flashing spells. Why was Dumbledore pleading so? Was he pleading with Snape to kill him? There certainly were not a lot of options for the old wizard at that moment, as far as Harry's fluttering memories showed. Had it merely been arranged to maintain Snape's reputation? That seemed a pale reason. Mercy killing and the former? He must be missing something critical, something Harry did not know.

"Harry?" Hermione prompted, making Snape release him.

"I don't deny it," Snape said, trying to find footing and distract from what he had just done. He had never killed anyone directly before, and to come up with the right dark energy for a Killing Curse against his old mentor, as frustrating as the man sometimes was, seemed inconceivable. "But there is much you don't know, too."

Harry returned to shouting. "All I know is that you keep going around killing people that I care about." He slapped his chest once, anger boiling over again.

"I did not intend to kill your parents," Snape retorted, seeing no benefit to holding back. "The prophecy did not apply to Lily and James as far as I knew. I was hardly on the announcement list, as you might imagine. Your father's oversized ego aside, the Longbottoms were far better known as defiers of Voldemort."

Growing wary, Harry said after a gap, "You said his name."

That had been a slip. Snape took a deep breath. "Why not? I'm not beholden to him any longer."

"What? You arm doesn't hurt anymore?" Harry taunted, more mocking than Snape ever would want to hear him be.

Snape resisted rubbing his burned forearm and answered honestly. "It does, but I can ignore it."

Harry's wand came up to point at his head. "I don't trust you. I don't care who you rescued. I want you to leave."

Snape relaxed slightly. "Hm, I'm moving up. A minute ago you were going to kill me." To Harry's darkened gaze, he added, "I don't think you can get by without me. The prophecy should have been finished by now. I think you need my assistance." Harry did not argue, merely held the aim of his wand steady. Snape went on, "Given the things you need to collect, I think I can be invaluable, just on my knowledge of where Voldemort tends to keep things."

"I think he's right, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry's lips twitched nervously. "I think he's a plant. I think Voldemort gave him one last shot at redeeming himself since he's the only one who can get in here. That's what I think. I think we should make him regret doing that, then make him forget everything, and then dump him in the street for his friends who are always on guard to pick up and do with as they please."

Snape sat on the foot of the bed but he kept his wand at hand. He crossed his legs and looked around at the blackened, cold cauldrons lined up along the wall. "At least you aren't being foolish," Snape said. "That's something." When Harry had no reply to this, Snape went on, "How about I give my wand to Ms. Granger, whom I trust because her temper is a little more predictable than yours, and you give me a chance to prove myself?"

Harry thought while Snape waited. When Harry nodded at Hermione, Snape said, "Oh, I'm not giving up my wand until you agree."

Harry grew thoughtful, which was a definite improvement. "It's still a setup. Whatever you do will be designed to work out and then you'll turn on us."

"Well," Snape said, sitting back slightly, making himself at home. "In that case, you get a freebie don't you? And you can decide to give me another chance ad nauseam, until such time as it becomes clear that it can no longer be a setup because Vo- the Dark Lord would never relinquish a Horcrux, even to capture you. You are just a puny, upstart boy, and the Horcruces, well . . . they are immortality."

Harry blinked at him in silence, surprised by this openness and by how much Snape knew. "Well . . . " Harry said, hesitating, anger dissipating.

Snape stood before the cauldrons in Lupin's room, all of them bubbling now.

Harry skulked in, wand in hand. He sniffed at the first one. "That doesn't look like Wolfsbane."

"It isn't. It is the precursor to Veritaserum, which I thought would be useful to you. There are many potions that could be of use to you." Snape finished stirring one viscous pot and set the silver stirrer on the rest before the cauldron so as not to mix it up with the others. "I am willing to do things that are more helpful than brewing, but if that is all I am limited to, I will try to make myself as useful as possible."

"I don't trust you enough to let you do more. This Hermione can double check."

"As you wish," Snape stated, bored.

"You still haven't explained why you killed Dumbledore," Harry said, raising his wand and looking fierce.

Snape fished for yet another diversionary line. "If he did not see fit to explain to you, why should I?"

Harry's frown deepened, taking this as an insult. "You're saying Dumbledore kept you informed. You, who had no prophecy?"

"Hardly." Snape said, sounding firmly like he meant it, "If you think for one minute that I am not as trapped by circumstances as you are, you are sadly mistaken."

Harry relented marginally and went back to sniffing cauldrons.

Snape's Harry, when he brought him home had been hungry for an authority figure to respect. "Sit down, Potter," Snape said with an edge of command. When Harry merely glowered, he added, "You have been fighting Voldemort a mere eight or nine years. Some of us have been fighting him for twice that. Sit down and listen for a moment."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, looking difficult.

Snape leaned back against the bench and said, "There is not much I can tell you that you do not already know, but perhaps hearing it spoken aloud will be of use to the rut you are in."

Without looking up, Harry complained, "You sound like Dumbledore. What happened to you?"

"If we can leave off with the insults, that would be preferable," Snape commented. This garnered a raised brow, a good sign. Going on, Snape said, "You have grown too careful . . . wait, let me finish. You let your losses lead you to a sort of paralysis where

you too fiercely fear losing other members of the Order, and as a result risk losing even more because you keep letting the enemy regroup and grow stronger. Every rule the Ministry adds on that goes unchallenged, every death that goes uninvestigated, all of these things weaken your position."

"You want me to risk everything. Throw it all away? I knew you were still on Voldemort's side."

"You need to be bolder; I said nothing about being stupider." Snape tended to a cauldron and then fetched the stool over to sit on. He was heartened to have the young man's attention and wanted to make the most of it, even if he lost a potion doing so.

Harry said, "I'm tired of everyone getting hurt, or killed. Especially for something that was my idea. It's my fault then."

"It isn't your fault. It is Voldemort and his followers' fault. And these friends and associates that do as you ask are doing it because they believe in what they are attempting. They have already decided that the outcome is worth the risk. That isn't for you to decide for them. Have some respect for them."

Harry mulled that over, instinctively needing to offset some guilt. Falling ever more glum, he said, "Things have got so bad that more and more witches and wizards want to volunteer, even though they don't really have the skills to help."

"The war is going quite badly," Snape said, feeling he needed to say that to someone, anyone. The newly delivered newspapers gathering in the kitchen had alarmed him more than he ever imagined he could be. They had missed this utter chaos in his world, something he was eternally grateful for . . . assuming he would one day return there. The Muggles were inextricably involved now, and the grand excuses for the destruction became more elaborate and unlikely, magic and mundane churning and over-spilling poison across Europe.

Harry raised his eyes and studied Snape, and Snape realized he had broken character too far. That had been a problem the last two days, trying to remain nasty when the outside world had that well covered had proved impossible for him.

Harry said, "The war is going so badly that my worst enemy is trying to help." His eyes did not waver from studying Snape. "There is something very wrong with you."

"So you say," Snape retorted, recovering some attitude. "I reserve the right to reach my personal limit on things. Just like everyone else."

From the doorway, Hermione said, "I've been wondering if you are really you." She stepped inside and held out a clear glass marble. "I borrowed this from Feorge. Hold out your hand."

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"What is that?" Snape asked, glad to have the leeway to behave paranoid.

"It's a Truth Teller," she lectured him. "Easier than Veritaserum, except that it can't make someone talk."

Snape held out his hand and Hermione dropped the marble into it. "Say your name," Hermione commanded.

"Severus Snape."

The marble flashed white. Hermione turned to Harry. "Could there be more than one?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry said, exhaling hard. "Are you helping Voldemort?"

Hermione interrupted before Snape could answer. "It doesn't work very well that way. It's too easy for the person to answer some other question he or she silently asked him- or herself in between. You have to make them say a statement. Say: I'm helping Voldemort."

Snape peered at her. "You want me to say that?" He studied the marble, not trusting it. But in the end, he repeated the statement. The marble flickered pink and black. He insisted in a huff, "I would not help Voldemort," and the marble flickered white. He dropped the marble back in her hand. "Enough of that."

"Something to hide?" Harry taunted.

"Many things. Especially from prying Gryffindors."

Harry muttered, "I still don't trust him."

Snape said, "I don't care. It is better if you remain untrusting when planning. Given the powers being used against you, anyone can be turned at any time."

Hermione said, "Like the other day, Ron had a fantastic idea and I felt I should check him for an Imperio." She gave Harry an apologetic half-smile.

Snape took the opportunity to study Harry better. Usually when they occupied the same room, he kept an angry scowl fixed on his face. With his attention diverted by his friend, Harry's face softened with humor into a strained and beaten down mode.

Hermione read Harry's face too, "I made lunch. Are you coming down?"

Harry nodded vaguely. "I want to ask Snape one more thing."

Hermione glanced worriedly between them turned with a bounce of her hair. Harry slunk around the potions one last time. "Is the Wolfsbane going to be done in time to help Remus next week?"

"Just barely. He will have a supply three days before the full moon, which is not optimal, but should help with the drain on his psyche."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah, he's not been doing well." Clearly this burden draped heavily over his shoulders as well. Slowly, Harry got to the point. "What you said just now . . . about people doing what I say because they want to do it – they think it's right. Did you mean that?"

"Have you held some piece of blackmail over their heads beforehand? Held a family member captive on the side, for example?"

Harry's face contorted in confusion. "No, of course not."

"Of course not," Snape echoed. "The situation is dire. Many who volunteer now have already lost all they have to live for. They are trying to make the best of it. That isn't your fault."

He could see Harry's chest expand and relax as he took that in. "You are the last person who would say that if it weren't true."

"I expect," Snape replied, feeling terribly bad for this young man despite that weakness being identical to the pitfall he had just warned about.

Harry stared off into space and shook his head faintly. "I can't see the trap you are laying here. Nothing makes any sense."

Snape thought wryly, If I told you the truth, it would make even less. He concocted something likely sounding. "Like everyone else, Potter, I've grown deathly tired of the way things are going. Egos aside, something much change, and quickly. Even I, as accustomed to darkness as I am, cannot take any more."

As plausible as this sounded, it appeared to pile on to Harry's psychic burden, and his face fell into the distant bleakness of his inner vision.

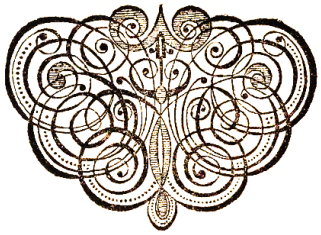
Snape struggled for something else to say. This wasn't his Harry; he knew what to say to his Harry. "You would not be named in the prophecy if it was not possible for you to succeed at this."

Quietly, as though fearing being overheard, Harry unburdened himself, "It feels impossible."

"It isn't," Snape said with immense confidence. "That I'm certain of."

Author's Notes:
Opting for sleep instead of finding a preview. Trust that it would be an incredibly cruel one anyway.

Chapter 28.



Deceptive Devices

Harry woke to the discomfort of his head lolling on an uneven surface while he fought to draw in a much needed breath. His hands fumbled for the wand in his pocket, scattering what felt like gritty ash and sticky damp shards over his robe-front. He had difficulty pulling his wand out, as though it had burrowed down too deep into his pocket. Spasmodically brushing off his cold-clumsy hands, Harry finally gained a grip on his wand and used it to warm the floor beside him. He used a spell strong enough that the heat seeped over to him without him having to move.

Eventually, with many preparatory deep breaths of rotted air, Harry sat up and peered around the decrepit hall. If this was not the right place, it was at least an equally miserable place. The oversized, candle-lined pentagram in the center of the floor, as creepy as it was, reassured him that this was the right place. Harry brushed his hand off again and froze as he spotted red flecked chips of bone amongst the fine ash clinging to his hand – the Hat Rabbit. Harry looked around the floor and then back at the destruction evidenced on his hands. The animal had not in the least survived passing in between. The paw Harry had held was the most intact part of it, but its frozen-into-dust remains spoke plaintively of the unforgiving harshness between the Planes. Harry could not even blame the rabbit's demise on its lack of magic, because it had been a magical creature.

Harry sighed and cleaned himself off with a spell before standing creakily to inspect the pentagram, which represented his next best hope. The Device exuded a distinctly Snape-like precision. Question now was, where was his Snape? Harry circled the unlit

shape, an angled forest of warped candles glowing faintly with the light leaking in the partly boarded windows. As he came around to the hearth side of the room again, a translucent form wafted out of the kitchen door.

"Harry Potter . . ." Tidgy said, the ghostly sound seeping right into Harry's bones.

"Tidgy," Harry said in surprise.

"I is having a message for Harry Potter."

"Oh, do you?" Harry could barely believe this luck. "Good."

"Master says you will find him at your godfather's house, Harry Potter."

"Oh, thank Merlin," Harry said, letting relief carry away the worst strain from recent events. "Thank you, Tidgy."

The elf gave a long sniffling whine, like a gas leak, and dabbed at a transparent tear. "Everyone is thanking Tidgy."

"Well, you deserve it. And please keep an eye on the house, eh?"

Harry donned his usual disguise and Apparated for Grimmauld Place's porch, wondering exactly what he was going to find behind the dark old door. Delaying finding his adoptive father, just to find out the details of recent events here was not something he could withstand; so there he stood, unprepared.

Neville Longbottom opened the door, peaking through the crack with his wand tip sticking through. "Who are you?"

"I'm an old friend of Dumbledore's . . ." Harry began in his plodding old manner, barely managing to hold it through his impatience.

Neville interrupted, "Well, you'd have to be to get this far." But he failed to open the door wider.

Harry said, "I'm looking for someone I believe is visiting here: Severus Snape. Is he here?"

"Hang about."

The door clicked closed. When it next opened, Hermione was there, a harried, permanently-stuck-in-examination-revisions Hermione. "Who are you?"

"Aaron Totten is my name. I was made to understand that Severus Snape is here, and I need to see him. I'm an old friend of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore's."

Hermione's narrowed eyes peered at him, judging him. "What do you want with Mr. Snape?" Her head disappeared and the sound of harsh whispering leaked outside. A piece of " . . . but I don't want to leave an old man just standing out there in the cold . . . well, but he has to have been given an invite at some point, right?"

The door opened wider. Hermione said, "Come on in, but you'll have to excuse our assigning you an escort. Standard procedure."

"What is?" Neville asked in confusion, and Hermione elbowed him.

Harry put on a kindly attitude. "It's no trouble my dear. I understand." He dearly, painfully, ached to point out that they should be checking for a disguise, but decided it best to not do so.

Hermione led Harry upstairs to where an aura of brewing hung in the still air like a curtain. She opened a bedroom door and led the way inside, saying, "Mr. Snape, someone is here to see you – an Aaron Totten."

Snape turned and looked up from the notes in his hand. Harry knew instantly he had the right man; there was a firmness, a stability, beneath the depths of this Snape's gaze where the other possessed only frantic strategy and suspicion.

"Harr-on," Snape said in surprise, correcting mid-word. Hermione closed the door behind her with just a quick mutter about leaving them alone to talk.

Hermione slipped away quickly because she had just surreptitiously made sure the twins' crystal ball was well positioned on the stand by the door and that was a much better way to eavesdrop than hanging around, obviously in the way. Down in the dining room, Neville had already pulled out the other half of the pair of connected crystals and placed it on the table, and was forcing Ron to be quiet as he asked too many questions about what was happening. Lavender crept out to fetch Harry and Ginny, who were in the kitchen.

Hermione doused the lamps and knelt on a chair to lean close to the sphere to hear. Ron reached more easily with his long neck. Back in Lupin's room, disguised Harry said, "Took me too long to find you."

Snape, over his surprise, calmly stated, "I left a message."

"That worked fine. But it took me too long to figure out you were gone."

The two of them stood stock still for a breath with Harry washed limp by relief. He crossed over to Snape and gave him a firm hug he was so grateful to be standing before him.

Down in the dining room, Ron covered his eyes and said, "Make me un-see that!"

Hermione hit him on the arm and whispered harshly, "Quiet! Sometimes the crystal balls go two-way."

Snape snorted a faint laugh and said with false sternness, "You disappoint me. I thought an hour, at most."

Harry released him to pace, disgusted with himself. "Yeah. Things were a little mad at home last weekend."

"How is . . . your fellow doing?" Snape asked. He made a motion to scratch his neck below his left ear, one of several Auror signals that indicated they were being monitored.

"Better. He's not the one I'm worried about right now. It's you."

Snape did not respond immediately. "I am doing all right."

Harry glared back. "I don't like the sound of that. You need to come home."

Snape turned to tend to a cauldron that was frothing hard, mimicking the rushing sound of a small waterfall. "Severus," Harry said in a threatening tone.

"Yes, I agree. But it is not easy."

Harry had to admit that he was not sure how to make it work out, but the spell must be repeatable. "You can't be resisting coming home. You don't belong here. It's too dangerous."

Snape waited for Harry to meet his gaze. "I realize it means going back on things I've said to you, but there are tasks only I can do here."

"I don't care," Harry snapped, heating quickly. "You have responsibilities at home, if I'm not mistaken."

Snape's brow rose in surprise. "Sensitive topic, I see."

Harry bit his lip. Snape cut in with, "Is my colleague behaving himself?"

Harry paced again. The room smelled of potions and sour sweat and it keyed him up more. "Well enough. I made a point about him doing so. I don't think he could have misunderstood."

"Are you behaving yourself?"

Harry studied the colorful stains running down the shelves in a pattern that implied there had been a serious accident recently. "Of course," Harry said in his best false voice. A bit of blackmail felt good.

Chapter 28

Down in the dining room, Hermione asked no one in particular, "Who is this wizard? How did he know Dumbledore and how does he know Mr. Snape?"

Ron, whinging faintly and backing away from the crowd around the crystal, said, "Sounds like they live together. What a thought."

Ginny said, "That would explain why he's not married."

Harry said, "It would? Like being a hopeless, evil, bat-like git isn't sufficient reason?"

Hermione shrugged as if to concede that point. "I guess everyone has at least one person who cares about them. Sounds like Totten cares. 'Though he's awfully old for . . . well."

Ron ducked his head into his long, boney arms. "Aaaarg, stop it!"

Harry leaned into the space Ron made. "I just want to know if he's yet another enemy we need to worry about."

Hermione whispered, "Doesn't . . . seem like it. He wants to take Mr. Snape away, doesn't he? Well, except that might not help."

"It would help me," Harry muttered stubbornly.

Back in the bedroom, Snape methodically stirred a grey, gruel-like potion and sprinkled in some long dried twigs that were immediately swallowed up. He said, "You'll have to locate something for me to be able to leave. I'm a bit of a prisoner here."

"The half-burned book. I know."

Snape turned to him sharply, despite his hands staying busy. "You must have made quite an impression on my colleague."

"I tried to. It wasn't difficult."

Snape bent over to sniff the cauldron before turning down the heat on it. "I don't like you doing that."

"I don't like you being here. You don't owe this place anything."

Snape hesitated replying. "I would have agreed until I got here. Now it is not so clear."

Harry rolled his eyes, and huffed in frustration. "I'll find the book and figure out how to get you back. Are you going to be all right?" he asked, placing a hand on Snape's arm and gripping it. He hated leaving him here. "I can take you somewhere safer."

Snape studied him closely. "You have not been following the news, have you? No place in Europe is safe. I do not think even you can travel easily farther than that."

Harry's hand slipped off his arm, trying to take that in. "It's like last time, with Grindelwald."

"Where has this bloke been?" Hermione blurted in the darkness. "Living in a cave?"

Snape said, "By the time it is finished, it may be worse."

"All the more reason to leave," Harry said.

With no rancor, Snape pointed out, "You are quite a fickle person in this regard, aren't you?"

Harry's only reply was a thoughtful frown. "You have other responsibilities, as I said. You aren't trying to avoid them, are you?"

Snape shook his head slowly, but with less conviction than Harry would like. "But once one is steeped in a place like this, it becomes difficult to remember there is another, more real one . . . waiting."

"Well, it is waiting," Harry criticized. "Don't forget that."

"I can't," Snape stated, strangely flat. "I killed Dumbledore for a reason, remember?"

Harry stared at him, realizing after a beat that this was a message regarding his counterpart. "Yeah," he muttered doubtfully, trying to digest that.

"Not for reasons anyone can understand here," Snape went on, eyes intense. Harry got the sense that Snape was asking him to find the answer.

Harry swallowed. "Then, I really have to go, but I'll return as soon as I can." He gave Snape another quick hug and departed.

When he made the bend in the corridor, Harry saw himself waiting at the bottom of the stairs. His counterpart stood with head cocked suspiciously, but his attitude appeared patient, as though he would wait all day there.

Harry stroked his beard to reassure himself it was intact and started down, slowly, pretending to be pained. "Hello, there, young man," Harry rumbled, trying to sound less like himself and more like a doting old uncle.

Hard as granite, slippery as glass, the other asked, "Who are you?"

"Not your concern," Harry replied. "No threat to you, I assure you. Just looking after my family."

This caught the other by surprise and his suspicion relaxed, making him appear far more vulnerable. "Oh."

"Times like these, we have to all stick together right?"

The other nodded vaguely, mind diverted elsewhere, an unshielded mind from which Harry caught a jumbled scene of helpless paralysis on the ramparts of Hogwarts, hated Death Eaters arriving, then Dumbledore, blasted off the tower in a wash of green, but it was too jumbled and fraught with disbelieving panic to piece together.

Harry said sympathetically, "He wouldn't have left the task to you if you could not do it."

The other's head snapped up sharply. Harry winked at him. "You need to learn some Occlusion. Perhaps while Severus is here."

The other went from wary to disgusted. Prompting Harry to add firmly, "There is no sacrifice too great at this stage."

Hermione slipped into the hallway, apparently to listen in better, or provide moral support. She had her wand out but her arms wrapped around herself.

The other Harry asked, "How do you know Dumbledore?"

"I knew him my whole life," Harry replied. "But never as well as I should have. He always kept something back. Obviously he did that to you too."

The other said smartly, "That doesn't answer the question."

Kindly, Harry said, "I'm not going to answer the question. It's irrelevant to you." He stood there longer, wanting to say more. The vacillations in his counterpart's emotions spoke of far too much stress and long-term damage, and Harry could see why Snape hesitated leaving. "Just keep in mind the things Albus told you."

Spoiled sounding now, the other said, "Been so long . . . it's hard to remember."

Harry had turned to go, but now turned back. Finding annoyance worming its way in, he said, "He told you what your greatest weapon was, did he not?"

The other backed off in renewed wariness, and Harry tried not to grin. "Maybe I knew Albus too well, after all. Just keep it in mind."

Harry did as he said he needed to, and hurried home. He woke up before his hearth, which Winky had started early for the cloudy afternoon. Harry lay there with the fire burning dangerously close to his hair, listening to the crackle of the fresh wood turning to ash.

Kali called from her cage, and Harry found the strength to strain his weary limbs and get up to fetch her out. He paced around the room, holding her in one hand and petting her with the other, remembering the Hat Rabbit with some regret. With a deep sigh, he stroked his pet one last time before raising her to his shoulder so he could free his hands to write a letter.

Harry had to go down to the drawing room to find clean parchment. Snape's desk felt violated, but Harry found everything in the usual place. He tugged out a sheet of the best, creamy-white parchment, opened an ink bottle and began:

Severus,

I hope you are not getting too comfortable there at our illustrious and quiet school, and that you are behaving as your colleagues expect, rather than as you wish to. I am going to assign a few of your students the task of keeping an eye on you. I expect you to ignore their activities if you discover them, which I'm certain you will, given that they are mere children and you an evil wizard's associate. If I hear any negative reports, trust that I will not be pleased.

Harry read through what he had written. It sounded like the words of someone who expected to be in charge. One part of him wanted to go straight there and threaten him again, it squirmed at mere letter writing. Harry suppressed that instinct, and dipped the quill again.

I have one question for you and I expect an honest and prompt answer. What did you do vis-à-vis Dumbledore?

Harry triple-underlined the word "prompt", pulled over a candle to work through making the letter for Snape's eye's only, and sent it off with Hedwig. He then composed three more letters for his old friends there including the only Slytherin he trusted fully enough: Suze. He made up a poor excuse for the task that family life seemed to be taking a toll on his adoptive father and he wanted to know that Snape was not taking that out on the students. Harry did not like that excuse, but it was the best he could think of, and anyone with an already doubtful view of the difficult Hogwarts professor, would be quick to believe it. Harry did not send the same letter to Hermione, in this case his overly sharp friend would be too difficult to assuage once her suspicions were arroused. Harry would have to hope she was too tied up with teaching to notice a shift in Snape's behavior.

Chapter 28

Harry went to his training the next day, distracted and with his readings only partly absorbed. The workout and drills gave him a much-needed distraction from his problems until lunch when he meant to head to the Minister's office to see Belinda.

Aaron waylaid Harry before he reached the stairs. He took one of Harry's arms, like he needed the support more than to stop Harry. "I need to talk to you. Do you have plans this evening?"

"I don't have plans," Harry said. "Stop over after training, won't you?"

Aaron immediately brightened. "Great. Cheers." Hands in his pockets, he sauntered off down the corridor.

Harry headed up to the top floor and found to his dismay that the Minister's outer office contained Fudge and quite a number of other important people gathered in clusters, talking. Harry did not see Belinda in the crowd to catch her eye, so he retreated – to his stomach's delight – it was not pleased about the prospect of missing lunch.

Harry opened his reading as he ate the meat pie Winky had prepared for him. Mr. Weasley told him he would prefer Harry not buy anything, even from a Muggle shop in the area. Harry bit into the middle of the pie, surprised to find his heating spell had not made it all the way through. He definitely needed to clear up some of the distractions in his life, especially if his magic was going to suffer for it.

At home that evening, Harry took a seat with his books beside Candide. An owl arrived, one of the plain brown ones Hogwarts kept so many of. Harry put the letter away in the back of his book rather than risk Candide even seeing who it was from. If it had an Eye's Only charm on it, it would burn up before he could read it.

Something about his actions or his attitude caused her to ask, "Everything all right, Harry?"

Harry held the book Monsters Too Small To See open in his lap and gave her his attention. How to answer that?

"Things have been better," he admitted.

Taken aback, she patted his arm and prompted, "Really?" in disbelief. "What's troubling you?"

She sounded like the question really mattered, so Harry worked harder on a good answer. She brushed his rampant hair back. "I'd suggest a hair cut, but I realize short hair isn't the norm in this household."

Harry peered back at her open gaze, discovering for the first time that such a gesture, unlike Mrs. Weasley's in years past, did not bother him. He wondered now why it would do so.

Mouth curled in amusement, she said to his silence, "You're much too thoughtful for someone your age."

"I wouldn't be if I had a choice," he pointed out, smiling too without trying.

She put her book down. It was a soft-covered pale green book of rule changes for the new accounting year. "Maybe you are looking for trouble now?"

Harry emphatically shook his head. "No. If only that were true." He sat back and sighed. Part of him wanted to tell her that her husband was an impostor, but another more careful and strategic part held back. Harry may not be able to switch his guardian back, or his Snape may be killed before that could be managed. This fear kept Harry silent by itself. He cast his mind ahead, trying to accept that outcome because he knew from past experience he must plan for every possible eventuality, no matter how grave. In that case, Harry thought with grim determination, he would stay in this house and make sure this interloper took over and assured that Snape's son did not want for a father.

"Hm," Candide muttered. "You are definitely far away, somewhere."

"Sorry," Harry said, feeling vaguely depressed. "I have a lot to think about." He excused himself to go and read the letter in his room. His stuff had been packed away in trunks in preparation for moving to the other, more distant bedroom, something he had resisted doing until Snape was truly back, preferring to stay closer to their room.

The letter read:

Potter,

If you were not so straightforward in your small-minded thinking, you would realize that it is perfectly in my interests to behave predictably. But, that said, I refuse to restrain from getting Slytherin House in order or retaking my class from a soft-minded interloper.

As to your last question, I cannot earn your understanding in this. Suffice to say, with little consolation, that he was dying anyway, and he commanded me to do as I did. Though you may not believe it of me, I did not wish to and I argued against it. The old wizard died of sentimentality for a lost cause and forced me to be the vehicle for it. That is all I wish to say on the matter.

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Harry destroyed the letter and felt a wave of relief that he did not have a truly evil version of his adoptive father on his hands, assuming what the man said was true. It felt like the truth, which bought Harry a little more time to work things out. But to fix things, Harry really needed the book printed with purple ink. There must be a copy in this Plane as well as the other one.

Harry went back down to the main hall and said, "I have to go to Hogwarts to look for something. Aaron is supposed to come over; I'll go to Hogwarts while he's here to keep you company."

"I need company?"

"I want you left alone as little as possible." He said this in a tone of finality, feeling like the old-man version of himself. She did not debate further, just tilted her head noncommittally, opened her rule book again and went back to taking notes in it while Harry returned to his reading.

A quick double knock sounded on the door. As expected, Harry found Aaron waiting in the garden, his impecably embroidered, shiny, unwrinkled cloak draped fully around himself in the chilling air.

"'Ello, Harry," he said breathily, before striding in at Harry's gesture of invitation. Aaron greeted Candide and took a seat opposite her, head hanging a bit low.

"Can I get you something?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I could really use a . . . never mind." He waved his hand. "I better not."

Harry resumed his seat beside Candide. "What's going on?"

"I need to talk to someone."

Harry glanced at Candide quickly and asked Aaron, "Do you want to move to the drawing room?"

Candide uncurled her feet out from under her saying, "I can go upstairs."

Aaron waved dismissively again. "No, it's all right. Please stay. It's your house, after all." He scrubbed his hair, then smoothed it carefully, managing to make it look even better through this process. He clasped his hands between his knees and announced, "I uh, I asked Ginny to marry me."

"What!" Harry blurted, glad he had not fetched a drink for himself because he would have spilled it right then. "You did?"

Aaron sighed loudly. "I did."

Harry could not find any words. Candide eagerly asked, “What did she say?”

Soberly, Aaron replied. “She said she had to think about it.”

“I would say,” Harry managed. “What . . . what made you ask her?” he sputtered.

Aaron’s brow twisted to perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean . . .” Harry paused, regrouping. “I don’t know. Just seems sudden.”

Aaron pointed at him. “That’s what she said.”

“Well, it is, isn’t it?” Harry returned.

Aaron shrugged his boney shoulders. “I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

They both turned to Candide, who glanced between them before laughing lightly. “Don’t look at me.”

“You’re the only married one here,” Harry pointed out.

“That does not make me an expert,” she replied while marking her spot and setting her her book aside on the end-table. She clasped her hands over her knee and said, “If it feels right. Time isn’t the issue. You can know someone for years and still not know everything about them. Until you see them in the right circumstances, some part of their personality may never come out.”

You are about to learn a lot about Severus, Harry grimly thought.

Candide went on, speaking to Aaron. “If she didn’t say ”no“, outright, you’re still okay.”

Aaron bleakly peered at the metal-railed staircase off to his right, eyes tracing up it to the balcony. A knock sounded on the door, and everyone stared at everyone else until Harry jumped up.

Ginny stood at the door, bundled haphazardly in her rough woolen cloak. “Can I talk to you, Harry?”

“Er, of course. Come on in.”

Harry expected to find Aaron in the hall, but he was absent. Candide pointed surreptitiously toward the drawing room door, which was open just a crack.

“Want anything?” Harry asked Ginny while he tried to decide whether to reveal that Aaron was already here.

Ginny shook her head, gaze lost far beyond the stone walls surrounding them.

Harry tried for a normal voice, "So, what's going on?"

Ginny pulled her cloak tighter. "Uh, Aaron asked me to marry him."

"Did he?" Candide asked, not sounding very authentic, but Ginny failed to notice.

"Em . . . what did you say?" Harry asked.

Winky arrived in a sparkle bearing a cup of cocoa. Ginny accepted it and sipped it between sighs. "I told him I didn't know." Then a moment later. "Crazy." She shrugged off her cloak and fell back, slouching nearly horizontal with her fine-boned hands out before her, clutching the steaming mug.

Candide reassured her, "You can't make that sort of decision quickly."

"I really do like him and all," Ginny said.

Harry could see movement through the crack in the drawing room door and he disliked the deception of letting Aaron overhear. Fortunately, Candide seemed content to run the conversation.

"And he has money; that should make the decision easier."

Harry spun his head to look at her, wondering at her bluntness.

Ginny replied, "It doesn't really; it makes it harder. The money is . . . like a third person you have to get to know and figure out if you can live with. No, it would be easier to decide if he were poor. He thought he was, briefly, when he believed you'd used all his money to ransom him. Said he was glad he wasn't, otherwise he couldn't ask me." She shook her head again. "Crazy."

"And you would decide what in the case of his being poor?" Candide went on, like an interview.

Like watching Beater practice, Harry turned back to Ginny.

"Oh, I don't know. I just know it'd be easier." She bit her nails for second before dropping her hands to her lap. "I just hope he gives me some time to think about it."

"I'm certain he will," Harry said, loudly enough to carry across the hall. Harry stood. "I have to go Hogwarts, care to go along?"

Ginny stood as well, but because her head hung low, she did not see the shifting of the light through the drawing room door. "No, I should get home. I told mum I'd help with cooking more."

"She doesn't even have that many to cook for," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ginny said. "I'm getting the idea lately she thinks she's done enough cooking for a lifetime, and I need to learn better."

Candide from her relaxed seat said, "Not if you marry Aaron, you won't."

Ginny pondered that a second before saying, "All the more reason to learn. I don't want to rely on someone for literally everything."

Harry suppressed a smile and with a thanks, Ginny Disapparated. Aaron immediately slunk out of the drawing room with a guilty curve to his back. Harry did not have the heart to give his friend trouble, so he said, "You were saying?"

"Maybe it was a little sudden," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. With a sigh, he let his arm fall.

"Want to have a seat?" Harry asked, worried his friend was slipping into a funk.

"I don't want to take up any more of your time," Aaron politely replied.

"It's not a problem," Harry insisted.

Aaron appeared unconvinced. Candide said, "Have a seat. You can do Harry a favor. He needs to run an errand and wants me to have company."

Brightening slightly, Aaron said, "Cheers then. Thanks." He sat back and propped his hands daintily in his lap. "I could use the company too. Since my troubles with the date I picked up at my favorite club, I haven't much for going out."

Harry shot Candide a grateful look, fetched his cloak, and Apparated away as the conversation moved to Candide asking, "What does you mum say about your choice?" and Aaron flinching with a mumbled answer about him not informing her yet.

Harry landed on the railroad bridge, still shaking his head. Maybe Candide could sort Aaron out; Harry certainly had no chance at it.

With the wind tugging and ballooning his cloak, Harry peered along the mist-lit valley emerging from below the trestle at his feet. He needed to think things through before rushing into Hogwarts. He did not want Snape to know he was there so he should head directly to the library to speak with Madam Pince to inquire about the book. Harry had another book by the same anonymous author, but it was short and contained only theories, not any facts and certainly not instructions for a device to travel between worlds.

After settling his mind and drawing his uplifted cloak close around him, Harry slipped into the Dark Plane and directly into the Restricted Section of the library. The tall

shelves towered over Harry as he stood and listened to see if his arrival had been noticed. Students whispered as they worked at the tables, vellum pages shushed as they slid over one another, a binding slapped closed and footsteps sounded far on the other side of the room. Harry peered up and down the nearby shelves. He had already once before checked all of these books for help with the Dark Plane, he doubted he would have missed the one Snape described. Harry slipped out of the row and through the gate, casually, as if he had every reason to be there and just had been hanging around for a while.

Madam Pince sat at her desk, holding her bifocals at just the right angle to read the tiny print on the verso of the book she held open. Whispers of surprise followed Harry across the room as the students noticed him. The room fell silent and attentive as he reached the desk.

"Uh, ah, Mr. Potter," Pince whispered in surprise. "What can I do for you?"

"I have question for you. Can we talk in your office?"

"Ah, yes, of course." She gave the library's student occupants a critical eyeing before retreating and inviting Harry into her office with a kind bow.

Inside the high-ceilinged, heavily shelved room, Harry said, "I'm looking for a special book. It's a thick one."

"Well, I do hope you have more description than that," she said scornfully. "You sound like a patron at the Wizard Public Library in London, I have to say."

"It has purple ink," Harry helpfully added.

Madam Pince's attitude changed. She gave Harry a piercing gaze. "Professor Snape was just looking around for a similar book early Sunday night. I'd forgotten my reading glasses and found him skulking around in the Restricted Section as though he weren't a professor here, or something, and free to come in any time."

Harry kept his face level. "Did he find the book?"

"Not that I know of. If he'd given me an author, I could have helped him. I sent him off and told him not to disturb the books any more than necessary. At midnight, of all times." She scoffed. She took a seat at her desk and adjusted her glasses. "So, purple ink, you say. Do you have the author's name?"

Harry shook his head. "How many thick, purple ink books could there be?" he asked, trying to stay hopeful. He imagined himself traveling endlessly from Plane to Plane, asking this of every single Madame Pince, and felt queasy in his stomach.

She removed her glasses and glanced around the rough wooden shelves sagging beside her under the weight of wide, shiny leather volumes. Harry took the cue and also glanced around, wishing Snape had not been able to Occlude his thoughts so that Harry could have glimpsed a vision of the book. When Harry's eyes came back to the desk, Madame Pince quickly shut the book she had out. It was bound like any other, in leather with marbled paper inside the cover, but the writing indicated it was being used like a notebook.

At Harry's curious attention, she said shyly, "Just a little story I've been working on." She put the book away in a drawer and shut it rather loudly for a librarian. "But you were saying . . .?"

Harry thought more and said, "Dumbledore maybe owned the book at one point. Did Severus mention that?"

Madame Pince raised a brow. "No, he did not." She slid her chair back to get to her feet again. "Let's check the Bereft Book room, then. Many of Professor Dumbledore's books ended up there," she said, reaching to open the corner book case that turned out to be a shelf-covered door, where the shelves were screwed directly into the stout, Hogwarts wood. The door did not open far before the shelves struck each other. Harry squeezed in behind the librarian, forced to duck to keep his shoulder getting stabbed by the wall shelf.

Sparse light filtered in through a window blocked by stacks of trunks. A long narrow desk occupied the other wall, with narrow drawers and shelves of materials like leather hides, large marbled paper sheets, threads on spools and heavy needles. A book lay open with its pages sewn together in bundles but not glued into a binding.

"Dumbledore's books needed repair?" Harry asked. "I guess they were probably all very old."

Pince waved her wand to shift the stack of trunks, saying, "Many of them needed repair because of some accident he had in his office." She popped open a trunk and used a spell to make the books hover in a nice display orientation, waved them back and went to the next. "He never would say what happened. It was just at the end of the school year a few years back." The trunks thunked together as she shifted them and popped the next open.

Harry's chest tightened. That had been him that had damaged the contents of the headmaster's office.

Pince saying brightly, "Ah, here it tis," broke Harry from his guilty revere. The books were flying back into the trunk . . . all but one, or . . . half of one. Pince

reverently held out, with both hands, the limply bound, but still heavy, partial book. The flopping binding showed how very long the book had been before half the pages had been burned away. The border pages had scorched edges but the rest were bright and undamaged even by smoke, indicating spell damage rather than real fire.

Harry thumbed the pages, daunted by the small print and obscure diagrams contained within. "Thanks," he said, trying to sound bright. "Can I keep it?"

Pince perched her glasses farther down her nose and took the book back for examination. "If you want it. Bit of an odd duck, that author. Not sure why Professor Dumbledore kept it around at all."

Harry thanked her and said, "Please don't tell Severus I found it. I, er, want to surprise him with it as a present."

She waved him off as they exited the Bereft Book room, indicating that she cared little either way. Harry was so pleased to have the book, he nearly absentmindedly slipped into the Dark Plane from her office. He tripped over his feet when he turned for the door instead with a jerk of his limbs.

"Careful there, young man," she said in her patron-correcting voice.

"Yes, I will be," Harry said, adding to himself: as soon as I get everything set to rights.

Out in the corridor where the beveled glass wall to the library threw star-shaped bright shards of light into the shadows, Harry waited until the echoing voices and footsteps receded before slipping away.

Harry brought two more lamps into his bedroom to better read the tiny print of the book. At first he was dismayed by the missing the first half of the book but after straining to read just a page, he decided it was just as well to be spared the pain of having to make it through so very many pages.

Hours later, eyes heavy and his Auror books untouched, Harry considered what to do with the book. If he kept it here at home, it could easily be found. The same if he took it to any likely hiding place. Harry considered hiding it in his locker at the Ministry, but Snape may find his Evanescent Deputy badge and look even there, and he certainly had the stealth to get away with it. Harry stretched as he stood and took himself to the place Snape was least likely to expect Harry to hide it.

Stone-frames surrounded glistening black glass windows and the dip worn in the center of the corridor floor showed more obvious in the light of the low burning wall lamps. Hogwarts castle was the best place to hide the book. Harry stepped over to where the hump-backed statue of Grunhilda stood and put the book inside her. He could easily slip back to fetch the book for reading when he needed to and, in between, feel secure that Snape would never find it.

Tired from a tedious, late night, not to mention daunted by the task of absorbing so much obscure knowledge to rescue his adoptive father, Harry left the breakfast table immediately after Candide left for work. Foggy-headed, Harry had trouble pulling out his wand for his turn at drills.

Rodgers did not fail to note his clumsiness. "Your power isn't much either, Potter," he criticized. "Try again and leave your distractions at the training room door."

Harry did, but he could not even come up with anger to meet his trainer's mocking tone, let alone a better attacking spell.

"Potter hopes he won't be facing anything tougher than a five-year-old with a licorice wand. Sit down; Aaron, let's give you an easy chance to shine while topping that sad effort."

Sighing, Harry sat down, quickly slipping off into his greater problems while the drone of mixed grudging praise and advice was heaped on his fellow apprentice in his stead.

Anxious to take care of something after a long day of harassment from his trainer, Harry headed immediately off to see Belinda. At the Minister's office, Harry was informed that the staff had been allowed to go home early because they had to work late the previous evening. Not believing his break in luck, Harry stepped back into the corridor and around to the stairwell to slip away to right before the door to Belinda's flat.

As soon as he arrived, Harry pulled his wand, believing he heard something in the direction of the stairwell. He waited, tense and listening, before waving a tracer spell that direction. The spell, no brighter than a sun-ray glinting on a dust mote, wove a spiral path through the air and disappeared down the stairs. Harry waited, but it did not return, indicating it had found nothing.

Harry relaxed and knocked on the door but received no answer. He knocked again, louder, before deciding she must be out. He knocked on the neighboring doors, thinking to interview them the way they did on Auror duty, but those doors remained silent and closed as well.

Dismayed, Harry headed away directly for home, thinking it best not to be seen leaving Belinda's flat through the front door, not fancying having a picture of that show up beside Skeeter's gossip column. Harry arrived directly in his own room and

had to pull his wand again in the face of finding Snape digging through the bottom trunk from the pile beside the window.

Composing himself, Harry asked, "Looking for something?"

Snape twitched in surprise, but turned with calculating calm. Their eyes locked. Harry wanted to get angry, but that dark instinct spilled out amusement instead at his servant's predictability.

"You don't need the book unless you are planning on going home voluntarily," Harry stated, finding power in simply locating the Mark in his mind, even as he held off on using it.

Snape glanced over Harry's face, thinking. Harry could not pick up his thoughts, so he took a guess. "You aren't going off somewhere far away to hide, either."

Snape raised a brow, recovering some of his obnoxiousness, indicating Harry had guessed wrong. "You think not?" he mocked.

Still the picture of calm, restrained power, Harry said, "You are going to stay here and take care of your wife and your counterpart's other affairs until I can arrange to send you home and get him back."

"Hm," Snape muttered, appearing to consider his options as he analyzed Harry additionally. He was going to test those boundaries, Harry could feel like a vibrating tug on an invisible leash and he wondered, given how clear that was, how Voldemort could have been fooled for so long.

Harry stepped closer and noted Snape consciously standing his ground. "If you try to leave . . . I will hunt you down, and drag you back here." At the derisive doubt that flickered over the black eyes, Harry added, "You can't hide from me. I can find you anywhere." He pushed on the Mark as he said this, making Snape contort with a jerk before overcoming the pain and standing firm, defiant. Part of him felt sympathy for this man, but another felt only annoyance and insult at his machinations.

"You are not capable of working out the spell," Snape snarled faintly.

"Then why are you looking for the book?" Harry asked brightly.

Snape breathed faster than before, gathering himself for something. He said, "I do not like leaving anything to chance."

"There is no chance you are not going home," Harry snapped. After a breath he added more calmly as a test: "Aren't you happy enough here for the moment?"

Snape lost his defiance and fell thoughtful. "This place is acceptable. Although you are an unexpected addition to it." He stared at Harry, gauging his reaction. "Since I prefer to remain alive, I certainly would prefer to not go back. No reason to lie about that."

"That's not under your control," Harry pointed out, and waited to see if Snape had given in.

Without Harry pushing on it, Snape rubbed his forearm. "Nothing ever is, it seems," he observed softly, making Harry's sympathetic sense win out.

"Go back to Hogwarts," Harry said, moving to let his pet out, who had been watching their exchange between bouts of grooming her fur. "And behave yourself."

"I suspect that is what my counterpart would be saying about now," Snape stated slyly.

Harry lifted Kali to his shoulder, trying to shake a twinge of confusing affection. "Don't pretend to be something you're not," Harry said stiffly, jerking his fingers out of reach of his pet's jaws, which had nipped at him.

Snape peered at Kali as though understanding she was projecting Harry's mood and said, "You must realize, I rarely ever have the opportunity to do otherwise." With a last glance at Harry, he swished out of the room, leaving Harry to disentangle from his pet, who was now aggressively chewing on his hair.

Tonks arrived after her shift, and Harry felt compelled to slip the book away when he rose to give her a perfunctory kiss. Mostly he hid the book because he did not have the energy to explain why he was reading the strange old half-burned thing. He needed to take out his Auror books for an hour anyway, or risk looking the fool again tomorrow at training.

Tonks read over Harry's shoulder for a while before curling up at his back to sleep. The meaning of what he was reading began to tip-toe out of reach, and Harry tried another book before giving that one up as well with a sharp closing of the hard cover. Tonks stirred and said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Harry muttered, his concerns rushing back in.

"Yeah, sounds like it," Tonks returned.

Not wanting to discuss Snape and knowing discussions about Belinda made her jealous, Harry propped himself up on a pillow and kept his mouth pressed closed.

With a faint huff, Tonks burrowed under the duvet and went back to sleep. After a time, lulled by the sound of her breathing, Harry did the same.

Chapter 28

Harry woke in the middle of the night. He stared at the fuzzy grey ceiling for a while before slipping on his glasses and staring some more at the details of the white plaster bisected by dark, rough-cut timbers. When he closed his eyes and drifted with difficult-to-achieve calm, he could see the shadow of the impostor Snape floating in the midfield of his mind. The other Death Eaters were a distant knot of darkness that he had to strain to sense. He wished he could feel none of them.

Worried about his adoptive father, Harry rolled over gingerly to turn up the lamp and pull out the clunky book. The complicated words and abstract ideas made more sense on a second reading in the unchallenging stillness of the night, and that gave Harry hope. He had no choice but to understand the book before he could move on. His guardian would be able to help him some with it, but given the difficulty of talking at Grimmauld Place and how unsafe it was for Snape to leave, Harry needed to be down to just a few questions to have a chance at getting as much as possible resolved at the next visit, which Harry intended for the next weekend. He was placing a lot of faith, he knew, on being able to activate the existing Device. If that proved impossible, Harry dreaded imagining how long it may be before he could swap them to their proper places. Long before it came to that, Harry imagined he would break down and force the impostor to teach him how to do it, by dire threat if necessary. Sick feeling at the notion of losing himself to that mentality for the time required, Harry doubled his efforts at understanding the complicated Pinhole-Bridging spell diagram on the page open before him. He knew instinctively how this worked – he could do it by himself – so he certainly should be able to understand this crazy old author and his drawings.

To his relief, Harry did passably well at training the next day, implying that his mind was adapting to the rigors of studying, even short on sleep.

The door to the Minister's office was closed and when Harry knocked, the cleaning witch explained that the Minister had taken her staff out to a ribbon cutting at a new broom manufactory. Harry thanked the witch and the delicately carved door closed with a click. Harry stared at the stern faces peaking out from corners of squares defined by ivy. That dark instinct inside him told him to slip into her flat to investigate. When he resisted that invasive idea, the instinct pointed out that his enemies cared little about such niceties.

Deciding that it would be acceptable to take a peek since he had been invited in before and he only had her best interest at heart, he slipped into the Dark Plane

and directly to her flat. He circled the main room, poking carefully into things after checking for spells, making satisfying use of his training. In the kitchen stacks of unclean dishes stood in piles that indicated either guests or long-term neglect. Harry considered skipping searching there, but heard Rodgers chastising him for sloppiness, so he stepped in and checked around and under things, finding little of interest. Despite the unwashed dishes, the floor was sparkling clean. The full sink gave off the odor of garlic-spiced food. Harry circled slowly around by the dusty-screened television, installed, he knew, at the Minister's insistence that her staff all keep abreast of Muggle events and opinions. The bookshelves were also faintly dusty in back. Harry pulled out every book, looking for anything hidden behind or inside before returning the dust with a spell.

When he finished the large shelf he began to feel silly for what he was doing and wished he had some idea what to look for. If Durumulna were troubling Belinda, what evidence would their be of that? The dishes in the sink were the strangest thing so far that he'd found, and that wasn't very specific. Harry gave up on thinking and let habit take over and returned to his methodical searching, wondering if he could hold onto that mode through a survey of her bedroom.

Following his trainer's absent voice urging him on, Harry crouched low, head to the floor, to see if anything interesting had fallen under the couch. As he did this, the lock clicked. Harry snapped straight and stepped into the nearby bathroom, caught momentarily by the sight of the men's shaving kit on the shelf above the sink. A glance through the crack at the door's edge, showed Belinda setting down her handbag and slipping her wand away. Harry slipped out of the bathroom and into the building corridor where he waited a count of fifty before knocking.

Belinda answered his knock promptly and expressed surprise at seeing him there.

"Hi," Harry said, expecting her to start where she left off on Diagon Alley the previous weekend.

Instead of asking for his help, she seemed vaguely annoyed. She said, "What are you doing here?" while glancing both ways along the corridor.

"I thought you wanted to talk."

Her brow lowered. "I did, but I got it straight now. It's okay."

"Really?" Harry blurted.

She glanced both ways again. "Yeah, really. Things are okay now."

Harry mimicked her glance. "Who are you expecting?"

"No one. Just didn't, er, notice you approach the door. You know, the alarm spells didn't go off."

Harry did not like this. She did not have alarm spells before. "Can I come in?"

At first, he was certain she would say no, but she stepped back and waved for him to enter.

When she turned, Harry wasted no time. "Look, I want to know what's going on."

His pushiness hardened her. "Nothing is going on."

"You were trying to hide from what I expect were Durumulna members just the other day on Diagon."

"Wouldn't you try to hide from them?"

Harry Legilimized her, and found nothing deceptive about this sentiment. "You worked everything out since then . . . the troubles you were having?"

She looked away. "Yes. It's fine."

She sounded honest, but Harry wished he could prove it.

"It's fine," she repeated. "And really, I'd rather not have you seen here. You aren't the only person in the world who can help people out, you know."

"Who's helping you?" Harry asked, intending to not leave until he knew at least this much. He dearly hoped she did not say "Percy".

"Why do you need to know?"

Harry fought a wave of frustration. He was starting to find keen appeal in using Veritaserum more judiciously, or one of several other tongue-loosening potions. That darker side of him reared up and mocked him as well for being too weak to simply force out the answers he wanted. He had an expert servant at his beck and call, free to help, how could he let her avoid explaining?

Harry took a step back, distracted by the notions he was having. Snape had become a tool in his mind, rather than an enemy, in just that instant, and the switch disconcerted him. Harry really needed his guardian back – the one who did not feel like a pawn to be moved around a personal chess board at his whim, then maybe these notions would lack such strength.

"Please tell me who's helping you, so I know you're in good hands."

She glanced around and said softly. "Alastor Moody." At his stare, she went on. "He comes by an evening or two a week to check on me. Has for a while, now."

Harry did relax at that. He dropped his hand from rubbing his head and straightened, bringing himself back to examining her. The flat's indirect light made her eyes appear poorly slept and her cheeks hollowed by strain. Through it, her eyes revealed worry for him overlaid with guilt and murky thoughts centered on someone insisting she do something, or face some undesirable outcome. She turned her head and Harry released a deep breath.

"If you are in too deep, you can ask for more help," Harry insisted. "Before you are cornered into doing something you may regret. Something that would threaten Bones for example."

Eyes on the floor, she mumbled, "I would never let anyone talk me into doing something that would put her at risk."

"I'd expect not." Harry needed some space to sort out his conflicting instincts, but he stayed put to gauge her better.

She repeated, "I don't want anyone to see you here."

"Like whom?" Harry asked, thinking he could corner her himself.

"Anyone. Skeeter, even Alastor."

Harry sighed. She had him there.

At home Tonks and Candide were both waiting at the table with a bowl of crisps between them, reduced to a few crumbs. Harry was glad to see Tonks, especially since it meant Candide was not alone while he was taking far too much time nosing around. Dinner sparkled in the moment he sat down.

"Didn't know you'd be late," Candide said.

"I, er, had some shopping to do," Harry said, thinking that an excellent excuse for his absence, given Christmas' fast approach, and the fact that it would be rude for them to ask more, in case the presents were for one of them.

"At least you try, Harry," Tonks said with a wink. "Blokes don't generally shop well."

Not wanting to get her expectations up too high, given that he could not foresee time to shop at all, he said, "I may not manage anything too fancy, but I do try." As he ate, he wondered with some dismay what in the world the impostor Snape may try to get for the two of them. That imagining made the luscious scented beef and gravy on his plate nearly inedible. It simply could not be allowed to come to that.

Chapter 28

The next day at training, Harry barely registered the questions his trainer aimed their way.

"Potter, you're acting as lovesick as Wickem here. I can't handle two of you living on cloud nine. Snap out of it. The Minister is due down here for a surprise inspection with some of the Wizengamot and I intend to impress them with our sharp skills, not our tendency to have our collective thoughts wandering off."

"Yes, sir."

Vineet raised his hand and asked, "If it is a surprise inspection, how is it you are knowing about it ahead of time?"

Rodgers propped his fists on his hips and raised a depreciating brow. "If they did not at least give us a hint, they may be sadly disappointed in the outcome, which they do not wish to be."

"I am grasping this meaning," Vineet replied. "I think."

They broke for lunch and Harry went to his locker to collect what Winky had prepared for him. He was reminded about how unwise a hiding place this would have been for the purple-inked book by the presence there of Percy and Fudge's other two assistants. Harry did not want Percy to see him execute the protective spell negation on his locker, so he waited while his fellows opened theirs and filed out of the room, all but Aaron, who glanced between Harry and Percy as though expecting something to happen.

"No place else to wait?" Harry stated pointedly to the trio.

The other two assistants: one a man with a neck even longer than Percy's and the other a short-haired woman with a square head that would have fit better on a bulky body rather than her lithe, flowing one, made a move to leave. Percy sneered at them. "Oh yes, let's do whatever Boy Wonder wishes of us."

"It is our changing room," Aaron pointed out, plucking at his workout suit. "We would like to do some changing before lunch; we've been working hard this morning."

"Come on, Pers," the man said, heading for the door.

Harry whispered, "Purse?"

Percy took a step forward. "No, I'd like a word with Boy Lightning Bolt here." His companions rolled their eyes and the woman left, leaving the man hanging in the doorway uncertainly. Percy leaned close enough for Harry to note he had already had lunch, something with pickled onions. He said to Harry, "You're not going to fool

them forever, you know. When they see what you really are, it'll be all over with." He gave Harry a small shove, and Harry tried for his wand but missed, as he had been lately, as though his fingers were still clumsy from the cold in-between or something. Percy swung his arm just as Harry got hold of it and his wand clattered to the floor and Percy kicked it out of reach under the bench before diving to make a grab for it. He stood swarthily and dangled it before Harry.

"Too bad this isn't Hogwarts. The things I could do to you. . ." Percy mocked.

Harry restrained his temper and held onto his dignity by not reaching for it. Aaron had his wand against Percy's temple less than a second later, complete with arm lock.

"You mean like the things we did to you, Percy?" Aaron mocked. "You remember Slytherin House, don't you?" He did not relinquish his hold until Percy gave over Harry's wand, even though he still had a hold of Harry's robe-front. Fudge's other assistant had approached but did not intervene.

Percy managed a smirk for Harry's fellow as he tossed his hair straight. "Yeah. You think you're everything too. Got everything you want, compliments of mummy."

Aaron required an unusual extra two beats to retort, "Compliments of your mummy, actually."

Percy's eyes turned dark. He pointed a long finger at Aaron. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry did not like the turn this was taking. He stepped between them, even though Percy's hold tried to keep him away. Harry said, "Percy, I'm going to use the most painful martial arts move I know on you if you don't let go of me and get the hell out of here. I will gladly go on a year's probation with your father just to put you in St. Mungo's with at least three things broken."

Percy said to Aaron, "If this has something to do with my sister. . ." he faded out and turned back to Harry, red in the face. "As for you . . ." He relinquished Harry with an ineffective toss of his wiry hands. "Some of us know what you really are. Remember that." He stalked off and his colleague followed with an apologetic glance back at them.

After lunch the official contingent poured into the training room. Pinned to the Minister's hip, Mr. Weasley was assuring Bones of the improvements in their department. Bones spoke over him, saying, "I was reminded the other day of how I had not arranged a surprise inspection since taking office, unlike the frequent ones arranged by my predecessor." She said this with a nod to Fudge, who gave her a simpering smile as he slid along the wall for a good observation spot, followed by his assistants.

Harry ignored them all and focused instead on what he had been told the demonstration would entail. His mind would churn out of control otherwise.

When the entourage had settled in, Rodgers announced, "We have been working of late on spell power. Vishnu, come up here for a demonstration."

A shuffle sounded from the wall and Fudge said, "No, let's see your star . . . Mr. Potter."

Rodgers took affront at this. "All of our apprentices shine. We don't allow stars here. At least I don't."

The apprentices nodded in agreement with this assessment. Pleased by this, as indicated by a crooked smirk, Rodgers relented and stepped back. "Potter, you and Vishnu."

Harry's spells had not been up to his usual level, so he approached the front of the room with dismay. Vineet exhibited the best control Harry had ever seen, and Harry held onto his blocks with only a little vibration of his wand. On attack he blotted out all other concerns and struck out, full force, surprising the room with the fireworks. The two of them traded off for Kerry Ann and Tridant, who did their best to appear to nearly kill each other, further impressing the visitors.

Soon enough, they were left to their training as Bones' contingent filed out with a rumble of commentary from those trying to convince the Minister of their view of how things looked.

The door snapped closed and Harry's shoulders fell in relief. He was apparently still too sensitive to having to prove himself to Fudge after all this time because the demonstration had left him agitated. Vineet slid over to him as they took their seats. Harry said, "You were trying to make me look good by holding back."

"I do not mind doing this," Vineet said, sounding fully at peace with the notion.

"I mind you doing it," Harry complained.

"Let's try to get something meaningful accomplished," Rodgers announced, louder than necessary. "And go over the readings for today."

Harry fetched the purple-inked book on the way home and curled up on the couch with it, determined to read it until he slept that night. Worry about his guardian kept his attention on the pages for many hours, and through painstakingly copying out the diagrams onto parchments to take with him that weekend. Harry ached to make another visit. This visit, he planned leave early in the morning, so as to have to time to help out a while if that would help keep Snape safe.

"Good to see you working on your books so religiously," Candide said when they curled back up with their respective work after dinner.

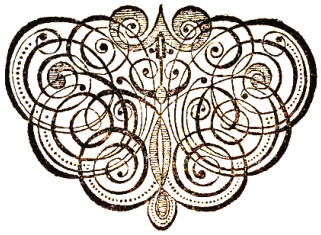
Harry nodded faintly. "I have to be prepared."

"Severus wanted me to keep an eye on your studies, but I don't know why he always insists that. You get to it fine on your own."

Harry nodded faintly again, wanting this ruse over with so badly it made his eyes hot.

> Author's Notes: I've started a new mailing list of people who want to be notified only when the entire story is finished (in addition to the one for chapter notices, which you can also sign up for). you can get on it by sending a message to darkirony at gmail (.) com
> I'm on the road. Depending on how exciting Latvia is next week ;-) we'll see if we can get the chapter posting down to 10 days.

Chapter 29.



Descent

Harry arrived at the Ministry a little early, thoughts circling around his weekend plans. His fieldwork was scheduled for Friday afternoon, which would allow him to get a good night's sleep before going off to visit Snape early Saturday. By then he should have worked out what Device diagrams were likely the ones relevant from the book, and therefore which accompanying spells. It felt overly optimistic to hope he could fetch Snape so quickly, but the following week, when they were released for Christmas, there would be more opportunities. That would work well with the other Snape being home; Harry could be assured he would be nearby to step into the Device. That just left Candide to work around. At least Harry's disappearances, as needed, could be attributed to last minute shopping. As the lift doors opened, Harry vowed to have his guardian back for Christmas, even as difficult as that would be. It pained him too much to imagine celebrating Christmas with the impostor.

Distracted as he was, Harry did not immediately notice Mr. Weasley standing in the middle of the corridor, just beyond the training room door.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley, said, just as Harry's attention came to rest on his boss' solidly planted figure.

"Sir." Harry had been hoping to get a last glance at his unfinished readings before their session started, but Mr. Weasley's posture indicated that was not going to happen.

"Come in here, Harry," he said soberly. "We need a word with you."

"I'll just drop my bag in my locker," Harry half asked, wanting to follow procedure to secure his lunch from tampering.

Mr. Weasley nodded and then led the way down to the tea room. Harry forced himself to exhale, wondering if somehow Percy's threats were already coming to fruition. The chair's metal feet squeaked gratingly across the floor when Harry pulled it out to sit. Mr. Weasley did not sit; he leaned on the back of the opposite chair.

"What did you do this last Tuesday, Harry? After you left training."

Harry kept all reaction off his face, or he hoped he did. His investigations of the Minister of Magic's receptionist's flat would not sit well with many, he now realized. A flicker appeared at the edge of the door and Shacklebolt came into view. Harry returned his gaze to his boss. "I went to talk to Belinda, Bones' receptionist. At her flat," he added, trying to sound helpful, then stopping himself because they all operated under the notion that overly helpful was a red flag in an interview.

Sounding honestly mystified, Harry added, "What's going on?"

Shacklebolt's blue robes slipped away from the door. Mr. Weasley said in a patently reassuring voice that was not in the least reassuring, "We're not certain yet, Harry. But why don't you stay here for the time being."

"Here in the tea room you mean . . . not just here in the Department?"

"In the tea room." He departed and Harry blinked in the wake of it, mind flying faster than his best broom in a hopeless bid to work this out.

Harry's fellows arrived for training. Their voices came down the corridor, gossiping about the Falcon's captain and his being seen the night before with the girlfriend of the Harpies' captain. Tonks poked her head in, but it appeared to be simply a check that he was still there. By the time Harry opened his mouth to ask something, she was gone.

Harry sighed, wondering what the penalty was for illicit investigations. They HAD made them psuedo full Aurors and had not reversed it, as far as Harry knew. If he were a full Auror, he only needed to justify his actions, which seemed easy enough given what he had observed about Belinda.

Mr. Weasley returned long after the training room door had boomed closed and the corridor had fallen silent. He returned to his previous pose over the chair, leaning heavily on the back of it. Shacklebolt slipped in behind him and took a seat, long parchment and pen in hand.

Chapter 29

Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, do you have a solicitor?"

Harry's heart fell as silent as the corridor outside the door. His mouth was too dry to speak immediately, but he managed to stammer, "I . . . not really. Hermione gave me a name once, but I don't have now." He patted his pockets for no good reason, really; the slip of paper had not been magical or anything and would not reappear after all this time.

Mr. Weasley nodded and turned to Tonks who had arrived, face thinned by strain. "Go up to the Minister's office and get a reference from Bones." With a toss of her brown hair, Tonks nodded briskly and slipped off.

Harry opened his mouth to ask something, he was not sure what may come out, but Mr. Weasley held up his hand. "No speaking, Harry, till the solicitor arrives."

Harry breathed instead, needing it badly.

Shacklebolt sat with his hands in his lap, the picture of calm, but Harry knew he always did that, no matter how bad the actions of the perpetrator they were interviewing. Harry reassured himself that if this were truly serious, they would use an interrogation room, so this must be something to do with his unauthorized search, which, apparently, was bad enough. Harry clasped his hands between his knees and wondered morosely if the French would still take him if he were kicked out of this program.

The lift bell sounded and Mr. Weasley went out and closed the door behind him. An argument sounded beyond the door, louder and softer as others came into the room – the whole department aside from Rogan, who must have been left manning the office.

Mr. Weasley was arguing with Fudge. "We will handle this internally. This is our jurisdiction."

"You are soft on that boy, always have been, I will not allow him to make a mockery of my authority again, look where it's got us." Fudge's voice rang with the strains of apoplexy, making Harry's whole body go on alert.

Mr. Weasley said, "You'll get your turn, but right now this is our matter." He came inside then and closed the door and held his hand in front of the handle a few seconds as if expecting it to pop open.

"All right," he said, sounding relieved. He took a seat too and no one moved until a knock sounded, which Mr. Weasley stood to answer.

A hulking, broad figure slid confidently around the full table to the empty seat on Harry's right. Harry gaped in surprise as deBenedictus, the vampire's legal counsel, crisply set down his brief case. Of Harry, he asked, "Said anything?"

Harry shook his head.

"Good." He sat his square frame in the undersized tea-room chair and popped the latches on his battered, but carefully polished, case to pull out a narrow roll of parchment and a gold stand. Harry got a glimpse inside the cavernous bag lined with tall shelves of oversized books and scrolls and even a shelf full of lamps and oil.

Harry wanted to ask something about whether the man held a grudge, but deBenedictus was rolling smoothly on. He set his miniature quill to record and surveyed the table while stating the date and getting the names of all present, including describing their appearance and where they were sitting, all of which the quill scratched dutifully out in a script too small to see without the lens attached to the arm of the stand.

Preliminaries finished, deBenedictus sat back ever so slightly, which did not make Harry feel any less dwarfed, and said, "You may proceed."

Mr. Weasley began, clumsily and Rodgers took over three words in. "Tuesday, Harry. Tell us what you did."

Harry's chest hurt, but before he could answer, deBenedictus rumbled, "You don't have to answer that."

Harry turned his neck to stare up at him. "I don't?"

"Have they arrested you?"

"No."

"Then you certainly don't have to answer that."

Harry wished his mouth had some saliva in it, talking would be so much easier then. "But I can answer that," he insisted, despite wishing he did not need to say anything.

In a darkly neutral tone, the solicitor said, "All I can do is advise."

Harry turned to the rest of the table. "I went to speak to Belinda." But before he could decide whether to skip over the part about searching her flat, Rodgers interrupted again.

"That was the first thing you did after leaving training?"

"Uh, no, I went up to the Minister's office to catch Belinda there. But the cleaning witch said they were off at a ribbon cutting. That they'd left early for that."

Mr. Weasley leaned forward. "What time was that?"

"I don't know. Right after training."

"Quarter past four," Rodgers supplied to Harry's relief.

Tonks confirmed, "You spoke to a cleaning witch?" At Harry's nod, Tonks left the room, making Harry miss her presence immediately.

"Then what?" Rodgers asked.

"I went to Belinda's flat to wait for her. I didn't want to miss her." That sounded good, and Harry invisibly patted himself on the back.

Rodgers again. "How did you get there?"

Without hesitating, Harry replied, "I Apparated."

The quill caught up during the follow-on pause. On a side parchment, deBenedictus' oversized hand was making notes in a curly, yet sparse, print Harry could not decipher.

"Did you speak to Belinda?" Rodgers asked.

Harry nodded. "She had asked me for help the other day, on Diagon Alley, but I didn't have time that day to talk to her." Harry hoped they did not ask what he had to do instead, as he did not relish having to make up yet another lie. "We talked for . . . a while," he stumbled, given that he had arrived home late for dinner.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing really. Insisted she'd straightened things out on her own, which I doubted, given how oddly she was behaving." Harry imagined mentioning the uncharacteristic dirty dishes but thought that would sound lame, even as strange as it seemed standing there in her flat.

"That's all?" Rodgers asked, sounding doubtful too.

Harry shrugged. "I kept trying to convince her to tell me what was going on, but she wouldn't. She said someone else was helping her."

"Who?"

"Alastor Moody."

A ripple went around the table, making Harry wonder if not everyone knew that the old Auror was really alive.

Mr. Weasley, with strange care, said, "What did she say about him, exactly?"

"That he checked in on her once or twice a week." Harry gave in and did what he should have done a long time ago. "I think she's been compromised, so I've been worried about her."

"But you haven't said anything," Rodgers followed on.

"I thought that if things were going that badly, I could convince her to say something herself. She always says how much she cares about the Ministry." He added quickly, "And I wasn't really certain. Am not really," he corrected. So far he felt okay with his performance and relaxed fractionally.

Tonks returned and handed a note to Mr Weasley before sitting with her head down. Harry wished her hair was not so plain.

Rodgers glanced at the note and asked Harry, "Do you have your wand?" When Harry pulled his wand out, holding the point because of the circumstances, his trainer went on, "You've had that with you all along, right?"

Harry glanced at the wand and shrugged. "Yeah."

"Didn't misplace it at some point?"

Harry shook his head.

"Can we check your wand for a spell, Harry?" Rodgers asked.

Harry began to reach out to hand him the wand, but deBenedictus clamped his bear paw-like hand over his wrist. "I strongly advise against that."

"Why? There's nothing on it."

"May I have a word with my client?" deBenedictus asked, in a rumbling, bear-like voice. When the assembled shuffled in their seats as if to stand, deBenedictus added, "It need not be in private." He made an failed effort to turn his body to face Harry. "Mr. Potter, despite your employment in this department, I feel obliged to explain some basic principles to you, so that you may better act in your own interest."

Harry set his wand so it would not roll away and clamped his hands between his knees again to listen.

"You need not cooperate at this stage as you are, and in fact it is highly unwise to." He paused.

Harry said, "But why shouldn't I?"

"Because you do not even know what you are suspected of."

That was quite true. Harry glanced around the table. "But if I don't and I'm suspected and can prove otherwise, nothing will happen."

Patiently, the man went on, "It is much harder to prove otherwise under such circumstances. If you simply hold back, and force them to appeal to the Wizengamot for a

hearing, we will be on far better footing. They will have to inform us of the evidence against you, for example, which we can then prepare a rebuttal to. At the moment, we have nothing."

That all made sense, but Harry appealed to him, "But I didn't do anything."

"That does not matter. You are making their job too easy."

Harry considered that most people they brought in here did that, perhaps not knowing any better. But Harry could not imagine not cooperating as the solicitor suggested. It felt too alien. Arguing for helping, he drew on his experience in the office and said, "They might put me in the dungeon if I don't."

deBenedictus put his lower lip out slightly. "No matter."

"No matter?" Harry echoed. "I . . . er . . . I have things I need to do." The notion nearly panicked him. He had to return to Snape and get help with the diagram and spells, make sure the Device still worked, help out so Snape would be safe. And he wanted his guardian home for Christmas. Returning to his early tactic, he said, "I didn't do anything. There is nothing on my wand."

deBenedictus held up his great hands in a motion of giving in. "All I can do is advise."

Harry's mouth worked, then stopped. He studied his wand more, something he did frequently when he was in school, but rarely did now given that it acted as a natural extension of his arm. It was the wand he had ordered for himself, had fetched the feather for it and everything. "I haven't done anything," Harry repeated to himself, remembering the last time they went through this and Moody had tried to argue that Harry could have removed a firestarting spell, making the lack of one no proof of his innocence.

Harry handed the wand to his trainer, expecting some reaction from the solicitor, but the man sat still, pen poised over his notes, letting Harry relax.

The spells of the morning and then the previous evening came off, just a few ghosts of reheated tea and hovered books, then the demonstration from the morning before and their drills, endless, repeated drills that made Harry want to rest his head on his hand. Then some more minor spells, a dehovered Auror book, and then the room dimmed and a flicker of that noxious green emerged from the floor, swelling as it sucked in snaking spirals of itself. The color alone made Harry's soul quiver with revulsion. The spell unwound and the ghostly figure of MadEye Moody, caught by surprise rose up from a heap and turned away from the wand and stood straight before fading out.

Harry stared at where the apparition had disappeared, hands vibrating despite his clasping them tightly. "I didn't kill Moody," he insisted when things clicked into place in his head. He closed his eyes tightly while the last few minutes of conversation unwound in his brain like the spells had. He muttered to the man next to him. "I should have listened to you. It's a trap."

The others in the room fell matter of fact, which made Harry feel even more isolated. Tonks kept her head down.

Harry breathily repeated, "I didn't kill Moody. Someone else did and is pinning it on me."

"Not many people knew he was alive," Mr. Weasley pointed out kindly.

Harry opened his mouth to point out a choice suspect, but deBenedictus cut him off. "What is this?"

Shacklebolt crossed his long arms and explained, "Alastor Moody is officially dead."

deBenedictus scratched out an aggressive extra note. "Well, isn't that interesting," sounding almost upbeat. He correctly gestured again that Harry should remain quiet, just as Harry opened his mouth again.

Shacklebolt asked Harry, "You're certain your wand has been in your possession?"

Harry thought back, imagining Percy dangling it before him. But he had picked it up off the floor just a second before after Harry dropped it. He should mention it, though, despite that. "Percy knocked it out of my hand before the demonstration, in the changing room. Other than that I've had it as far as I know."

deBenedictus softly said, "I feel compelled to remind you, despite your clearly functioning memory, that you need not answer anything."

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" Harry glumly pointed out.

"It may."

"Well," Harry returned, feeling better for exercising some control over the situation, "in that case they will simply arrest me and then make me answer."

"Willing to submit to Veritaserum?" Rodgers asked. Unlike the others who were all leaning forward, he was sitting back confidently, one hand reaching out to tap out a random rhythm on the table.

deBenedictus gave a squeak, a noise that seemed impossible from one his size.

"Yes," Harry replied.

The solicitor's briefcase flapped open without his touching it and he rapidly pulled out a thick sheaf, which he shoved across the table's stained surface.

"What's that?" Harry asked, feeling life slipping away to the sound of paper sliding rampantly over a tabletop.

"Limitations they must agree to. You do not wish to let them ask you absolutely anything; do you?"

Harry shook his head, appalled by the thought.

The solicitor's calm was underlined now by aggressiveness, which Harry was grateful for, due to his losing all of his better sense somewhere along the way. To the Aurors the solicitor said, while handing over a pen, "State in the blanks on page twenty-seven exactly what you plan to ask him, including any expected followup questions, initial each question and sign page thirty four."

A tiny vial had been fetched and now sat beside a piece of dissolving blotter. Tonks handled putting the soaked square on Harry's tongue for him while he sat on his hands to keep from fidgeting madly. He then sat back and waited as passively as possible for it to work. The room grew melty and streaky immediately indicating it was a fine batch.

Rodgers handled the questioning with reassuring confidence. "Did you kill Alastor Moody."

Harry's mouth handled the answering as though submerged deep in water, "No."

"Have you ever wanted to kill Alastor Moody?"

"No."

"Have you ever been angry with Alastor Moody?"

"Yes."

"Angry enough to get even?"

"Yes." Harry remembered that vividly, even through the drug. Moody's shift from paranoid Order member helping against Voldemort to paranoid Harry-doubter felt like betrayal, and he had the magical powers to make Harry pay for his change in allegiance.

"Did you plot to get even at any time?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I assumed a chance would come along on its own some time. And he claimed that he helped out in the battle with Merton's associates."

"But he was following you around; he repeatedly told Fudge you were going dark."

Harry could not answer since there was no question.

Rodgers leaned forward, smearing across the left side of Harry's vision. "Are you going dark, Harry?"

Harry's remaining willful part of his mind wondered why that question was allowed. Shadowy pawns and masks swam before him. Dark marks sang in his gut, just below his heart, pressed in like burning marbles. He could touch them now and make them all suffer, no matter where they were. It did not feel very white-wizardy. "I don't know."

The room sat back, shifting in their seats.

Rodgers tried to concoct a followup, tugging the Limitations document over and reading it before sitting back with a frown. He grabbed up the document again and, reading off, asked, "Barring this interview, is your life in any way easier now that Alastor Moody is dead?"

"No."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Yes."

"Anyone other than Voldemort and his followers?"

"Sirius Black," Harry heard his dream-voice say, like an announcement.

"Harry," Tonks blurted, voice going teary as she spoke. "Bellatrix killed Sirius. You can't possibly believe you're responsible for that."

Mr. Weasley had interlocked the fingers of his clasped hands and pressed them to his lips. He pulled back after several seconds and said, "I think we're done."

They gave Harry a sip of antidote, and he sat staring at his fingers holding the empty little glass vial, oddly thick sided and heavy relative to its size.

deBenedictus broke the silence. "So, you have a counterbalancing evidence here."

"Not as much as it looks," Rodgers said. "I'll do you a favor, Mr. deBenedictus and give you a heads up. There were no cleaning witches in the Minister's office until after eight; there is no record of anyone Apparating near Belinda's flat until she herself did – to a block away from originating from where the Minister was; and she also denies receiving a visit from Harry that day."

"What?!" Harry snapped.

"I will handle this, Mr. Potter," his solicitor said. "Sit back. Did you expect otherwise given the state of your wand?"

It occurred to Harry that he had not received his wand back. He crossed his arms and slouched, a spectator to the final paperwork of his own official demise. Dizziness washed through him, most likely the potions, but as the room wobbled, he wondered with a wrenchingly helpless alarm if he had not slipped into the wrong place, a place where his counterpart really had done away with Moody. Harry propped his forehead on his hands and found that a better place to listen to the official words pass over him.

Inside his own racing mind, Harry wondered with a icy chill if it had not been Snape who had framed him. Was it possible his guardian's impostor could have arranged such a thing, so quickly? Had Harry pushed him too far?

The paperwork passed in a blur interspersed with scratching pens. Tonks stood, and sounding plodding, said, "I'll take Harry."

Mr. Weasley stepped over beside her. "We'll both take him." They both turned. "Harry? Time to go."

Harry raised his head from his hands and stared at them. They had no idea how very important it was that he finish taking care of his guardian. Maybe he should have told Tonks what had happened with Snape. She certainly knew about his strange skills, but not about how much trouble they had caused. And he had been desperate to keep it a secret and secrets told too broadly were impossible to recapture later, so he had said nothing and now he had no help.

He considered simply slipping away, out of their grasp. He could go anywhere and they would not be able to track him. He could escape to the Plane where his adoptive father was trapped and help him stay alive until he could be brought home. That plan reverberated through him as entirely feasible.

Rogders grabbing up Harry's arm and hauling him to his feet, jarred him out of his plotting. Harry met each of their eyes, Tonks, Shacklebolt, Mr. Weasley, Blackpool.

Their faces were full of duty and, surprisingly, affection. Each one met his gaze full-on, promising and reassuring him at many levels.

Harry let his feet carry him to the door, unable to willingly abandon these people and his own duty to them. deBenedictus followed close behind. He said to Harry, "It is unfortunate that you are not free to help prove your innocence, but all is not lost. I am quite certain the legal ramifications of killing someone already dead are murky at best."

Harry turned his head around the room again. "They don't believe I did it," he said with certainty.

This caught the solicitor by surprise. He took in each of the room's occupants one at a time. Upon concluding this survey, he said, "Ah, well then. I will see you before the Wizengamot and you should hear from me by owl before then."

Harry nodded vaguely and let himself be led away, unable to grasp anything more than putting one foot before the other as they went to Mr. Weasley's office to fetch the portkey that would transport them to L'île de Cachot Méfait – the French wizard prison.

Harry wanted nothing more than to yell for it all to stop. He swallowed hard while Mr. Weasley fiddled with the fleur-de-lis-shaped portkey. Tonks leaned close and said, "It's going to be all right Harry, we're more worried about you than anything. We decided if we take you away, you'll be safe."

Harry had only managed to invite that notion partially into his churning thoughts before his boss grabbed his arm and the world he knew jerked out of view and grey took over until the wave-swept quay of the prison spun up at them through a heavy mist.

Harry landed and held Tonks from stumbling. The monolithic entrance loomed over the end of the quay, the door a tiny notch in the bottom of it. Harry had faced this grim façade once before with very different intent. This time, he felt nothing but doom. But he could still get away, could still slip off and take care of his family. Harry swallowed hard, and blinked salt mist from his eyes. If he left, it would be an admittance of guilt and he would have lost this life here. His guardian would not be pleased by that.

Harry stumbled this time, in a bid to delay reaching the door. Tonks wrapped her lean fingers around his arms and waved Mr. Weasley away with a shout over the surf. In Harry's ear, she said, "Don't go. Don't escape unless your life is in direct danger,

all right? Promise me. Trust us to take care of things. You won't be here long. We'll find Moody's real killer and fetch you home."

"For Christmas?" Harry asked, sounding difficult, a tone that did not survive over the crash and hiss of the foam on the quay. The waves ebbing over the edges made the solid quay seem to rock on the sea.

"Probably not for Christmas, but soon after. Harry, we don't want anything worse to happen. Durumulna wants to get even and we can't protect you, it seems. It will be loads easier if they believe we bought into their ruse. You'll be safe then."

Salt spray escorted them to the door, which opened just as they stepped on the great slate slab leading up to it. Harry knew that beyond the bridge in the atrium, he could not return, even by using the Dark Plane, and he hesitated again, until Tonks pulled him along. The guard, complete with fancifully feathered helmet and spike, led them mutely to the lift.

The air changed as they descended, growing chilly and thin. When the platform ground to a halt, the guard gestured for them to exit before impatiently poking at the lift controls to return to his post. Another pair of guards snapped to attention and led them to the brightest lit doorway on that corridor where warm air poured out.

Harry had been invited to come back to this place for a tour, so this was not at all how he envisioned returning. His face burned when the warden's office door opened and Mr. Weasley began introductions and explained that Harry was to be incarcerated.

The warden was strangely convivial. "Ah, Meester Pottar, such change in fortune you 'ave had. Well, we will see to it that the best is made of your situation."

Tonks, her hand clamped on Harry's elbow, said, "We are very concerned about Harry's safety. I noticed on the prison map you sent us that you have an outdated and unused cell block. We are . . . " Here she glanced uncertainly at Mr. Weasley, apparently not clearing this ahead of time. "We are hoping that Harry can be housed there, to eliminate any chance that he interact with the other prisoners. Many of the ones we sent here, Harry helped capture, and we are worried about what may happen if they can get access to him."

The warden nodded deeply, then gave a snug twist to his long mustache as if to straighten that too. "I assure you, things very carefully are run here, but nevertheless, given the celebrity of our guest, we can open old Section Bey, just for Meester Pottar."

Tonks gave Harry a meaningful look that he could not translate.

Harry took a seat across from the paperwork and sat, half-aware, through that, followed by the spells to register him. Strained by needing to go home and take care of things there and beyond, he barely perceived what was happening. He looked up at Tonks, ignoring the latest sheets placed before him. "You'll keep an eye on Severus and Candide, right?" he pleaded, wishing she knew what had happened, but it was impossible to explain now.

"Yes, Harry. We will. Extra guards and patrols and everything. Don't worry."

But Harry could not help but worry. The Ministry had said such things before and, even knowing from the inside how things worked, the promises did not feel reliable against real evil. Reading his face, Tonks insisted. "Really Harry. I'll see to it myself."

The warden himself announced he would escort Harry, Tonks, and Mr. Weasley to the cell. They took a second lift and followed along a corridor that resembled the dungeon under the the Ministry, only on a much larger scale. The prisoners they passed could not be seen – the barred windows were too high on the doors and the eye-level viewing slats were locked closed, but the occupants could be heard, reacting to the cluster of footfalls going by. Some pounded metal cups, resulting in a startling racket. Others whispered and muttered, audible through the cracks between the iron-reinforced planks. The noise in the first block made the subsequent quiet blocks, where only a whisper of movement sounded from within, all the more un-nerving.

At the end of the third block, they went around half a curved staircase and through another door. The warden shouted something in French and an office door flew open. More instructions followed before they continued on into the darkness.

The air grew colder. Torches fluttered weakly when commanded to by the warden. They reached a T intersection where the corridor widened into a real room, complete with chairs and a table supported only by magic, before crudely narrowing into crooked rows of hand-hewn cell doors. Stray newspapers and cigarette ends littered the area.

"Dis is sometimes used as a breaking room," the warden explained before unlocking a block of cells with a rattle and chatter of resistant metal and leading the way inside. Harry hoped that he had misspoken.

They stopped before a door about three quarters of the way along the block. Pounding footsteps preceded the breathless arrival of a guard carrying pads and blankets. With some ceremony the pads, less than an inch thick, were stacked upon the bench, which like everything else, was carved directly out of the unyielding rock. The opposite wall

had tilted shelf of rock with a groove cut in the middle. Water trickled along this and down to a channel where it dropped away into a bottomless hole that also served as the facilities. The place was so grim, Harry did not move immediately, even after the explanatory tour ended. He tried to speak, but Tonks cut him off, saying to Mr. Weasley, "Let me talk to Harry alone, please."

Mr. Weasley sadly nodded his ascent and after bowing several times, the warden followed him out, gesturing to the uncomprehending guard to do the same. The door thudded closed and bounced slightly, unlatched.

"Harry," Tonks said with firm appeal and a tight grip on Harry's sleeves. "I had them put you in this cell block so you could escape if needed to. I expect you can."

Harry's mood brightened considerably, and it must have shown in his face because she sharply said, "I don't want you to use that route unless your life is in danger. Do you understand?" Her voice dropped to barely audible. "They'll know that a prisoner is gone the instant the cell is empty. Their magic is very good here. If you leave, and the press finds out, we're going to have a much harder time proving you innocent."

"What if you never do?" Harry said, heart sinking precipitously.

"Don't be daft, of course we will. Just give us a little time. Like you said, there is only a rather short list of people who knew Alastor was alive."

"Percy," Harry said, feeling darker just stating that name.

"I'll be on his case, Harry, if that's where you want me to focus my part of the investigations."

Harry thought that over. He could be wrong, but that did not feel wrong. "And Belinda. She's got in over her head in this. I'm not certain she meant to."

"She's a given for a closer look, Harry. And Transportation. They should have seen you Apparate."

Harry shook his head.

Tonks twisted her head and glared for an instant. "You're not making this easy, Harry."

"And if you tell them now . . . you know . . . how I get around."

"It's not going to help your case," she finished for him.

The stared at each other until Tonks pulled him down for a deep kiss. The door squeaked open and the Warden said, "Ah, such is a most important reason for delay."

Tonks stepped back and patted Harry on the cheek. "We're doing this for your own good, Harry. Behave, please." She sounded truly pleading. After another quick kiss, she joined Mr. Weasley in the corridor. The door closed again, this time with a clang and the rusty scratch of the bolt sliding into place. Footsteps scuffed on the floor and then receded.

"Please," Harry murmured to the dank, empty air. "Please, no one do anything for me for my own good."

"What did you do to Harry!" shot out over the crowd-murmured air, powerful enough it echoed around the high ceiling of the atrium before vanishing. An instant later Ginny collided hard with Aaron and grabbed hold of the front of his crisp designer robes.

Aaron stepped back to retain his balance, and glanced around at the atrium's full attention on them. He pulled her closer to quietly plead, "I didn't do anything to Harry."

Voice toned about halfway down, Ginny insisted, "I just read that you took him away, to prison."

"I didn't. Personally."

"Yeah, but you're in that department," Ginny said angrily, continuing to behave as rigid as a metal spring in resisting his attempts to shift them to a more delicate, and publically palatable dance. "I was just on my way to giving my dad what-for, for me and the twins and anyone else I know."

"Look," he said, glancing around the burgeoning lunch-time crowd. "Let's discuss this elsewhere, okay?" He Apparated her away to his flat.

When they arrived in the brightly lit sitting area, Ginny stepped back and propped her arms akimbo, her elbows as pointed as swords and looking just as dangerous if well-aimed. Aaron wondered if somehow her hair became redder when she was angry, or if it was just the light.

"Look," Aaron said, "I don't have any control over what the department does." He started to tell her more, then decided he best reseal the room from eavesdropping, which he proceeded to do, ignoring her complaints until that was finished.

Chapter 29

Aaron ended up near the long leather couch. "Have a seat," he said, feeling drained all of a sudden.

Ginny strode over to the end of the couch and stood firm, arms crossed, face sharp.

"All right then, I'll sit." Aaron let the couch absorb him. It was the kind of couch where your bum nearly reached the floor by the time you finished sinking in. He waved over a foot stool and sat back, making a point about relaxing in the hopes of getting her to do so too. But this failed.

"How can you sit there like that?" she accused, eyes burning.

"Because there is nothing to be done. If you'd sit down and listen for half a second I can explain."

She pulled the footstool out from under his legs and sat there, looking ready to disbelieve everything.

Aaron propped his legs on the armrest instead. "Magical Law Enforcement put Harry in prison pending his hearing because they feared if they did not do so Durumulna would find some other means of getting even or simply getting Harry out of the way. They killed Moody. They went to all this trouble to set Harry up. They are serious about this."

Ginny did not budge from her stiff posture. "They set him up because they know they can't kill him."

Aaron had to concede that. "Possibly. But Harry has others around him who could be hurt. And some bad blokes are determined to get even with him. I'm sure by now they've discovered that they've been cheated. Those metal disks have started showing up in the shops and it's had the positive side effect of getting the shop keepers to talk." He crossed his hands behind his neck and stretched back. "Nothing like feeling cheated to loosen them up their tongues and get some cooperation."

Ginny fell thoughtful. "We just have to make sure nothing happens to Candide while Harry is away."

"She has a guard assigned now. You can sign up for double shifts if you like." His mouth twisted into a silly grin. "I can come serve them with you if I'm not on duty."

She flushed and stared at the ceiling.

Aaron went on, "Training has been cut to three hours so they can assign us all to the investigation. And Professor Snape will be home from school for the holidays shortly."

He sat forward slightly. “But no one is to know that Harry is not considered to be the primary wizard of interest. Don’t let that slip to anyone.”

“I won’t,” she snapped, recovering from embarrassment with another dose of offended anger. “I know how these things work.”

“You didn’t sound like it two minutes ago,” he pointed out, teasing with false exacerbation.

“Well . . .” she hemmed. “It just struck me as terribly unfair.”

Aaron stared at her blushing, noticing it did not fade immediately. “You still like him, don’t you?”

She looked away and shrugged. “Everyone likes Harry.” But she could not hold her mouth still.

Aaron, sounding clever, said, “I like Harry just fine too, but there’s a limit to my like.” After a pause, he said more soberly, “Is that why you don’t want to get married, because you are still hoping . . .?”

“That isn’t it at all,” she insisted. “Ask me in a year, all right?”

Sounding childlike, Aaron echoed, “A year?”

Harry sat pensively on the stone bench that served as a bed in his cell. The constant trickle of water was the only sound in the cool air beyond the range of his breathing, which he consciously had to keep slow. He had no idea what time it may be, only that the total time for which his current reality felt solid was much shorter than the total time he had occupied it.

He tried to believe he had fallen out of place, because it would wipe out all of his problems if true. But beyond his bad circumstances, nothing felt truly out of order. He was home, in his own Plane, albeit with the wrong man for a guardian.

Harry’s thoughts seized up and then spun away in a mad review of the past week. What if he had pushed the intruder too far and he had arranged to get Harry out of the way? Perhaps Harry had underestimated this version of Severus Snape and his ability to scheme and play the double agent. What if Snape had played Harry the way he played Voldemort, pretending to be meek and cowed when in reality, working for his downfall?

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Harry did not move, but the rhythm of his heartbeat changed, speeding his thoughts along faster. He should go, he thought, and challenge Snape, just in case his fears were correct and this Death Eater was all enemy and no friend. That was when Harry felt them; before that moment he had been too caught up in his own distress to properly perceive their presence. But there they were, dozens of Death Eaters, hovering so terribly close, in rows, even, like soldiers waiting for orders. Harry's hand twitched where it lay beside him on the bench, longing to hold a wand. But did he really need a wand? He had these followers; weren't they better than a wand?

At the moment, he was safely separate from them. They were in one area of the prison and he in another, and clearly they had not escaped before now and likely would not anytime soon. One of the shadows must be Voldemort himself, trapped as he was in a Muggle existence. He, certainly, represented no threat.

Harry's thoughts ran through this, then reeled back to concern about leaving a double-crossing Snape free to do more harm. He could not allow that. He gathered his wits, preparing to slip away in the long gap between regular corridor patrols. But the clacking noise of the viewing plate in the door sliding aside stopped Harry cold.

"Monsieur?" Came a startled sounding voice through the gap. Only a pair of eyes could be seen, hovering beyond the slot, moving constantly about to see around inside.

"Yeah?" Harry replied, thinking it silly now that he had not moved at all for hours. Although . . . what would he do, instead, really?

"Très bon . . . az you were," the voice said, and the slat closed with a slap.

Harry blinked at the wall across from him while he took that in. As a test, he stood and shook his robes straight. He thought of Snape at Hogwarts, of wanting to visit him for a serious talk. Nothing happened. He prepared to slip away. The slat clattered open again.

"You zink dere is escape, Monsieur Pottar?"

Harry scratched his head. "There is a way out of every prison," he replied, finding a jovial tone. "If one dreams hard enough of it."

"Ah, a poet!" The eyes widened with delight.

"Not really," Harry mumbled, acutely disappointed that as soon as he prepared to escape, someone would notice. Magically, he was being watched too closely to sneak off. As Tonks depressingly insisted, he should only go for an emergency. The slat closed again. Harry was not truly certain it was Snape who had arranged this, in fact, he wanted to believe otherwise.

Harry sat down, having nothing else to do. Even the three pads were not all that thick and his bum complained. Unable to contain the energy inside him, he slipped off his robes and proceeded to jog in place until his breath steamed the closed-in air, then he did push ups against the bench, then he did sit ups, then with muscles burning he repeated it all until he could barely move to flop on the bench and sleep, kept company by a forest of shifting shadows whispering promises.

Severus Snape re-read the first part of the letter he held. He had subconsciously moved closer to the stone-framed window to better see it, but the words remained the same the second time. Arthur Weasley's handwriting read straight and simple on the page, no flourishes marred his message. He had arrested Harry for the Murder of Alastor Moody, but . . . and here the letter grew careful . . . investigations are continuing and I will pay you a personal visit as soon as I can get away. The oath of the Order is still in force.

The foolish boy, or perhaps more accurately, young man, had walked into a trap that he should have foreseen. Snape shook his head. His cleaner-than-normal hair did not sway the way it normally did, part of keeping this ruse intact. He stared out the window. The Hufflepuffs were practicing on the pitch, earnest but barely competent, a description that fit the Harry he knew, and apparently this one as well, despite first impressions otherwise.

A whistle drifted over the lawn and the figures at the pitch gathered in a cluster again, one figure gesturing at the rest. It would be convenient to have Harry out of the way. He had kept Snape's secret until it was too late. Were he to attempt to reveal Snape's origins now, his accusations would sound shrill and too far-fetched to credit.

A fierce knock sounded on the door, and Snape instinctively crumpled up the letter and stuffed it away in his robes. The door opened without further pre-amble. Snape had been forced to leave it unsealed, a necessary vulnerability he would never grow accustomed to.

Hermione Granger burst into the room, wild hair appropriately framing her frenzied face, voice half an octave too high. "Did you hear what happened to Harry?"

What should his reaction be, he wondered. "Arthur sent me an owl." He needed her on his side; she was smart enough to catch him up, so he added, "One promising further explanation and action, presumably in Harry's best interest."

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Hermione stopped in the middle of the floor, just at the edge of the worn rug and exhaled what sounded like the last of her strength. "We knew they'd get even, or try. But how could Harry be accused of killing Moody when he's already dead? I don't understand that."

"Presumably he was not."

She blew her fringe off her forehead with an overdone sigh. "Yes, presumably." Her gaze narrowed to his, heavy with sweet hope, something he viscerally disliked having aimed his way. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

Snape thought quickly, pulling out and smoothing the letter to gain time. "Arthur promises to visit when he had a spare moment, but I will turn my duties over to Professor Lupin and pay the Ministry a visit instead, right now."

Pleading pathetically, she said, "Let me know how it goes, will you? And get Harry's post address there, so I can send him a care package and have my students send him letters of support."

"Yes, I'm certain he will appreciate that," Snape managed to say, only because he should.

The Ministry's security had grown to be rather like that in Snape's world, surprisingly like it, except for the lack of Pureblood registration. Snape submitted to extra tests and questions, and in the end, his former house student, Aaron Wickem, came and fetched him because he required an escort.

As they walked briskly to the lifts, Aaron said, "I'm glad you're here, Professor. We need all the help we can get."

Snape's better instincts told him to stymy the investigation, if possible, but his promise to Dumbledore fought it down. Snape wondered if his pledge really should apply here, and tried to hold that thought, but it slipped away like an eel, leaving him resigned but unenthusiastic about his duty.

"Severus", Mr. Weasley said breathlessly when he turned and found him standing off his escort's elbow. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement hummed with overactivity, with personnel invading from other departments. "Let's go into my office," Mr. Weasley said, waving the others off.

Snape wasted no time after the door snapped closed. "You mentioned the Order Oath."

"It was the safest way to tell you we don't think Harry did this."

Snape nodded silently. He was mostly here because it was expected that he be here, although curiosity helped him along. "How long do you think?"

"Before we can realistically let him out?" Mr. Weasley took a seat and smoothed the wispy hair on top of his head. "I don't know. They've got him pretty good; I'll give them that."

Snape felt annoyance at this, just on principle, and used it to say sharply. "Come now, they cannot have left no holes in their plot. And you must have a suspect of your own."

Mr. Weasley grew agitated, making Snape wish he would look up so he had a chance of seeing why. He considered insulting him for his incompetence, but decided that he personally needed to retain this man as an ally, so he kept quiet, but it was a hard fight holding back. His own dismay came across clearly when he said, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Keep an extra layer of spells around your house, at a minimum. Although, we expect things to quiet down now that they believe their ploy successful."

"How are you proceeding from here, may I ask? This is my . . . family," he managed with a slight choke on the word. "Son" was right out. " . . . we are discussing here."

Mr. Weasley shuffled some files around. "Alastor was doing his own investigations for Fudge in the Department of Mysteries, so we are trying to track backwards what he was doing."

"What have you learned so far?"

Mr. Weasley's hands fell still, limp. "That he was investigating Harry. According to Fudge, that was his primary job."

"Ah," Snape uttered.

"Fudge is livid. Harry isn't going anywhere unless we have something rock solid to get him out with. We're going to delay the Wizengamot hearing as long as it takes to generate that evidence . . . that we have the political power to do, but not to pull him out of there until that time."

"What about the Ministry Dungeon. Why have you sent him so far away?"

"Because we aren't certain of keeping him safe here. I can't bear to think of him trapped in a cell without a wand to defend himself."

"He hardly needs a wand to defend himself," Snape pointed out, mostly to keep arguing, which he felt like doing after a week of being overly nice to everyone.

"True, but you'll recall he was poisoned right here in the Ministry."

Snape did not recall that, but he had no reason to doubt such a confession. After a gap, he said, "Seems you have more problems internally than you can cope with."

This made Mr. Weasley look up and now he revealed the side Snape was more familiar with: the lined and world-weary face of a man responsible for too many lives beyond his skills, a man whose adherence to principal gave him a naïve intrepidness that should be mockable, but Snape, who had no difficulty openly criticizing Dumbledore's attitudes, could never quite manage to.

"We can handle this, Severus," Mr. Weasley assured him.

Snape was not reassured, but one part of him hummed with strategic pleasure at that belief. While Mr. Weasley made more assurances, Snape began laying out his next moves. He should visit Candide at her office. He had seen the address on her papers, and such a visit would be expected. He escaped the Ministry with that excuse, and as predicted, it worked well to get him away.

Candide was far more distraught than Snape imagined.

"Look at the papers!" she shouted, seeming to have waited for his presence to vent this. The papers were scattered around her sizable desk, mangled and forlorn. Her office mates, bent over their work, flinched at her voice; outward emotion and cold numbers mix poorly.

A robustly bellied man in a waistcoat with two watch chains gestured behind Candide's back that Snape should vacate with the woman. It was late in the day in any event.

"Why don't we go?" Snape said.

This halted her tirade. She pushed her hair back and turned hopefully to her boss, who had the sense to smile graciously and gesture that she could depart.

Candide's harsh vocal complaints about the Ministry specifically and fate in general did not re-occur, fortunately. Once home, she took her overburdened body to the couch and sat back with undue care, leaving Snape standing nearby, uncertain what was expected of him. He decided it best to wait for a cue. As difficult as Harry was

to handle, this part of his borrowed world left him feeling far more uncertain. Being pushed around and abused by a mad, powerful wizard Snape was accustomed to, even if he had gone to great lengths to escape it only to end up back in the thick of it. He knew well how to placate and lie and act appropriately and do even a bit better than survive. But facing the reality of a very pregnant wife and a veritable mile-deep snake pit of emotional expectations and responsibilities left him feeling inexpert and short of the willpower needed to sustain the needed artifice.

Candide tipped her head back and sighed, then sniffled. "Poor Harry. I can't imagine him there in prison. It's just awful." She dabbed her eyes and looked over at him. "You're just standing there."

"I'm thinking."

"Of how to get him out?"

Snape did not answer. The will to lie was gone, and he had no desire to reveal his torn emotions in this area.

She patted the couch beside her expectantly. "I assume you are staying a while since I don't have a guard yet. Home too early for once."

Trapped, Snape stepped that way and sat down, knowing if he behaved as stiffly as he instinctively wished to, he was going to have questions if not an argument. He brought his over practiced willpower to bear and brushed her shoulder. He intended to leave it at that, but she tugged her feet up and turned casually to lay in his arms. He fumbled while adjusting his hold, but this went by unnoticed. Snape tipped his head back and held perfectly still until his heart slowed. He silently shook his head, far too aware of the pressure on his arms and chest, and wondered with no little alarm how any version of himself could find this casually normal.

She sniffled again, but he did not even move to roll his eyes as he would have liked. Yes, truly this part of his borrowed world was the hardest to cope with.

She sighed for a fourth time and rubbed an eye, but Snape took little notice. The scent of her was impossible to ignore this close. She smelled of love potion brewing, overlaid by something strangely both sweet and animal-like, which could be the pregnancy. Then there was that. His child. Or essentially his. The pit under his feet widened so that he stood on air, suspended helplessly over a seething mass of impossible circumstance and expectation.

"Poor Harry," Candide said, breaking the spell of doom holding Snape captive.

"He'll survive," Snape murmured, far less certain of him own fate.

"Yes, but it's so unfair."

Snape could not censor himself. "Life is unfair."

She slapped him lightly on the arm. "You always say that. It isn't always true." But she was not angry, just teasing to lighten her own mood. Snape was surprised he could recognize that so easily.

She settled in better, head shifting to the crux of his shoulder. Snape's arms were aching he held them so rigid, so he was grateful for a chance to relax them. He had not felt he could move without her moving first.

"I hope the guard is late," she said. "They'll go to the office first so that will delay them somewhat."

The implication of that was clear, even as unbelievable as it seemed; she wanted to be alone with him like this as long as possible. There was only one person Snape had ever wanted to hold like this, but her haunting presence had never felt so distant as it did this moment. Something about that strange scent, the scent of a future faced with hope rather than constant fear and strategic panic, the scent of someone willingly desiring to share that future, sliced a gash in this festering pain. Some morbid instinct in him wanted to gather it up, to hold it from escaping, to cherish it. But with the weight of Candide compressing his chest and the scent of her making his thoughts flutter, he realized that he had only cherished that pain because there was nothing else to cherish.

Something of his inner turmoil must have shown, because she patted his arm and asked, "Are you going to be all right, Severus?"

Again, he could not lie. If she chose to ask the right questions, he would tell her anything. He was bleeding stagnant, poisonous pain and in its absence found that he was not empty without it, as he had feared he would be. He was perhaps lost and drifting, but not empty.

"I don't know. Possibly," he said softly. He was thinking for the first time that Lily was long enough dead that what used to feel like betrayal no longer did. He had sworn he would never do as she did and betray her in return after she had left him with an empty life. He let those old memories run through him, finding himself more like a stone in the stream of them than the tossed leaf he normally was. She had chosen his worst enemy, and that still burned, but in the end maybe his empty life had been his own doing, a thought that felt far safer in his current, cramp-armed position.

The patting on his arm continued, finding a rhythm. "Taking Harry on as a responsibility was a very noble thing to do."

He tried to imagine that without hope of comprehension. "Yes, so unlike me," he said, finding better footing and maybe even strength in self-depreciation. He still felt purposeless and did not particularly like it.

She hit him firmly, but in a philosophical tone, said, "I expect you thought it would get easier."

"I would never think that," Snape replied, absolutely certain, within and without.

Harry woke to the dimness of his cell, reminded firmly by the dank dungeon scent where he was. The shadows tried to follow him out of his dreams to hover around him there in the cell, but he firmly pressed them away. He sat up and slapped his face lightly to rouse himself better. The thin air made it difficult to come to quick awareness.

He sniffled and immediately blamed it on the musty air, rather than emotion. Needing a concrete task, he used the facilities and spent some time washing up as well as he could with a trickle of water, a chained metal cup, and only a faint fairylight to do it with. If he wanted company, he need only prepare to depart and the guard would appear. The magic of this place immediately gave away his escape, but that also made him feel less alone. At the moment, Harry wanted to be alone to think, so he folded his pads and his three ratty blankets and made a comfortable seat at one end of the bench. Then he propped his chin on his hands and did just that; he thought over the last few months of his neglected real life in as much detail as possible.

Clearly Belinda had fallen in with Durumulna, even as unlikely as Harry thought that to be before now. She had always been so positive about what the Ministry stood for and really believed it could accomplish things. Harry shook his head at the conundrum of that. Perhaps she was not involved willingly, but under an Imperius Curse. But for certain she had not shown symptoms of that during their last few meetings. Harry thought back farther when he would go visit her in the Minister's office and Percy always seemed to be lurking about. Had she shown symptoms then, he now wondered. That would implicate Percy. Then with giddy mockery, Harry considered that perhaps that was how Percy got her to date him in the first place.

This cruel humor faded quickly as the possibility of that grew in plausibility and his stomach turned sour.

It was possible, Harry decided. Those times she had given Harry nothing but stiff responses, may have had nothing to do with her breaking up with him months before. But she had warmed up after that, so she must have been released from the Curse at some point. Balanced with her insistence that Moody was keeping an eye on her, Harry now wondered it that had not been the old Auror's doing. But if so, why had Moody not reported it? Or, maybe he had, to his boss, Fudge.

Harry pulled the knuckle of his thumb out of his mouth before he chewed it through to the bone. He needed paper to write a letter. And ink. And a pen. Some light would help too. They told him his post would have to be screened coming in, and he wondered if that meant they would have to be screened going out as well.

Harry sat thinking until breakfast arrived, and unlike lunch and dinner the previous day, which he had turned away, this tray he readily accepted through the slot in the door, to the guard's obvious delight.

"Très bon. Très bon," the man said. "Zee warden will be most plea-zed."

Even as the delicious scent of salt cod, bacon, eggs and hollandaise reached his nose from the tray, Harry found himself dismayed to imagine the warden taking an interest in his meal consumption.

The guard went on. "He wishes to invite you for dinnar zis even-ing. If you are will-ing. 'E does not wish to interrupt your five stay-jes, 'owever."

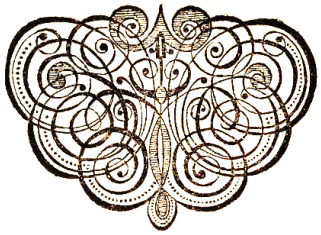
"My what?"

"Your five stay-jes of grief. All ze new prisoners, you know, zey 'ave to go through this."

"Ah," Harry said, finally understanding. But Harry was not staying here long term; he did not have any grief. In fact, what he had instead were quite a few captive followers willing to do just about anything for him. And he had letters to write, and really, he could leave anytime. Not a terribly grief-generating situation. "Yeah, tell him I'll be there for dinner."

> Author's Notes: No preview this time. Make something up, post it in the comments if you like. There will be some humor in the next chapter. I get to use my Monty Python Frenchmen a bit more extensively. Such fun!

Chapter 30.



Prison sans Bars

Harry paced most of the day, wishing for even just a foot more space to do it in. He worried about his guardian, who would not know why Harry did not come to assist him and would worry in turn; that was, assuming nothing bad happened to him in the meantime. Harry worried too that the impostor Snape could be at least partly responsible for framing him, even if Harry could not work out how he might have managed it.

Harry scuffed his feet to a stop and rested his forehead on the stone wall. A film of dank moisture came off onto his skin. He could go and take care of both Snapes, but it would mean throwing everything else away. He could do that; Tonks had seen to it that he could leave. What he would do after it was all straight was far less clear, but at least he would not be standing here in such a state, worrying.

Harry heaved a sigh that was eaten up by the imprisoned air. He really should stay and trust that others would take care of things. His guardian had made it clear he could take care of himself, even in that muddled place. From Harry's perspective, his guardian seemed to fall into his new, or perhaps old, role a bit too easily. He would be more than a little unhappy with Harry when he found out how much Harry had sacrificed just to help him with something for which he had spent a decade and half fine-tuning his skills. As to the impostor, well, he wanted to stay, which meant he would not do anything to harm his reputation, or he would not do so until his position was more secure, so for the moment, he was not a danger.

Despite being unable to piece together how the impostor might have managed to set up the evidence that led to his arrest, Harry imagined it to be well within his skills,

even if he could not imagine him killing Moody. Although, another niggling part of his mind pointed out, he did kill Dumbledore.

Harry pounded his head lightly on the rough rock. He wanted a future, but he also wanted a present, and to have those two desires so viciously in conflict made him want to scream.

Harry sat down hard. If he had paper, at least he could be doing something. The guard who brought his meals insisted that his personal effects would take time to get through screening – days even. Harry growled and stretched his neck back to stare at the low ceiling. If he were susceptible to claustrophobia, he would have gone mad in this place already. As it was, his breathing occasionally faltered, especially if he thought too hard about the solid square miles of rock above him, poised to crush the cell and him into wet dust.

Harry rubbed his face and paced some more, trying hard to avoid looking inward at the army of shadows close by. Dwelling on their presence brought on that dark strategic thinking where he felt certain he could take over and control everyone, easily – the mode where his enemies would regret being his enemies in some fashion so gruesome his mind averted from the notion and blanked it out.

When the guard came to take him to the warden, Harry nearly leapt up off the bench with joy at the prospect of leaving his cell, even as badly as he had wanted to retain an air of detachment. The guard led Harry back down the long, uneven corridor. The carvers of this place had lacked not only the tools to work along a straight and level line, but apparently the desire to as well. The floor rose, fell and faintly corkscrewed.

They reached the wide area where the guards' unofficial break room had been set up. Another guard sat reading a ragged magazine. He stood and eagerly shook Harry's hand, spitting out a string of harsh French, at which Harry could only nod politely in turn. As they stepped away and the guard gave him a hearty, salute-like wave, Harry began to suspect he was currently being treated better than he would have been in Azkaban. This thought disturbed him with its implications and he mulled it over until reaching the warden's office.

Harry waited through a round of spells to verify he carried nothing dangerous before the door was opened. The warden waved off the guard, who did not even hesitate in departing. They know nothing about me, Harry thought in a kind a remote alarm. Or, maybe they did: Harry did in fact have zero intention of making trouble.

"Meester Pottar," the warden said warmly, leading Harry inside by the hand he pumped up and down, despite their having been introduced again just the day before.

A marble and iron cafe table had been set up in the warden's office, complete with gold-edged dishes that sparkled in the flickering lamplight.

"'Ave a seat. Please," the warden insisted.

"Thanks," Harry said, taking the more distant chair. Even though the office was not appreciably larger than his cell, the candles and the signs of normal life made if feel far more welcoming.

The wine poured itself and the warden raised his glass in a toast. "To you, Meester Pottar."

"To me?" Harry echoed wryly. "If you insist . . ." Harry drank up, figuring that if they wished to potion him, they would not have to go to this length to do it.

A knock sounded upon the door and a guard with a chef's hat stretched down over his unyielding helmet slipped in with a large pot of fish soup that filled the air with a heady simulation of an ocean breeze. Harry's thoughts tried to whirl far away with the scent.

When they were alone again, the warden put his elbow down beside his bowl and leaned forward eagerly. "Zo, I am dy-ing of curiosity. What was eet? A lov-er betrayed you?"

"What?" Harry responded, not following.

The warden paused to slurp soup before trying again. He held up one pinky and used it to point at Harry while also twisting his long curled mustache around between his fingers. "I am a-zuming that you, zo passion-ate, that you were driven to this by love betrayed, no?"

"No," Harry said. "I actually-"

"Ah! No, no, let me guess. I am close, though. I must be . . . I am zer-tain." This time he gestured with his oversized soup spoon. "No, it was a rival-ry and you stood up for your 'onor . . . or your lady's 'on-or. Yes, that would be more to your styling." He gave a great sigh. "This life it is zo full of trial for one such as you. Always so many wish to share in your spot-light and if they cross the line, you have but no choice but to crush them, am I right?"

Harry had abandoned eating for the moment. "I didn't do it."

The warden appeared not to hear. "Or . . . blackmail. Such fam-ous peoples make such easy targets." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Or so zey think. But you showed zem, eh?"

Harry tried again. "I didn't do it."

The warden stared at Harry and sniffed sadly. "You still defend your own reputation, even so late in the game."

"I really didn't kill him," Harry said in his most honest and calm voice.

"Ah," the warden excitedly gasped in a breath. "Magnifique! You 'ave been framed!" He kissed his fingertips as if expressing delight for the soup. "Oh, I have not imagined this. It iz wonderful, zeez intrigues."

Harry had put his spoon down and now sat back, hand on chin, to stare at the man across from him.

The warden waved his fingers. "You have no worries about poisoning. My chef is most careful. He must eat 'alf before he brings the rest. Zee kitchen is all zee way at zee end of zee hall. If 'e makes it to the table wiz it . . . we are okay."

Harry, not wanting to be rude, picked up his spoon and continued eating. The soup was still boiling hot; the bowl must be charmed. The conversation fell off in the interest of eating, punctuated by noises of delight from his host that may or may not have been related to the food.

In the middle of the terrine course, which made Harry begin to worry seriously about how many courses might be forthcoming, the warden returned to his earlier topic. While tearing bread into chunks to eat with the terrine, he said, "Zo, what ees your strategy for re-solving your zituation?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. I've been framed quite well, but the department is trying to prove I'm innocent."

"And your pink-haired lady-friend iz on your side for certain? If she is part of the con-spirazy you may be 'ere a loooong while." This prospect sounded pleasant to him.

"I don't think she is," Harry said.

"Ah, but it would be perfect if she were," the warden pointed out, clearly intrigued.

"Not for me it wouldn't," Harry replied glumly.

The warden noticed that Harry had stopped eating. "Oh, I 'ave taken your appetite. My apologizes."

"No, I think the previous six courses took my appetite," Harry stated, worried if he moved more than to breathe his stomach might rupture.

"Oh, but we are only 'alfway true zee meal. Perhaps you need some digestif." He rang a bell beside his plate and the guard in the chef's hat came hurrying in.

Harry slowly sipped the proffered liquor while his host ate the next courses alone. He wondered how in the world the man could more resemble Lupin for physique rather than his Uncle Vernon.

During the second dessert course, which Harry managed to nibble at, grateful that enough hours had passed that he had managed to digest some of the earlier courses, the warden reached over to his desk for a thick folder.

"Your file. Or a copy of ov eet," the warden explained.

Harry balked at how thick it was. "What . . . have they put my marks in there from school, even?"

The warden flipped some pages around. "Yes, your 'Ogwarts' file ees in here, of course." He read a bit. "You were quite fond of detention, I zee."

"It was fond of me."

The warden flipped some more, tugging out a familiar page. "And your adop-tion. Most interesting. Same professor as your detentions."

"Funny that," Harry said, just to say something. His stomach was making him sleepy and the wavering candles made the room seem to rock gently, like a moored boat. Through a haze of food fatigue, Harry felt a painful stab of worry about his adoptive father. Here he was having a twelve-course meal with a crazy Frenchman while Snape struggled to fight Voldemort. At this point, even if he could leave, Harry felt unfit to do more than drag himself slowly away to his bed, certainly not battle anyone. He rubbed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to fall flat on his poorly padded stone bench, but he resisted asking to go back to his dreary cell, so he held out . . . through the subsequent coffee course and follow-on cheese course. The chef, after all that, behaved disappointed in the news that they were finished. He hung his helmeted head and pulled off his starched hat, which he crumpled up as he shuffled off in a posture of defeat.

Harry thanked his host for the nice dinner and said, "I wonder if I can get parchment and pen and ink from you, rather than wait for it to arrive in my care package. I need to write some letters right away."

The warden spun a mustache and let it snap back into place, eyes glittering. "Ah, you wish to unwind zis mystery, no?"

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Harry hated to admit it, but he said, "I don't think I can from here." He ached again, thinking of Snape, trapped so very far away. "But I want to warn my friends to be careful." That sounded safe since he did not want to give them any clues to help them decipher the double meanings he would be using should they be reading his post.

The warden pulled several sheets from his desk and found a pen and inkwell, which he bundled up with string for Harry to carry off.

"Thank you," Harry said, finding unusual gratitude in receiving something so ordinary.

The warden went to the door. "Your post will be slow, I'm afraid, we must trans-late it, you understand."

"Even going out?" Harry asked.

This stopped the man. "Ezspecially going out," he stated knowledgeably.

"Ah," Harry said, disappointed.

"I vill ask around the cell-block poetic if there is a bilingual prisoner who can 'elp speed dis up."

Harry faintly shook his head. "What? You have a cell block just of poets?"

"But ov course," the warden said, gesturing toward the door. "We cannot put zem with anyone else."

The warden called out in the corridor to one of the guards, whose helmet visor fell closed when he snapped to attention from stealing tidbits off a tray of un-served courses hovering beside the door.

"Take Meester Pottar back to 'is cell, Marcel."

When the guard bowed, his visor fell forward again, and he left it down as he marched off. Harry followed, thinking ahead so intently about whom he should write to first that it startled him when the guard stopped to disengage the long locking bar for his block of cells, not with his crystal-tipped spear, but with a wand from his pocket.

"'ere we are, Monsieur," the guard said with a bow when they reached the right doorway.

Not ready to be left to the solitary stillness of his cell yet, Harry asked, "Why did you have to arrest so many poets?"

"Zee poets? We 'ave to arrest zem," the guard blurted. "Zo much trouble." He slowly shook his helmeted head, making it rattle with each pass. "Zey had a war, you know, of words. You have no heard of zis?"

Harry shook his head.

The man sighed and scratched an invisible pattern on the floor with the handle of his pike. "It vas a terrible time. No one could open zere post, and everyone, zey took the zides. The poets, you zee, zey got jealous ov each ozer. Zey began to write poems zat were not zo much poems, but spells, zome quite nasty. And zey zend zeese to each ozer." He pointed at Harry accusingly, as though he may have been involved. "ZAT would have been ac-ceptable, but zey began also zending zeese poems to colleagues and family who came out in zupport of zere poet. Zoon, everyone was in-volv-ed."

"Poems that were spells," Harry repeated, working hard to hear through the accent.

"Exactamondo," the guard said, highly pleased Harry understood. "Zis is not allowed, zis magic is not. To let it continue . . . it would be zee end of ma-gic. Words 'ave such power, zey cannot be treated so lightly."

With a little bow that for once left his visor in place, the man closed the cell door and left Harry alone, to compose carefully worded letters in the cold, thin air, starting with his ersatz father. If he wrote carefully enough, perhaps his words would carry enough power to loosen his worry.

Severus Snape stood in the hallway outside the dining room of Grimmauld Place, observing Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom charming Christmas decorations onto the curtain rods and a crooked, two-foot high tree propped on the corner of the long table. Hermione directed and Neville obediently followed and soon the room glowed and sparkled with spell-generated gaiety. The scene threatened to roll over Snape like a great wave. For all his instinct to remain where he could be useful in aiding Potter in defeating Voldemort, a less well-cultivated instinct longed to be home, to be where the most serious redecorating issue was moving his oldest son to a different room to make space for his newest son. His oldest son . . . whatever had become of him.

Hermione glanced up and fell still and wary upon spying him there. Snape took advantage of that impetus to move on, upstairs, to check on Lupin . . . to do something.

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He found Lupin bent to the task of carefully packing his one spare set of robes into a backpack that had extra straps sewn onto it to prevent him shedding it in wolf form. Without comment, Snape moved to mix a restorative potion with the honey and egg white he had just fetched from the kitchen. He poured this into a bottle spelled to be unbreakable and handed it to Lupin to add to the pack.

Lupin studied the bottle rather than put it away. Milky liquid strands swirled within as he turned it to study every side. "If you are here under false pretenses, Severus, you are doing an excellent job of hiding it." Before Snape could compose a response, Lupin added, "But then you must always have been good at that, fooling your master all those years."

Snape did not want to cast his mind back to that time in any detail. He said, "Do you have everything you need for tonight?" in as hard a tone as he could manage.

Lupin waggled a finger at him mockingly. "Dodging questions is one good way to avoid getting trapped into an unacceptable answer."

"I do not need to answer to you."

"No, funny that you only needed to answer to Dumbledore and we know what happened to him."

Snape ignored this, since it only stressed him more about the double who was living his life. "Where will you be at dawn? In the event that you need assistance returning . . ."

Lupin laughed, but his smile faded quickly. "If I keep arguing with you, I suspect I could get you to say anything, no matter how uncharacteristically kind-hearted." He cinched the pack closed and swung it over his fatigue-bent shoulder.

Flatly, Snape stated, "I will fetch you if you require it."

Lupin flinched, perhaps remembering the last time he needed to be fetched home. "I'll be on the Dartmoor, near the Bowerman's Nose."

"Fine," Snape snipped. His rancor for this man had faded, but he found it phenomenally easy to pretend it had not.

Lupin trudged over and opened the bedroom door, letting in a cry of "Harry's back!" from down below followed by pounding footsteps originating from all corners of the house. Reluctant to lose face, but as curious as the others where Harry had gone off to that morning, Snape followed Lupin downstairs at a discreet distance.

The dining room swelled into a hive of activity as everyone in the house gathered there. Fortunately for Snape, Ginny's approaching Harry with her arms crossed held

everyone's attention, so they did not notice their unwelcome guest hanging in the doorway.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going?" Ginny demanded.

"Because you would have followed me," Harry pointed out, trying to tease, but falling flat. He sat at the head of the table, beside the flickering tree, his heavy cloak still draped over one shoulder.

Ginny's hair caught the orange light from the hearth as she stretched her neck toward him. "Like we aren't all in this together," she mocked, rapping him on the shoulder.

Ginny's light touch made Harry's jaw tighten. He shifted carefully in his seat, holding his cloak around himself with one hand. Voice oddly bright, he tried again with, "I can only hide myself safely with the invisibility cloak. I wanted to check on something. I thought I'd figured out how to find the cup and I wanted to bring it back as a Christmas present for everyone."

Hermione leaned over the table in Harry's direction. "Did you get it?"

Harry smiled faintly. "No, but I know how we can get it." He glanced across the room and accurately out the door where Snape stood. Staring thusly, Harry fell pointedly silent.

Snape stepped away to the staircase. Lupin, almost as though pretending to the room that it was he who had halted Harry's story, waved faintly and said, "I have to be going."

This pulled Hermione out the door. "Got everything?" she asked. Lupin assured her that he did as she saw him to the door.

By the time the outside door was fully re-bolted, Snape was upstairs, standing far from the railing in a position where he could not be seen from below. He was certain Harry was injured and intended to hide it from his friends. He waited there, picking up the trickle of low conversation.

Down in the dining room Harry said, "With Bellatrix in hospital for the foreseeable future-"

"Thanks to Mr. Snape," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry uttered. "With her out of commission, protecting the cup has fallen to the Malfoys, which means Draco. I realized that all we have to do is make Draco think we already have the cup and then we can follow him when he goes to check if it's really gone."

Ron said, "He's a pretty simple minded git, should be easy to fool."

Harry said, "And he's scared, which makes him easy to manipulate. Close the door, so I can tell you my plan."

Footsteps sounded and the door clicked closed. Snape remained where he was, staring at the soot-stained, gold and green fabric wall-covering across from him while the house creaked and settled for the night. He pulled aside the thick drapes beside him and looked out into the square. A solitary crooked streetlight cast a pittance of light over the cracked pavement, neither of which did the Muggles have the wherewithal to repair. Sirens wailed in the distance then faded. The orange city glow over the dark roof-line across the square could just as easily be the city burning. If tonight it was merely extra-low clouds picking up the myriad electric lights, then it was just putting off the inevitable. Dropping the curtain back into place, Snape went back to doing something concrete.

When the door opened after a sharp rap, Snape sat, hunched, on a battered old bar stool, mixing a general restorative. He looked up to find Harry standing in the doorway, cloak still covering his right shoulder.

"I have a question for you," Harry said, in the tone of making a demand.

Snape bowed faintly and continued stirring. Hermione and Ginny followed Harry inside, each standing just behind a shoulder.

Harry said, "The Malfoys have a secret hiding place in their house. I know this because I overheard Lucius describe it once. So don't try to claim they don't have one. Where is it and how do we get into it?"

Calmly, Snape said, "There is a dungeon hidden under the second and third to last floorboards on the wall opposite the hearth in the drawing room."

Hermione said, "A dungeon hidden under the floorboard?"

"It is a wide pair of floorboards," Snape commented, directly at the smartest of them. "And it is the most significantly warped piece of magical space I have ever observed. It exceeds the Tossfet Maximum Actual to Experienced Ratio by a factor of at least two."

Ron came up behind the trio, out of hiding. "Blimey, the Ministry's dug around their place completely at least twice and never found anything."

Retaining his patience with effort, Snape said, "That's because it is not really below the house, simply between two floor joists."

"How do you open it?" Harry asked. A scattering of sweat beads glittered on his upper lip, a symptom of fighting pain, Snape was certain, since the room was cool.

"I will tell only Potter. He can tell the rest of you if he trusts you enough." He glared at the lot of them in turn, pleased with this excuse.

Harry, with an abbreviated movement of his left hand, sent them out. "Hermione has his wand," he pointed out to Ginny to finally get her to depart.

With the door closed, Harry sat carefully on the bed. "So?" he asked impatiently after a gap.

"Precisely what I was going to say to you." Snape stared him down before turning to quench the burner. He took his time, giving the mixture one last stir. He turned back and asked, "How badly are you hurt?"

Harry's face lost its shape, unable to retain the ruse if it did not need to. "I don't know, really. Is it that obvious?"

"To me. Your little friends are even more dunderheaded than I ever gave them credit for if they cannot see it."

Harry lacked the strength to defend his friends, because he said, "They don't want to see it. And I don't want them to either. I'm barely holding them all together as it is." He wiped the sweat off his lip and stared at the moisture now glittering on his palm. "Compared to my scar, it's nothing."

"What'd you get hit with?"

Harry shook his head. "There wasn't an incantation."

Losing patience, Snape asked, "What color was it? Did it make a sound? Did it pulse or waver?"

"It was violet and red and it may have waved a little."

"Let me see it." When Harry failed to move, Snape said, "Going to check yourself into Mungo's instead? Get a bed beside Lestrange's perhaps?"

Harry moved ultra slowly to shed his cloak. Snape had to keep his hands fisted at his sides to resist helping, which would be too far out of character. The fabric of Harry's shirt had melted to the skin of his shoulder, and had to be tugged free, which Snape did help with, but since it made Harry gasp the action did not come across as solicitous.

"How deep does it go? Raise your elbow."

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"I can't," Harry said.

"Because it refuses to move or because it hurts too much?"

Softly, Harry said, "Hurts too much." He studied his mottled shoulder. "What'd I get hit with?"

"I wasn't there; how should I know?" Snape said, venting his angst over Harry's condition in the only appropriate manner available, back at the young man.

"You can be a right bastard when you want to be, you know that?" Harry complained weakly.

Snape handed him a clear liquid in a small cup. "Drink this, then raise your arm."

Harry sighed even before he lowered the cup of Painaway. "That's good stuff."

"Arm," Snape insisted.

Harry obeyed, moving easily.

"You are very lucky your shoulder joint is not seized." He began digging through the cupboards and pulling out old clothing that given the pink frills and stains not even Lupin would wear.

Harry said, "But what was the spell? I know you know."

Snape, crouched beside the lowest cupboard under the window, looked up at Harry sitting on the bed. With no rancor, he prodded, "Do you now?"

"You're transparent, you know that?"

For a moment, Snape could not move – an intense homesickness paralyzed him there in that spot. He stood with effort and laid out an old flowered skirt on the bed. "Let me borrow your wand, or cut this into strips for me, if you can manage that difficult a bit of magic." He intended that to come out more mocking than it did, which twisted it into grudging affection.

Harry tossed the skirt on the floor and used a less-than-efficient cutting spell that also damaged the rug. Rather than bend, he gathered the strips up with a hover charm and handed them over like a bundle of dead snakes. Snape soaked them in an astringent potion and without comment began bandaging Harry's shoulder, reminded starkly of needing to do similarly to his Harry. With his pain taken away, Harry sat stoically through this process before pulling his damaged shirt and cloak back on.

"Leave that on at least two days," Snape said, turning to put things away.

"Yes, Professor." Sounding less than grateful, and perhaps even begrudging, Harry asked, "Where's your friend? I thought he'd be back before now."

Snape took care to set down the bottle he held. Harry, as usual, had hit a sore point, intended to, it seemed, as a means of putting proper distance between them again.

A knock sounded on the door and Hermione called out. Harry answered that everything was fine. Snape quickly whispered, "Twist the left horn on the goat's head under the mantelpiece and use the spell I will write down for you to open the floor itself."

Harry nodded as the door opened. Hermione said, "We wondered what was taking so long."

Harry replied, "I was just asking Snape here about his mysterious friend and why we haven't seen him back."

"Oh," Hermione said, in a tone that indicated she wished to know this too. She shifted to staring at Snape with interest rather than suspicion.

"Yeah," Harry said with quickly recovered bravado, "I was just asking how long Totten had been his boyfriend."

Snape nearly dropped the box of beetle carapaces he had just taken off the shelf. He glared at Harry in disbelief before turning to the mortar and pestle while broadly shaking his head.

"Well then, is he your cousin or great uncle or something?" Hermione asked.

Snape, pestle in hand, grumbled, "You would not in your entire miserable little lifetimes understand what he is. Go away."

Harry said, "Well, we thought he'd be back before now. He sounded worried about you." Hermione gave Harry a dissuading nudge, and he added, "You know, as unbelievable as that is." This garnered Harry a glare from Hermione.

Snape rolled his eyes and let his hair fall into his face. "I certainly knew you were listening in. What do you take me for?" He held up a finger. "No, don't answer that."

Harry was tenacious. "But aren't you worried that he hasn't been back?"

Snape stared at the other that looked so much like his own. In truth he was so worried that to dwell upon it would render him useless. "That is not your problem," Snape commented, low and threatening.

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Hermione gave a tug on Harry's elbow, fortunately for Harry on his left elbow. "Come on, Harry."

But Harry stood his ground. "I want to know why, if he's not a dark wizard, this Totten didn't stay to help."

Snape was growing angry like he had not in a long while – driven into black rage by a helpless, gutting pain. He wanted this conversation finished before he did something he would regret. "There are other things in this universe to attend to; your little world isn't as big as you think it is."

Oddly, Harry did not appear to take this as an insult as intended; his eyes indicated that he took some kind of hope from it. This time when Hermione pulled on him, he relented and followed her out.

As the clanging footsteps of his morning guard approached, Harry jumped down off his bench and went to the food slot to receive his post. This guard did not speak any English and Harry did not know his name, so he had named him Steeltoe Pierre, due to the loud metal boots he wore.

"Thanks," Harry said, catching the string-bound bundle when it fell through the slot.

"Je t'en prie," the guard said, and then hesitated. He had tried several times already to speak to Harry in French on the previous day, but had finally given up. Harry suspected he wanted to try again, but he let the flap on the slot slide closed and a second later the latch clicked. Harry listened to him walk away, the crisp echoes making him sound like multiple guards.

Harry took his prized letters to the bench to sort out. Word had made it around and now every letter included a sheet of parchment for Harry's reply, well, the letters from friends did. At home when less-than-favorable news was printed about Harry, Candide used a charm to drop the nasty post outside as needed, but Harry did not have the benefit of that here. He could usually tell by how the address was written out that the letter was going to be an angry tirade. This certain wasn't the first time he had received hate mail, and he would prefer that it not bother him, but he had grown tentative about even glancing at these letters. When he had read one the previous day, out of sheer boredom and lack of other unopened post, the shadows had drifted in, whispering dark reassurances of revenge for the insolence.

So, Harry tossed aside the letters with dubious writing, although sometimes his judgment about the envelope was mistaken. One letter yesterday, where the address was slanted and the nib had torn the paper, was a tirade against the Ministry in Harry's favor, from someone he did not know. It had buoyed him quite a bit, that letter. His friends he expected to be on his side, but to have a stranger believe in him, despite all the evidence against him, made him feel rather hopeful and touched.

Harry sighed and tossed another letter on the questionable pile, despite the lavender hue to the envelope paper. The next was from Suze, and Harry dropped the packet and opened this one immediately.

Harry,

I hope you are doing alright. Do let me know if you need anything. I'm home for the holidays now and can go to Diagon Alley whenever I like. Just name it. I'm sure you could use loads of things to pass the time. The Prophet ran a special set of articles on the L'île de Cachot Méfait where you are being kept. It didn't seem like it could even have a place to get outside at all! You must be terribly cooped up. I tried to imagine what it must be like when we were having our last House Quidditch practice and it made me feel most sad for you.

You asked me to keep an eye on Professor Snape, which I have been doing. He is very suspicious lately, but I think he does not suspect I have been walking by his office several times a day checking who is there if the door is open. He is quite disturbed by your being arrested. He has been short with everyone and our House punishments have been stricter than anyone remembers. I hope he doesn't think you really did what they said and is trying to make up for it, somehow. I tried to ask him the other day if he thought you really did it, but he sent me off, and threatened me with detention. Ouch! Which my parents would be really unhappy about. I've stayed out of trouble all year so far.

I've tried to tell the other Slytherins that there is no chance you are guilty, but I don't think they believe me, but fortunately, they are too afraid of Professor Snape to say anything too loudly. I'm not even sure what my parents believe, I have to confess. I'm working on them too.

I will send you some sunshine if I can find a spell for capturing some, Suze

Harry folded the letter up and put it under the foot of his mattresses with the others he wanted to keep. Imagining that somewhere up above in the real world people were playing Quidditch, with the breeze in their cloaks and the clouds dancing with the sunbeams, rendered him utterly depressed. He dropped the letter packet onto the

floor, kicked the sorted out nasty ones aside, and lay down on his bench to try to think about nothing.

Harry had no idea how much time had passed, but did not wish for a clock. Watching the hands of a clock creak in a circle would push him over the edge, he was certain. Better to go by his stomach and when meals arrived. In between those events the uncertainty helped keep him grounded in his own head.

He wrote a letter back to Suze that he hoped would move quickly through the censors.

Thanks, but short of getting out of here, I have everything I need. Have an excellent Christmas.

The next letter was from Rita Skeeter and given the envelope:

The Formerly Illustrious Harry Potter The Prison of Misdeeds, Dreariest Cell Block B Relentlessly Pounded Island in the English Channel

Harry suspected she had used her Quick Quotes Quill to address it. He glanced rapidly through the letter. As always, she wanted an interview, and this time, she seemed to think Harry would fall victim to her dubious charms simply because he was bored and was allowed few visitors, of which she would of course be among the privileged few. She was not informed enough to include a blank sheet, so Harry used the back.

He wrote:

Fat chance.

P.S. Lucky for you the poets are in Cell Block M or this letter would be longer.

He addressed the envelope by crossing out his address and writing in hers, taking the high ground by resisting making an insulting version of her address in return. There were other, better, ways to deal with her, the shadows reminded him.

Since it would be opened by the prison staff anyway, Harry tucked the flap of the envelope in rather than re-wet the gum. Setting this one with Suze's letter, Harry took the next off the pile, from Neville, and read it slowly. Neville was confused, Harry could tell. He believed in him, but he also had a tendency to be influenced by others, and it showed in his letter. It reminded Harry that, trapped here like he was, he could not effectively argue his case, and that if this went on long enough, many would believe all kinds of untrue things.

The letter to Skeeter sat beside Harry, mocking him in this regard. Harry sighed and reconsidered his reply while tapping it on his thigh. But the shadows and he both agreed that she could not be trusted, so he put it back on the "out" pile, unaltered.

Harry flipped through the newly arrived letters and leaned back against the dank wall. The chilly damp soaked into his robes, waking him up and making him vaguely cross. He wanted to be home. He wanted to be somewhere there was noise, of any sort – the silence now threatened to crush him long before the solid rock did.

Harry found a letter from the twins and the resulting burst of affection sent his constant dark companions scurrying. With relish he pulled the letter out of the already unsealed envelope, hoping with a smirk that the censors got a little Weasley surprise when they opened it originally.

Severus Snape sat in a drawing room that was so quaint and pristine he still had not grown accustomed to it. He held Harry's letter, a couched affair full of so many trite phrases it seemed clear he knew there were censors on his post and as well, that he was practiced at coping with them.

I'm disappointed about missing Christmas at home and I hope you can make Candide's holiday happy enough alone. SHE deserves it, even if you do not think much of the holiday. I've told all my friends to all drop by, to make up for my absence. Please do manage some present shopping, even if you dislike doing so. Pick out something you hate, but think Candide will like, and put my name on it for me, if you would.

I want to believe you were not aware ahead of time that the Ministry would take this action to "protect" me, but I'm not certain of that. If you did know, or were involved in the planning, be aware it is something I intend to deal with when I do get out. There is not much I can do from here without serious repercussions later, as I'm certain you're aware. I'm used to suspecting the worst, but if I try hard enough, I can hope that you are free from involvement.

The letter went on with more disguised worry and suspicion, squeezed out through words unsuited for carrying proper force. Snape put down the letter after reading it through again. Harry requested extra parchment in the postscript, as much as could be wedged into the reply envelope. Snape pulled out the copious stash from his desk to count out ten sheets and something came out with the package and tumbled to his lap then the floor. He had carefully gone through every drawer to learn the contents, but he had not previously noticed this particular beribboned scroll, crushed as it was between unopened packages of parchment.

He scooped the roll up and untied the pastel velvet ribbon. It was a marriage certificate, with his name on it. Shaking his head faintly, he started to roll it back up

again, but he stopped and rapidly unwound it again. The dratted and bizarre thing was signed by the Supreme Mugwump, of all people. He stared at that for over a minute, trying to conceive of that, before giving up and wrapping it up more tightly, so it could not be so easily damaged.

A figure moved in the doorway before knocking on the frame. "Are you going to change?" Candide asked.

Snape tossed the scroll away in the drawer where he had found it. "Do you think I should?" he asked, unflappable in the face of little knowledge. His calendar had only read Dinner 7p.m., in overly slanted and heavily grooved writing.

"Well, my father usually wears dress robes when he comes, you know."

Ah, Snape thought, wondering what his counterpart would be thinking about now. The writing made him suspect disgust and annoyance. "I could change, but that would imply I was trying to please and that would be a distinct disadvantage."

Her brow went up. She was good at conveying a lot with just that. "Still," she said, sounding like one trying to cater to some harmless but persistent foible.

Snape bowed his head once. "All right, then. Something slightly more appropriate." It wasn't as if the closet lacked for robes. More frighteningly, its full state implied someone shopped regularly.

Dressed in the simplest dress robes he could find in the wardrobe, Snape returned to find Candide entertaining a middle aged man and woman in the main hall. They turned to him with the kind of expressions he was accustomed to: masked discomfort and wariness. He pointedly shook hands with the father and took a seat across from the portly man, feeling more in his element than he had since arriving.

"How IS Harry?" the woman asked.

Snape would presumably know her name if he had taken the time to read the witnesses at the end of the marriage certificate he had just found. Or, given the dubiously studious looks they were giving him, perhaps not.

Candide hesitated replying. "His letters are starting to come through now . . . they have to be read by someone at the prison first . . . but he sounds like he is coping well enough."

The man grunted, making his belly rock up and down. "So, did he do it?"

"NO, of course not," Candide snapped.

The man glanced at Snape and gruffly said, "Just had to ask, given the influences abroad in this house."

Snape held back a grin that came out in his voice as warm ego. "If I had assisted Harry, he would never have got caught."

Heads turned his way, but the man's thick brow furrowed thoughtfully. "I suppose there is that," he conceded, proving he was a typical bully that would back down if challenged on his assertions.

"Severus," Candide criticized. If she meant to say more it was interrupted by Winky bringing drinks before quickly disappearing again.

Snape rattled the ice in his glass before tasting it. "Harry is not the killing sort . . . at least not intentionally."

Candide sat back and huffed before sipping her butterbeer. "Forgive Severus, he has been in a mood since . . . well since Harry's troubles." Her brow furrowed too as if thinking over that ordering.

The older woman glanced around the hall. "No decorations, I noticed."

"It didn't seem right with Harry stuck in that awful place," Candide explained.

"Doesn't feel like Christmas without them, does it?" the woman asked wistfully, perhaps goading.

Candide, without losing her slouched, belly supporting posture, seemed to rise up. "It isn't Christmas without Harry here." She glanced at Snape for support. "You want us to celebrate without him?"

"I didn't mean that, dear," the woman said, getting huffy. "It is just so unfortunate, the whole thing."

Snape waited a beat before saying, "It wasn't unfortunate; it was planned." When everyone stared at him mutely, he said, "He was framed. That requires planning. Someone wished him to be out of the way and they succeeded. Fortunately for Harry, it merely resulted in relocation, not something worse."

"You sound so cold about it," the woman complained. She leaned across toward her daughter. "Is he always so cold, Candy?"

"Harry is safe at present, is he not?" Snape rhetorically asked, ignoring Candide's frown. "At the moment, there is nothing to be done." But as he said that, it rang untrue, and partly to mollify Candide, he said softly, "At least nothing I have thought of yet."

Chapter 39

Candide patted Snape's arm before crossing hers and taking on an anxious posture. Her mother said, "Don't stress yourself too much, dear. It's a critical time for the baby."

"It's fine, Mother. I'm not overly stressed."

Snape said, "Indeed, she gets quite a bit of sleep."

The woman patted Candide's knee. "Well, that's good, dear."

Candide turned a sharp look at Snape and he innocently cut her comment off with, "Sleeping for two?"

Amusement relaxed her scrutinizing him. "Yes, actually. Tough to sleep while getting kicked repeatedly. Too bad wizards don't play football more. I think this one is working on trying out already."

"Well," the woman said brusquely, directly at Snape, "I do hope you warm up some before the baby arrives. You act far too cold to deal properly with a child."

"Comes from being part reptilian. Or so I'm told," Snape informed her calmly, and like most woman who saw themselves as proper, she sat back, properly disturbed.

Candide made an attempt at defending that with, "I'm confident Severus will do fine. But no more reptilian talk or he may have to show you his Animagus form."

This halted Snape's taking that thread further, since that was most certainly a skill he lacked. He managed an uncomfortable shared smile with Candide and changed the topic to one he had been holding in reserve. "I'm certain Candide would like to show you the baby's room."

This overly delighted the woman. "Oh, yes, we'd like that. Wouldn't we, dear?" she asked her husband.

Candide explained, "I was reluctant to finish off the room with Harry gone, since it IS his old room, but he said in his letter that it would be fine, that he wouldn't mind. So we moved his room to the other side."

"This room?" her mother asked, pointing to the first door off the balcony on the other side of the hall.

"No the last one, that one, well . . ."

Snape chimed in helpfully, "The first room is reserved for dark magic incantations, and Harry, being the hopelessly white wizard he is, expressed a preference for the unadulterated room on the end."

He gleefully accepted their gaping looks, which migrated questioningly over to Candide, who said, "Well, that's essentially true."

An uncomfortable silence followed before Candide levered herself to her feet, saying, "Maybe I should have Winky serve dinner."

"So early?" Snape asked with pointed innocence.

"It's not early," Candide insisted. She returned from the kitchen and said, "By the time I show you the nursery, dinner will be ready."

The baby's room was roundly declared too Spartan by Candide's mother, who insisted on dropping by that very week to decorate. Or, after further thought, perhaps the week after, when Hogwarts resumed . . . so as to not be in Snape's way.

Dinner passed even more awkwardly than the evening began, which was fine with Snape, since it gave him time to think. Candide frowned rather a lot, which he disregarded for the time being.

When they were alone again, Candide sat down on the opposite couch and patted her belly. "Well, that could have, maybe, gone worse."

Snape leaned back with a fresh drink and asked, "How is it possible you convinced me not to simply poison them?"

She stared at him, beyond him, then back at him. "You are really different tonight."

Certain it was safe to say, he countered, "Did you expect us all to get along?"

She frowned and flipped her hair out of her eyes. "Well, no, but . . . you were baiting them, making it worse."

"They do not matter," Snape stated as though it were obvious.

"Yeah, you've said that before, but it always seemed like a lie, or wishful thinking, until now. And it isn't quite true, for me, which normally would make it not quite true for you too."

Snape stared into his glass, at the crazed facets bisecting the ice cubes without actually breaking them apart, and wondered with a burst of introspective honesty if he wasn't really the boor Lily Potter insisted he was. But those people . . . there was zero chance he would ever in this lifetime submit to their judgment, to build around himself a prison of their expectations. Hers though, that was different, in a way he could not yet define.

"Have I offended you?" he asked.

She paused to consider her answer. "No. I'm just making an observation. I know that just the notion of trying to please them is abhorrent to you. You just weren't passive in your dismissal of them, I guess, like usual. You didn't have Harry here to use as a tool to make your point this time, I guess is why you behaved as you did." She pushed to her feet and gingerly stretched her back and flinched. "Well, we're good until sometime in February."

"You're certain I haven't offended you?" he asked again, wondering if that was the point he had missed with Lily: that he was supposed to change not for others directly but because she would prefer it. What an empty, trapped existence in that case.

"Severus," Candide said, starting out corrective. She shook her head and brushed her tired hair back, adopting a caressing tone. "I didn't expect better, tonight, really, but I don't know what is going on with you lately." She stared down at him, leaning slightly backwards still, hands reversed on her hips. "Want to give me a hint? I'm not so good at that mind reading you do."

"It's not really mind reading, exactly," he muttered, lecturing.

"Oh, that tone. Well, that's a "no"," she quipped with strange affection.

She stalled departing and they watched each other. She did not expect him to change, apparently, which surprised him with how much space it gave him. It left him nothing to fight back against. He had been left to define himself for the first time, without risk.

How much could he lose, truly, giving in to such small issues over dinner? When he arrived here, he would have sworn he had nothing whatsoever to lose. Was being polite to people he inherently disliked any different than what he was doing otherwise: adapting to survive by being a companion to her and serving McGonagall? He did not feel he had lost any of himself doing so, perhaps even the opposite. The fact that he even had a opportunity for introspection about these things spoke volumes.

Candide smiled wryly. "You've got a lot to work out, I see. I'll leave you alone to do it." She started to shuffle away.

Snape said, "And you claim no skill at Legilimency."

She snorted faintly and returned to kiss him. He realized too late that he was expected to raise his mouth, but she adjusted smoothly and kissed him on the cheek before heading upstairs. Snape propped his fist on his chin and pondered the unexpected power of raw acceptance as the hearth fire at the end of the hall burned down. Candide made it clear what she preferred and left it at that, his choice. Somehow he could not imagine Lily, with all her perfection and high-mindedness, ever leaving it at that, and the realization made him a bit queasy. He had not at all understood what he had been trying to obtain all those years ago.

Prison sans Bars

"I'm glad you came," Aaron said, stepping back to open his flat's door wider for Ginny.

Ginny stepped inside and stuffed her mittens into her pockets. "So am I. I nearly got in a killer row with my dad. I needed to get out of the house."

"Well," he sighed dramatically. "I hope someday a visit to Chez Wickem Refuge and Emporium can be marginally better than mere escapism-"

"I didn't mean it like that," she said, giving him a one-armed hug as she passed. "You know that."

He closed the door and stood there expectantly. "I'm glad you're here because I have something for you." He pulled a small wrapped box out of his pocket and held it out.

She stepped back. "You can't give me my Christmas present yet, I didn't bring yours with me."

"This isn't your present; that is." He nodded over his shoulder toward the front corner of high-ceilinged sitting room.

Ginny choked on what she was going to say and gaped at the tall, multicolored box sitting where he indicated. "What's that?"

"Your Christmas present," he explained with bright quaintness. "That means you can take this now." He dangled the box enticingly.

"No, I mean, what's in it? It's huge!"

"Well, the present isn't quite that big, I find the biggest box I can so you can't tell what's inside, since the box would fit anything," he explained, clearly proud of his cleverness. "Here." He dangled the small box closer.

"Yeah, that would fit a giraffe," she said, still discussing the other one.

Aaron pulled the little present back and tucked it against his chest. "Did you want a giraffe?" he asked in all seriousness.

"No, I . . . wouldn't know where to keep it," she replied, hiding vague alarm.

"Ah, good. Now open this."

Ginny sighed again and took the box, which was rather heavy. Under the wrapping the box was covered in distinctive blue felt. "This isn't what I think it is, is it?"

He glanced from her to the box she held. “Probably.”

“Aaron, really, you are nothing if not persistent,” she complained while opening the box in a fit of curiosity that could not go unquenched. Inside was a smooth ring with seven red and white striped polished stones inset in it.

“What do you think?” he asked, leaning forward with hands elegantly clasped behind him.

“No diamond?” she teased.

He tilted his head knowingly. “Didn’t seem like your style. Plus, this way you can wear it as an ordinary ring if you like, thus you cannot reject it outright on the grounds of refusing an engagement.”

The ring was quite attractive in an elegant, understated way. She slid it from the holder and held it better in the light over the bar counter. “What are the stones?”

“Your birth stone, sardonyx.”

“That’s not my birthstone, it’s peridot.”

“Well, technically both are, and I had no interest in getting you a ring the color of my main rival’s eyes.” He stepped closer. “Here, try it on.”

She frowned at mention of Harry. Any kind of fun seemed to make everyone think of Harry, stuck away, not able to have any. Everyone kept expecting he would be released soon, but it never seemed to happen. She sighed and returned to the present. The ring fit perfectly.

“You’ll accept it?” he asked.

She spun the ring around to align the stones on top. “Aaron, if I said ”yes“ now, I might just be saying that because I feel sorry for you.”

“That’d be all right.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t have an answer yet.”

He lifted her fingers to kiss them passingly. “Well, wear the ring so it reminds you to think about it more often, in the hopes of speeding things up.”

Her eyes fell on the tall present across the room, a box so big it gave little clue to the worth of what was inside, kind of like the ring.

“Thanks. I don’t want to seem unappreciative.”

"Do you like it, at least? I had Finicky Fitters design something I thought you would like to wear all the time."

She spun the ring again. "It's perfect. It won't get caught on things at the Wheezes when I am working."

He kissed her hand again and dropped it distractedly. "On that topic of the hourly shop clerk and the family scion, I have another favor to ask: Christmas dinner with my parents."

She glanced down at herself. "I may have to go shopping for some decent robes."

"Amazingly, I don't care what you will be wearing; I just need the moral support."

She dropped her hem and held up her hand, fingers waggling. "Shall I wear the ring?" she asked suggestively.

"Yes, why not. It matches your hair and It will keep the topic off me and put it firmly on you. It will be the best dinner with my mother ever."

She stared at the ring. "Did you get Harry a present? I tried but I received a note back saying the contents weren't allowed to prisoners. It was only a case of butterbeer."

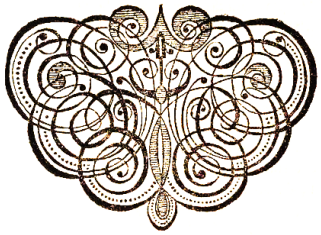
"The glass would be right out. I read the rather lengthy rules and worked out something to send that should make it by the guards."

"But will he like it?"

"I expect. It has a griffin on it. I had to grit my teeth and close my eyes to buy it, but I managed."

> Author's Notes: All I can say is if you know how busy life has been, the delay would be understandable. As of last week, in the last 7 and a half months I've been home 13 days. But things are getting saner now, so more writing. Yay!

Chapter 31.



The Eve of Something

In the days before Christmas a few presents trickled into Harry's cell via the post. One present from Aaron, a griffin banner, Harry spent over half an hour working out a method of hanging. In the end toothpicks hoarded from his dinner trays tied into a bundle with a loose thread from his robes, and jammed into a crack in the mortar served as a workable hook.

Harry sat back on his bench to appreciate the effect of brightening just part of one wall. Not that he did not appreciate the gesture, especially from a Slytherin, but the overall contrast was more depressing than uplifting. He sighed and forced himself to stop fidgeting, which he had been doing too much of lately.

Lunch arrived with his post and Harry turned it away, having only barely picked at his breakfast. Steeltoe Pierre did not argue because he could not. He did tsk excessively from beyond the slot before walking away. Harry took the newly arrived post and nearly tossed it aside on his not-to-open pile. Even correspondence held little interest now where before it had been a lifeline. He resisted opening even the ones from his friends, wary of the pleasant things that would escape to mock him. The letter from Snape, however, that one called to him when he found it in the stack.

Potter,

The Ministry has nothing meaningful to report. I wonder at your state of mind for even requesting that I enquire. Arthur tells me your solicitor filed for permission to meet with you and his visit may precede this letter, but if it does not, know that is in progress.

Harry read that through again, thinking that either the impostor sounded remarkably like his guardian, or his view of the world had skewed far enough to make a true Death Eater sound normal and well-adjusted.

Your friends have visited in droves as you warned they would. Most wished to know how to get your presents through to you, as the French have rejected most all of them as unsuitable.

Candide said to wish you well, in case this letter arrives before hers. She insists I inform you that there are no decorations and no parties here and will not be until you return. All is quiet here now that the in-law visits are dispensed with. There are no threats from within or without.

Snape

P.S. I do not shop for anything that cannot be put into a potion, period.

Harry marveled at the letter again. Was Snape somehow himself again? He would have inserted a clue, or ten, if that were the case, Harry was certain. He always was too good at kowtowing to power, a thread of acid thought pointed out, both impressed and annoyed with the letter.

Harry closed his eyes while still clutching the letter, trying hard to force the black wraiths away. It had grown increasingly difficult to do so. They were like Dementors in that way, requiring happy thoughts to combat. But unlike Dementors, the shadows did not suck him dry; they instead pumped him full of strategic notions and a sense of power.

Harry opened his eyes; the letter had fallen to the floor. Time had passed but he did not know how much. He stumbled to the other side of the cell to wash his face in the metallic water. Bent over the stone basin, with the water dripping off his nose, he breathed deeply, trying to find himself again. He disliked the flat, stale water. He disliked this claustrophobic place. He needn't be here, and he certainly needn't worry about the repercussions of escape. With his loyal followers from here and the easily warped Durumulna, he could do whatever he liked. Worrying about repercussions was silly if you had absolute power.

Harry bit his lip and dried his face on his robe sleeve, scrubbing hard. The slot on the door clacked open and dinner emerged through it. This startled him badly about how much time had passed when he had blacked out.

A concerned voice said, "You must eat, or we will 'ave to do zee force-feed-ing. Zat is not pleasant for anyone."

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Distracted by his inner fears, Harry mutely took the tray and set it on the bench. His stomach growled painfully at the scent but he ignored it and took up a precious sheet of blank parchment and began a letter to Ginny.

Harry poked at his food enough to satisfy the guard when he returned for the tray, or at least enough that the guard did not mention it. He also accepted the letter, which Harry sent off alone in the hopes it would go out faster that way. Harry liked the guards, as much as one could, but he knew well that the shadows hated them and he did not want a confrontation that would exacerbate those conflicting feelings, even if it meant eating when he did not particularly want to.

Harry sat on his bench, stroking his face and nose with the backs of his knuckles, a behavior he had adopted without being aware of it. The cell air hung in absolute silence, leaving him alone with his heartbeat and the rush of his blood, which his ears used to fill the void. He felt marginally better knowing the letter was on its way; Ginny deserved to know what she faced.

As he usually did when boredom overwhelmed him and he did not know the time, Harry lay down for a nap. His major muscles ached from doing this too frequently, but the pain reminded him that was alive, so he did not mind, and sleeping passed the time better than any other activity. When he had first arrived he had frequently exercised as best as possible in the small space – endless pushups on the bench and jogging in place. Now it seemed a waste of time and he could not imagine bothering, even to relieve the aches.

As he lay there, in a half-sleep state where he led his shadow friends through a merry chase in the forest of his mind, Harry heard an unexpected noise.

He woke fully and wondered if he had imagined it. It sounded like the cell block locking rod shifting, but there were no footsteps approaching, so that seemed unlikely. Mostly because he had nothing else to do, Harry stood and went to the cell door, which to his surprise, yielded to his touch and swung open without effort.

Maybe he was dreaming; Harry considered. It felt like a dream with the door drifting open into the cold, dim corridor. As he stood there in the open doorway, glancing around in an effort to work out what was real, he heard banging and shouting from the exit end of the cell block.

Harry's soul woke up at this, his mind went from adrift to focused as his feet carried him along the uneven floor, from the cover of one cell door alcove to the next. He ducked fully out of sight just before he reached the wide join to the staircase containing the break room. A fight was in full swing, based on the sound of armor clattering

against stone and Harry glanced out just in time to see a tattily robed figure smacking the guard, helmet and all, over one of the couches and jumping on him.

Harry rushed out as another punch fell. The attacking figure exhibited the maniacal violence Harry knew from field work, so he approached cautiously, ready to move at the first safe opening. The guard's hand flew out to the side and his wand tumbled and rolled to Harry's feet. The attacker sputtered something in French and when Harry stared at him incomprehensibly, the man said, "Grab 'is wand you eediot!"

Harry picked up the wand and felt a rush of magic, long absent and hungered for. Without hesitating, he raised it and hit the attacker with a mummy curse. The man toppled to the floor and rolled to a stop while Harry approached the guard. It was Steeltoe Pierre, and he appeared to be out cold, despite his head being incased in metal. Harry did a Revelatio on him and it sparkled healthy.

Footsteps and shouting trickled down the curved staircase connecting the cellblock to the rest of the prison. Harry did not think it wise to be caught there, holding a wand over a guard. He put the wand in Steeltoe's hand and pressed his fingers around it, hoping that would hold. He stepped back and was just considering whether it would save him a nasty spell strike if he crouched down with his hands on his head when the warden appeared behind his guards.

"Ah, Meestar Pottar," he said, clearly pleased.

Steeltoe sat up and straightened his helmet, and the arriving guards helped the mummified prisoner to his feet to unwrap him. No one was behaving properly, returning Harry to a dreamlike state.

A grey-haired man with an equally grey walrus mustache sweeping his collar emerged from the stairs. The fine material of his suit reflected the light, black pretending to be silver. He joined the warden in pondering Harry.

"Zee, as I tell you," the warden said, rocking up on his toes.

The grey-maned man tilted his head side to side.

"Meestar Pottar, zis is our Ministre des Affaires Magiques, César Morel."

The man gave a formal little bow. Harry looked between the two of them, mind blank.

The warden explained, "I wished to in-vite you to dine with zee two of us, but Monsieur le Ministre did not sink it wise – 'e does not trust in you, you zee, so I arran-ged a little test to prove I was cor-rect." He rocked on his toes again, pleased.

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Harry slowly exhaled, finding annoyance where there had been numbing adrenaline before. "I see."

The warden wiggled his mustache by twisting his face back and forth. "I 'ope you are not upset." When Harry declined to reply during an awkward pause, he went on. "Would you like to come to dinnar?"

"I think I'll pass," Harry said, trying to not let annoyance transform into the more potent betrayal.

This clearly was not expected. "Ah."

The Minister's hairy white brow raised in a kind of disdain. The shadows were very close here, surrounding them. In the corridor above, beyond the staircase, someone rattled a cell door, someone else joined in. The guards ceased their teasing conversation and rattled up the stairs in their armor, all but one, who remained to monitor Harry.

Glancing back at Harry, the warden said, "If you prefer your cell . . ."

"Tonight I do."

The cell door beyond rattled again followed by a spell flicker and raised voices. The commotion did not ruffle the Minister, but the warden colored.

"Take 'im to 'ees cell, Gaspard," the warden commanded, more perplexed than insulted.

Harry turned deliberately when the guard gestured for him to lead, and pushed his anger outward one more time, making the cell doors rattle again, even though the noise was cut off abruptly.

"Sacre bleu, what is 'appening up zere?!" The warden marched away, trailing the cool headed Minister whose eyes followed Harry until he was out of sight.

The next morning, as indicated by the guard arriving to wake him, Harry rose rigidly like one who has rested without sleeping. But the guard had not brought breakfast, he instead opened the door and gestured that Harry should leave his cell.

"Vite, vite," he said, smacking his spear on the floor. Harry did not recognize this guard. He definitely behaved stricter than the others. His stern attitude was accented by his coarse skin and the scar that bisected his jaw.

They strode quickly to the end of the cell block and through the next two and up several turns of stairs to an unfamiliar corridor where warm air flowed. The guard opened the third door on the right and Harry stepped in and stopped when a surge of rare joy startled him at the sight of Tonks. He approached her, arms raised, but a crystal-tipped pike swung between them with a magical sizzle, tossing Harry back and making his clothes crackle.

"No frater-neye-zing!" the guard ordered.

Harry righted himself with his fingertips caught on the doorframe, and turned a glare on the man. The guard stood unimpressed, his pike at ready.

"Harry?" Tonks said to get his attention. She sounded worried.

Harry, his precious happy mood shattered, had no interest in relenting on the darkness sinking around his mind. He put on a falsely dutiful attitude and took one of the heavy chairs at the small table, noticing only then that deBenedictus already sat at the end, notes piled beside him. He sat in stillness, watching Harry.

Harry gave him a nod and ducked his head to stare at his crossed arms. The shadows paced around him. Harry wished he could feed the guard to them. So did they.

"Harry?" Tonks prompted again, alarm creeping into her voice. She was leaning over the table, violating the yellow line painted down the middle of it. The pike tapped on the table top and Tonks stood straight to take up a chair, surprised wariness in every move.

The guard took up a position at the door as rigid as his pike, ready to level it along the barrier line. Harry raised his gaze and took in Tonks' wide worry. He did not relent. He was not happy about being here and he would not pretend otherwise.

Unnecessarily, Tonks said, "I, uh, brought your solicitor. I arranged to escort him." Her voice fell off and her hair drooped. With a sigh, and hanging of her head, she gestured that deBenedictus should start.

The man did after a hesitation. "Mister Potter, I have been preparing for your inevitable hearing, which the Department of Magical Law Enforcement informs me will be delayed for at least another week."

His calm droning about organized things drew Harry up out of the depths he was drowning in, perking him up to care about what was happening.

deBenedictus noted this, and went on. "Barring significant new evidence we have a number of options, the most obvious being the undisputed non-extant status of the

victim. That creates both the opening for a technicality as well as grounds for a reduction in charges. It does not rise to the level of a dismissal, I'm afraid, but it is a start."

Harry abruptly turned to Tonks and asked, "Have you been following Percy?"

Tonks nodded. "But he's like a church mouse . . . barely does anything. Goes from work to home and back again. Except he slipped away from me once, right after I was certain he was too clueless to know I was there. I don't know if it was a coincidence or an astoundingly well orchestrated ploy to distract me. But other than that one time, I've got nothing but a sore back out of it." She held his eyes. "Are you sure about him, Harry?"

Harry scratched his chin. At one level it was hard to care at all. "I thought I was. He gives me a bad feeling when I'm around him. And he's such an annoying git."

deBenedictus shuffled his parchment around. "If only all the annoying gits were murderers, then we would no longer need tolerate them in polite society."

Harry did not know him well enough to read his tone and the darkness in him took umbrage at what could be mockery. Without being aware of it, Harry rose from his chair.

"Harry!" Tonks' sharp voice snapped at him, knocking him off of his anger. Harry lowered himself to his chair and sat slumped, glaring at her, seeing two worlds, the tiny meeting room and the forest of shadows.

Guards ran by on a crossing corridor, perhaps unrelated, but Harry suspected not.

"What's wrong with you?" Tonks asked, sharply panicked.

Harry wanted to say that he did not like it here, but some part that liked communing with shadows stopped him. With more time he would understand them utterly.

Tonks explained to the solicitor, "I don't know what's wrong with him." She swallowed hard and asked in a slow cadence, "Harry are you just trying to make a point or are you really this far gone?"

Harry blinked at her, wondering abstractly how he appeared to her. He could not explain, was barred from doing so by strategic instincts that had as full a hold on him as he had on the shadows.

"It's Christmas," Harry said, thinking that might explain. The grim statement of it summed up his mood nicely.

"Yeah, I know, Harry. I didn't think you'd still be here. I'm sorry."

In truth, he did not mean to worry her. Felt detachedly bad for doing so. He shrugged to try to dispel her concern.

deBenedictus' droning started up again, describing his legal maneuverings while Harry forced himself to listen and remain interested, which worked only for a few minutes at a time. Fortunately the solicitor repeated every major point he wanted Harry to grasp. In the end it was all only hopeful in the way knowing someone was working on it could be.

Eventually, deBenedictus wound down, closed the file before him, and asked, "Is that all clear to you? Do you have any questions?"

Harry sat back and with a forced level voice, said, "It doesn't sound very good."

They studied each other. The solicitor said, "It is a process, Mr. Potter, and it has not yet run its course, so its course is not yet fixed. Nor is the landscape fully revealed. I'm very good at this. Everything that can be done is being done. Trust in that, for now."

Harry pursed his lips, bit back on a retort, and turned to Tonks more sharply than he intended. "Did you bring the papers?"

Regret clear in her movements, she pulled out a rolled newspaper. "Just one. It's all they would let me bring in." She did not hold it out. "I'm loath to give it to you, given your mood."

"You aren't going to like my mood if I can't have it," Harry stated, flat and sober which lent it more force.

Tonks set the paper down and it partly unrolled itself. As he reached for it, Tonks carefully said, "I have to take it out with me again."

"I know," Harry snipped, reading quickly about his ruined home life. He felt he read about someone else. Some poor sap whose life was completely out of their own control. He stuffed the paper back at Tonks. "Someday I'll get even with her."

deBenedictus cleared his throat. "Perhaps best stated outside the presence of your legal representation?"

Harry slid his eyes that way, a faint smile relaxing his face. "Perhaps. Depends on whose side you are really on."

As Harry was led away to his cell, his solicitor remained sitting, carefully filing things away inside his case. Tonks waved at Harry one last time before the guard led him

through the door at the end. She returned, closed the conference room door, and leaned back against the wall, spent and distressed.

deBenedictus said, "I'm contemplating filing a motion to have him removed to St. Mungo's."

Tonks rubbed her face and peered at him, considering that. "That would be a public motion." This was half a question. When the solicitor nodded, Tonks said, "That would be the end of his career as an Auror I expect."

Speaking frankly, he pointed out, "He demonstrated a rather drastic shift in personality between his arrest and just now."

"Well . . ." Tonks struggled to explain. "You haven't seen Harry angry before, I'm guessing."

Repacking abandoned, deBenedictus asked, "He gets like we saw just now frequently?"

Tonks tried to belittle that notion. "Not often, but sometimes." She pushed away from the wall and stepped closer. "You have to understand that Harry's been through a lot without breaking, but partly that's because . . . well . . . he has this hard edge to him that once it's loosed . . . well . . . you saw."

"You have seen him like that on a previous occasion?" deBenedictus asked, clearly aware of the specificity of his question.

Tonks grimaced faintly. "Not exactly like that, I'll admit."

The latches on deBenedictus' case snapped closed and he tugged it to the table edge, fingers around the handle. "You still believe him innocent?"

Tonks tossed her hand in the direction of the door. "That has nothing to do with that," she said dismissively.

"Interesting," deBenedictus muttered. He moved to heft his case, but only pulled it to the table edge. "Can I expect the prosecution to call witnesses to that sort of behavior?"

Tonks contemplated that. "If Fudge gets to lead the prosecution then probably, yes."

"I should not ask, but I am already extended beyond such concerns already here. What are the odds of that?"

Tonks huffed through her lips. "This has been the worst time for a Ministry turf battle, but we are fighting one anyway. I dearly hope Fudge isn't. But how about

this, off the record . . . if Fudge is leading it, it means he managed to incapacitate me before I got to him."

Tonks escorted deBenedictus back to the Ministry, barely aware of the man's considerable presence. They had both fallen silent, including parting in the atrium. Tonks went straight to Mr. Weasley's office and closed the door, which had the advantage of giving her an excuse to tower over the boss because of the confined space. He held out his hand expectantly.

"I'm keeping the French Portkey a little longer," Tonks informed him, still a little breathless with alarm.

"Ah. Why is that?"

"I'm loaning it to Severus so he can pay Harry a visit. Someone needs to go talk to Harry, right now, and he's the best one for the job."

Mr. Weasley put his hand out again. "You're on duty. I can escort him there if you think it so important. He can't arrive alone."

Tonks resisted setting Harry up to be seen in his current state by this man, but on the other hand, sending Harry there was Mr. Weasley's idea.

"Harry isn't doing well," she explained.

"So I'm aware."

"You are . . . how?"

Mr. Weasley held up a sheet of crisp white parchment. "Memo from his solicitor. It arrived just before you did."

Tonks pointed behind her, then at the desk, befuddled. "How did it beat me down here?"

"The man writes a fast flying memo." Mr. Weasley pondered the sheet. "Wouldn't want him as an enemy."

"What did he say?"

"He said Harry is in a bad way, and if we don't take action, he will." Arthur tossed on his cloak from the hook behind Tonks. "Which I think you will agree, would not be best, since his actions would limit ours." He nodded to Tonks. "Give me the key; I'll take Severus to see him."

Tonks dropped the decorative charm into Mr. Weasley's palm, hoping for the best the way one would dropping a penny into a fountain.

Chapter 31

"Hello, Arthur. Do come in," Candide's voice drifted out from the entryway.

Snape rose from where he reclined on the couch with one of many irresistible books from the house library. For him this was a rare and wonderful kind of Christmas Eve – one where nothing special happened.

Arthur clutched his pointed hat in his hands and bowed in greeting. "I'm afraid I need to draw Severus away on a bit of an errand . . . to the French wizard prison." He turned to Candide. "You could go visit Molly, if you like. The Burrow certainly wouldn't notice yet another guest. Unlike here, I'm afraid we're celebrating a bit at our place . . . but just a bit."

Snape turned to her. "Yes, why don't you do that. I'll fetch you when we are finished."

Candide asked. "What is happening? Is Harry all right?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated, crumpling his hat down smaller. "Harry is perhaps not coping as patiently as we hoped." He glanced around. "I don't know if you've run any debugging spells so we should perhaps not talk here. I'll tell you more on the way."

Candide went off to don her cloak and mittens while Snape wondered about Mr. Weasley's comment, which he was clearly expected to understand. He gave no indication of his confusion, and waited keenly for an opening to induce clarification. After Candide disappeared in the Floo, Snape, with a formal air, took put a finger on the gold charm Mr. Weasley held out and they were both jerked away.

Snape lost his balance in the brutal wash of wind that greeted them upon landing and had to put a hand and a knee down on the water-sloshed pier to steady himself. The sun reflected blindingly on the wave caps as the sea crashed onto the straight-edged rock on either side of them. Dizziness stole his breath as for a disconcerting moment it was the stone island that surged up and down in the surf rather than the opposite.

Mr. Weasley's hand felt warm when he used it to take Snape's wrist to help him up and lead him forward. At the end of the pier towered a great black monolith of solid rock, with a tiny door in the base of it. When they approached, the door itself loomed, several men high. It opened silently and the guard that appeared within gestured unmistakably for them to enter.

The lift plummeted for minutes on end and the air grew clinging, still as death and just as rarefied. Endless carved rock sailed by the platform, swooping far upward to a tiny square of darkness high above. Snape decided that remaining sane in such a place would qualify as a kind of insanity.

They were led to a room with a well-used clerk's counter where they both signed paperwork they could not read, led expeditiously through it by a guard practiced at flipping to and pointing out where they should sign. Then they were urged along a series of dreary, small doored corridors, some stained by a trickle of ocean that could not be denied, even by magic. Behind the doors, the inhabitants banged, rustled and moaned, all of it rolling together and building into a crescendo that surged and receded like a massive, barely discernible heartbeat and exhalation.

"You all right there, Severus?" Mr. Weasley asked when they had reached the top of a spiral staircase that curved away into darkness and Snape had paused to put a hand on the wall while trying not to visualize all that rock and water pressing in upon them.

Snape straightened. "Yes. Just needed . . . a breath. Air's a bit thin, don't you think?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head, not understanding, making Snape consider that possessing a simpler mind could sometimes be an advantage, at least in those few cases where the active imagination would otherwise run to distraction with monstrous possibility.

The guard returned up the stairs to fetch them before gesturing for them to wait in an area unexpectedly sporting couches, old magazines and an aura of bitter cigarette smoke.

He returned minutes later, leading Harry, who halted upon seeing Snape despite the metal clad arm continuing to urge him forward. Harry shook his guard's grip and slumped an approach at a wary pace. When he got close, his nostrils flared, perhaps breathing in the fresh sea air carried in with them.

"Hello, Harry," Mr. Weasley politely greeted the young man, as though at a picnic or a pub. His spray-darkened cloak hung heavy on his low shoulders, giving him even less presence than usual.

Harry's head jerked that way as if just noticing his boss that moment. "Hello, sir," he said flatly.

Mr. Weasley smiled pleasantly and paced away, making an opening for Snape, who would have preferred more time to observe from the side.

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"Potter," Snape began, trying to sound imploring. He had some other meaningless words lined up behind that, but he was cut off from the bother.

"Why do you call me that?" Harry lashed out, causing Mr. Weasley to spin around.

Snape stepped rapidly closer to Harry, while the young man went on, clearly lacking a regular outlet for his anger.

"You make it sound like you're talking to my dad," Harry went on, seething with heat eager to boil over once it found an escape.

"Harry . . ." Snape said, face to face now. Heat sizzled over his Mark as Harry sized him up, looking for an excuse to rant more. Snape did not give him an opening. "Calm down, if you would, for just a moment."

It was most likely not his words that worked, but the tone – a soothing warmth he could only manage in a fit of true desperation. He shook his hand at his side, wanting to rub the pain from his Mark. The gesture drew a flicker of Harry's eyes in that direction and the pain faded.

Harry looked away, at the wall. Snape said, "I realize it is difficult here." That was the truth; just coming down here had unsettled him. "But you must be patient . . . restrain your instincts a little longer."

Harry's pose shifted to a cocky one so very reminiscent of his father that he could be a projection of his memory. He mockingly said, "I don't know why I can't enjoy myself here. I have so very many friends."

Snape felt something terribly disconcerting then – like hot water running under his skin. It made him dizzy with prickly sensation the way an overdose of Invigoration Draught would. A moment later, a cell door on the corridor above began to thud against its bolts. With an abrupt rattle of his armor, the guard started that way, stopped and reconsidered, then went up the stairs after a glance at Mr. Weasley.

"Po . . . Harry," Snape said, voice tightly controlled. Mr. Weasley wandered closer, orienting himself to face both the stairs and the two of them. Snape softly said, "Most of the inhabitants here will not make particularly good friends."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You know, I bet they'd make particularly obedient ones."

A bit lighter, Snape quipped with a knowing attitude, "There you would be mistaken."

His more bantering tone worked, Harry backed down. He looked around at the floor and muttered, "I don't like it here, and I'm not convinced you didn't have anything to do with it."

"You are not supposed to like it here," Snape pointed out. Then, with voice pitched very low, added, "And you flatter me if you think I could have managed this."

Whispering too, Harry said, "I wouldn't put it past you."

Snape stepped closer, leaning almost to Harry's ear, "I don't even know who is alive or dead here, let alone have the allies required to set this up, certainly not this fast."

Accusingly, Harry said, "Having a nice Christmas with your lovely house and wife?"

Snape raised a brow. "Nice enough."

Voice almost too low to hear, Harry said, "Just nice enough? That's all? That should make it easier for you when you do go then. As soon as I'm out of this place . . ."

Harry paced away from Snape, sending him a glance full of lingering suspicion. "What am I being punished for?" He asked louder, taking both of them in with that question.

Mr. Weasley started to answer, but Snape cut him off. "For not paying sufficient attention to the details around you, so as to get caught up in such a thing."

While Harry frowned at Snape, Mr. Weasley said, "Oh, now I wouldn't go so far as that. We're trying to protect you, Harry."

Harry glared at him. "I don't need protection. If you kn-"

Snape stepped into Harry's line of vision to his boss and said in a tone that implied deeper meaning, "You need protection from yourself, I would say." He took Harry's shoulders and backed him farther out of earshot of Mr. Weasley, ignoring the prickling in his Mark as this gesture drew retribution.

Snape shot his hand out to the side in an attempt to shake the sensation. He leaned respectfully close, hands behind his back, and drew forth a tone he formerly reserved for the only other being who could pain him so. "It is understandable that you are displeased by this situation. Realize, if you will, that it will not go on much longer."

Harry raised his gaze, looking hopeful. He gestured in Mr. Weasley's direction. "They said they haven't made any headway with the . . ."

"Quieter, if you would," Snape pleaded, cutting him off.

Whispering, Harry said, "They said they haven't made any headway with the investigation. Tonks even admitted it."

"If we rely on that, you will be here rather a long time."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

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The guard clanked back down the stairs and ordered them out with firm gestures. "We 'ave to go to lockdown on zees cell blocks," he said, partly out of breath.

Snape turned back to Harry and quickly said, "Do try to remember that you have more friends outside this place than in." He accented this with a intense look. The guard had drawn his staff, so Snape had to move that way, he glanced back and said, "If you remember nothing else . . ."

The portkey dropped Snape and Mr. Weasley back in Shrewsthorpe. Snape immediately paced the hall, glad for Candide's absence so he could think in silence rather than waste time recounting events. Mr. Weasley swung his arms and clapped his hands before him, his statement jarringly out of line with Snape's worries. "Well, as I expected, just feeling stubborn and out of sorts."

Snape stared at the table teetering with the presents Harry's friends had sent, gathering firm control around his reaction.

Mr. Weasley prodded at his reeling thoughts with, "Don't you think? Much ado about nothing."

Snape, facing the prospect of a burgeoning resurgence of the Dark Lord within a far more eclectically skilled Harry Potter, could only manage a shrug, a mocking one at that. "He should not be there," he managed to say with some levelness. He had to say something.

Mr. Weasley straightened his hat and put it on. "Well, yes. And that is at least partly our fault, I'll admit. Harry has a temper on him, but when he calms down I'm sure he'll understand."

Obliquely, Snape said, "There are many things Harry does not understand. Fortunately for you, power is one of those things."

Mr. Weasley puzzled that before shrugging his cloak straight in preparation for departing. "Well, we'll have things straightened out soon enough, I'm confident." He waited for some kind of response, and Snape half nodded, again mockingly, but this was again lost on his audience.

Awkwardly, Mr. Weasley asked, "Do you appreciate our position, Severus?"

Distantly, Snape replied, "I appreciate far more than you realize."

Again, this generated a puzzled expression before Mr. Weasley said, "Well, I'll be on my way. And I'll send Candide along."

"No rush," Snape muttered, mind elsewhere, plotting. "If she wishes for a nice holiday dinner, she should remain there."

The Eve of Something

"Aaron, dear. Do come in," the apparition that was Mrs. Weasley in her best unmatched flowered dress, robe, and apron invited.

Aaron hesitated at the sight, but made his feet move. The entire Weasley clan and many others filled the ground floor of the Burrow. Bill sat in a close circle with some cousins. Charlie's wife, starting to show a rounder belly herself, was deeply engaged in a conversation with Candide. There were so many people the lamps had a hard time spreading their light around the room.

The twins took the most interest in the new arrival. They teamed up on either side of the finely attired guest and asked, "How are you, then?"

"Getting on all right?"

"Smart robes."

"You look like you're sleeping well."

Aaron shifted his gaze back and forth between them, before waving them both to silence. "Are you looking for a favor?"

The twin on the right leaned in closer to say to the other, "Slytherins can always be counted on to catch on quickly, as needed."

"What is it you want?" Aaron asked, but the matriarch swooped in and swept the twins aside with an apology for their behavior.

When she returned, Aaron frankly said, "I do owe them."

She waved her finger before her face, denying that. "Ginny'll be down in a twinkle." She surveyed her magically stretched table, with too many seats to count in a glance. "It'll be the first Christmas Eve dinner she's missed."

"Er . . ." Aaron began, caught fast by her wistful tone.

Ginny appeared on the staircase and bound adeptly over the crowded floor and through two different games of Exploding Snap to stop just before him. "I'm ready."

"You're sure you can come?" Aaron asked.

Ginny's bright eyes narrowed. "Of course." With a dark glance at her mother, she pointedly stated, "It's better than risking sitting next to Percy, like I always seem to."

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"Now, young lady, we're a family here and we will always be together as a family. Especially during the holidays."

Aaron gave Ginny a look that said see?

Ginny took his arm and, turning for the door, said, "I don't know what time I'll be home."

"Don't you now?" Mrs. Weasley called back.

Aaron stalled their progress and said to Mrs. Weasley. "It won't be late."

"Why not?" Ginny demanded.

"Because . . . there are only so many hours I can take my mother at a time . . ."

"Oh yeah. There is that."

Mrs. Weasley tut-tutted Aaron, which he ignored. "We'll come back here for afters," Aaron said, returning a wave hello from somewhere in the room before swooping Ginny out of the house.

A fine snow gritted on their cloaks as they walked up the drive to the Freelander Estate. Under the blindingly lit overhang supported by carved capitals, Aaron paused to properly order his overlapping collars, then inspected Ginny. He was biting his lip when he gestured for her to spin around.

"Are you sure I'm dressed all right?" she asked, working very hard not to sound hurt or exasperated. "I picked this out pretty carefully and borrowed a scarf from a friend with a much better wardrobe than mine."

Aaron had hold of her shoulders, thinking. "You look fine." But he did not move.

"What's the matter then? Shall we ring the bell?"

His voice sighed as he said, "I'm just thinking."

She waited. He bit his lip harder. She said, "Care to clue me in?"

Aaron dropped his hands. "My . . . father . . . is literally impossible to please. I'm just trying to brace myself for tonight." He sounded truly at sea.

"It'll be fine – " Ginny began, but the wide door with the big round brass handle in the middle creaked open then and the butler bowed them inside.

Ginny took up Aaron's hand and was able to hold it while a cavalcade of servants unhooked and took their cloaks and even bent to give their shoes one last polishing.

Ginny held up one shining black toe. "You weren't kidding."

Aaron pushed his shoulders back. "It's only one night," he whispered to himself.

They were led to the dining room, a mere four rooms away, beyond the grand ballroom which sat demurely this evening with only a tenth of the lamps lit in the massive chandeliers. The long table was set for four at one glittering end and a bouquet the size of a small car sat hulking in the center, many feet away.

The butler led them beyond to a small drawing room where Mrs. Wickem overflowed a sizable settee and Lord Freelander sat swirling a crystal glass filled with something dark. Lord Freelander stood as they approached.

"Aaron," the master of the house greeted him formally.

"Sir." Aaron, slightly breathless, started to say, "And this is . . . "

But Lord Freelander had Ginny's hand clutched between his own two coarse ones. Brightly, he said, "I am quite aware of who this is. How are you Ms. Weasley? It is good to see you again, I despaired at ever again having your natural charm grace this house. Do have a seat." He led her away and found her a chair beside the settee. "A drink for the lady," he commanded one of many vaguely penguin-like figures circumscribing the room. He bowed to his charge as a tray was offered. "And once you've settled in, I have taken some paintings out of storage after our conversation of last. I'd be delighted to give you a tour of them."

Aaron, abandoned in the center of the floor, gaped at this scene.

Mrs. Wickem raised herself from her chair. "If you aren't coming over to greet your mother, the mountain will have to come to her son." She gave him a hug. "How are you, Aaron?"

Aaron pondered her, then pondered Lord Freelander who was pouring on the charm with Ginny, explaining the origin and process that led to the liqueur she had just been served. "Uh, pretty good, all said," he uttered, still trying to accept what he was seeing. His mother pressed his hands around a drink, which he sipped at.

Another figure sailed in, draped in a long, simple dress. "You are early," Mrs. Freelander said, sounding gracious.

"This is my wife, Beatrice," Freelander said, starting the introductions with Ginny before moving more awkwardly to Mrs. Wickem and Aaron. "And, uh, this is Aaron Wickem."

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Aaron felt himself coloring, even though he had promised himself he would not. "Madam," he said, greeting the woman who was studying him most closely, as if looking for some sign in his face.

"Charmed, I'm sure," she said before accepting a drink from a servant who had followed her since she entered the room. "Alfred tells me you are training to be an Auror . . ."

Aaron nodded. "Doing my best at it, I suppose." He felt unexpectedly shy with her, pressured by the awkwardness of it all.

Freelander said, "I'll let you get aquainted," and stepped back with a bow.

Mrs. Freelander's wizening face smiled reassuringly. Voice lower than needed, she said, "I'll confess I did not know Alfred in his younger days to know if you resemble him or not."

Aaron could merely shrug. His mother sized him up while brushing a lock of his hair back. "He's got a lot of my father in him. It's hard to see much else."

Aaron snipped, "Let me know when the Best of Show portion of the competition starts, I'm really hoping to win that."

While his mother rolled his eyes and Mrs. Freelander nodded that they were perhaps out of line, Aaron slid over to Ginny and Lord Freelander. "I didn't realize you two knew each other . . ." he began.

Ginny explained, "Oh, yes, I escorted Harry here one day when he had an appointment. Back when he always had a guard."

Lord Freelander took a healthy swig of his drink. "Turns out he continued to need one."

Ginny's face fell. "Yeah . . . Yes," she corrected herself. "Maybe if he'd had a witness that said he'd been somewhere else that day."

Lord Freelander took a nearby chair, but remained on the edge of it, leaning forward. A servant filled his glass without his notice. "I read that he has exceptional legal representation already, or I would have offered someone I have on retainer." He glanced up at Aaron, and voice cheery with alcohol said, "Do sit down, my boy. Unless you are too thin and hungry to wait for dinner and are hoping to move that way."

Aaron took the chair beside Ginny's. Pointedly, Freelander asked, "How is the investigation progressing?"

"I'm not authorized to say, I'm afraid," Aaron said, noticing the others coming close to listen. "We've had some horrible leaks already, no one knows where from."

"Yes, you have," Mrs. Wickem accused. "That poor boy. After everything he's done, too."

Authoritatively, Lord Freelander stated, "In the court of public opinion, that does not help. It makes it worse. Too many are too eager to see heroes, or great men or women, brought low. And that paper of ours. It's enough to make me want to buy it out and fire them all."

Ginny straightened. "Why don't you?"

Freelander sat back and dismissively said, "Terrible investment. It's run at a loss already."

Aaron said, "It's half adverts. How can that be?"

"That's what the accountants tell me."

Sounding like one treading carefully, Aaron said, "Are you certain they weren't lying to you? Maybe to keep you from being too interested?"

Freelander huffed and thought that over.

Ginny said, "I'd love to see Skeeter fired. The article she printed today, I couldn't even finish reading it. I threw the paper in the fire instead."

Mrs. Wickem waved her hanky, which she had pulled out upon lamenting Harry, but had yet to put it to use. "Yes, the one where she claimed his family was happy enough without him. Where does she get the nerve?"

"Where does she get the quotes?" Ginny asked. "Professor Snape is usually really careful. And I can't imagine him saying those things."

Mrs. Wickem sniffled. "If the boy is not wanted at home, he can come live with me, anytime."

Aaron raised a disturbed brow, but let it go when Ginny squeezed his hand hard enough to hurt.

They moved to the table and a feast was conducted in as if on cue to the last of them sitting down. The conversation lagged into trivialities while everyone ate. With the rest of the lamps in the area extinguished, the servants moved in and out of the light, shifting from shadow puppet to solid and back again as they moved around the table, trained into silence when there should be noise. The massive silver branching

candelabra looming over the roast platter glowed so brightly, Ginny had to squint across at Aaron. But he could see her merely picking at her food, because he said, "Not hungry?"

Ginny's shoulders drooped. "It's a lovely dinner," she said in the direction of their host. "I'm just thinking about Harry. Makes it hard to enjoy celebrating." She set her fork down and took up her glass, but only sipped at that too.

Aaron bit his lip for an instant, before taking up a more rigid posture. But his face remained doleful and his eating stopped as well.

Ginny sighed and clasped her hands together in her lap, where her fingers encountered the ring. Straightening up, she raised her hand and said, "I should show you the ring Aaron gave to me."

"A ring?" Freelander echoed with heavy meaning and a glance at Aaron.

Ginny held her hand out so he could better see, and continued to hold it steady while he pulled out his glasses.

Freelander observed, "That's a unique ring. What is that, seven stones?"

"Seven is a very lucky number," Mrs. Wickem proclaimed, while waving to the waiter that she would like a top up on her soup.

"It didn't feel lucky growing up," Ginny said. "That's too many older brothers for one person to have to take." She held the ring out for the lady of the house as well, who winked at her knowingly.

Freelander folded his glasses away, "Nothing the matter with that many guaranteed allies, my dear."

"They weren't allies, though. They were always telling me what was best, and never letting me do much of anything." She spun the ring to straighten it, and added quietly, "By the time you get to seven no one gets around to asking you what you want."

Aaron's eyes had narrowed thoughtfully through this and his face did not hang quite as long now.

Mrs. Freelander said to Aaron, "You have plans perhaps we should know of?"

Sounding too neutral, he replied, "I will when Ginny puts enough thought into it. She's taking her time."

"Someone should," Freelander said. He turned to Ginny, his face looking far older highlighted by the stark candlelight. "But, someone should also inherit this place. Otherwise who knows what the state will do with it."

Ginny froze, blinking rapidly. "Inherit this place?"

"Well, yes." Freelander said, sitting back to let his stack of bowl and plate be taken away. "Aaron, now that he has shown promise at making something of himself, will inherit this estate, of course."

"Ah . . . I hadn't thought of that."

Freelander sent a hard-to-interpret look at Aaron, one that appeared dubious, perhaps. Ginny bristled and said, "I do understand how these things work, of course, I just hadn't thought about it." She uneasily glanced around the grand dining room. The entire Burrow would fit inside just this one room if you cut it up and arranged it right.

Freelander patted her hand and signaled for more wine to be added to everyone's glass, even those who had not drunk much yet, like Ginny. "I wasn't implying you were slow my dear. It's that your comment seemed to indicate that you had a stunning case of irreproachable motive. A rare thing." He raised his glass casually before drinking from it.

"Can't see yourself living here?" Aaron asked, the flickering light on his angular face giving no clue to his thoughts.

"It's hard to imagine living like this. No offense, I hope. It's just, uh, too much of everything, I guess. Too far from what I'm used to."

Freelander smiled faintly. "You have plenty of time to get used to the idea. I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

"I certainly hope not," Ginny said.

"In the meantime, we'll have to teach you how to spend money," Aaron teased.

Mrs. Wickem sat forward energetically. "We can do some shopping my dear. That would be divine, just us girls."

Ginny shifted her shoulders uneasily, and managed to say, "I'd like that."

Aaron scratched his ear and leaned toward his mother beside him. "She's not a very good liar."

Mrs. Wickem grinned as though they shared a long-standing joke. "So I noticed. Not the worst quality in a wife."

"I am so a good liar," Ginny argued, then came to awareness of what she was saying. "Ehem. Right," she muttered, glancing around the table.

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Snape paced the quiet house, his movements startling the candles as he passed. He had the outline of a plan and itched to begin executing it. But there were too many things he did not know, the most curious one was Mr. Weasley's comment about bugs or bugging. That was a distinctly Muggle notion involving electronics, which despite his deepest desire to understand, Mr. Weasley was hopeless at, so why would he use that word?

Snape distinctly disliked this state where important things were obscured from him and not others and he did not have an ally to ask for clarification. He could have asked Harry, but there had not been an opportunity, and now post would take days back and forth, at best. Snape passed the side table where the newspapers had been tossed, the day's paper still rolled up from delivery. The angry-letter conveying owls were sorted out with a spell that often caught the news owl, given the content of the paper. This particular one had made it through. Turning the roll revealed the headline: Harry's "Family" Thinks Prison Will Do Good for Wizard "Hero".

Snape slid the string off the paper and began reading the article.

This reporter has heard from a most reliable source that Harry Potter's household has not only moved him out of his own bedroom, but they profess that he is better off as a jailbird. For one thing, his incarceration has restricted his access to the dark magic that normally occupies his free time. He is now kept company by the far more wholesome, prison-censored correspondence of his friends rather than by the gruesome illicit books and device experimentation of his uncontrolled home life.

Snape tossed the paper aside, behaving uninterested in it. They were clearly being watched, in a way his nightly spell reinforcing was not blocking. Given that, he had to assume he was being watched right that moment. Still moving casually, which nicely focused his emotions into plotting, Snape went up to Harry's new room in the far upper corner of the house. He let Hedwig out of her cage. She gave a trembling shrug and stretched her wings while he wrote quickly on a small card curled in the palm of his hand. He folded it up without opening his hand, wrote Tonks on it, and gave it to the bird, who hopped on his shoulder to wait for the window to be opened.

The rarely used window stuck open and had to be closed with a spell. During the delay, the room's air frosted from the cold wind. In the ensuing silence, a plaintive chirp drew Snape to the other cage in the room. The Chimrian put a tiny paw through the cage bars and clawed in Snape's direction with a long-needled foot. Snape had

instructed Winky to care for Harry's pets, since he himself had no interest in wrestling with something so nasty only Hagrid could love. Even Winky had seemed reluctant to accept the care duties, but the cage was clean and the water dish full, implying she had followed instructions. The Chimrian chirped again and clawed more frantically. Snape stepped closer, but well out of reach. Such a creature would viciously attack anyone but its blood master, Snape well knew. The fact that Harry had such a thing attested to some truth to Skeeter's article. But this one was less than healthy, most likely from the long absence of her master. Tufts of her bright fur littered the cage, and where it had gone missing, the black, leathery skin of her lithe body showed through.

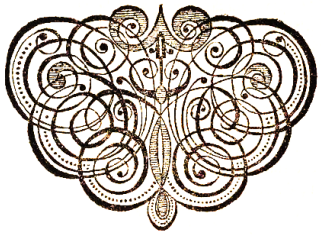
The chirping grew more frantic as Snape stood there, and he found himself reaching for the cage door. Chimrians reflected their master's mood, but what if that worked both ways? Could calming this creature improve Harry's dark demeanor, buying Snape some much needed time? The creature scuttled like lightning to the door when his hand reached it and he instinctively jerked back. The next cry from the creature was gratingly plaintive. It certainly was not behaving like a murderous protector of one master, unless it played far more coy than expected.

Curious more than anything else, Snape unhooked the cage door, and pulled his hand back. The Chimrian balanced on the threshold bar an instant before leaping at Snape, who only had time to tuck his hands away. The violet, four legged bat latched onto his robe front and held tight, burrowing into him with it's fox-like nose.

Snape exhaled and slowly raised a hand to touch the tiny form. What fur it had left was stunningly soft. Snape petted it additionally, just in surprise at that. Was it possible that he was this thing's master as well as Harry? He did not know such a thing was possible; there must have been a rather interesting extra spell involved if so. The creature responded to his petting by burrowing into his breast pocket and curling up inside it.

Tentatively, because he still feared losing a lot of blood should the creature decide to turn the flesh of his hand into ribbons, Snape lifted the thing out to put it in his side pocket, where the lump of it rested more conveniently. A muffled chirp sounded through the layers when it was safely away – a far less frantic sound. Presumably the creature had a name. Snape found himself wondering what it may be.

Chapter 32.



Corruption

Christmas day passed like every other day in the house in Shrewsthorpe. The piles of presents went untouched until Snape had an idea and went to sort through them. Kali crawled up onto his shoulder to better observer these doings, reminding him that her claws could again use a trimming. Snape found what he was looking for and tucked the beating-heart-covered box under his arm and went to the library where Candide rested in a belly relieving, twisted position on the divan, listening to the wizard wireless on low.

"Merry Christmas, Severus."

Nodding awkwardly, Snape said flatly, "And to you."

"What's that?" She coyly asked. "We aren't opening presents until Harry's back, you know."

"I am quite aware," Snape said with no little relief, since he had not purchased anything for her. "I need to deliver this elsewhere on Harry's orders."

She sat up with some effort. "Ah," she said knowingly. "I can go visit my mum and dad while you're gone. Unless you don't mind my coming along?"

"Ms. Tonks is on duty today-"

"Christmas day? Her guilt must be running quite deep, in that case."

Snape paused, not having considered that. "In any event, I may have some difficulty in catching up with her, so perhaps it would be best if I go alone."

Amiably, she said, "I'll visit mum and dad, then." More sadly, she added, "Give Tonks a Happy Christmas for me."

"Of course," Snape said, nearly nauseated by how truthful he sounded.

Snape set the present aside and waited in a heavy gloom cracked into slices by sunlight slanting between the rotted boards on the windows. His exhalations chased dust through the air to swirl in the knives of light. Kali tried to crawl out of his pocket, but he gently dissuaded her, not wishing to chase her down should she decide to investigate too far afield. Snape had arrived early to assure himself the place still existed and was still secure. Nevertheless, when Tonks arrived, he gestured for her to remain silent, and said, "I ran some protective spells but I want to be certain . . . if you would do me the favor of running them again?"

Tonks paced around the old Order safehouse, an abandoned rowhouse in Newcastle under Lyme. She ran the same spells, but finished up with one to force Animagi to reveal themselves.

Not wishing to risk revealing his ignorance, Snape suppressed his curiosity and moved on. "I saw Harry yesterday, as you probably know."

"How is he, do you think?" Tonks blurted. "Arthur dismissed my concerns after the visit."

Snape said, "I believe your concerns are well founded. Arthur did not comprehend Harry's mood."

Tonks' shoulders fell, drooping as much as her murky brown hair. "I thought so." She sounded strained and her face looked sleepless.

Snape said, "My concerns are why I asked you to come here."

Tonks paced, looking up to study the cracking and peeling paint surrounded by water stains on the ceiling. "Yeah, and it needs to be quick. I'm on duty."

"I will be as brief as possible, but I must be complete. I do not want any more contact between us than is absolutely necessary."

Her curious gaze fell over to him, and he went on, "Harry must be removed from prison as soon as possible and that can be arranged straightforwardly enough, but I need your assistance."

Her gaze grew more puzzled. “Harry can leave anytime he wants . . .”

“Not without repercussions he is clearly unwilling to face.”

She paced again, kicking up dust. “Well, true . . .”

“I want to have him cleanly removed, with no unnecessary baggage. To that end I need something from you.”

He waited while she decided to take that bait. “And what might that be?”

“I need to you to deliver a Durumulna member to me. Someone freshly captured, whom no one knows you have captured.”

She shook her head as if to clear it. “Huh?”

Testily, Snape, his voice emanating from the stark, dusty shadows, returned, “I’m quite certain you heard me.”

Voice raised, she said, “You want me capture someone and rather than taking this person to the Ministry dungeon, you want me to give him to you?”

“Or her, I am not choosy.”

“Or her,” Tonks echoed quietly.

“The only criterion I require is that this person harbor some kind of major guilt. Beyond that I don’t care who it is.”

Wary of the answer, Tonks asked, “What are you going to do?”

Brightly, Snape said, “Get Harry out of prison. I presume you wish that to happen as well, no?” He was mocking her by the end of this, and backed off to pace as well.

“Yes, but-”

He spun, feet gritting on the grey-dusted floor. “But what? How difficult could this be? I don’t require a member of the leadership, whom you’ve presumably been unable to locate. I assume at any rate. I need one of the lackeys I am certain you are leaving free to track in hopes of catching someone higher up.”

Tonks swayed as though in a trance. “Yeah, we are . . . but, I don’t think-”

“Don’t think,” Snape stated crisply. “That is not what is required of you in this instance.” When she continued to hesitate, he said, “Perhaps I was mistaken and you do not understand Harry’s state of mind.”

“No, I do,” she sadly said.

"No, I do not think you do, or you would not be hesitating. Perhaps you failed to notice how his anger made the Death Eater's restless in their cells, making them bang on their doors."

"He what?" She fell far away again. "Is that what happened? The guards, they ran by for something, just as Harry was at his worst."

"Most likely."

She tipped her head back and let it hang with a nearly broken looseness.

Snape softly said, "I am not certain what he is turning into, but I know it must be stopped. You are aware of the full range of his skills, I assume? How very dangerous he would be if he finally decided he had had enough of being a proper wizard?" He let that sink in. "He needs to be free of the influences of that place and steeped again in the company of his friends who can provide a badly needed moderating effect on any dark instincts he has picked up. He responds well to that, I have observed. If that isn't sufficient, something else can be tried."

Tonks looked up. "He responds well to you."

Snape let that pass. Tonks paced to the hearth, brushed the dust off, and rested her head on the mantelpiece, only then noticing the box there wrapped in paper covered in pulsing heart shapes. "What's that?"

Mildly, Snape said, "Harry's present to you."

Tonks shoved away from the mantelpiece. "I just can't . . . what? Let you frame someone for the crime?"

In his favorite speaking-to-a-daft-First-Year voice he said, "Then make it someone whom you feel deserves to be in prison. I don't care." When she merely stared at him from her tilted head position, lost in thought, Snape added, "I assumed you cared about Harry enough to help, but perhaps I was mistaken."

Face twisted in pain, she turned away and pounded the mantelpiece once. Staring at the present, which in the poor light appeared to be spotted with spreading blood, she said, "There has to be another way."

"Yes, and when you think of it, I'll be happy to assist in kind, but in the meantime . . ."

She swung her arms in unison and paced the bare floor. "I just don't know, Severus."

"You don't know what? You don't know what is happening to Harry? I suggest you visit him again, every day, until you are convinced. Unless you are blind and deaf I

expect you will come around in, say, two visits, at most. And during that delay, we may lose him irrevocably." He waited. "Shall I map the rest out for you? How he will not stay put in that place. How you will be hunting him down for deeds he really did commit. How you will be unable to capture and hold him, forcing you to resort to-"

"Stop it!" she snapped at him, pained. Taking up the present, which she gently turned in her hands, she said, "I get it already."

He held back on appearing smug. "In that case, when you have this person – and I suggest you not dally given the circumstances – leave them at the ruins of the Shrieking Shack and send me a post owl from another location with the message I finally have a Christmas present for Harry. I will take care of the rest." He paused and watched her breathing heavily. "Clear enough?"

She stalked off without a word, leaving only her restless footprints in the dust on the floor.

Snape returned home and immediately ran an Animagus revealing spell, but it generated nothing of interest. Glad to be alone, he went to the divan in the library and reclined there, thinking. The wireless was still on, he noticed once his head was close enough to the gold filigreed speaker. A holiday tune drifted out extolling the vapid joys of the season. In his world such lyrics could only be perceived as mocking and satirical, describing that which existed only in the mists of time. Disturbed by its unrealistic call to virtue and sentimentality, he tweaked the knob so the wooden box fell silent.

That night as he lay down, still distracted by finalizing his plots, Candide leaned close and said, "Not much of a Christmas."

"It was lovely," he deadpanned.

She cocked a smile. "You have managed the impossible – becoming less romantic."

Snape continued to stare at the ceiling. As one might expect when sharing a bed, she lay so that they touched all along one side of him. By concentrating he relaxed into it. Her fingers began playing with the hair at his forehead, which distracted him terribly from plotting. He could feel her breath when she said, "You've been pretty standoffish."

She played with his hair longer before asking, "Did I finally get too huge to be alluring?"

His mind had been elsewhere. "What?" Contrary to what he would have expected of himself before all this, he found her quite appealing. Her blatant acceptance, the powdery scent of her, and the knowledge that she already carried, essentially, his child added up to rather a lot of allure.

She continued to curl his long fringe around her fingers. "Not feeling guilty about Harry, are you?"

"Certainly not."

He sat up and grabbed his wand up from the night stand to run an Animagus revealing spell. The room stood as before.

"Great Merlin, you don't think she'd be in the bedroom at a time like this?"

He gazed at her, eyes peering about, looking ready to do battle against an unseen enemy, and he found himself amused.

"Are you laughing at me?" she demanded, quick to take offense.

"No," he replied, easily finding a soothing tone. He set his wand back aside. "I would hope Skeeter would not be here, but I do not trust her."

"And why would you?"

She lay back down, turned slightly away as if giving up. He felt a stab like regret. He did not want her to give up. He considered her a moment, then rested a hand on her upper arm. "You are not displeasing."

Sounding moody, she said, "You're just saying that."

Snape needed a moment to recover. "You truly think I would just say that?"

She rolled toward him, onto her back, and scoffed with light humor. "Eh, no, maybe not."

He stroked the fleshy arm under his hand, trying hard to seem casual about it. Her skin felt too soft to be real. He let the backs of his fingers drift over her neck, along the lace collar, to the buttons of her nightgown. She made a noise that he added to the list of things that made her alluring and bent to follow his fingers with his lips.

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In Grimmauld Place, the distinctive atmosphere of a feast – silverware clattering, serving dishes thudding, chairs moving, accompanied by the drifting odor of roasting meats – greeted Snape as he moved along the balcony. He had not eaten all day and felt dizzy with the scent alone.

Closer in, the voices revealed attitudes of forced gaiety that tempered his separateness somewhat. He stepped into the chaotic dining room just long enough to toss an unwanted overcooked turkey wing and potatoes on a plate. Glances rose sharply, then disregarded him, an improvement over the norm.

Back in the bedroom he shared in shifts with Lupin, Snape set the plate on the brewing counter and buried his nose in a stained and holey Potions book. If he did not focus on something his mind would head off to imagining his counterpart, eating his food, off his plates, sitting at table with his family. Had he not been famished, the thought might have made him lose his appetite. As it was, he ate as slowly as he could bear to to best relish it all. House meals at Grimmauld Place had grown paltry in the days of hoarding leading up to the feast. The previous day the meals were so unsatisfying that Snape suspected Hermione had simply magicked them into being out of desperation.

The object of his suspicion knocked on the open door just then, her other hand buried in her pocket, looking strangely guilty. "There's more to eat," she said. "You should have seconds." She hesitated, but started forward while drawing her hand out. "And I brought you-"

"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked, slipping in from behind.

Hermione put her hand back away. Something square glittered in her grip before she released it to gesture. "I'm just telling Mr. Snape there is plenty of food tonight."

"He can figure that out for himself," Harry stated flatly.

Hermione shrugged broadly. "What are you doing up here?"

"I want to talk to Snape. Shut the door."

"Can I stay?" Hermione asked, clearly challenging.

"Yeah, okay." Harry pulled over a battered chair and turned it backward before straddling it. Facing Snape, he said, "Ravenclaw's diadem. Do you know where it is?"

Snape shook his head while he resumed eating.

"I don't believe you," Harry stated.

Snape stared at him for effect. "I can only guess, and those guesses will waste your time and patience, I am certain." When Harry rested his chin on his hands curled around the chair back, Snape added, "I would tell you if I knew."

"I was going to check the library," Hermione reassured Harry. "Just haven't had a chance."

"You think that will work?" Harry mocked.

"Yes, why not?" Huffy, she went to the door. To Snape she said, "You should come downstairs to eat."

When she was gone, Harry grumbled in annoyance. Between nibbles on the paltry but tender meat between the wing bones, Snape said, "May I offer you some advice, which you are dearly in need of?"

"I doubt it will help," Harry mumbled. "But you can try."

Snape set his empty plate aside. "You are misusing your people. Ms. Granger should have no task but researching what you seek. She is singularly suited for that task and she must not be distracted from it."

"But we need to eat," Harry said, standing up and putting the chair aside.

"Others can procure food."

"Not as well."

"That does not matter; they can do it."

"An army marches on its stomach," Harry quoted, sounding miffed and defensive.

"This one will falter for lack of information long before it starves bodily." Snape bundled up his napkin and considered his decimated plate.

"There is more food," Harry grudgingly muttered.

Unable to deny that idea, Snape followed Harry downstairs. Perhaps because he clearly accompanied Harry inside, the room disregarded Snape's entry. He eagerly helped himself to the copious leftovers and stood in the corner of the room to observe.

Lavender sat discussing the latest rumors with Ginny, who was the only one to frequently eye Snape as he stood in the shadow of the curtain, relishing filling his stomach.

A bang! brought silence to the room. Harry, closest to the door, was the first one out of it to investigate. Snape set his plate down and reached futilely for his wand, cursing

under his breath and balling his empty fists at his side. Ginny stopped in the doorway, gesturing authoritatively for the others to remain where they were. Snape considered it a telling measure of his situation that he found reassurance in the confident way she held her wand.

The others returned, carrying what appeared to be a dead goose sporting a red ribbon around its neck.

"What is it?" Someone asked, sounding appalled.

"A message, I presume," Harry said, tossing the animal aside. "And not from a friend." By the limp way it moved and the lack of rotted scent, it must have just died.

When it hit the floor, something golden rolled free of it – rolled unpredictably, like an egg.

"Don't touch it," Snape and Harry both said when a few bystanders moved toward it.

Harry bent over the egg, wand at ready, and nudged it with his foot.

"What is it, do you think?" Harry asked.

At this, it cracked open, making him twitch back. Clattering started and a ticker tape emerged straight up from the egg, fell over itself and piled onto the floor. When it abruptly stopped, Harry bent and ran his fingers along it to read the flowing writing stamped out in holes on it.

"It really is a message," he said. He ran his fingers along it and found the beginning. "You have something I want. I have something you want. I propose an equitable trade: Sword of Gryffindor for Hufflepuff's Cup. Meet at the Three Broomsticks at 9pm tonight. Draco Malfoy." Harry dropped the tape.

Hermione said, "You DID get the cup?"

"Not exactly," Harry said. "Or I wasn't certain I had, but I guess I did. Turned out there were a thousand cups or so. Every time I took some, more appeared. I took as many as I could and stashed them away somewhere safe to see what happened." He grinned. "Apparently the real one is in the stash."

He went to the bookshelf and hunted around behind the books, eventually pulling out a golden cup.

"Is that it?" Ginny blurted hungrily.

Harry shook his head. "Odds are not. It's just one I grabbed from the stash to show everyone. The spell ran its course after creating like a million of them. They nearly crushed me." He held it up. "Merry Christmas."

Hermione took the cup from him and held it this way and that. "We'll have to come up with a way to find the real one. Where are they?"

Harry did not glance around, he just said quietly. "I'll tell you later."

Hermione nodded like one suddenly remembering herself. "But someone could go trade this one for the sword," she said.

Harry peered at the cup. "I could go do that."

"Not wise," Snape intoned, stepping out of the shadows of the tight-knit gathering, but not so close as to seem challenging. "It is undoubtedly a trap."

"So?" Harry asked, scoffing.

"So? That is the best you can offer in return?" Snape mocked. He had an uneasy sense of altering things, of standing where he could force the rivulets of time and event to diverge off course. Without him there, the young man would go off and do as he wished. He breathed deeply, plunging in. "It is undoubtedly a trap specifically for you, that makes it imperative you do not go. You can always rescue others later, but who will be there to rescue you?"

Harry frowned while thinking. Hermione said, "I'll go."

Harry turned to her. "No. You research how to tell the cups apart and how to find the diadem. I don't want you doing anything else. Let someone else take care of everything else; you do only that, okay? From now on."

Hermione, ever pragmatic, did not argue, just frowned, appearing strained. Ginny, beside her, said, "I'll go. I can deal with the little blonde snake."

"I'll go with you," Neville said. "You shouldn't go alone. We'll take the cloak."

Harry glanced between his friends, hesitating. Snape took advantage of this and said, "The cloak can only hide one of you and both of you are wanted. No one will be expecting me, so I should go, and the other of you can use the cloak." He glared directly at Harry. "That will be far safer."

Harry stared back, but actually focused beyond Snape. The room stood in stillness, barely breathing, waiting for Harry.

Snape calmly added, "I believe I can best handle Mr. Malfoy, having been in a position of authority over him for years." He held up his hands. "But it is your decision, Potter."

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"I don't trust you," Harry said, stepping close to get right in his face. The others backed up to make way. Snape noted that he had to rock up on his toes to get to his own Harry's height. "Realize that if anything happens to my friends because of you I will take it out on your skin as slowly and painfully as I can muster the patience to do so."

The threat felt like half show, half real. Snape nodded. "I would expect nothing less," he quipped.

Harry searched his face seconds longer. "Fine." He spun and glanced between his friends. "You two draw straws . . . Or maybe not. Neville you tend to get too nervous around Snape. Maybe you should go, Ginny. Or maybe I should, after all." He spun on Snape again, looking for a reaction.

"And if I refuse because I can see you RE-injured your shoulder . . . ?" Snape innocently asked.

Harry colored. A few in the room burst into questions and the rest looked at the floor. Harry overrode them. "I'm fine. I'm just bruised from having ten thousand cups fall on top of me is all."

Lupin, previously unnoticed in the corner, said in a weak voice, "Then perhaps you should be on the injured list and stay, as Severus suggests."

"Whose side are you on?" Harry demanded of him.

Sounding inordinately tired, Lupin replied, "I'm on the side that argues that the Prophecized One should be reserved for the key task only he can complete." Lupin shuffled forward and leaned heavily on a chair back, appearing small inside the thick robes he wore against the chill. "Harry, you have much to do yet. No one is going to accuse you of shirking. I know you dislike sending your friends off into danger, and that's noble, but they want to do it for you because they can't finish this in the end like you can."

"However I'm supposed to do that," Harry grumbled.

Lupin tilted his head back and forth. "One thing at a time. The critical thing is that only you can do this last thing. Everyone here knows that and is willing to sacrifice so you can reach that point. Even Severus here is, which just shows how important it is."

Snape shot him a look of dismay, but let it go. That had not exactly been his thinking. His thinking had more been along the lines of shaking his oppressive helplessness with a bout of recklessness. And he was tired of being trapped in his dead enemy's house.

Harry paced in the space left by the group watching him. "Given it's a holiday, it should be a temporary armistice day. So, Ginny, why don't you go. I think it should be safe enough. I hope." He sounded bold at the beginning, but by the end his eyes rested sadly on her.

Snape pointed out, "I'll need my wand. At least for the evening."

Glaring at him, Harry gestured for Hermione to give it up to him. It gave Snape less reassurance than he wished as he slipped it into his pocket.

Harry puffed up then and marched from the room, pausing only to say to Snape, "Bring her back safely or I'll kill you." He did not look back to see Snape's reaction.

Snape found Ginny as the crowd dissipated. "We don't have much time," he said.

Without a word, she went to get ready, returning minutes later bundled warmly and carrying two broomsticks. Snape joined her at the map on the wall which marked the paths people had taken last to travel to various common places. Circles and colored arrows marked landing areas and Apparition points. She said, "We should start southward, to throw them off. I know we don't have much time to get there by nine, but can't risk getting predictable."

With his eyes, Snape followed the course she plotted and nodded, eager to leave this place for any reason. Ginny found him a cloak, flying gloves and a scarf from a trunk by the door. She carefully brushed off the dark plaid scarf before handing it over, muttering sadly, "We didn't use to have so much extra stuff, but . . . we've lost so many people . . ."

Snape wrapped the anonymous dead man's scarf twice around his neck and tucked it firmly into his robes. Harry stepped over and gave Ginny a kiss. "Be careful," he said to her before striding away again, ignoring Snape.

"Ready, sir?" Ginny asked, eyes far away and determined.

They Apparated, then flew some before Apparating again and flying some more. Snape took charge of the last Apparition, taking them into Shrewsthorpe in the fields behind his house. He stopped there, transfixed by the gaping windows and bowing roof marred with holes.

"Sir?" Ginny prompted as she rewrapped her scarf in preparation for flight.

Snape dropped his borrowed broom while saying "Up," and let it bump his leg as it hovered beside him. He resisted going. He wanted to simply step back into his house the way it should be. Ginny was already twenty feet in the air. Keeping his face averted from the decaying visage of his house, Snape followed.

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They landed on the hilltop overlooking Hogsmeade. The rutted street was busy enough that the snow had been trampled down to mud and warm light shown from every window.

"Everyone's taking advantage to get out," Ginny said, tossing the cloak over her head and disappearing.

Snape led the way down to the alley beside the Three Broomsticks. The scent of stew and rotting beer permeated even the snow-covered ground. Snape could track Ginny by her footsteps in the snow and he made a half-blind grab for her shoulder when he heard cries of dismay from the roadway ahead. Ginny willingly backed up behind him as the walls iced over more and gloom descended on them. Snape pushed his charge behind him, between stacks of empty barrels. "Don't move, no matter what happens," he commanded, then released her.

Torn wraiths flickered by on the road outside their hiding place and for a moment, dread released them. But the gloom crept back and hooded shadows peered around the crumbling brick edge of the building.

Snape looked away, not wanting to look inside the approaching tattered hood. The Dementor both creaked and slithered closer. Snape could not run because there was no point in running. There was nowhere safe to run to. This place, this world, was an endless kingdom of doom and chaos. There would never be any real hope here. His bright house and wife and son were nothing but a cruel dream. He would never see them again. His Harry would never return and he would be trapped in this place forever, lucky only to survive, or perhaps not so lucky.

Snape clutched his wand, yearning to cast a Patronus to send the demon off, but it increased the risk of their being investigated. He ducked low, trying to shut down the flow of despair, the flow of all his emotion, in the hopes it would lose interest. The earthy, decayed odor of the Dementor's ragged robes wafted around them as a hooded head passed close, sniffing like a predator. The air hummed with perverted joy at his pain. He worried for Ginny crouched nearby and ducked lower into his arms trying to find any small hope inside himself, but there was nothing but bleak expectation of permanent emptiness. Torn robes brushed Snape like dried leaves one came so close, and then a whistle sounded and the Dementor jerked back and turned. The whistle repeated and the ghastly pair slipped away without a sound.

Snape rested his head more firmly in the crook of his arm, leaning heavily on a barrel, trying to school his rampant grief. He could not grab hold of it, let alone wrestle it out of the way, it permeated every fiber of his being.

"Sir?" Ginny said, then fell silent. By the sound of it, she took a seat on one of the barrels to wait. She sounded like she fared better than he, which annoyed him as much as it relieved him.

He had a task; Snape reminded himself from the absolute darkness of his robes. If he had a task, there was hope. He had lived exactly this way for an awfully long time, and it should be possible to return to that mentality, but somehow the past made it harder, not easier.

Snape raised his head, rubbing his forehead, trying to focus on the task, the purpose.

"Sir?" the invisible voice came from beside him again.

Snape stared down at the barrel he leaned on. Ice crystals had formed on the lid. Sharp, clear shards of the kind that accompanied Harry through the Planes. Harry would come. He had to come. Snape straightened, grabbing at that hope like a lifeline.

Sounding apologetic Ginny said, "I was about to scare the Dementor away even though I knew I wasn't supposed to reveal that I was here. They didn't seem to notice me under here."

"No, you did right," Snape managed to say, voice as unsteady as his heart.

Even though they were late, Snape took care putting on a disguise. Just taking any action released him from the debilitating effects of his grief, which made the spells work better, so he did them over twice. He bolstered his shoulders and neck with added muscle, greyed his hair, and fattened his face, spells minor enough that they might go undetected by a disguise-revealing device.

"Let's go. Stay close to me so I do not have to move as one being trailed. If Dementors cannot see you, that is not an ordinary invisibility cloak, but I do not want to push our luck, as thin as it is."

They transformed their brooms into barrels, stacked them with the others, tossed snow on them, and walked around to the front door.

As expected, the pub was full of revelers making the most of the holiday. Snape scanned the room for Malfoy but did not see him. He moved to the bar for a butterbeer and asked Madam Rosmerta if she had any rooms free for the night, just to get a chance to look at the register when she pulled it out. She did not need to; she nodded towards the empty key rack behind her and said, "Nah, been booked solid since a month ago."

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Snape took his drink and stood against the wall with it, careful to always leave space for his companion to follow without bumping anyone.

The bright, borderline cheery voices filling the air were a balm and Snape began to feel himself again. He sipped his drink for show and froze when he heard one voice that vibrated through him as if his heart were a drum struck by a mallet. Snape peered desperately around the smoky haze. He found his mark with difficulty because her back was turned and her hair was different. She sat at a table with her officemates and her boss. The person beside her got up and disappeared down the corridor where the toilets were. Snape could take the chair – if only until her companion returned and demanded it back. It would be something, even as small as it was.

Snape began to move without thinking, drawn, then hesitated. In the end, the decision was made for him. The side door down the corridor beside the bar banged open and figures in Death Eater hoods slipped inside, wands in hand, but lowered. Snape slipped over to the seat and moved it closer to Candide to make room for his transparent shadow to crouch beside.

Candide turned to him in amused surprise. "Hello?"

"Greetings," Snape intoned, feeling strangely at ease.

"You look familiar," Candide's boss said.

Snape drew his gaze away from Candide's thinner than expected face and introduced himself. "Phineus Polstar, I used to play for the Wasps." He was saved from having to worry if this man were an ardent fan who would see through this lie by the room falling silent as the Death Eaters spread through the room.

Candide started and moved as if to stand. Snape leaned close. "Doing anything at all will get you singled out," he hissed at her before backing up and putting on a grin. "Someday we'll be playing Quidditch again," he said, giving a mock toast before pretending to just then notice the invaders.

Ginny bumped his leg as she crawled fully under the table and near disaster happened – The man on Snape's right shuffled his feet and ducked slightly to look under at what had brushed him. Snape leaned closer to Candide to say, "Just stay calm," but it was really an excuse to move his legs and give Ginny more room. His grim humor suspected she was debating which was worse: hugging his shins like she was or giving herself up. The man thankfully decided to ignore what was under the table and his movement went unnoticed, but it was dumb luck.

The room fell utterly still as the hooded but unmasked figures moved through, gazing challengingly at everyone in turn. Snarling at some for no reason, shoving others.

They circled the room using their bulk to bully their way around, then as quick as they had arrived, they were gone.

Beside him, Candide deflated in relief. "They had to ruin a decent night, didn't they?" she complained. She sucked at her beer and said, "Thanks," to Snape. "You'd think I'd be used to them."

"You should never get used to them."

Candide's friend returned and cleared his throat. Snape stood, in a rude, body blocking way that gave Ginny space to get out too.

"'Scuse me," the man snipped in false pleasantry.

Snape bowed to both of them with overdone graciousness and with one fleeting glance back at Candide, returned to the wall to watch the room where his back was protected.

Over at the bar, Rosmerta, with suspiciously mechanical movements, handed a key from below the bar to a figure that had just entered, hooded as well, but smaller than the others who had just departed. Snape turned away before the figure could look his way, trusting that with his alterations he would not be recognized from behind. When the figure moved off, Snape whispered to his shadow, "Follow him."

He himself wandered casually behind examining the sporting photographs lining the corridor that led to the alley and the stairs to the rooms. At the foot of the stairs, he heard a disembodied voice breathless with excitement say, "Room four."

Snape led the way up the stairs and intending to not give Draco any time to prepare, burst into the room. He caught the young man exchanging his scratchy Death Eater robes for a richly woven dressing gown. Snape knocked the young man's wand away and snagged it for safe keeping. He then moved to a chair and sat crosslegged, as if he owned the place. "There, now we can talk."

Draco stood still with his robes half over his head. He came to himself and tossed them aside and slipped on the gown.

Miffed, Draco asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I have what you want."

Draco blinked at that.

Snape had no interest in giving away who he was working with. "Your message was ridiculously easy to intercept."

Draco fell relieved. "Then at least you understand that I have to get the cup back. You really have it?"

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Snape reached into his pocket and gave Draco a glance of just the lip before securing it away again. "But I want the sword."

Draco paced while straightening his collar. He stopped before the free-standing, snake-edged mirror to brush his hair in place before facing Snape again. "Why? What good will it do you? You certainly aren't a Gryffindor, so it will be of no use."

Finding snootiness from somewhere, Snape replied, "The cup is nothing to me, but with the sword I can torment others. With the cup I can only torment you, which is a paltry game, really."

"You're awfully confident for a man literally everyone would like to kill."

Airily, he said, "No one seems to actually have the time to bother. Other priorities, I suppose." They stared at each other. "The sword?" Snape demanded.

With a rumble on the rough wooden floor, Draco pulled a trunk over from under the bed and opened it from his side of the table. He pulled the sword out of it and set it out. It was tethered with a chain to the trunk. Draco re-closed the trunk and gestured that Snape could inspect the sword.

Snape inspected Draco instead, looking for any deception, but there did not seem to be any, just wariness and certainty that he could pull off this transaction and that once he did, all would be well again. The sword certainly looked authentic to Snape. He touched it, but it felt like ordinary cold metal.

"The cup," Draco demanded.

Snape set the cup on his side of the table. Draco pulled a silvery drawstring purse from his pocket and tossed glittery powder from it at the cup. The powder passed through the cup as if it were not there.

"That's not the cup! That's a copy," Draco snarled, after glancing inside to see that the smooth metal bowl held no powder.

"Is it, then?" Snape said, laying a hand on the sword hilt, wondering if he could break the thin, decorative-looking chain. Draco was wandless, so he had an advantage there. "Understandable, you must admit, given how very many cups there were in your secret cellar."

Draco kicked the trunk and an answering thud echoed from inside it. A second later a Bludger broke free and flew straight through the flimsy plastered wall, dragging the sword behind it and painfully out of Snape's grasp. Snape ran to the window to look out, feeling a breeze behind him as Ginny joined him there.

"Ha!" Draco said. "You think I'm that stupid."

"Where is it going?" Snape asked, Ginny perhaps, but she was smart enough not to answer. The Bludger had been heading in a straight line, toward the castle. And if it were a Hogwart's Bludger, it might just head to the changing rooms where it was normally stored . . . eventually, anyway.

Snape ran for the door, Draco yelling, "Give me my wand back!" followed them out.

Two sets of feet pounded down the stairs, Snape tried to get the two of them in sync so they would sound like one. They burst out the side door of the pub into the alley and, as if trained to it, efficiently transformed their brooms back to normal. Shouting followed them out of the pub and running feet approached from several sides. Snape pointed straight up and took off, hoping Ginny would follow. He got a glimpse of her feet poking out from the fluttering cloak before the night sky blotted everything out, and knowing she followed, he accelerated for the school grounds.

Snape slowed high over the lake, something had disturbed the pristine snowy surface. A bursting line in the shape of a comet bisected the plane of icy snow and at the end of it, cracks radiated out. Snape turned and dropped down to hover over that spot. He flew farther out where the ice was thicker and landed. Another set of footprints appeared beside him.

"Why not just Accio it out?" A voice asked.

"That particular sword will not come that way. But you may try if you wish."

She did so, but nothing happened. A party of Death Eaters gathered on the shore near the village. They were slow to muster and organize and he must put that time to good use. He put a featherlight charm on Ginny and had her do the same to him. Then they both slip-walked over the crunching ice to where the cracks started.

"Stay back. I'm lighter," Ginny said, and started inside the real danger zone.

Snape said, "Give me the cloak. You do not wish to lose that."

She bundled it up and tossed it to him. He wrapped it around his neck like a scarf. More shouting drifted over the flat surface. "They're coming," Ginny said.

"They are in trouble if they come that way. The ice is thinnest near the village where the sewers dump in."

Ginny, who was on all fours, inspecting the hole said, "Oh, wonderful." Her weight caused the ice to darken and water to slip over the top. She backed up by crawling and began quickly removing her cloak.

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"What are you doing?" Snape asked.

"Fetching the sword. I think I can see it. Does it glow?"

"Not that I know of, but it is hardly ordinary, and you are a Gryffindor. Perhaps it wants you to fetch it." Snape looked up at the approaching mob of Death Eaters. A spell sizzled across the ice but Snape had plenty of time for a Counter. "Perhaps you should hurry."

Ginny was already stripped down to her shirt and trousers. She slipped off her shoes with vicious tugs and tossed them toward Snape's feet. With just one deep breath, and perhaps before she could think too hard about her actions, she dove in, shattering the ice more. She bobbed to the surface an instant later, gasping like a death rattle and flailing. "Merlin! It's cold!" She grabbed for the edge of the ice, but it simply broke it off to float about her in jagged pieces.

Snape used Draco's wand in his other hand to fetch her clothes closer to him out of reach of the spreading stain of water.

"Do hurry," Snape said.

"You think I'm not?" she weakly gasped, her eyes tightly closed as freezing lake water rivuletted from her hair over her face. With great effort and a thrown back head, she took three hoarse breaths, and ducked under the liquid slate surface again.

She was gone much longer this time. Their pursuers split up; some came over the ice and others came along the edge of the lake to get closer. Once they were tossing spells from both of those angles, defense would become difficult if not impossible.

Snape was just about to Accio Ginny herself from the depths when something burst from the water – a pale hand clutching a sword. The sword and hand crashed down on the ice as Ginny emerged. Snape had to back up as the surface gave way across a large area, staining with water and tilting ominously. One crack extended to the nearest pursuers taking the short path and cursing sounded as they fell through in the shallows.

With a careful whip charm, Snape dragged Ginny from the hole and up a thicker sheet of ice that groaned under her weight, but did not crack more. On his knees, Snape backed up to firmer ice, pulling her and her dry clothes along. She had gone limp beyond clutching the sword but because of the cold he had more time to revive her, so he moved carefully, rather than rush and potentially send them both into the freezing arms of the lake.

Their pursuers were extricating themselves from the water and coming around where the ice was sounder. A whistle sounded and Dementors emerged from the bare-limbed forest and floated along the snow down to the ice. The gathered Death Eaters

stumbled back to let them pass. Snape tugged the chilled Ginny close and tossed the cloak over both of them.

Ginny's shallow breath reassuringly moved over Snape's neck, and she struggled blindly until he whispered that she should stop. Under the invisibility cloak, he unfolded her woolen cloak and helped her slip it around her neck, resisting simply wrapping her in his arms as would be reasonable, but completely out of character. She began to shiver so violently her teeth rattled together. In the small space, her jumper and robes could only be bundled around her from the front. Her shirt began freezing solid.

Above them the Dementors swirled in confusion. Their pursuers had found a boat and were pushing it out onto the loose ice chunks.

"We have to make a dash for it," Snape said.

Ginny nodded amidst her violent shaking. Even in the dim light, her face was ghostly pale.

"Can you keep ahold of the sword?" Snape gently asked. "I'm not certain it will accept me."

She nodded again and used her robes to protect her hand to grab hold of the blade with one hand while tangling the fingers of her other hand in the guard on the hilt.

"Now," Snape warned her. He lifted the cloak behind him and Accioed the broomsticks over. The brooms slammed into them with stinging speed. Ignoring the pain, Snape bundled them together, and hovered them with a painful jerk on his shoulder. With one arm under Ginny, and one leg barely over the broomsticks, he launched the two of them into the air with bone jarring acceleration, and skin freezing speed.

They flew so fast, the grief of the Dementors merely brushed them as they blasted up through them. But the creatures were in pursuit immediately, and Snape had no hand to spare for a spell. His cold hand clad in a worn borrowed glove, cramped from holding two broomsticks and his other arm could barely hold Ginny over the the wood and his lap and she had no hand to hold on either.

Ginny began to slip. Snape halted their rise fast enough that for an instant she became weightless. He adjusted his leg grip on the paired brooms and while keeping a grip on her, better caught her in front of him so they were flying normally. Her loose robes and jumper fluttered in the wind as they gained speed. Snape was not going to fly far; they would be far better off Apparating away despite how easily it could be traced. He landed them in the forest beyond the Apparition block and took her away in a sidealong.

"Quickly now," he said, unfolding her jumper so she could don it, but she was too numb to move and she refused to release the sword.

A noise made the both jump, so Snape Apparated them away again. In the alley of a small Muggle town Ginny swayed while he slipped her robes over her head and arms, and tied her jumper around her neck.

"We need to fly a little bit more to make it hard to trace. Can you make it?"

Her lips were blue, but she nodded.

"Never mind; let's just get you home."

She nodded again.

Snape took them through two more Apparition rounds before landing them on the stoop at Grimmauld place, where he had to hold her up to keep her from falling. The door opened immediately and many hands came out to take Ginny inside.

In the painful light of the usually dim front hall, Harry got a look at Ginny and demanded of Snape, "What happened?" He grabbed hold of Snape's robe front with his fist.

Snape grabbed Harry's arm in self defense. "What did not happen? would be an easier question to answer."

Ginny struggled with her arms caught inside her robes. "I have it. I have it," she muttered deliriously. Harry paused in his attack on Snape to hear her out.

Her struggles loosened her robes by raising them up enough for her to toss them back like a large hood. She held the sword out for Harry, who, stunned at the glittering, glowing sight, still held Snape.

"You have the sword," Harry whispered, finally letting go to take it by the hilt. He peered along its length while giving her a one-armed hug. "You're brilliant, Ginny. But you're soaked and freezing!"

She laughed with effort. "Well, yes . . ."

Harry released his awkward hug reluctantly as Hermione and others hustled Ginny away for a hot bath. The hallway fell quiet and Snape exhaled. "I don't think she is seriously injured. She just jumped into the lake for the sword."

Harry rested the point on the floor, looking like a statue of a knight. "The lake in Hogsmeade? It must be ice right now."

"Most definitely."

"How did it end up there?"

"Long story. The short explanation would be something like: it wanted to be there since its magic requires that it be earned." Snape felt in his pockets. "I lost the cup. But Draco believed it wasn't the real one. Let's hope he was correct and that we did not fool each other."

"Odds are it wasn't."

Snape smiled faintly, which felt good. "And better yet, I saw the spell he used to test it."

Harry's eyes glowed. "Excellent," he breathed. "Things may finally be turning around for us." He squinted up the darkened stairs, where the sounds of hurried bath preparations issued forth. Then he looked down at the sword he held, biting his lower lip while adjusting to grasp it in a proper two-handed grip. "It's her sword now, I suppose. She earned it."

"Perhaps," Snape softly said and felt compelled to add, "I suspect it will honor your will as well."

Harry slipped one hand free of the guard and stepped lightly forward to thrust out in the direction of the stairs, blade flashing unnaturally in the low light. He smiled. "Yes, I suppose it will. But it is hers." He stared along the blade's length again and as though sharply compelled, said, "And I should take it up to her."

He ran lightly up the stairs, leaving Snape alone to worry that he had changed something significant.

Boxing Day, Tonks rested her head heavily on her palm as she filled out a report. She took extra time now filling out reports since going out on duty with her magic unpredictable just strained her nerves more and they were close to fraying away to nothing.

Rogan stood at the log book, going over assignment slips. He scooped one off the floor and said, "Disturbance at the warehouse in Scunthorpe . . . did someone take this one?"

"I did," Tonks lied without hesitation.

Rogan hesitated. "You took it alone?"

As reluctant as she was to get involved in what Snape planned, the lies flowed easily. "It was just an old charm hanging around confusing the Muggles. Even I could handle it."

Rogan tossed the slip in the finished box and went on with sorting.

Tonks waited ten minutes, just long enough to deflect suspicion. She moved without will, watching herself travel along a path she despised but could not change. "I'm going to grab a late dinner," she said to Rogan.

He gently said, "Good idea."

She slipped her gloves on before Apparating away. His sympathy did not help. They were all worried about her and at this point did not bother to hide it, nor could they hide the accommodations they were making for her.

She Apparated to the perimeter of the site where they had found the rogue elf guarding what must have been a Durumulna meeting place. As she walked closer in, wand barely glowing for light, she hoped the call was a real one as much as she hoped her lie was closer to the truth.

Her detection spells revealed someone was inside. Tossing out the glow on her wand, she spelled and slipped inside the back door. Taking positive action to help Harry, even as morally dubious as the action was, made her feel much stronger and her magic worked as it should, propelling her more surely along this bad path. She changed her face and hair and clothes to mottled grey and tip-toed along the rows of metal racks. As usually happened when she got confident, her clumsiness got the better of her and her sleeve caught a long metal rod. But fortunately, it rattled on the far end, not near her. A spell shot out of the darkness, along the parallel row, and Tonks immediately shot a chain binding where the spell had originated. Someone grunted followed by the rattle of heavy links hitting the cement floor.

Tonks scuffed her feet before approaching, overcome by a rabid and paranoid tumble of thoughts about how she should proceed. She changed her appearance again, to make herself taller and to make it look like she wore a black mask. She marched over to the victim with unreal confidence. By the light of her Lumos, she examined the young man, probably mid twenties, shiny dark hair sticking straight off his head. He tried to spit on her and she found herself laughing out of nerves at what she was about to do.

The stranger fell silent and fearfully watchful; her laughter echoing around the warehouse did sound unnerving.

Tonks stood above the perpetrator, wand aimed, wondering how in the world she could tell if the man harbored any guilt. Snape may be able to do that with a man pinned under his spell like this, but she certainly could not. What did he expect her to do, take him out for drinks and chat him up until he opened up a bit?

A large dog broke out into fierce barking just on on the other side of the metal wall, making them both jump. Tonks scoffed and quelled the adrenaline quake coursing in her limbs. With a silencing and a hooding spell, she took her charge away, but not directly away. There could be no traceable trail. Fortunately, she knew how to do this without thought given how many times she had worked the other side of the procedure.

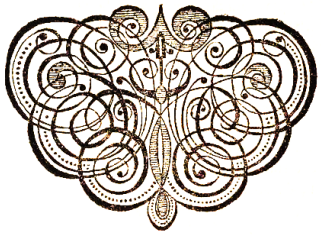
Tonks propped her hands on her hips and surveyed the scene. She had the ramshackle room soundproofed, the house propped up somewhat because it looked beyond ready to collapse, and the man bound with ample water in reach. The anonymous wizard had sat, half sentient due to repeated spells, watching her make the preparations for his prison. His puzzled and worried brow never relaxed.

Yup, Tonks had thought to herself more than once, you count on us playing fair, but not this time, I'm afraid.

She resisted wishing an honest good luck to the young man as she departed, wondering how long his confused gaze would haunt her memory. Maybe it would not matter, she thought as she put a snowshoe charm on her feet to leave no trail out of the ruin of the Shrieking Shack. Maybe Snape would wipe this all the next time they met. She kind of hoped he would because just the chance gave her a depressing kind of hope for herself.

Author's Notes:
Well, this almost happened before but I managed to prevent it by making a super-long chapter, but that wasn't feasible this time, so the previewed scene did not get in. It's been pushed into the next one. So, you get another preview scene. A two-fer.
On another note, I have to give the betas their due. They work really hard and man the last two chapters have really needed some serious help. I don't know where I'd be without you guys. A million, gazillion thanks!!!

Chapter 33.



Ace in the Hole

Harry paced across stone cage, turning in one corner on a toe before marching three steps to the opposite corner and turning again. His thoughts flitted onto a notion and off again without landing anywhere solid for long. Keeping his thoughts unraveled seemed to be the best way of avoiding plots involving dark, sniveling servants. It did not make him feel more like himself, but it did keep him from feeling like someone else entirely.

Harry tired of the repetition and stopped, breathing hard in the poor air, staring down at his meager excuse for a bed. Shoving the blankets aside he pulled out his most recent letters again and wished for more news, wished for a newspaper, even one full of Skeeter's lies, anything to tell him what was happening. Neville, perhaps because he had trouble thinking of things to write about, tended to ramble on about trivial things, which to Harry served as welcome news. Harry read his letter again. Madam Malkin's shop had been cursed so that their stock of wizard cloaks had turned pink and all their witches' robe's had grown needle spikes all over. And a gang of broom riders in leather cloaks had been reported harassing the elderly coven of the Solstice Sisters during their moonrise rituals just before Christmas.

When Harry started to think that this was a pathetic use of such an organization, and that there were much more profitable ventures, he put the letters away and went back to pacing.

The rhythmic padding of his footsteps became maddening rather than meditative, so he stopped again. His eyes felt heavy and that gave him hope for some good, solid time-killing sleep.

The blankets piled on his bench were tattered and full of holes. Harry methodically picked each one up and held it by the corners, turning the next one so the holes would not line up and increase the draft. Finished with this neatening, he climbed under the scratchy things and Occluded his mind, something he had been unable to do previous days.

Harry curled up more for warmth, finding the bench strangely comfortable, as if he floated above it on a softer, cradling bed. His sense of where he was drifted loose as if sucked away by the security of the weighty blankets and he sank into a blissful, dead sleep.

Mrs. Weasley called up the worn and rickety staircase for her daughter to come down. Ginny emerged from upstairs, one deliberate step at a time, nose in a book entitled Barrier Blocking Basics.

Mrs. Weasley, expression pleased and anticipative, held out a letter from Harry. It had two decorative, swirling postmarks on it: one from the prison showing a tower island with water flowing around it and one from the French magical post office showing a woman in a limp pointed cap, her hair flowing into the water of the mark beside her.

Ginny took the letter and turned back to the stairs.

"Oh, read it here dear. I'd like to hear it."

Ginny groaned and tore open the envelope. It was a good thing she read ahead two lines before reading aloud.

Dear Ginny,

Do not discuss this letter with anyone else, if you would, unless you have no other choice. I have something that is very difficult to tell you at the best of times and would be hard to explain even if I did not have to write it in the white space between the lines of another letter.

"Um, it's kinda personal, mum," Ginny said, shuffling away with the missive folded over her thumbs for safety.

Her mother had waved the dishes to begin rinsing and had to shout over the sound of the water. "I'm surprised he did that given the censors."

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"Me too," Ginny said, heart thrumming fast. She slipped away to her room and put an Imperturbable charm on the door and the window before sitting where the sunlight made reading easier. Lack of light was not the problem in understanding the letter. She quickly began to wonder if Harry had lost his grip.

There exists another place, like ours, but where things have been going along much better, much happier – my parents aren't dead there, for example. In this other place there is another Trelawney with a habit of telling people things they maybe don't want to hear. She's been telling people things, and it isn't supposed to be for us, but I fear it has become ours. I'm not sure if this is my fault. I suppose it has to be since it was me who carried these words from that place to this one.

Anyway, she warns of a wizard (not a particularly nice one), taking command of idle dark servants, and peace being shattered. I don't want to believe this warning. Trouble is, I'm not feeling so stellar in here in the company of You-Know-Who's old friends. Actually, that's not quite true. Sometimes I feel very good here, and that's worse. I rarely feel much myself at all now, and so I thought I should write and tell you, just in case. See, the warning says that only the "seventh son who is not" can properly bring an end to the bad goings on and overcome this not particularly nice wizard.

I'm sorry I can't be more straightforward. I hope this letter doesn't take too long to reach you. Please stoke your fire with it, if you would.

Harry

Ginny read the letter again, faster, then again slower. Was he really implying that he was the dark wizard who needed warning about? Was he really talking about a prophecy? What was this about his parents being alive still? She had about a hundred questions and no way to ask them. She stared at the walls of her room, not seeing them, before starting for the door, letter in hand.

Huffing, she stopped and tossed it on the fire after one more quick read-thru.

Downstairs she looked around for her father. "Where's dad?"

Her mother did not look up from where she was bent over a plate that refused to mend, even with a spell. Ginny suspected it had been broken one time too many for even magic to repair. "Outside in the shed, dear."

Ginny headed out the door, ignoring her mother saying, "He said he was working on a surprise and didn't want to be interrupted."

At the shed, she knocked and did not wait for a summons. The wind blew brisk and cold and she wished she had put on a scarf, at least, before marching out of the house.

She slipped inside the shed where her father was quickly trying to hide a rounded metal box surrounded by piles of gears and wires and curved metal pieces.

"Yes?" He composed himself, but went on rambling too fast, "I don't have much time, I'm afraid. I thought I'd have this working before Christmas . . . just a little surprise, the Muggles are quite good at . . . well, spells don't work so well for bread . . . anyway, what is it?"

"You have to take me to talk to Harry." She spoke with clear, calm determination, holding her father's gaze through the steam her speech poured into her face.

He turned back to his project, giving up on hiding it. He held a little panel with buttons like "Stop", "Start", and "Timer" on printed on them; wires dangled off the back of it like thick hair. "That's not really possible, Ginny."

"Why not?"

"You have to apply for permission, or fill out rather a lot of paperwork, and really it is only immediate family or representation who are allowed outside of law enforcement."

He put down the little panel and picked up a tiny screw, which promptly flicked off his fingers onto the floor. He ducked under the little workbench and not seeing it, waved his wand, causing a hundred little screws to fly up and pummel the tabletop, mixing with the screws already there.

"Blasted," he muttered, then sighed.

Ginny crossed her arms against the cold air. "It's really important, Dad."

"Many things are really important."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "This is more important than everything else. Someone has to talk to Harry . . . I have to talk to Harry."

"People have been talking to Harry," he said in overly soothing tones. "I, myself, talked to him. Severus talked to him. His solicitor, even, had a meeting with him." He fell quiet at the last as if losing certainty.

Ginny crossed her arms. "But I haven't. And I don't trust the lot of you."

He shook his head and blew on his cupped fingers. "Well, I suppose I'll leave this for tomorrow." He stared at the disarray of pieces. "Doesn't look likely to be finished today, anyhow."

"What is it?"

"It's, uh . . . don't spoil it for your mum . . . a breadmaking machine." Brightening, he said, "See, here's the paddle, it goes here, and it kneads all by itself and then bakes. Does everything. Really very clever."

It looked like a pile of shiny metal rubbish to Ginny. "What will it take to get you to listen to me?" she asked, disliking the squeak rising into her voice.

"I am listening to you, Pumpkin." He gestured that she should back out the door.

"Not very well," Ginny criticized, stalking to the house. At the door, she said, "If you were listening better, you'd take me to see Harry."

Mrs. Weasley opened the door for them, and closed it quickly behind them, pushing against a gust. Glancing from one face to the other, she asked, "What's this?"

"I need to go see Harry," Ginny insisted.

Confused, Mrs. Weasley said, "He's in that Caché de . . . well, he's in prison."

"I KNOW that," Ginny retorted. "If he weren't, I'd just pop off and go see him myself. I don't know why he's there. He hasn't done anything, but for some reason, Dad, and others, thought it a brilliant plan." She exhaled hard, wishing she could avoid falling back into arguing with them as a teen rather than an adult. It would help if they would actually treat her as an adult.

Mr. Weasley beat the snow off his winter cap and hung it up. Firmly, he said, "You can't go, Ginny. And that's final, I'm afraid."

Ginny had just returned to calm, but it broke with a long growl of frustration and to accompany that she had to stamp off. The stairs were good for this, given their hollow state and long history of others doing the same, which long since loosened all the nails.

Ginny paced her room, feeling trapped. She had to do something; she could not bear to just remain in place. She tugged the trunk down from her wardrobe without magic, so it would bang onto the floor more satisfactorily, opened it, and began filling it with the contents of the shelf behind the bed, including some old stuffed animals: a dragon, a griffin, a winged sheep that when its magic was new would sing her to sleep. The sight of them there in the deep box of the trunk depressed her, and besides she did not need them. She tossed them away onto the floor and ignored them.

She wanted to hurry to make a point, but decided, given the limited space in her un-magical trunk, to sort out and take only the nice clothes, her Auror study books, and her favorite photo album. Trunk latched, she looked about the shambles of the

room and smirked at the mess that she did not care about now. She pulled out her warmest, oversized jumper and her heaviest cloak. The weight of them made her feel invulnerable.

Ginny grabbed her broom up from where it stood propped on the wardrobe and was prying open the window while standing on the cracked lid of another trunk when a knock came on the door.

"Yeah?" she asked rudely while working at unjamming the crooked window.

Her mother opened the door. "Ginny dear, what are you doing?"

Ginny paused to come up with something better, but in the end just mockingly said, "I'm leaving?" The air blowing in took a bitter bite of her exposed fingers, making her grateful to find her old Quidditch practice gloves in the pocket of her cloak.

The window sash finally yielded fully to a spell and flew open hard enough to crack a pane. Mrs. Weasley shuffled closer while taking in the state of the room.

Ginny repeated herself. "I'm not staying here with people who think it's fair sticking Harry in prison for his own good." Gesturing downstairs through the floor, she added, "He won't take me to see him. He doesn't even know when he's going to let him out. Harry's going mad and Dad doesn't care!"

"Harry's not going mad, dear, he used to live in a cupboard, I'm sure he's doing fine."

Ginny gaped at her mother. "I don't believe you said that. Isn't he always your favorite when he's here?" Ginny stopped to catch her breath from shouting – and sounding jealous. The prophecy felt like a heavy, sodden blanket over her, making it hard to get air. If it was Harry in the prophecy, what were they all going to do? Realizing that she held her broom, and her trunk was at her feet and the window wide open, she said, "I'm going now." She tore down the decorative sash from the curtain rod and tethered her hovered trunk to the broom with it, glad she would not have to use her scarf because she needed it to keep warm. "Don't tell Dad goodbye for me," she said as she climbed onto the window sill.

Mr. Weasley stepped into the doorway of the room and frowned deeply at the scene. Ginny wanted to stiffly wave goodbye, but needed both hands to get on her broomstick as it floated half out the window. She ducked under the sash and kicked off the wall of the house to get her and her luggage moving.

Before Ginny could pick a direction, which she needed to do because towing a heavy trunk required careful and deliberate maneuvering, her mother came to the window and leaned out, ignoring the cold air.

"Ginny," she said, sounding disappointed.

Her tone reminded Ginny of being a child and that made her more angry. "Give it up, Mum," she snapped, and pushed the end of her broom down just enough to take the slack out of the sash cord, then pushed harder to tug the trunk along behind.

Back in her bedroom, her father gazed grimly through the window with its crack like a lazy path through fields beyond. He had his wand out. "Where do you think she will go, or shall I put a Tracer on her?"

"What do you mean: where will she go? And put that away . . . she's feeling betrayed enough as it is." She tapped the stubborn sash with her wand and closed it easily.

With a sigh, Mrs. Weasley said, "Trying too hard to keep them only sends them off faster. She is too old to placate."

"What was her reason for leaving? She must know I truly cannot take her to see Harry." Mr. Weasley said.

"It must have been the letter. He must send very different letters to his friends than to me. The last one I received from him sounded rather reassuring." She pulled it out of her dressing gown pocket. "He said he was enjoying the holiday from his duties. Sounded rather pleased that so much was being done to get him out. Almost did not sound like him, at all, actually, sort of poetic, in fact." She frowned.

"May I see that?" Mr. Weasley asked.

She handed the letter over and, after a squinting glance out the window to check on his daughter's progress, he pulled the lamp closer to read the letter. "Hm," he muttered, quickly closing the letter along the worn fold.

"What is it?"

"Do you mind if I take this?" he asked, already putting it away into his pocket while peering out the window again.

"Not at all."

They continued to watch the speck fade in the sky, veering in spirals because of the load. Mr. Weasley asked, "Are her friends close enough for her to fly to like that, do you think?"

Mrs. Weasley turned from examining the cracked pane to stare at her husband. "You really don't know where she is going?"

"No . . . do you?"

"I have a pretty good guess," she replied knowingly while stepping by him out of the room, leaving the window broken.

Ginny flew toward no where in particular, the broom straining out ahead of the trunk like a leashed animal. Taking great care not to allow the trunk to slide sideways out beside her, she turned gently while gaining altitude. She tapped her own head with a Obsfucation Charm then slowed slightly so the trunk drifted closer to tap it too, satisfied with its appearing to melt into the sky.

She considered going to Shrewsthorpe where Candide might be in need of a live-in guard, but with the Christmas holiday Professor Snape would be home and Ginny did not fancy trying to move in with him present. It would be an all night flight in any event. Ginny sighed and turned a little more toward London.

Two hours later, bodily exhausted from flying while steering something heavy in tow, Ginny sat down on her trunk in the corridor outside the door to Aaron's flat. Only two flats led off the outside door and someone had gone to great effort decorating even here, with dark-stained carved wood framing carefully sculpted plaster. Ginny let her eyes trace the polished, ridged wood as it arched and branched over the narrow ceiling, giving one the impression of sitting beneath a copse of young trees in winter.

She had not knocked but the door opened and Aaron stood there in his velvety dressing gown, wine glass casually in hand, projecting himself as a cross between Adonis and Bacchus. Ginny did not remove her head from where it was propped on her hands because looking up at him made the effect stronger, and it was not a bad effect. Everything about him screamed a lack of want for anything. Although . . . Ginny was learning that was not entirely true. She sat up and brushed off her robes. "Hey," she said, trying to sound casual. "Can I stay for a bit?"

Aaron gestured skillfully with his half-full glass and stepped back to make room in the doorway. When she had first met him much of what he was thinking made it to his face, but since the kidnapping, he often pulled a flat mask over his thoughts, which gave him more an air of mystery than previously.

He pulled out his amber-colored wand and waved her trunk in behind her, letting it come to rest against the wall opposite the bar.

Ginny resisted sitting without being directly invited to. "You haven't asked why I'm here, or teased me about being here unannounced or . . ."

"Have a glass of wine," he said, pushing a freshly poured one into her hand.

Chapter 33

She stared down at the glittering liquid like thinned honey and realized with a stab that she was going to have to sort out whether she loved him or just loved his lifestyle. How would one go about sorting that out, anyway? She took the cool leather seat he steered her to and drank down half the wine in one go.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes," she admitted, sinking farther into the couch.

"Good," he said, sounding pleased. He put his arm up on the couch back and leaned in her direction.

Swallowing hard, Ginny said, "Something's wrong with Harry. We have to get him out of prison, like fast." While Aaron considered that with little clue to his mood, she went on, needing to talk, "I got angry with my dad because he wouldn't listen to me about Harry. I stormed out when he refused to take me to see him. But I have to see him; he's not well."

Aaron stiffened. "What do you mean: he's not well?"

"I got this letter from him. Well, he didn't want me to tell anyone some things in it, but . . . it scared me. He's talking crazy stuff."

"Do you have it . . . the letter?"

"I burned it."

Aaron rubbed his chin, which made a scratching sound that Ginny sort of liked, and made her wish she had sat down closer to him. Moving over now would send a stronger signal than she wanted to send. "Can you tell me anything in it?" he asked.

"Well . . . " She hesitated, dearly wanting to protect Harry, but her need for help made her say, "He has this problem where if he is too close to the Death Eaters, he starts to think more like . . . well . . ."

"Voldemort, you mean?" Aaron finished for her. "He's had that trouble for a while now."

Ginny was stunned. "You know about that?"

Aaron nodded. "Harry's told me . . . warned me is perhaps the better word." He scratched his chin additionally. "And there is no shortage of Death Eaters where he is."

"No, there isn't," Ginny agreed emphatically. "What are we going to do? Poor Harry."

Aaron pulled down the hand he had put across the couch-back, withdrawing slightly, and Ginny realized she had made him jealous.

Aaron fell serious. "Other than finding out who really killed Alastor Moody, I don't have any brilliant ideas. We've been working at that non-stop and haven't come up with much of anything. Whoever killed him knew how to hide their own trail while leaving us only one, leading to Harry." He clasped his hands and leaned over his legs. "The department's a mess. Tonks is at the breaking point, especially. I've never seen her like she is now, her magic's got so bad the department can't send her out without a full Auror partner." He shook his head.

They sat in silence, cradling their empty glasses. Ginny looked around and said, "You don't mind if I stay here, do you?"

Aaron's face scrunched up comically, more like his old self. "I asked you to marry me, and I think I just heard you ask if I mind you staying. Which of us is plastered drunk because it's gotta be one of us?" He peered into his glass in abject curiosity.

Ginny smiled. "Must be you, I've only had one."

Aaron produced the bottle from nearly thin air by sweeping it up from the floor beside the couch. "We can remedy that."

Ginny accepted a refill and thought she maybe should not finish it if she hoped to come up with a plan. She sat forward and set the wine on the low glass table at their feet. "I should go talk to Professor Snape."

Aaron sighed and leaned forward to match.

Pleading for understanding, she said, "I don't think I can rest without doing something." She stood, torn a bit by knowing Aaron would feel jealous and may in fact feel she was choosing between him and Harry. But even with that risk, she could not sit still. Softly, she promised, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He stood with her, seeming overly casual. "Want me to come along? You know, so you don't have to face my tetchy old Head of House alone?"

"I can face him alone. Thanks though."

Since Ginny visited often, she tried to take the Floo into Harry's house, but got redirected to the node in the nearby train station. The walk cleared her head in one way, but also gave it time to color in with more shades of worry.

Moving the innocuous crooked wooden gate aside to enter the garden sent a sparkle of spell energy along her arm. Ginny paused to see if anything worse happened but the

dormant vines shrouding the garden walls sat in frosted stillness. Winky answered the door.

"Don't get up," Ginny quickly said to Candide, who was propping herself up in preparation for standing from the couch in the main hall. "I just need a word with Professor Snape."

"He's in the library. Go on in."

Ginny knocked on the door frame. The figure in the corner straightened and turned in one fluid motion. Snape had been bent over an open book, head nearly touching the bookshelf in a pose of benediction.

Sounding doubtful, he said, "Ms. Weasley."

Ginny slipped inside and slowly shut the door so as to not seem rude. "Can I speak with you, sir?"

He did not put the book down. "If you must."

"I'm worried about Harry. He sent me a letter that makes me think he's over the edge. I have to find out if there's anything I can do to help get him out of there."

"I sincerely doubt there is anything you can do . . ."

Rambling in frustration, she said, "There must be something. I'll go mad if there isn't anything I can do. I'll do anything."

Snape closed the book and set it on a small writing desk. While staring at the ceiling he abstractly asked, "Do you feel guilty about anything?"

Taken by surprise she stuttered, "Well . . . no. Should I?"

"It was just a question. I have others, such as do you know why he is there?"

Ginny stared at him, noticing a few things she had not before, like the fact that he had bursts of stress lines around his eyes and that his temples were scattered with grey. It was eerily difficult to distinguish the pupils of his eyes, lending unneeded intensity to his unwavering stare.

"Some reason other than the one my dad gives, I'm assuming? No, I don't."

She felt relief from his scrutiny when he turned away to peruse the shelves. "This is difficult to navigate, Ms. Weasley. There are people whom, even still I believe, Harry wishes to protect."

She interrupted. "He's losing his mind. Do you think any of that matters?"

He made it to the end of one shelf and started back, reading the spines on the next row above. "Incarceration does strange things to some people. Harry is apparently one of them."

"I think there's more to it than that," she said, but stopped because Harry's letter had been clear on how little she should say, to anyone. Growing angry, she said, "I wonder if the Prophet isn't correct, that you aren't happier with him gone."

"Is that what you think?" he asked, putting his hand in his pocket, which was strangely full.

Thinking he was going for his wand, Ginny pulled hers out. "I beat you in a duel once, I can do it again."

"You think?" He did not have his wand out, but a blink later he did. Then it was gone again. "Put it away, Ms. Weasley," he said in such a tiresome voice that she blushed as she obeyed. He said, "I want Harry removed from there more than your tiny mind can imagine."

She ducked her head, "Of course, sir. Sorry."

"Note also there is very little I won't sacrifice to achieve that."

Ginny swallowed. That sounded more like a warning than a pledge. "That include me?" she asked, head swimming.

"Smart girl."

Ginny, with some effort, drew in a breath. "I don't think Harry would like that very much," she said, trying to laugh lightly while saying it. She thought farther. "But, that's assuming he found out." That eerie gaze was back again. She drew in a better breath and her thinking cleared. "If I might say, Professor, I don't think anyone really understands what you are."

He had not moved. "A distinct advantage, no?"

"That's my motto," she commented weakly.

Silence fell until Snape asked more lightly, "Still wish to assist?"

"Yes. But I don't particularly want to be sacrificed," she added forcefully.

He nodded like a twitch, seeming amused. Speaking in a hypnotic tone, he said, "I will let you know if there is anything you can do. It may be as simple as being a more regular companion to Candide, as I have some things I must attend to at a moment's notice. It may be something more that I ask of you."

She swallowed again, wishing she did not have to since it gave away how nervous she was. "Thanks." The door beckoned and she stepped to it, but stopped before opening it. "Does Harry know what you are?" she asked, feeling dizzy with how bold the question was.

"Most definitely."

"Well, okay, good," Ginny muttered, then shook her head to clear it.

Before she could turn the knob, he said, "Given your reaction to Harry's letter, I assume you know that action is imperative. Once things are imperative, understand clearly that I do not flinch. If you are to assist, I expect the same of you."

"Yes, sir," she said, staring down at her hand clenching the door knob.

"In which case, keep your wand in your pocket for just a moment." He took his out and ran three anti-animagus spells. "Good," he breathed in clear relief before resuming his intense posture. "Why do you think I needed to do that?" he asked, sounding the perfect teacher reviewing the reading for the week.

"Er, because Skeeter has been sneaking in again?" she asked, thinking that a stupid answer.

"Go on," he invited.

Ginny shrugged, confused what answer could possibly be meaningful here. "She's a bug, so she sneaks in easily?"

"Do you like her?"

"Bloody Merlin, no," Ginny blurted, then remembered her manners. "Not in the least."

"Good," Snape muttered. "You may go."

Ginny departed, spending far less time chatting with Candide on the way out than she expected to on the way in. She found the contrast between Snape's inscrutable strategizing and his wife's cheery demeanor intolerably bizarre.

Back at Aaron's flat, Ginny dropped onto the couch, wondering if she were way too far over her head or just utterly drowning. Aaron handed her another drink, frowning sadly.

"Thanks," she said. "After talking with Professor Snape, I could use a whole bottle. Maybe you should have come along. Next time would you?"

He sat back, making no move to close the gap between them. "That bad?" When she mutely shook her head, he said, "He was a Death Eater."

"Yeah," she agreed wholeheartedly. They fell silently into their respective thoughts. Aaron finished his glass and topped it up again.

"Do you believe in prophecies?" she asked suddenly.

"I try not to," Aaron quipped. He finally slipped over closer. "Not unless they say something magnificent will imminently happen to me."

She raised a dubious brow in his direction, glad to see him lighten up.

Aaron walked a pair of fingers over Ginny's shoulder and played with her collar. "Do you have a prophecy that says anything like that?"

"I may," she said, blushing.

"Mm," he said, but his fingers stopped and he put his arm back up on the couch back. "But you were saying something important, I think . . ."

Ginny shook her head. Apologetically, she said, "There's too much I don't understand, so I can't explain."

His fingers found the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. "Well, in that case . . . I personally always find that actions speak louder than words."

Snape circled the dim upstairs bedroom of the shrieking shack. The slitted mask covering his face caught the moist heat of his exhalations and quickly became uncomfortably sticky inside his hood. The Durumulna-mimicking costume felt too familiar and he shrugged inside of it, trying to shake the sense of entrapment by reminding himself of the power and liberty of anonymity.

He paced to stand over the wizard Tonks had chosen. If Snape timed the potion right, the man would awaken momentarily, but just now he lay on the bare floor, one arm outstretched from under the rude heavy blanket Tonks had provided.

Snape turned away from the scene, robes swishing, hood making the room seem even darker than it was. He pulled the mask loose to dry a bit before resettling it, trying to wait with patience. The costume cast him back to other unsavory but necessary

tasks – some Dumbledore himself had pressed upon him – and his mind came into clear, unhesitant focus just as the man on the floor stirred.

Snape stood unmoving in the corner by the window, waiting to verify what state his victim had been rendered into. Durumulna had done part of his task for him by removing much of the man's identity already. Through a potioned session of hypnosis the previous day, he had found what he needed, a youthful mistake that had festered into adulthood pain. By leaving it as one of the few vestiges of the man's ego, Durumulna's leaders left the man highly susceptible to what Snape intended to do.

Snape stepped out of the shadows, careful not to make a sound beyond the creak of the wide old boards. The man turned at the noise and started upon seeing the masked figure peering down at him. He quickly fell resigned and passive. After a pause where Snape did not move, the man said in a lilting accent, "I . . . I don't know what I did wrong."

Snape turned away to pace a few steps. Casting his voice deeper and layering on an ambiguous accent, he said, "Yes, you do."

The man, strain showing in his posture, appeared to think harder. He rubbed his eyes and head with a clumsy hand. The potion would make it difficult for him to reach any conclusions on his own, which is exactly what Snape wanted. Conclusions were something for him to deliver.

"You claim to not know, when Armando's ghost tells us otherwise?"

The man, alarmed, glanced around the decrepit room, with its peeling faded wallpaper, still marked with dingy halos where the furniture had previously been placed. "Wha . . . What do you mean?" He recovered some bravado, as much as the potion would allow. It would have been considerable bravado otherwise, given how strong the potion's will was. "I've never seen his ghost." He frowned, puzzled, and looked to want to say more, but the drugging kept him from coming to any useful suspicion about why his overseer might actually care.

"I've seen him," Snape assured him. Which was true; he had seen him in his mind. An overly eager boy, trying with all his small might to keep up with his older brother and his brother's best friend, to the point of taking on a task too difficult for him to complete. And when he balked and failed, the punishment was too spontaneous and fierce for one so young. His last plea for mercy had been deeply engraved on the man's memory, one of the few memories that still was, conveniently enough.

Snape intoned, "Armando still does not understand."

The man looked away, annoyed, but he lost the battle and fell passive. "I didn't mean it," he explained defensively, but the potion won again and he repeated the phrase with great regret.

"You do not have to live tormented by this guilt. You can escape and travel beyond it."

The man's mouth worked. Too many questions vied for too little awareness, so nothing came out.

"You are trying to ask why, are you not?" Snape said. "You were left with this memory for a reason, it shapes you into something useful, but now it is time for it to serve in a new way. Would you be living this life now if those events had not happened?"

The man gave the barest shake of his head. Snape gave him space to think, a slow process given the chemicals working on him. Sounding vastly saddened and stung, the man said, "I didn't mean to . . . we were just sick of him tagging along. And he wanted to. Begged . . ." He stared off into space, and Snape assumed he was remembering again. Without much else to remember, it seemed a safe assumption.

The man, his accent growing harsh, said, "They never forget, do they?"

Behind his borrowed mask, Snape fell dumb with the truth of that statement. His victim, went on more angrily, "Never a second chance, even if you regret what you did."

"I'm going to give you one. Of a sort." Snape held out a potion bottle inside of which swirled in the colors of ink and silver. "Drink that."

The man stared at the proffered bottle without moving, perhaps without comprehending. Offering it was a test more than anything; Snape could easily knock him senseless and force it upon him. Snape patiently said, "Which weighs heavier: the guilt or your grim future?"

Harry sat with his letters in his lap. Elizabeth had sent him a rather long and heartfelt message which practically bled faith in his innocence. He read it through twice. She also spent inordinate time talking about a future hinging on the assumption he would be out very soon – she insisted he come over for dinner now that she had a flat of

her own, gave him a menu even. Her letter came across as naive, but he needed naïveté about now. The postmark was the day after his arrest; the length of the missive must have slowed it down. The pale pink stationary was well worn as was the envelope, hinting at extensive handling before it was delivered to him. Harry frowned at that, thinking he had not properly appreciated having his post to himself before this happened. The times back in Hogwarts when he had to mask his messages to Sirius felt like a childhood game compared to this.

Harry slipped that letter to the back of the pile and reread the next one from Ron. He did not feel like responding to any of them. A kind of grey lethargy had overcome him and within its dispassionate confines he could maintain a wall that kept the whispering shadows at bay.

Footsteps approached, heavy boots gritting on the stone floor, and Harry set the letters aside under the mattress. He did not go to the door since it was not time for post or meal delivery. He waited instead to see what the guard would do.

The door swung open with a protest of unoiled metal and the guard, the steelier guard, who had taken him to meet Tonks and his solicitor, gestured with his gauntleted hand that Harry should come out.

Unsure why he was being removed, Harry took his time, standing slowly to approach the door. He must have pushed the thin patience of his guard too far because he was given a shove down the corridor that made him skin his hands on the wall when he tried to slow his careening. Harry spun into a natural fighting stance, but turned to find a crystal tipped spear pointing at his heart. The spear smacked him on the shoulder.

"Allons-y!"

"Right," Harry said, rubbing his shoulder while he started down the corridor. "Don't suppose you could tell me where we are going . . . ?"

He did not get an answer and he did not like walking with his back to the guard; it felt horribly exposed. He should not have to worry about guarding his back – he had followers plenty for that.

The corridor was long. Harry slowed and started to turn, but his guard was faster. The pike tangled Harry's feet and he fell, headlong. Re-abraded hands stinging, Harry pushed himself halfway up and turned, glaring. "What do you want? I'm going," he snarled, inordinately angry, not just at the guard, but at the entire world.

The pike leveled at his eyes. Harry deliberately raised himself up fully and pressing his raw hands to his robes for some relief from the stinging in them. He did not feel like

going anywhere; the pain, even as small as it was, cut through him, releasing deep-seated stubbornness. When he resisted the next clearly gestured instruction, another spell came at him. But this one was a curse. Grinning faintly, Harry squelched it, and the guard dropped his pike with an exclamation of, "Calice!" Well trained, he had it picked up again in an instant and made ready to use it as a club.

Harry gauged him an instant and walked on before the man had an excuse to do more, but Harry went only a few steps before he slipped away into the Dark Plane. The wide open quiet of the place blew through him, loosening every nerve, but he could not stay. He counted to five and returned, just behind the guard, who as expected, had grown alarmed at losing track of his prisoner.

Harry tapped the man on his chain-mail-covered shoulder. "Looking for me?"

The guard turned, but he was not one of the stupid ones. He stared at Harry from the inside of his helmet for almost a minute, thinking. With a small gesture of his pike, he indicated Harry should continue on, in the lead. Harry did so, turning to walk backwards every so often, feeling pleased, like some kind of equality had been reached between them.

The guard did not harass Harry any more, and when they reached the warden's office, the guard stood inside the door, even after it was clear the warden expected him to wait outside. The guard eventually relented after repeated commands interspersed with reassurances – all very clear just from the tone. The guard gave Harry a last threatening glare before the door closed.

"'Ave a seat, Mr. Pottar," the warden said. He casually went through the file before him before looking up and saying, "I 'ave zee sense zat your Ministry did not eggspect you to still be 'ere at sis late date, Mr. Pottar."

"I like to think they didn't," Harry agreed.

"Would you like tea?"

Harry would very much like tea, so he nodded. Moments later Steeltoe Pierre came through the door with a tray. He smiled at Harry and handed him a cup and saucer before handing one to the warden. He looked like he wanted to stay, but the warden shooed him off with, "C'est bien," and went back to perusing the file, which had been fattened even more with newspaper clippings.

"It is curious, Mr. Pottar, I sought I understood zis situation." He sat back and closed the file.

Harry rapidly sipped his tea, wondering if he could get a refill. Realizing that a reply was expected, he put his cup down and put on an attentive expression.

The warden casually said, "You know, we 'ave quite a bit of security 'ere."

"It is a prison," Harry said, just to say something.

"Hm. You are not fully understanding." The warden picked up a folding frame that held a mirror, one of a row of them that sat on a low shelf behind his desk. He run his finger along the side of the frame before setting it on the edge of his desk where Harry could watch it. The mirror, which was not reflective when viewed head on, showed a fuzzy oval view of the corridor outside Harry's cell. He and the guard moved into the frame and the events of his being led played out on it.

Harry's heart froze. It was true, that he was not fully understanding the security. He met the warden's gaze without shirking, part of him glad for the revelation, for the challenge to the warden that it represented.

The warden put the frame back on the shelf and held his finger up to stall Harry from speaking. "It ees no matter at one level. You are only 'ere at the convenience of your ministry. At another level . . . I do prefer to run zis place without mistakes." He interlocked his fingers and set them on the desk, in a pose much like McGonagall's. "But I am curious. I was curious, zat is why I 'ad you brought 'ere. But now I am extrem-ely curious." He leaned forward. "Why 'az your ministry inzisted that you be placed here in a manner that spezifically will allow you to ezcape?"

Harry pondered how to answer that, wondering if he could just skip doing so. He did not want the warden to pass on what he had seen.

The warden sighed. "Well, I do not know what to be making of zis."

He sounded disappointed and Harry found himself regretting what he had done because it had not been particularly well-mannered. The regret made him feel far more like himself.

"You 'ave nozzin to say?" the man asked, even more disappointed.

Harry wished he were angry; that he could work with. "I don't want to be here. I have things I need to do. Very important things. And I don't like that guard much."

"Ah, yes, 'e provokes you." He sounded amused, which made Harry frown. The warden went on, "Of course, you are tired of being wissout power. Zees is understandable, especially wis what I saw." He gestured over his shoulder at the mirrors.

Harry raised his head to look down along the row of them, but could not see anything in them.

Sounding strangely pleased, the warden said, "You 'ave solved one mystery for me, which I am plea-zed about. I see now how you captured zee the vampire, alone, no less."

Harry dropped his gaze. "Yep."

A long pause, and then, "Your history here, she does not have this detail."

Softly, Harry admitted, "They don't know."

The warden's hand smacked the table, making Harry jump. Then the warden held a finger up, excited more than anything. "Interesting," he said, sitting back again and lacing his fingers together.

They pondered each other until Harry said, "I don't think I understand you much either."

Eyes twinkling, the warden said, "Keeping zee magically powerful criminal mind in check is my role. It is one I enjoy. And I like to keep learning." He paused. "Would you like more tea?"

Harry nodded and Steeltoe returned just long enough to pour him more. Harry thanked him and the guard bowed.

"Zee, you are quite civilized, even when cornered. Not at all typical. One wishing to learn everysing about a topic, must closely examine zee eggszeptions, not zee norms." While monitoring Harry, he reached into a desk drawer for a flask out of which he poured a shot into his own teacup. "Not in zee rules to offer you any, I am afraid, unless wis a meal."

Harry shrugged, quite happy with a decent cup of tea.

The warden grinned crookedly. "Interesting. See zis here, even. I observe zat you are capable of escape, of defeating my guards, but I find, surprisingly, zat I trust you. Zis is also a first." He toasted Harry with his teacup.

Harry sipped his tea, unable to return the toast, undone by wanting to be trusted, even here.

"'Opefully your ministry returns you home soon, no?"

Harry nodded, tired in the wake of losing his anger, which safely put aside that other self, that part that seemed to have all the fire. He wondered how long this mood would last. He felt powerless, like he were twelve again, and he did not really like it. It gave him control over himself, but not of much else.

The warden drained his teacup. "Shall I assign Gaspard to take you back?" He gestured at the door. "My tea brewer? He does not provoke you, I sink."

Harry felt even younger to be offered such consideration. He took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks."

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Snape stretched for his notes while continuing to stir a cauldron. It all would be much easier if he put a spell on the metal stirring stick to free up his hands. He felt at his robe-front where the stolen wand lay flat against his chest in his most inner pocket. He turned to Lupin, who had been reading, to ask him for a spell, but found the man sleeping, the book pushed aside, pages providing a crumpled backdrop to his ragged hair.

Pulling out the wand, Snape put a spell on the stick himself. The wand felt greasy in his hand, not something he would have expected from someone as meticulous as Draco Malfoy. Checking again that Lupin slept soundly, Snape blocked the lamplight with his body and turned the wick up. The wand felt waxy because it was covered in something like shoe polish, rendering it mutely grey, but some rubbing with a brewing rag revealed pale wood underneath. A noise made Snape stop his investigations and quickly put the wand away again. He grabbed the stirrer, letting it guide his hand in circles.

Footsteps creaked by the door and went on their way. Snape let go and returned to his notes until the potion finished. With care he decanted the Noble Nod Sleeping Draught into a metal tin to cool and extinguished the burner.

In the bed Lupin snored softly, in need of no such potion. Finished for now and not wishing to disturb the usually poorly rested Lupin, Snape slipped out of the room and downstairs to see if the day's newspapers had arrived.

"You have to do better," Lavender insisted as Snape approached the dining room. "I can see what you have without even trying."

Angelina Johnson laughed heartily. "Come on, let me deal this time."

The two young ladies and Neville were clumped around a table corner, playing cards. Snape stopped with his hands on the newspapers stacked beside the door and watched. Neville neutralized his expression and picked up his cards, his face remained mostly blank.

"Better . . ." Angelina said. "But I bet that's a middling hand."

Neville frowned and put the cards down flat.

Lavender looked up at Snape. "We're trying to give Neville poker face lessons."

Angelina laughed again. "Yeah, he's pants at it."

Snape, finding it easy to play his part said. "Do not ruin him for that; it is convenient for me to know what you are all thinking."

Angelina, who might have had more than the one beer that sat open beside her patted the table and said. "Is that a challenge, then? Got any money?"

Snape glanced down at the top newspaper, which had an article about expanded city cordons and security checkpoints. It went on to warn that witches and wizards must apply for Muggle papers or risk arrest. He had little desire to read the article. "No, I'm afraid I haven't."

Angelina measured off a stack of knuts before her and shuttled them closer to the empty chair across from her. "Here, I'll spot you a sickle's worth. Neville needs the practice."

Willing to take any distraction from his worries both worldly and personal, Snape slipped into the offered seat. For his own amusement, he gave Neville a sharp glance, making the young man's face pickle up.

Lavender giggled at Neville and gave him a half-hug. "I'll deal ya' a good hand. I promise."

"But, but, I'll just give it away," Neville muttered, nervously taking up his cards one at a time as they were dealt.

"What are we playing?" Angelina asked, sounding impatient.

"Just five-card stud. Keep it simple." She glanced at her hand and put it down. "You bet first," she said to Angelina.

Ten minutes later, Snape had quite a bit more money in front of him.

"I think 'e cheats," Angelina said.

"'Ar 'Ar 'Arry said he reads minds," Neville managed to say, face scrunching up at the sight of his cards, which he folded up and put down. "I pass."

"It's not your turn," Lavender said. "You dealt."

"I still pass," Neville insisted with a sigh.

"What's this about mind reading?" Angelina demanded.

Snape looked at his cards, which only had strength if he drew to an inside straight. "It's less about me, and more about what astoundingly slow learners you are." He put his cards down and called Angelina's bet of two knuts.

Chapter 33

"Yeah, well, pay me back what I loaned you," Angelina insisted.

Snape pushed a stack of knuts to her. "Gladly. And in that case I raise you two."

"What's this?" Ginny said from the doorway. She tugged off her hat and scarf, flashing flushed cheeks.

"Well," Angelina began in the mode of telling a long story, "we were innocently giving Neville lessons in keeping his thoughts to himself, when this, this, punter came along and insisted on joining us."

Snape stared at her, blinking a few times for good measure. "Oh, is that how you remember it?"

Harry stepped up behind Ginny, interested in the scene, but moving around the table to pour out glasses of water from a pitcher.

"No," Neville said, sounding confused and sincere. "You asked him to play." When Angelina rolled her eyes, Neville said, "Oh." Then a second later: "Did I already say I folded?"

Snape leaned toward him. "Longbottom, a losing hand is just as valuable as a winning one, or it can be. You must only make your opponent believe in what you hold. That is all that matters. In fact, a winning hand often is not, for exactly that reason. If you give away that you have unbeatable cards . . . as you did two rounds ago . . . no one will call your bet and the pot will contain nothing for you to collect. You recall that little incident, correct? It was just moments ago."

Neville's puzzled expression went through a variety of transitions. "A losing hand is just as good?"

Trying to sound gentle rather than exasperated, Snape replied, "Yes. In this game, and in many areas of life for that matter, you seek not to control the available riches." Here he gestured at the thick deck sitting in the middle of the table. "But to control others by misleading them, to direct their behavior to your advantage."

"But if they know you are doing that . . .?"

Snape held up a long finger. "Ah. You do not let them know that."

Neville stared at his cards. "So, if I had a good hand, I might . . . actually pretend that I had a bad hand because you . . . any of you . . . would expect me to give away that I did, and then if I bet, you would call, or even raise and then when I revealed my great hand, I'd actually win? For once."

"Correct," Snape said, relieved more than anything to be getting through.

Neville sat up straighter. "In that case I raise you ten."

"Neville! You already folded," Lavender blurted.

Angelina patted her arm. "No, no, let him go. I need to win some back." She glared at Snape. "Someone's taken half my money."

Snape called as well. "So Longbottom," he said, when the young man simply sat there. "You have to show your hand."

Neville laid his cards down. "Three kings!" Lavender shouted. "Why in the heck were you folding?"

Neville grinned and sat back as Angelina shoved the pot in his direction. "I wanted to win, and it worked. Thanks for the lesson, Professor."

Snape stared at the boy, then shook his head while reminding himself not to underestimate any of them.

Harry pulled out the chair beside Angelina. "I'll play," he said eagerly. "Kreacher, bring us some butterbeers!" he shouted to the ceiling.

Kreacher appeared with an armful of dusty bottles. He gave Snape one first with a deep bow. "Master is saying Kreacher must serve the Mudbloods, but Kreacher will serve the ones his old Mistress would have preferred first."

Harry stood to grab up Snape's bottle. He sat down, opened it with a spell and took a relishing sip of it. Kreacher shot Harry a dirty glance and graciously gave Snape another after dusting it off on his tea towel.

Smirking, Harry said to Snape, "Yeah, old woman Black was your sort, wasn't she?"

"Deal me in too," Ginny said, sitting down beside Harry, which put her far down the table.

Lavender, who was dealing, said with playful seriousness, "Get yer money out if you want in. Threes're wild."

Harry and Ginny dug in their pockets and dumped a cascade of small coins out on the table, some of which they had to catch from rolling away. Ginny giggled when the two of them hit heads trying to catch an errant sickle.

Rubbing her head, Ginny asked, "What's the bet up to?"

"Give me a chance here," Angelina said, rearranging her cards. Snape gauged her expression and decided she had a promising hand. Hermione stepped in and walked

behind each person on the other side, giving Snape another evaluation of the hands on that side. Her brow furrowed just faintly upon seeing Harry's cards.

Snape's own hand was a natural flush. Behaving with the slightest edge of disgust he put the cards face down and looked to Harry, and found his stare hard upon him. Snape raised a brow.

"You've been cheating all along, haven't you?" Harry asked, disgusted.

Snape crossed his arms and sat back. "You state that so judgmentally. It isn't cheating if your life is on the line, which mine very often is, I'll have you know. But no, I haven't been. It has hardly been necessary."

Harry looked at his cards and called the bet of three Knuts before putting his cards down and avoiding meeting Snape's gaze after that. Ginny folded. Snape bet five. Neville raised him to seven.

With an overly broad smile, Neville said, "I think I'm getting the hang of this game."

Snape gazed at him and tiredly said, "Perhaps you are. I have actually no idea whether you have a bad hand and are pleased to realize you can pretend it's a good one or whether you realize that by pretending you have a good one we will automatically assume you have a bad one."

Neville paused and said, "What?"

Snape held up a hand. "Never mind."

The betting went around until only Harry and Snape were still in. Harry leaned forward to count Snape's remaining coins and deliberately put down a Knut more than that.

"Classy of you, Potter. But I should not be surprised." He folded his hand into his fist and rapped it on the table. Angelina said, "I can spot you one." She glanced between them, dreadlocks swinging. "Well, if you're going to win that is. Otherwise I'm not spotting you nothin'."

Harry taunted, "Come on, don't you have a watch or a ring you can put in the pot?"

"I have the robes on my body, that is it, Potter. Pleased to hear that?"

"He has the wand," Ginny said, as if just thinking of it.

Harry's face shifted from mocking to serious. "What wand?"

Snape froze as well, surprised that she remembered, or that she was choosing to reveal him now after saying nothing. He gave her a dark look.

Explained Ginny, "I don't trust you any more than Harry does."

"Remind me of that before I save your life next time, will you?" Snape retorted.

Harry had his wand on his own wand pocket. "What wand are we talking about?"

Ginny said, "Draco's wand. Mr. Snape took it from him at the Three Broomsticks when his Blond Highness' hands were busy . . . you know slipping into something more comfortable."

"What a nauseating thought," Lavender complained.

Harry faced Snape plainly. "You have Draco's wand? You gave your wand back to Hermione but kept Draco's?"

"You think me a fool? Of course I kept it." Snape pulled the wand out and set it on the table before him. "You are going to take it from me anyway, so I'll put it on the pot to raise you, certainly."

Harry frowned at the funny colored wand. "Ew, Draco's filthy wand. Yeah, I'll spot you a Knut for that."

Keeping his hand on the wand, Snape said, "If I win this hand, I get to keep the wand." Under his hand, the wand felt warmer than it should, like it resisted being released.

"Yeah, sure," Harry said, and put down his cards, revealing a straight flush using two wild cards. He reached out for the pot, and Snape shoved the wand in his direction. "Don't like losing?" Harry taunted.

"I do not like being defenseless," he sneered, angry. "A perfectly reasonable motive for wanting a wand. Especially in the middle of a war."

Harry picked the wand up and instinctively rubbed his fingers on his robes. Snape relished saying, "It's been finished with shoe polish it appears."

"That doesn't sound like Draco," Ginny said.

"It's not the wand he used at school; it's pale colored," Harry said, holding it up to show the clean edge he had revealed.

Hermione grabbed up the wand and cleaned it by putting a spell on a napkin then passing it over the wood. Holding the wand this way and that in the light, she exclaimed, "This looks like Dumbledore's wand!"

Harry turned in his chair and said, "He was entombed with his wand. It can't be."

Hermione shrugged and gave it back. "I'm just saying." Her eyes found Snape's. "Mr. Snape would recognize it for certain."

Harry hesitated handing the wand back over, but did so with a sudden gesture as though battling with himself over doing so. Snape took in the subtle carving on the handle, now standing out starkly with the stain filling the recesses.

Mystified, Snape said, "It does look like his. Which would imply someone has opened his tomb."

"Lucius, I bet," Neville said. "He's always been a real winner, pretending to be all refined. I can see 'im grave robbin'."

Harry said, "And as headmaster it'd be easy for him to do it whenever he liked."

Hermione borrowed the wand again to look at it in the light of a lamp. "Why would Lucius want it?"

"He didn't want it," Lavender pointed out. "Draco had it."

Hermione gave a shrug and handed the wand back to Snape. Snape turned the wand in his hand and held it out to Harry, handle first. "Yours now, I believe."

Chapter 34.

Guilty Conscience

Professor Snape strode along in a shuffling cluster of other shoppers bundled heavily against the cold. At the door sporting three overlapping, gold edged Ws, he stopped to pull his scarf down, which sent his next breath in a blinding cloud against his face. The door chime clanged dully, the sound made by a bell that has been smashed and reformed too many times.

Five Slytherin students stood bent conspiratorially over an overflowing barrel of Bagshot Bombs: every color of the rainbow and then some! They went silent at Snape's approach and fell away, hands slipping casually behind their backs. Their faces tried for neutral, but their eyes remained revealingly wide. One whispered hoarsely to another, "Is this a bust?"

The Weasley twin restocking the nearby rack glanced up at the students curiously; then his eyes alighted on Snape. His mouth formed an "O" before he bit his lips, and systematically set the precariously stacked crates aside. He recovered his self-assured attitude and slid over to Snape to smoothly ask, "Something I can do for you, Professor?"

Snape glanced around and found Ginny paging through a ragged stack of papers in the cramped area behind the till. He announced, "Just taking the opportunity to survey exactly what you intend to unleash upon our unsuspecting school in the new year."

His narrow-eyed glare at the students brought them up straight. The students shoved their full little hands into other barrels, onto shelves, dropping everything they held.

They then shuffled sideways by him and out, their small bodies barely forcing the door open enough to make it chime.

The twin beside Snape sighed. "Good thing you weren't hanging around ruining the Christmas shopping season." He tiredly looked Snape up and down. "You joining the shakedown operation? I admit we did not foresee this particular kind of blackmail threat."

Voice low, Snape said, "I need a word with Ms. Weasley."

Ginny, who had been listening in, put a broken brick chunk on each crinkled stack before her and started to lift the hinged counter to come out.

Snape restrained her with a gesture. "In private. We'll use your back staircase." With one last glance at the empty shop and the passing, disinterested shoppers out on the alley, Snape slipped by the other curious twin and gestured for Ginny to open the door in the far wall.

Ginny went up a step to make room and flicked a Lumos out of her wand as Snape pulled the door shut. The staircase was colder than expected. Snape shrugged his cloak fully around himself and pulled out his wand to put several privacy spells on the door, one of which caused someone on the other side to shout, "Ow!" and stumble into something that fell with a cascade of noise. Snape's next spell blocked out that noise too.

By the light of her wand, Ginny's face appeared gaunt and uncertain, but she stood with her shoulders firmly back, determined.

"I'll be quick," Snape said. He reached into his pocket for a ribbon-tied bundle of letters and handed them over to her. When she began to examine them, bringing the tip of her wand close, he said, "Do not untie them; they are quite particularly arranged."

She moved her wand high to the side where it could provide more general light.

Snape said, "I want you to visit my house this evening, ostensibly to keep Candide company. Bring this packet of letters with you, stored in a way that the lump of them is not visible. I'm certain your brothers can assist you with a pocket spell for that. When I give you this signal . . ." Here he scratched his right temple. "I will excuse myself to go to the drawing room. You will follow, saying that you wish to discuss something with me in private."

The light of her wand dimmed as she slipped the letters away in her inner robe pocket. She remained dutifully quiet while Snape went on.

"I want you to say exactly the following to me: I don't know what to do. I was given some things to hide, but I don't know if I can keep them safe." He stared at her. "Can you remember all this?"

Ginny's intent eyes blinked rapidly. "Yeah . . ." she said, sounding intrigued.

Snape went on. "You must be precise in your words. I want you to clearly hesitate as you say all this, by the way. Pace and fidget and such. I want you to tell me that someone wishes you to hide these letters for her, but you have no good place to do that. I will ask you why she does not simply destroy them, and you are to reply that she wants to have them as mementos. They are important to her, even though they are very dangerous. Still following?"

Ginny nodded, taking out the packet again to examine it, turning it this way and that. The addresses were bundled inward, so nothing showed.

"Good. You will then ask me to hide them for you. I will resist the idea as an annoying inconvenience-"

"Sounds like you," Ginny quipped while pondering the parchment, which appeared blue-grey by the light of the wand.

"Yes . . ." Snape growled, but let it slide. "But I will give in. I will put them in my desk drawer with the promise that I will take them elsewhere later that evening."

A breeze whispered through the bowels of the ramshackle building, taking their breath off in rapidly dissipating wisps. Snape said, "If I do not give you the signal tonight, you are to visit each night, until I do." He paused. "I assume you can manage all this?"

She slipped the bundle away again. "Yep. This is nothing. I worried you were going to ask me to harm someone."

"Oh, I am asking you to harm someone . . . or, more accurately, asking you to help someone to do harm to themself."

"As long as they deserve it. Anyone I know?" she asked knowingly.

Snape could see in her eyes that her suspicion was spot on. "No questions. Just do as you are told."

Chapter 34

Snape stared out the window of Grimmauld Place. Bare tree branches swayed silently in and out of the streetlights across the square, distant skeletal hands waving. He had the room to himself as Lupin had been sent out on a mission. He stared blankly out at the night in an effort to keep from wondering what had happened to Harry. It was not working. And there were no other useful distractions remaining; the potions were completed and every one of them and the leftover ingredients were meticulously organized behind him on freshly dusted shelves.

He had spent many evenings in the dungeon of Hogwarts meditating just like this, first on whether the Dark Lord was truly dead and then later on worrying what the machinations between his two masters would next demand of him. This involuntary return to a helpless past mode of existence was not welcome.

At the moment, the only thing he felt truly grateful for was the loss of his Mark. Were it not for that, his life would be a constant, grinding misery. Sitting in this place, perched on a crooked stool before a wind-leeching window, looking out over the sleeping, battered city, he felt for the first time that he may actually have earned the loss of his Mark. That made him feel slightly better, in a way that bought him no additional future hope, just more satisfaction with the past.

A soft knock came on the door and Ginny entered, slipping inside after a last glance back at the balcony and stairs.

"It's late," she said after groping for words.

"Does Lupin need rescuing again?" Snape asked derisively. He had no idea what mission the man had gone out on, and half hoped for an excuse for action as little as he wished more difficulty on his previous nemesis.

Ginny shook her head. "No, he's not due back for a while." She stepped further in, glancing around. "I just wondered, well, if you needed anything."

Snape pondered that. So easy to sound rude with, "Such as?"

They had grown immune to his rough side, unfortunately. She ignored his tone and remained kind sounding. "Well, that old wizard, you know. If something bad has happened. I was just thinking . . . do you want help looking for him . . . that wizard Harry calls your boyfriend?"

"Harry should not call him that," Snape stated while trying to figure out her motivation. Was she truly simply being nice? "Why the offer?"

She shrugged awkwardly with her hands anchored in her back pockets. "We think he could help. Too. I'll admit."

"He undoubtedly could. But apparently he has insurmountable difficulties of his own to navigate at the moment."

She touched the book of potion notes on the counter beside the neatly lined up cold cauldrons. "Where is he? I mean, do you know where he is?"

This conversation was not helping Snape's state of mind; helplessness was leeching into him along with the cold draft from the window. "In a sense," he said, sounding dismayed even to himself. "But I cannot follow. Not without more knowledge." Not without the book, which he had not been able to locate.

Her red brow furrowed. She was not as silly as she acted even scant years before, as indicated by puzzling that answer rather than coming back with another question.

"Well," she said, sounding more nervous. "Just thought I'd ask."

"Does Harry know you are asking?" Snape inquired, wanting the upper hand again.

She smiled nervously, coyly. "He's planning on coming and asking you, himself."

He considered her standing there in jeans and a blouse, clean, but worn to threads around the cuffs and collar. "Why don't you have the sword?"

"What do you mean? Carry it around the house?"

"Yes. Given the age of this place, there is undoubtedly a scabbard or a dozen stashed somewhere."

She stared at him. "There is one in the decorative set over the hearth in the sitting room."

Speaking frankly, he said, "The sword is a powerful magical object with properties no one has fully documented. It has a habit of disappearing. You should keep it on your person."

She smiled like he had thought of a quaint game that sounded fun to play. "Okay."

When she opened the door Harry was standing there, poised to knock. "Oh."

"Just asking Mr. Snape something about the sword," Ginny quickly said, and slipped away.

Her light footsteps pattered down the stairs and faded out. Harry shut the door and wandered to the window. Despite clearly having a mission there in the room, he said nothing, so Snape said, "At the risk of sounding the spy trolling for information, how are things with the diadem progressing?"

Chapter 34

"Hermione is off looking up information tonight."

"Ah, sneaking into the London Magical Library is she? I hope you gave her the cloak."

Harry frowned wryly. "That obvious?"

"Even in your reflection I can see that in your thoughts. As ghastly as the idea sounds to me, I am willing to give you more lessons in Occlumency."

Harry's mouth worked. "Maybe we could try that."

Snape saw his next thoughts too. "Then the dreams would ease."

Harry quickly looked away from the window. "Sometimes the dreams are helpful." He flipped open the potion manual and notes. "The potions you brewed us worked well. The Insentience Draught is really good to use on guards. They don't even realize later that anything happened."

Snape paced the shelves once and stood with his hands clasped behind him. "Depending upon what other restricted ingredients we can procure and how much, there are many other potions and some rather clever delivery mechanisms."

Speaking jokingly, Harry said, "Can we knock out the Ministry for a day?"

Snape stepped over to join him again by the window, glad the young man was opening up. "With enough material, we could give them a good nap."

This brought Harry's chin up to face him. "I'll keep that in mind." He sighed and looked down again; this time he straightened the cauldrons, rubbing his finger over the rainbow edge to the tarnish on a brass one.

The flash came before the noise, like a dream where the mind has to catch up and justify an errant vision. The sound approached as the shifting of countless stone blocks. It came up through the floor, cracking the plaster. They both froze in place and stared out the window, blinking through spotted vision at the flickering red rising up between the roofs, perhaps five streets away. Harry grabbed hold of the window sill and leaned closer to the glass. Smoke poured up, billowing as if trapped in a giant sack before catching on the wind and drifting, limned by the burgeoning fire. Another flash came, farther away and to the left. This rumble delayed and muted by distance.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs and shouting could be heard both within and without. Snape leaned close to the window also, trying to see what Voldemort's guards outside on the square were doing. But the power flickered to the street lamps and went out.

By the light of the oil lamp beside the cauldrons, Harry rested his head on the window, face scrunched up in pain. His hair pressed into the fresh fug as he rocked his head back and forth.

Footsteps pounded closer to the room and Harry suddenly backed into the corner beside the door hinge waving "no" at Snape. The door opened and Neville breathlessly asked, "Seen Harry?"

Snape shook his head and the door snapped closed again and the footsteps stumbled off.

Harry had sunk back into the corner between the door and the book shelves as if he wished to be swallowed up. "Go ahead and say it," he muttered, voice wavering. "I haven't done what I was supposed to. If I had, none of this would be happening. All those people would be alive, instead of dead."

"Potter," Snape said, stepping closer, wanting to lift the burden, or at least the heaviest sense of it. He stopped. There was so little he could do here.

Harry pressed himself back harder, hunched over with his hands on his head, breath coming in heaves: the picture of agony. Snape could not remain where he was. He stepped closer and reached out to brush Harry's arm, just a feather-light touch. "Potter," he said, more firmly, succor clear in his voice.

This vastly unexpected gesture shocked Harry out of his self-inflicted pain, as hoped. Harry, hand cupped over his nose and mouth, peered at him.

Snape, working to keep his tone level, said, "You're making progress, Potter. Don't give in to despair now, of all times."

Harry rubbed one eye and lowered his hand. He glanced out the window where sirens sang out and flickered in concert with the smoky glow. Strained and low, he said, "Sometimes I can't imagine how he thought I could possibly do this."

A knock sounded on the door and Harry quickly swept both eyes and straightened his shoulders. The door opened and Hermione rushed in, arms around books that looked too big to hold let alone carry.

Harry drew out of himself. "You all right?" he asked her sharply.

"Yeah. Fine." She put the books down on the bed. "With all the commotion I decided to bring things back to read."

"Good idea." He glanced at the top book. "Great Wands of History," he read out.

"Yeah, sorry. I got distracted a bit with wondering why Lucius or Draco would want Dumbledore's wand." She quickly scooped the books back up. "But I'll do some reading and let you handle other things." She glanced out the window and said sadly, "Doesn't look good; does it?"

Harry shook his head, face long.

She exhaled hard. "Hang in there, Harry," she said gently. "Things really will get better." And with that she hefted the load of books in her arms and tottered out under their weight.

Tonks let Rogan go on ahead as they circled the building to which they had been called. Like the surrounding Muggle office blocks, the windows of this one gleamed deep black from their decorative stone surrounds. Night reversed the shadows on the carved decorations making the color-washed world of London appear in negative.

Tonks shuffled along in the disguise of a night watchman. Laughter drew her attention across the wide boulevard, where two leggy women in skirts far too insubstantial for the season stumbled along, aided by one man in a suit, tie askew. They stumbled when they saw Tonks there.

"Aw, not a bobby," the man slurred, urging his friends along while they all laughed.

When the echo of high heels clattering faded around the bend, a voice made Tonks stop.

"Not exactly a bobby."

Tonks stopped. Wedged at the uneven bevelled edge of a building stood a shadow in a cloak, only discernible once he spoke.

"Severus."

At the end of the pavement, Rogan had stopped. Tonks swung her nightstick, the signal that he should go on.

Tired, Tonks said, "Did you make this call?"

"Yes."

Tonks rolled her eyes into the cold clinging air. "We're pretty busy, you know. We have another kidnapping to deal with. We would've ignored this call, but it was strange enough we thought it could be related."

Snape ignored her complaints. "This is important. I need to know what information about Moody's murder was never released to the public." A faint breeze lifted the corners of his cloak, merging his form with the oscillating shadow of the tree growing beside the nearest streetlamp.

Tonks breathed out heavily, adding to the mist. "He was hit from the front first, not in the back as we told the press. It was definitely someone he knew since his wand wasn't actually in his hand as we said. Mad Eye was wearing a leather cloak, not a woolen one. A heavy thing I don't think he could have carried if his leg hadn't been fixed."

"You adjusted quite a few details."

She huffed. "Yeah, we get a lot of crazies confessing to this kind of thing, or trying to turn in a brother in law, so that makes it easy to sort them out."

Tonks could not see Snape's face, so his voice floated out, disembodied. She shifted from foot to foot, hoping Rogan kept going around rather than come back. Snape asked, "Anything else? What spell was used?"

"We don't know for certain. He had burn marks on his clothes, in a large star pattern, almost. Strange."

"Excellent," the deep voice breathed with pleasure, sending a chill down Tonks' spine. "Give me two more days and I will be ready. Unless you receive a message from me otherwise, I will drop him where you picked him up. I want you to arrange for Fudge to be involved in the arrest."

"You aren't asking a lot or anything," Tonks snipped. "Fudge?"

"You'll manage something; I have every confidence."

"That all?" she asked, annoyed and eager to go.

"Yes. Your unhesitant cooperation is refreshing."

Tonks stared at her feet. Her shadow showed her hair had drooped without her knowing it. Stressed, she said, "The French Prison warden sent a message; he suggests moving Harry to a more secure area. Says he cannot guarantee he can hold him otherwise."

When there was no response, Tonks looked up, but the dark figure was gone. After a quick glance around, she hurried on to catch up to her partner to convince him there was nothing here worth bothering about.

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Arthur Weasley shuffled down the corridor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, head bent over the stack of letters he had collected. They were all letters from Harry sent to various people around the Ministry, or Weasley family members. He shuffled each letter to the back of the pile, examining the addresses, pausing at the ones written straighter than the others.

At the corner, he ran headlong into Tonks and the letters scattered.

"Sorry, Arthur." Both of them bent to scoop up the envelopes. Tonks straightened while staring at what she held. "What's this? Harry's?"

"Yes."

She held out what she had retrieved. "Are you monitoring his post?"

"Not exactly," Mr. Weasley said, bunching the letters together again. He flipped through the pile and held an envelope up for her. "Look like Harry's writing?" When Tonks nodded, he held up another, where the lines were straight. "This?"

Tonks nodded again. Mr. Weasley said, "Written a bit too neat for someone without a desk to write on."

"What are you saying?" Tonks asked, hackles raised.

Mr. Weasley put his finger to his lips. "Not a word. I have to do some more investigating." And with that he shuffled into the Aurors' office, Tonks close on his heels.

Mr. Weasley went straight to the senior Auror. "Kingsley, a call went out before Christmas for translators to help the censors at the French wizard prison. Do you happen to know who volunteered?"

Shacklebolt put up his hands in surrender. Arthur turned to Tonks and got a similar shrug. Kingsley said, "Maybe try the Foreign Liaison office in IMC?"

Mr. Weasley snapped his fingers. "Brilliant. Of course." He stashed the letters into his pocket and strode away.

Shacklebolt turned curiously to Tonks, who had dropped into her chair, legs splayed and lifeless. "I can't take much more of this," she said.

"Maybe you should arrange a breakout for Harry," he teased gently. "It would give you something to do."

"Maybe I will," she said, sounding defiant.

Shacklebolt smirked faintly. "Don't tell me the details if you do. I might have to ruin it for you."

"Oh, I won't," Tonks said, feeling slightly better for joking about it.

Down on the fifth floor of the Ministry, Mr. Weasley smiled sweetly at the receptionist, an ancient wizard whose curly beard hid all but his eyes and nose. "Who would I speak to about a French translation?"

The wizard reached under his desk and pulled out a form and pushed it across the desk. It was an official Document Language Alteration Request Form. Mr. Weasley pushed it back. "I just want a minute of this person's time."

The wizard pushed the form back at Mr. Weasley. If he had an expression on his face it was buried in his beard.

"No, you don't understand," Mr. Weasley said. "I don't want something translated, I just want speak to the translator."

The wizard peered dubiously at him. "In what language?"

"English," Mr. Weasley replied after a beat, a little baffled. "It's the only one I know."

The man pointed his thumb back over his broad, rounded shoulder. "You'll be wanting Mrs. Wraithwright, then. Office's on the right."

Mr. Weasley found a portly witch in faded pink robes, surrounded by shelves full of dictionaries and style manuals. She greeted him with a broad smile and went back to penning something with a peacock quill. "Hello, and what can I do for you?"

Mr. Weasley shut the door to the office and slipped up to the desk. "I'm wondering if you happen to know who has been assisting the French prison with translating Harry Potter's post?"

"You mean L'île de Cachot Méfait?" she asked lilting heavily, but let him off by smiling again and not waiting for a reply. "I have been helping. As has another staff member."

"Someone from this office?"

She shook her broad head. "No, no, someone from the Department of Which We Don't Speak."

Mr. Weasley stood straighter. "Do you know who?"

"Yes, of course. I frequently see him there."

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"At the prison?" Mr. Weasley said. "I thought Magical Law Enforcement had the only two keys."

She spoke soothingly. "I'm certain you do. They send an escort for us." Leaning in conspiratorially, she said, "One of these days I'm going to talk the guard into a quick diversion to a Parisian café for lunch. You'll see." Smiling to herself, she sat up and said, "Yes, he's a bit brusque, young Percy is. Could use a tad more personality, but as long as he keeps quiet so I can work without unneeded distraction-"

"Percy? Where did he learn French?" Mr. Weasley blurted.

Chuckling, Wraithwright said, "Why don't you have a seat? Your feet might not hurt, but mine do just imagining standing that long. Name's Wilimina, by the way. Call me Winnie."

"Arthur. Pleased to meet you." Mr. Weasley tugged a chair over and sat upon it, thoughts moving through his head too quickly to amount to anything. They settled into an official groove and he said, "I'd like to ask you not to discuss our conversation with Percy, if you would. It's sort of important that he not know we talked."

"If you wish. As to your question, Percy told me he learned his French because he had an eye on a girl at school one year. Took a correspondence course, aided by some memory sweets his brothers cooked up." She crossed her broad arms and clearly enjoying herself added, "I asked him if it worked out with girl and he finally admitted he never got the nerve to talk to her even once. Just as well, his pronunciation leaves, shall we say, a bit to be desired."

Mr. Weasley slipped fully into professional mode. "When you and Percy are at the prison, are you given access to any areas beyond your work area?"

"We can go to the tea room, of course, whenever we like. Percy does insist on fetching the tea. Someone taught him his manners, I must say, to a fault, perhaps, even."

He narrowed his question. "If you wanted to go into the areas where the prisoners were housed, would you be able to do that?"

"I've not had the notion to try," she exclaimed. "The very thought. All manner of humanity and beyond in that place."

"I'm going to teach you a very nice spell," Snape said, bending over the foreign wizard sitting on the floor. The morning's doping left the man slow and passive, safe to hand

a wand to. Because Snape need not concern himself with damaging other memories, he could employ rather brutal, identity-weakening potions. Normally this sort of reprogramming required delicacy and a great deal of time to wear down resistance.

With typical slow movements, the man examined the wand he held, fascinated by it.

"The incantation is Stellifera. It has a rather nasty result if used with enough force, so I think you will like it."

Crouching and taking the man's pliant hand, Snape repeated the motion several times while whispering the incantation in his ear. Using an accent he had adapted to match his victim's, Snape said soothingly, "You've been using violence to paper over the guilt of that first uncontrolled act, trying to overcome it by making it part of you. You've failed at that . . . it's only become worse. But you no longer need pretend. You will be purified from that old act very soon. You wish to be, don't you?"

The man nodded sadly, eyes fixed on the floor as though too ashamed to even look up. When first brought there, his hair had been shiny and would have bounced as he nodded, but now it lay around his face, dull and flat.

Snape lifted the wand out of the man's fingers. When he reached shakily for it, Snape said, "You may have it back presently. Very soon, in fact. But first a bit of sleep, so you remember the spell."

He did not actually put the man to sleep; he put him under hypnosis. On top of the psycho-tropic potions, this resulted in a dreamy, drool-inducing state.

Snape waited ten minutes before rapping the man on the shoulder to rouse him. He put a Lumos Charm on his wand and moved it before the man's sagging eyelids to hold his attention. In the manner of a soporific chant, he said, "Remember, the guilt will wash clean away the moment you confess what you did to someone in high authority. The higher the authority the purer you will become. Nothing will matter after that. You will be serene and safe from your own conscience."

Snape waited again for that to worm its way in, biting his jaw to keep from rushing. One last test, and everything would be ready. The man's eyes blinked slowly, but erratically, almost a code. Careful to keep all eagerness out of his voice, Snape chanted on. "When you come face to face with this authority figure, what will you do?"

The man swallowed, reluctantly, which was fine, as it would add to the realism. "I'll tell them what I did."

"And what did you do?"

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"I killed the Auror."

"Why?"

"Because I was told to."

"By whom?"

The man struggled for an answer, finally stressfully admitting, "I don't know."

No Durumulna foot soldier ever knew the answer to that, which made this all so very easy. Snape slipped the man's wand into his hand and said, "And you did it with the spell you learned just for this job."

The man nodded sagely and thought it all over. Snape, with the aid of a hallucinatory potion, had given the man his own imaginings of the scene of Moody's death using a pensieve. Only in snippets, though, and only disjointed. He had then led the man to perform walkthroughs of the event to smooth over the edges of the fake memories, to connect them to the man's muscle memory.

Snape hovered the ratty old blanket into the air against the blackened hearth and said, "Why don't you show me the spell you used?"

Moving dreamlike, which gave the spell very little force, the man curved and swished the wand. He skipped speaking the incantation, but it did not matter; a ripple like a heat wave emitted from the wand and when it encountered the blanket it bunched up on itself and flared white hot, leaving behind a star pattern burned into the fabric.

"Hm," Snape mused softly. "Silent even. No wonder they hired you for the job."

Mr. Weasley sat at his dining room table, wearing his index finger raw rubbing the chipped edge of the tea cup he held.

"Something the matter, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley asked. When she did not receive a reply, she looked up from her embroidery.

"I don't know yet," Mr. Weasley replied. "Not for certain, at any rate."

He sat awhile longer, trying to overcome base instinct to think only the best of his son. Rather than thinking, he should be taking action to find out the answer – treat it like any other investigation. He noted that Molly had her wand in hand for her needlework, mostly for undoing parts of it. She worked at adding a pattern of daffodils

to the tablecloth . . . while it was on the table. It was pretty much the only thing left in the house unadorned.

He stood. "I'll return in a bit."

"It's getting late. Are you off to the office?"

"I just need some fresh air," he reassured her, not wanting to give anything away, lest they be monitored somehow. Harry's warnings about Legilimency made it easier to be extra careful.

Moments later Mr. Weasley knocked upon the heavy door to Aaron's flat. The young man uncharacteristically stuttered upon seeing him, "M- Mr. Weasley, sir." But he recovered his usual gallant style and bowed him in.

"Dad?" Ginny said in surprise, standing up from the couch where she had been reading Aaron's Auror books.

Mr. Weasley cut off her questions, by taking her shoulders. "No time. Do me a favor and go keep your mum company. Both of you, if you would, Aaron, my boy. I have something I need to do and I may be out a while." When she tried to interrupt, he ignored her and said, "Don't say I sent you. Pretend you went spur of the moment."

Aaron sidled over. "We can say we came to see you, even."

Mr. Weasley pointed at him. "Good thought. And whatever you do, do not let Molly give you any of Harry's letters to read. Well, gotta run." With that he Disapparated.

"What-?" Ginny began, but she was asking the empty air. "What in Merlin's name is that about?"

"Let's go see your mum," Aaron eagerly said. He scooped up her books and tossed them in his satchel before heading to the cupboard for their cloaks.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Ginny complained lightly. "You want to get grilled by my mother about how we are getting on? As if I want to talk to her, anyway." She huffed.

Aaron hooked her cloak around her neck and attractively bit his lip while hooking it. "I'll admit, I'd like to get it out of the way. Not so much that I'm looking forward to it, exactly." He patted her shoulders. "Come along. Duty calls."

She stretched her shoulders back. "Yep, I suppose it does. Are your assignments always this mysterious?"

He grinned as he said, "Do they treat us like mushrooms all the time . . . you are asking? Absolutely."

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Molly Weasley was thrilled enough to see them that she asked no difficult questions at all and in return Ginny held her tongue about Harry. Her mother hooked her arms through one each of theirs and led them to the table. "So good to see you both. Have a seat."

The two of them joined her around the daffodils blooming along the edge of the cloth piled up on the table top.

"Found something else to decorate, I see," Ginny said. "Flowers are good."

Aaron bent down and blinked in alarm at the bright yellow and green congregation already crowding his side of the table.

"A bit nicer than gnomes," Ginny added firmly, mostly to keep Aaron's commentary in line.

He nodded sideways in agreement with that.

Mrs. Weasley grinned at them in turn. "I have a surprise for you. Something I'm working on. Just practicing on mine first." From a bag at her feet she pulled out a brand new shimmering tablecloth and with frantic movements to contain the slippery fabric, lined up the edge along above she was working. "Nice fabric, don't you think? I'm going to use the shiny thread to match. I'm sure it will look lovely at Aaron's place."

Ginny swallowed. "Er . . ."

"You know," Aaron said, jumping up to look at things from her angle. "Do you have thread with, er, more muted colors?"

"Muted? Why on earth would one use that?" But she dug around in her basket as she spoke.

Aaron's jaw worked a second before he recovered. "It would go better with the existing décor." He reached around her and slid the cloth over. "Here, put a single daffodil. But in, ah, these shades of green." He rummaged through her collection. "And this yellow."

"That's grey."

"No, that's got a tinge of yellow. And put a vertical bar of a warm grey. Like this one. Here." He held up a spool of thread to show her.

"A grey bar?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, mystified.

"Yes, beside the flower, extending up and down." He drew with his finger on the fabric as he spoke, as though seeing it already. "One here and just one other on the other corner. I have some tall square vases and the combination will be divine."

"Sounds quite plain," Mrs. Weasley said. "But if that's what you like."

Aaron make an okay shape with his fingers. "Minimalist, is the word you are looking for. Minimalist."

"Ahhhh..." she said, picking up the grey thread for the needle, and winking at him.

As Aaron settled back beside her, Ginny grinned and mouthed, "Good job." Remembering herself, she sat up and said, "So, where is Dad?"

"Went for a walk, or a little broom flight or something. Wanted some air." She sounded down. "Don't know why."

"Huh," Ginny said, sounding mystified, which expressed how she felt. This felt too much like Harry sending her to guard Candide. Who did her dad think could get through the Burrow's protective charms anyway?

At the French Wizard prison, Mr. Weasley found that the night warden did not speak enough English to answer his questions about the translators. The best he could communicate, with lots of sign language, was that he wished to speak with Harry.

The guard, who made rather a lot of noise when he walked, fetched Harry to the break room area at the end of the cell block. Harry crossed his arms upon seeing Mr. Weasley there, and blinked in the lamplight like one woken up moments ago.

"Sir," Harry said after a sniffle.

Mr. Weasley turned to the guard. "If we may speak alone?" But the guard simply stared at him.

Harry said, "We are alone . . . he doesn't speak English."

"Ah. Yes." He stepped closer. Harry appeared gaunt on top of poorly slept. "Are they feeding you all right?"

"Is that what you came to ask in the middle of the night?"

Mr. Weasley held up his hands to ward off his anger. "No. But I'm asking anyway, after getting a look at you."

Harry shrugged. "I'm not always hungry. Believe me, they regularly try to stuff me full of fancy French food."

"Well, good, at least you aren't being abused."

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Harry resisted answering Mr. Weasley just to be difficult. This whole situation felt, if not abusive, then at least lacking in consideration of his rights. But honesty won out, and he said, "No. Not for the most part. One guard here doesn't particularly like me, but the warden said he wouldn't assign him to me anymore."

Mr. Weasley contemplated him. "In that case, you are being treated extremely well given how these places are normally run. But as you implied with your biting question, that is not why I am here. I'm here because someone has been sending poetic letters in your name. Molly even received one."

"Poetic letters?" Harry echoed, sleepy mind slow to comprehend, but it snapped in place. "From the poets here?" Mr. Weasley nodded, and Harry added, "Well, it wasn't me."

"I know that, Harry. They are being sent to your biggest allies, to mute their complaint about your situation." Mr. Weasley began to pace. "So I asked around and discovered that one of the two translators that come here every few days to help censor your post, is my son, Percy."

Harry felt heat course through his arms and neck. A cell door rattled, but he pulled back on his anger and it stopped.

Mr. Weasley paced back the other way. "I'm trying to understand what is happening here."

"No, you aren't," Harry heard himself say. That energy had filled him again, and it gave him clarity and no desire to withhold his thoughts. "You aren't trying to understand; you are unwilling to suspect him of anything. You always think the best of people until it is too late." From the back of Harry's mind came the wry notion that Mr. Weasley gave him exactly the same benefit.

Mr. Weasley did not reply right away. "Do you have anything besides suspicion, Harry?"

"Do you?" Harry returned immediately.

"I'm close," Mr. Weasley admitted.

"You won't find any proof if you don't want to find it," Harry calmly pointed out, feeling victory in that small cruelty. The shadows hummed in the air, but apparently only he could feel it, based on Mr. Weasley's lack of reaction. It was as if Harry stood at the center of a circle of power, and could draw on it at will, if only he wished to. If he kept it narrowly focused he remained in control; more than that and it would overtake him.

Mr. Weasley must be sensing something because he was watching him now, with curiosity and wariness. Harry remained silent and saw in Mr. Weasley's eyes that his thoughts returned to worrying about Percy and how to approach him. Harry said, "It would be foolish to confront him directly, since it would tip your hand."

Mr. Weasley turned abruptly on his toes and resumed pacing. "I believe I better understand Ginny's concerns about you," he said without looking up. "I would move you, Harry, to the dungeon at the Ministry, if I did not fear it would constitute the perfect trap for someone wishing to do you harm. Many, many people have access to the dungeon."

"You needn't to worry about me," Harry said mockingly. He did not mean to but the power hungered to be on top.

Mr. Weasley finally met Harry's gaze, because he forgot not to. "That's not true. You remain my responsibility, in more ways than one."

"I'm tired of being everyone's responsibility," Harry snapped. "You, the warden, Severus. . . I can take care of myself."

Mr. Weasley frowned and let that go. "If Percy is involved, then we-"

"If Percy is responsible, you mean."

"Involved. Then we are much closer to getting you out."

"Because the investigation is at a dead end otherwise," Harry supplied, mocking again. "I won't wait in this place forever."

"It's not even been two weeks," Mr. Weasley countered, finding some sharpness.

Harry sighed lightly. "It may feel like it to you. It feels like months to me."

"I know, Harry. And I am sorry for that. It was all supposed to be straight by now."

He did sound sorry, which sucked the thickest darkness out of Harry. But thinking of Snape, trapped in that miserable world made him say, "Another week is all I will stay."

Mr. Weasley glanced around, assessing the walls. "I'm not certain what you think you are going to do, but your timeline is duly noted."

"Fine," Harry said, crossing his arms. "Just so you're informed."

Mr. Weasley exhaled and swung his arms once. "On another topic. My daughter is rather cross with me for not bringing her here to see you. You sent her a letter that

sent her on a mission of sorts." When Harry did not reply, he went on. "Can I take her a message from you. Something that might perhaps get me off her Worst Dad in the World list?"

Harry felt for the shadows around him. He could no longer discern where he ended and they began. "Tell her to be careful. Do her readings."

Mr. Weasley complained, "She's going to think I made that up."

Harry smiled faintly and felt like himself again in a rush. "Tell her she needn't panic but just stay alert."

"That will have to do, I suppose," Mr. Weasley tiredly said. "I believe the warden is looking out for you, above and beyond what we expected, but if there is anything you need, do let us know. I wish you would be more patient with us, Harry."

"You don't know how hard it has been to stay here even this long," Harry said. "You don't understand much of anything."

Mr. Weasley put his hat back on out of his pocket, covering the uncombed hair flying away off the top of his head. "I don't think you've kept us well informed."

Harry, fully charged again, stated clearly, as though he were the one in charge, "The things I did tell you, you refused to believe. You would not believe any of the rest."

Despite it not being her shift, Tonks sat in the Aurors' office, pretending to work on paperwork, when in reality, she frantically schemed how to arrange things that evening per Snape's demands.

There was a meeting that afternoon with the Minister and the department heads, and she intended to wheedle her way into it. Odds were that Fudge, who could not leave his nose out of anything, would also have worked out an invitation. It was her only chance.

Shacklebolt sat at a nearby desk, plucking lint from his robes as he dictated to his quill. Tonks waited for a break in his transcription to ask, "You're going to the meeting today, right?"

Shacklebolt rolled his eyes and grumbled. "Yes, I suppose."

"You sound thrilled."

"Waste of time," he muttered.

Tonks shrugged, and hunched over in his direction, hands clasped before her. "I could go to it instead so you could work. I haven't been feeling terribly useful lately." It was easy to sound strained. She did feel useless, in more ways than they knew.

"If Arthur will have you along, that'd be just grand with me." He shook his head. "He just wants someone to help back him up and take notes."

Tonks sat considering how to approach Mr. Weasley when the man wandered in. Shacklebolt grabbed up his quill off the parchment and said stiffly, "Take Tonks with you. I have too much to do to waste time in a meeting."

Mr. Weasley said, "Well, if I had any delusions about being in charge, Harry and now you, are doing well at convincing me otherwise."

Shacklebolt stood and canceled his quill before dropping it on his desk. "Sorry, Arthur. Just a bit stretched thin."

Mr. Weasley regained his warmth. "I'll take Tonks along, Kingsley, don't interrupt what you are doing."

Tonks followed him out. He walked to the stairs instead of the lift. On the way, he said, "I saw Harry last night."

Tonks was watching her light blue boots walk along the floor, but this brought her attention up. "You did?"

"Yes. He seemed all right. But . . . not quite himself."

"He shouldn't be there, Arthur. It's not good for him."

They had reached the next floor, so the conversation stopped. Tonks and Mr. Weasley slipped by the group gathered around the Minister's doorway, making goodbyes. Inside the Minister's office, Fudge and Percy, as well as the head of International Magical Cooperation were waiting.

Tonks took the seat beside Mr. Weasley and sat quietly, hoping she could pull this off without raising suspicion. Bones swept into the room and opened the meeting with her usual grand manners, intended to draw everyone present to her way of thinking.

"All right then, reports from the last week, if you will." Parchments were pushed her way, which she redirected to an assistant. "Summarize if you will."

Mr. Weasley began by explaining that earlier outreach efforts were paying off in increased tips of suspicious activities. Fudge scoffed through most of his summary. He concluded with: "We're still waiting on assistance from our colleagues in Portugal."

Bones said, "Even though that is a lead in for a report from IMC, I sense you would like to go next Cornelius."

Fudge leaned forward, elbow out on the table, and said to Mr. Weasley. "You neglected to mention that your crime activity statistics slipped again this week, all but your precious anonymous tips, most of which will amount to nothing."

He went on in this vein, until Tonks, tired of it and seeing her chance, interrupted his red-faced diatribe. "If you think this is so easy, why don't you try patrol for a night or two."

Mr. Weasley put a hand on her arm. "It's all right, Tonks."

This was going to be the best chance of arranging what Snape wanted, and like Shacklebolt she had stress as an excuse for losing control. She shook his hand off. "It's not all right. We're supposed to be working together, but all Fudge ever does is blame, not help. If he wants to help he can do a few rounds of patrol." She sat back and crossed her arms.

Mr. Weasley too must have tired of Fudge, because rather than get short tempered with her as Tonks expected, he wryly said, "I'm not sure which of you I could possibly convince to partner with him."

"I'll take him out," Tonks angrily said, "if it will shut him up."

The table fell silent. "Ridiculous," Fudge scoffed. "I have far more important things to be doing." To demonstrate this, he began rearranging the many notes before him.

Bones said, "I think it's a wonderful idea."

"What?" Fudge blurted, turning redder.

"I think we all lack appreciation for the difficult job the Aurors' office does." She waved to her assistant to take a note. "I think several department heads would benefit from tagging along on patrol for an evening."

Tonks glanced at Mr. Weasley's alarmed face. "We don't have to make a project out of this," she said.

"Nonsense," Bones countered. "It's a great idea."

Tonks sat back again and in a mode of apology to her boss muttered. "I didn't mean to have a great idea. Really, I didn't."

But Tonks had arranged what she needed to, and that evening Fudge stood before the log book, getting a tour of it from Rogan.

Tonks took small satisfaction from Fudge asking, "All these calls are just yesterday's?"

Rogan turned out to be a natural at the task he had been given. "Oh, that was a quiet day," he said dismissively.

A Magical Disturbance call came in from Wiltshire, and everyone turned to Tonks questioningly. "Want that one?" Rogan asked. "Shouldn't be a tough one."

Tonks had to wait for the call from Scunthorpe that she felt confident Snape would arrange. She fingered the slip. "It's probably just the local coven, disturbing the Muggles by racing modified broomsticks again. I don't think Mr. Fudge would get much out of that."

Rogan, trying not to smile, said, "Unless Durumulna decides to weasel in on the established bookmakers, no, probably not."

Fudge took the slip. "They may decide to do just that."

"Least of our problems if they do," Rogan said, taking a seat and putting his hands behind his head. Sounding lazy, he said, "Pass it on to Reversal. Probably their purview anyway."

Tonks would have pointed out that he wasn't making a great impression, were he not inadvertently helping her. She sat down to wait again, pulling out an old report and pretending to look diligent. Rogan followed her example and did the same. Fudge prowled the room, finally settling on the task of auditing their temporary filing practices, something Shacklebolt had been harping on for a while, so everyone left him to it, on the condition he not complain aloud, but take down notes about his concerns.

Finally, the call arrived. "Aye," Rogan muttered as he read the slip. "Not again."

Tonks joined him at the log book, half on instinct, and Fudge naturally followed.

"What is it?" Fudge asked.

Tonks replied, "A warehouse Durumulna had been using." She glanced at Rogan. He would be easy to convince. "I could take this one," she said, sounding vaguely reluctant. "At least it has some connection to the organization most of interest to Mr. Fudge." She passed the slip over and held her breath. This was going well, and she feared mucking it up.

Fudge rocked back on his heels, which made his belly more pronounced. "I've found this evening to be nothing but a waste of time, so I will take any call, just for a change of scenery."

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Tonks took up her cloak. "Probably nothing, but it's a familiar locale, so we can case it quickly if it's a false alarm."

The long, low roof of the warehouse stood quietly in the late evening light that brightened the sky in a way so as to render everything else darker by comparison. Tonks crept alongside a rack holding square metal rods and nearly tripped when she tread upon something fleshy that gave a squeak of complaint. She regained her footing and held up a hand to stop Fudge from stepping on it also.

A Lumos Charm revealed a dog, curled tightly upon itself, mouth closed with a curse.

"That's telling," Fudge whispered.

"We'll free it when we're through," Tonks said. "We don't want it barking either."

At the door to the warehouse, Tonks knocked off the lock, distracted and assuming somehow that their prey would be an easy catch. She assumed wrong. A spell sizzled just over their heads as the door swung open. Without thinking, Tonks shoved Fudge back out the door and dived for cover between the racks inside. She sent a shower of movement inhibiting spells through the gaps and things fell silent.

Tonks quelled her breathing. She might have him, or she might not. Snape did a good job to leave this much fight in the man, she thought. She was just about to send out a Doppelgänger when Fudge pulled on the door from the outside, which brought on another barrage of spells. It instinctively felt like covering fire. Tonks ducked down and slipped through the rods on the lowest rack, just as a Blasting Curse sparkled from behind her, along the row.

Tonks rolled, and despite painful scuffing on her hands, knees and shoulder, slipped again through the next rack and got to her feet. There were two of them, apparently. A spell shot out low, knocking her legs out from under her. Tonks threw a Grappling Charm upwards, which found purchase on the open framed ceiling, and whispered the reeling trigger. She flew upward, just as the racks smashed together.

Tonks canceled the grapple and surveyed the scene from her perch on a crossbeam. A figure moved below, too thin to be Fudge. She struck it straight down with a heavy Net Charm and jumped onto the closet rack, but the pipes on it had been upset by the collision moments before, and they began to roll en masse off one side. Tonks threw herself to the other side and grabbed hold as they rolled under her. "Look out!" she shouted, having no idea where Fudge was.

The deafening crash died out only after long seconds of echo and reverberation.

"Mr. Fudge?" Tonks called, climbing in a panic down the end of the rack. Being well practiced at upsetting things had probably saved her life.

"Over here." He sounded strained.

She bent to check the figure under the net and found him out cold. It was not the man she expected to find. With a wave the net became a Mummification Curse that she hovered behind her. Banging sounded on the nearby the door as well as shouting. The door must have been magically barred because it shook against the loose latch without yielding.

Tonks stepped quickly over the piles of pipe to where Fudge stood over another figure. There was no time. The other door was wide open and it would not take long for the Muggles to go around.

"We have to go. Ministry. Now," Tonks said, grabbing hold of her charge.

She arrived in the Atrium, in the only area they could Apparate into. She counted to three, prepared to return, but Fudge appeared just as she began to hover her prisoner over where he could not Apparate away again without help or breaking his bonds. Relief flooded her bruised limbs upon seeing Snape's "project" hanging from Fudge's fat-fingered grip.

Curious onlookers gathered. Fudge, hand grasping his prisoner's cloak instead, said, "You need a better area to Apparate into."

"We've been saying that a long time," Tonks smartly pointed out, while pushing her way through the small throng. "We'd happily use the large cupboard off the dungeon. But someone accused us of a power grab by virtue of controlling office space, or some such nonsense."

They were ushered through the gates by the receptionist.

"Ah," Fudge said.

At the lifts, Tonks couldn't resist saying, "That was you, wasn't it?"

Fudge hemmed a bit. "I'd have to check my notes to be certain."

Tonks bit down on a smile and roughly shoved her prisoner into the corner of the lift cage. She observed Fudge's prisoner was also having a difficult time with breathing given Fudge's grip. "Not a bad haul," Tonks said.

Fudge said, "You seemed rather blasé in how you approached that facility."

That had been a mistake, from many angles; one undoubtedly brought on by exhaustion. "We've been there many times where it's come to naught," she explained.

He nodded, accepting that to her relief.

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They assigned each of the prisoners to an interrogation room and Tonks went to wash up and get some bruise salve out of her desk.

Mr. Weasley sauntered in. "What is this Fudge is saying about a good catch?"

Tonks looked up from dabbing gel on her elbow. She smarted everywhere. "We found two Durumulna members at the warehouse in Scunthorpe. And on that topic, Reversal should make sure the scene is clear. There is a dog to uncurse if not some memory charms to be distributed."

"So you failed, then?" Mr. Weasley asked. At her confused gaze, he explained, lightly teasing, "You are giving Cornelius the impression that what we do is easy."

Tonks sat down to treat her skinned knee with a spell and some gel. "Given the fight they put up, I hope he didn't get that impression."

Shacklebolt came in. "Fudge wants to interrogate his prisoner."

Mr. Weasley straightened from helping Tonks to say, "That's our responsibility. Put a stop to it."

Tonks held in her reaction. Shacklebolt crossed his arms and said, "Perhaps that should come from someone of his rank."

Mr. Weasley stalked off. Tonks, hoping to stall him, put her gel down and followed him, limping faintly.

"He's more on our side at the moment," she said, speaking rapidly. "Maybe don't rub him the wrong way?"

"Cornelius has no right way to be rubbed," Mr. Weasley stated and opened the door to the interrogation room.

The prisoner sat in the corner, legs pulled up to his chest as a bulwark against the tirade Fudge was putting out.

"You are despicable, you know that? Living off other people's labors like you deserve it. Threatening people, ruining their livelihoods when they resist you," Fudge said, pointing directly in the man's face. "When I was Minister of Magic, this sort of thing did not happen, I'll tell you."

Mildly, Mr. Weasley said, "Yes, we just had Voldemort to contend with."

In a small voice, the prisoner asked, "You were Minister of Magic?"

Fudge straightened proudly and pushed his girth out before him. "I certainly was. For seven years. Some of the best years Wizarding Britain has ever had."

Tonks held her tongue with effort. Mr. Weasley said, "I would appreciate you leaving the interrogation to us, Cornelius."

"He's my prisoner," Fudge countered. "By all rights I can simply take him down the Department of Mysteries."

Tonks could not hold back. "Why in the world would you want to do that?"

Fudge blustered. "I am just saying." He rubbed his hands together and lorded over the prisoner. "This department seems to capture all kinds but not to get much out of them."

Mr. Weasley said, "That's because they don't know much, or have you not been reading our memos?"

Fudge ignored this. "Get a transcribing quill and we'll see what we can do, eh?"

Mr. Weasley slipped by Tonks, saying, "Keep an eye on him, would you?"

Tonks' heart rate was about double normal. She gratefully sat on the stool Fudge was ignoring and held her wand out at ready. Watching Fudge rant, she wondered with no small amazement at Snape's scheming. He must have known that once the former Minister had their plant in his hands, he would not let him go, walking merrily into the trap they had set.

Mr. Weasley returned with an Autoquill and a roll of parchment. He set the Autoquill going and gave the date and time and those present. He then gestured at Fudge to continue.

Fudge bowed faintly and turned to the perpetrator. "So, young man, happy with what you have wrought?"

Mr. Weasley rolled his eyes and Tonks put her hand to her forehead in dismay. Fudge cleared his throat and tried again. "Why were you there in that place? That place where we found you?"

"I was hiding," the man said, as though speaking to an idiot.

"Now we are getting somewhere," Fudge said, clasping his hands before him. "How long have you been this country?" When the man did not reply, Fudge kicked the bottom of his sole with his toe. "Well, perhaps some Veritaserum will get us somewhere."

Mr. Weasley said, "It won't. He doesn't know the answer to that. He knows very little, Cornelius, believe me."

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Tonks began to fear that Fudge would so bungle this that the confession Snape presumably had him ready to give, would never come out, but she absolutely did not want to raise even a hair of suspicion by seeming to manipulate what was happening. She grasped for another option. "We have a standard procedure we follow," she began, thinking of the list of normal questions and that one would likely trigger something.

Fudge turned on her, his temper flaring. "Maybe your standard procedures are the problem. It's time for something creative around here."

Mr. Weasley calmly said, "They serve us quite well, but go ahead as you were if you wish. But I'll have to ask you to not to strike the prisoner again."

"I didn't strike him," Fudge said, flabbergasted.

"You did. And if you do it again I will throw you out of here."

Fudge rose up and said, "You think they'd treat you equally well? I read the report of what they did to that apprentice of yours."

Mr. Weasley replied, "Precisely why I refuse to stoop to their level. I consider us to be better than them." He let that sit and said, "This is my department Cornelius. I'll have you removed if I see fit to, and I will keep the prisoner."

The Autoquill finished writing all that out during the lull. Tonks said, "Should we restart that?"

Mr. Weasley waved her off. "No. Leave it." He moved to stand in the corner opposite Tonks, leaning heavily on the wall, head drooped with exhaustion. Tonks stared at him, waiting for him to look her way. When he did, she gave him a proud smile. He barely acknowledged it and looked away, down at the prisoner in the adjacent corner, mind and focus elsewhere.

Fudge leaned close to the man, making a point of not touching him. "So, you were hiding, were you? Hiding from what?"

The man struggled, in an odd way, Tonks thought. He did not hesitate, exactly, more that he could not put his thoughts together. He wanted to confess, she thought with a chill, but Fudge was not setting it up right.

Finally, the man repeated, "Hiding."

Fudge stood. "Where do they get these blokes? They're not smart enough to lace their boots."

Mr. Weasley, from his corner, said, "If you'd lost as much of your memories as this one has, you would have about as much to say. We imagine they are perpetrating crimes against us, but they also do grievous injury to their own."

Tonks frowned, feeling guilty about what was almost certainly more injury caused to this one . . . with her assistance.

"What is your role in Durumulna?" Fudge asked the man.

Tonks did not think he would answer, but the man said, "I do what I'm told."

"Ah." Fudge paced, and muttered, "We could use a few of you around here."

Tonks rolled her eyes again, and glanced at Mr. Weasley, expecting commiseration, but found him lost in thought and looking saddened.

"And what were you told to do lately? Anything you remember?"

The man's jaw moved, then stopped. Fudge went on, cajoling. "Come one, we haven't all day. We have things to do. Cleaning up the mess you people have made, for one thing."

Fudge was about to launch into another question, when the man softly said, "I didn't want to kill him."

Everyone froze, Tonks with her heart racing again, and Mr. Weasley rising back to awareness of his immediate surroundings.

The man on the floor swallowed hard. "I didn't mean . . . I didn't want to." He seemed confused, and shook his head like a dog would after running headlong into something.

"Who?" Fudge prompted, fortunately losing his overbearing mode.

"The Auror," the man replied, then shuddered faintly as though struck by something invisible. "I was told to," he added, sounding almost eager to speak.

Tonks swallowed too, and sat on her hands to keep them from shaking. She felt nauseated and faintly dizzy.

Fudge needed time to recover, but he finally asked, "You killed which Auror?"

"The one . . . " The man had to think about that, and Tonks held her breath, fearing that he did not have an answer supplied by his programming. After much apparent digging through his memories the man replied, "The one with the machine eye."

Mr. Weasley pushed out of the corner, shifting quickly into action. He re-read the transcript and looked up at Tonks. She drew on his innocent excitement, and let her limbs relax.

Fudge said, "Alastor Moody?" Turned to glance between Tonks and Mr. Weasley, looking for help.
Mr. Weasley whispered, "Ask him what spell."
"What spell did you use, you, you worthless ruffian?"
The man raised his wandless hand and ran through a spell. "Stellifera," he said. "I learned it . . . just for the job." He sounded far away, happy almost. It gave Tonks the quivers.
"Heard of it?" Mr. Weasley asked her. When Tonks shook her head, he said, "Go look it up."
Tonks rushed down to the Aurors' office and thumbed through the Compleat Encyclopædia of Spells, hand shaking too badly to find the right page.
Shacklebolt came up behind her and took the book away. He kindly asked, "What are you looking for?"
"Stellifera." She should tell him the prisoner confessed, but could not bring herself to do it.
Looking at her, Shacklebolt closed the book on his thumb at the right page and said, "Stay here. I'll go down."
She held her hands out for the book. "No, I'll go."
He opened the book for her and gently handed it over. "There in the right column."
Tonks hoped that soon, their extra consideration would not be needed.
She took the book and rushed back, hoping she felt better about all this when she had Harry safely home, but feared she may not.
Mr. Weasley read the spell description. "As the name indicates, leaves a distinctive star-shaped marking of burns." He levered the heavy book closed and again looked at Tonks, as though needing confirmation.
"Can I go get Harry?" She pleaded, desperate to leave, to escape, to reach the ends before guilt about the means overwhelmed her.
He glanced at the transcript one more time then looked at Fudge, who put up his hands in surrender.
Mr. Weasley said, "Let's go and get him. I expect they'll let us straighten out our part of the paperwork later."

Author's Notes: I've started using double breaks (

) to denote jumps between universes. Been doing that for a few chapters, but I thought I'd point it out.

Chapter 35.

Free Bird

The clanging footsteps reached a crescendo just before they stopped on the other side of the iron door. The bolts slid back and Harry, thinking he had another late evening visitor, stood up from his stone bench. And indeed, Steeltoe Pierre gestured with the riveted, rusty bucket he held for Harry to come out into the corridor. A sparkle of metallic confetti fluttered off the guard's armor as he left Harry there and efficiently swept back through the cell and tossed everything in the bucket, including the things Harry had stashed under the mattress.

Harry started to ask what was going on, but remembered he would not get an answer and, with his face-guard down, Harry could not gather a clue from the guard's expression either. Following gestures eager enough to make Harry worry that Steeltoe might become impatient with him, Harry led the way down the uneven, poorly lit corridor.

The warden's office contained a surprise: Tonks, standing before the desk, hair fluttering between brown and spiky pink like an agitated sea creature.

"Tonks," Harry managed breathily. He dearly needed to see a friendly face. Mr. Weasley stood off to the side, looking chagrined.

"Your pape-airs," the warden said, holding out a stack to Tonks, eyeing Harry keenly the whole while. He too had metallic confetti glittering on his robes.

Tonks turned the stack around to glance at them before reaching back for a pen from the well on the desk. "Here, Harry, sign this," she said.

Chapter 35

They had decided to move him to the securest area of the prison, Harry thought, heart thudding as though a Bludger had become lodged in his chest. He should have exercised more control. Now he was going to be in with the worst, with the Vampires and who knew what else. But maybe he deserved that.

Tonks forced the pen into his hand. While he hesitated, the pen scattered ink on the pages she held up, arms propped up as a desk. "Don't look so glum, you're going home."

The pen slipped off the parchment, dividing the dense text with a wide, shiny line. "What?"

Tonks seemed unable to say more. Her face moved but her lips remained mute. Mr. Weasley stepped up and said, "We caught the real killer."

Harry's mind engaged on this news and the room snapped into clarity. "Who?" he demanded.

"Just a hired wand. A foreigner brought in by Durumulna to do the job."

Harry could not stop his shoulders falling in disappointment. He wanted to hear the name Percy quite badly. He rubbed his hair and scratched the back of his neck, trying to take in this new reality – he did not have to go back to his cell. He did not feel elation, just quivering relief.

Sounding strangely pained, Tonks flipped the page and said, "Sign here too, Harry."

After a firm handshake from the warden, who still had a knowing glint in his eye, a paper-wrapped package of his possessions was pressed into his hands by the guard. Steeltoe bowed them out of the office, inadvertently shutting his face guard, which he left down while he escorted them back up to the surface.

As they rose in the lift, the air grew fresher. Harry tipped his head back and breathed deeply. The shadows grew distant and he instinctively grabbed for them, pulling them along. The lift stopped, throwing them up onto their toes, and Harry lost his grip on them and his package. He picked it up slowly, stalling to see if he could recapture that fortifying sense of power. Tonks, thinking he needed help, picked it up for him and hooked it under her own arm while taking his. Something was going on behind her eyes, something easy to use. But she turned to lead him off before he could delve into it.

Reluctant, but given no choice, Harry followed them out into the towering entry hall. The sea sloshed angrily in the slots along the walls, spitting foam onto the floor and up onto the walls.

Mr. Weasley pulled out a Portkey from his robes and lifted it to dangle before them on its chain while he fumbled for his wand. Tonks shifted her grip on Harry's arm to lift his hand to touch the body-warmed gold. Harry turned back to their escort and with a clack! audible over the noise of the sea, Steeltoe saluted, and the prison spun away.

They dropped into the Ministry, in the corridor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement outside Mr. Weasley's office. Tonks, who still had hold of Harry, pulled him down for a hug. Others flowed from around the corner, far more people than would normally be there for a late evening shift.

Aaron patted Harry painfully on the arm. "Happy New Year, Harry," he said. "You're coming to my party, right?"

"I forgot it was New Year's Eve," Harry said while accepting a hug from Blackpool. "I didn't have a calendar."

Tridant teasingly said, "Didn't you make marks on the wall to keep track?"

Harry replied, "If you tried that, one of the bricks'd give you a bloody nose." He finished greeting everyone, feeling raw relief radiating off his colleagues.

When Aaron again urged Harry to come to his flat, Tonks stepped in. "I think Harry should go home." She took Harry's hand. "I'll take him."

Harry did not argue, he longed for his own room and his own bed. The world felt disjointed; one minute he was stuck in a tiny stone cell and the next he was free to do as he pleased. "I have to go home," Harry confirmed with Aaron.

"Well, Ginny's annoyance with me will be on your head, then," Aaron said.

"Don't worry," Mr. Weasley said, "it's already on mine."

"Come by the house, then," Harry invited Aaron.

Vineet spoke up. "Hermione too, wishes to visit."

Tonks said, "News travels fast."

"Party at Harry's house," Kerry Ann cheered faintly.

"Not sure what Severus will think of that," Harry said, mind casting out to worry about the impostor.

Mysteriously, Tonks said, "He'll be fine with it. Come on, Harry."

They Disapparated, but did not re-appear in Shrewsthorpe as Harry expected. They arrived at Tonks' flat.

Chapter 35

Tonks pushed Harry to arm's length, face distraught. "I have to tell you something." But she fell silent, head dipped between her bony shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, trying to see beyond the unchained lightness of unexpected freedom. At some point her hair had changed back to brown and he had not noticed when. Upon arriving at the Ministry it had been as bright as ever. "Tonks?"

She paced her flat, running protective spells. "You're going to be angry," she said, stopping before the window and keeping her back to him. Sounding angry herself she added, "But we aren't as perfect as you . . . you know. You have to understand that."

"What are you on about?" Harry blurted. He would have found her statement funny if she were not so distressed. "I'm turning into Voldemort and you think I'm perfect?"

This made her turn. Through her stress, her lips tried to smile. "You don't seem much like Voldemort right now."

Out on the street revelers were shouting. Harry said, "Helps to get away from that place."

"That was exactly the point of it all," she said sadly.

She turned away from him again and parted the curtain to look out. Lights flashed on the adjacent building. Harry approached and peered down at where a car was parked with its hazard lights on. The driver leaned out the window to speak with someone walking along the pavement.

Tonks' dark flat felt small and closed up. Harry wanted nothing more than to be home. "The point of what? Come on. We're going to be missed."

"Severus arranged for someone to confess to the murder . . . to get you out."

Prickles ran over Harry's arms. "Arranged? What do you mean?"

Tonks spun on him, grabbing up his robes with her hands. "See, the killer is still free; you have to be careful. Durumulna will know they were cheated, not only out of framing you, but out of one of their own, who will take the fall."

Raising his voice, Harry blurted, "Severus framed someone else?"

Tonks exhaled audibly. "Yes. I didn't imagine he could do that . . . get someone to confess like that to something he hadn't done." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't like thinking about it, even. He's rather a dangerous chap when he wants to be."

"He is," Harry agreed. Then hoping to downplay it, reassured her, "He mostly behaves himself."

"I hope so." She tugged on his robe front and gave him a kiss. "It's good to have you out no matter the means," she said, but she sounded like someone trying to convince herself.

She tasted good, but he resisted pulling her closer. "We should go."

At the house, Hermione and Vineet were sitting on the couch beside Candide. Snape glided over from where he stood talking to Aaron and Ginny. "Welcome home," he said, in such an oddly convincing tone, that Harry needed a pause to say, "Thanks."

Candide levered herself up to greet him. Harry rushed over to meet her halfway for a hug. The motherly scent of home on her skin called to Harry's insides from unsettlingly far in the past. "Good to have you back, Harry. Really too bad this all had to happen."

Harry helped her sit back down and said, "It's all right."

Harry looked around the room at his friends, and their anxious expressions. He did not want their concerns right now. He had plans well concocted from his copious idle time and he was itching to get them in motion. He spun on Snape. "I want to talk to you, alone."

Snape gestured to the drawing room, but Harry went to the stairs. At the top, he had to fight his instinct to go to the right. Snape passed him and led the way around to the left, to where Harry's new room lay.

Farther down the balcony from the room that still gave off a chill of dark magic, Snape stopped. Harry glanced down into the main hall, where his friends were looking up, watching them.

"Candide has been busy in here," Snape stated, opening the door on the end.

Harry slowed as he entered. Indeed, the formerly neglected room had been transformed with mutely patterned curtains and matching bed drapes, and a new rug covered the middle of the floor, artfully turned diagonal to keep it distant from the embers of the corner fireplace. Even his old wardrobe glowed with fresh polish.

Harry went to the cages by the window, but they were both empty. "Where's Kali?" he asked sharply.

Snape stepped closer and reached into his pocket, out of which he plucked Harry's furry, bat-like pet. Harry lifted the sleeping creature from Snape's hand, eyeing him in

surprise, which quickly became tainted with suspicion at being manipulated so. Harry cradled his pet in the crook of his arm and rubbed her fur. She creakily stretched her wings, one at a time, batting Harry's hand.

Snape said, "I realize you do not wish to like me."

Harry glanced up at the man who looked too much like his adoptive father. Pet now in hand, Harry's concerns about Snape handling her as a means of handling him slipped into unimportance. He said, "You helped me get out, even if it was to your benefit to keep me locked away."

"It was to no one's benefit to have you remain there."

"Not even yours?"

Smugly, Snape said, "Especially not mine. I understand to a degree unmatched by no one else exactly what is at stake."

Harry bent back to his pet, who was trying to crawl up his arm. "So you also understand what is at stake if I don't get my adoptive father back."

Voice low, Snape replied, "I resist understanding it, but if pressed . . ."

Harry felt the siren of the shadow hovering before him and said, "I'm grateful for your help, as dubiously moral as it is, but I'm still upset with your invading my home. I'll give you a day to prepare, but even if you put up a fight, you're going back."

"Put up a fight . . ." Snape echoed, sounding sarcastic, "to keep this perfect house? This perfect little family?"

"You sound jealous," Harry said.

Snape tossed his head and ignored the comment. "I have learned too much the last few weeks, too much about the power of chance and possibility."

Harry finally let Kali crawl up to his shoulder where she commenced chewing on his hair. He knew a lot about those alternative paths. "Learn too much about yourself?" he prodded.

Snape spun away on his heel. "You are undoubtedly expected downstairs."

Harry halted him before he reached the door, like tugging on a string. "Severus . . ." The air between them hummed. Harry could sense the shadow inside the other as an extension of his will. How easy it would be to reach out and make a firmer point about his power over him.

Kali took flight, clawing Harry as she shoved away. Snape's eyes tracked her progress back to the roof of the cage, where she landed, ungainly extending her wings for balance. Harry stepped over and picked her up again. She chewed lightly on his fingers, but remained in his grip. He turned to Snape and considered him and the connection that allowed him to stay his departure. Harry would miss having a dark servant this close as much as he wanted his family properly reassembled.

Snape's hand slipped from the door latch. "If you force me to, I will bow to you. But I somehow cannot imagine Lily Potter's son resorting to that." His voice grew drier. "Not without his temper riled, that is."

They stared at each other, Harry limited himself to a hard look, leaving the shadow untouched. Without breaking eye contact, Snape reached to open the door and gestured that Harry should lead the way out.

Downstairs, even more of Harry's friends had gathered. Many wore sparkling pointed hats and glaringly bright robes, as if coming from other parties. Harry accepted a fizzing glass, the best seat on the couch, and tried to insist that, really, there was nothing of interest to tell about the French wizard prison.

Aaron sat across from him, looking older than Harry remembered him. He leaned toward Harry to ask, "Looking forward to stretching the ol' wand out in training on Monday?"

Harry did not answer right away. He had been anticipating using his liberty to take care of the imposter and investigate Durumulna himself, and not much beyond that. In fact, he would prefer to have more time for those things.

His silence did not go unnoticed. Tonks, from her perch on the couch arm, speaking with Ginny, quieted and turned to listen.

"I don't know," Harry said.

Aaron bent his head down. "I'd understand if you didn't come back."

Tonks bumped Harry with the back of her hand. "What's this?"

"I have to think about things," Harry announced, sitting back and sipping from his glass. The bubbles fizzing inside it were not spherical, but starburst shaped. They careened off the inside surface of the glass and each other, sometimes combining in little explosions.

The surrounding conversations remained muted a minute before starting up again.

The last of the spontaneous partygoers departed in the wee hours of the morning and a tired Harry glanced around the main hall. He thought he was alone, but Snape

stood in shadow near the merrily fluttering hearth, watching him. His wand moved in the familiar arcs describing the usual anti-eavesdropping spells before he stepped into the orange light.

Snape examined his hands before saying, "I submit to you that tomorrow, Saturday, is not the best day to arrange the switch."

"Why's that?" Harry calmly asked, knowing he could gain the upper hand in an instant.

"Candide will be here. I suggest that Monday, when she will be at work all day, would be a better choice." His starkly lit chiseled gaze came up. "I assume you still wish her to remain incognizant of the situation?"

Harry wanted to fetch his guardian as soon as possible, but perhaps this would work out for the better. He could go tomorrow and warn Snape to be ready, and to make sure the notes were complete enough to execute the spell, then go back on Monday to assist with activating the Device. That would give him a chance to attend to some other things first, while he had the leeway to do so, a thought that appealed to him a little too much.

Sounding lightly disdainful, Snape said, "So, that meets with your approval? I have been led to believe that I can pass my teaching duties on to Lupin for stunningly weak pretenses."

Harry nodded. "We can do it Monday, unless there is no choice but to do it sooner." Harry strode away, turning on the stairs to say, "Don't enjoy your last two days too much."

Harry settled into a familiar bed in an unfamiliar room. Hedwig scratched at the window and he stood up to let her in, having lost the habit of using his wand. Hedwig had a bundle of letters for him. The top one was from Elizabeth. Harry put both of his pets in their cages and took the letters to bed to peruse.

As he read Elizabeth's letter, he felt relieved that she was isolated from the troubles in the magical world and would not lose faith in him since she was outside the normal wizarding world gossip. Her letter was written before she knew he had been released and her sympathy baldly reminded him of how much his living conditions had changed in mere hours. Harry sniffed the chilling air in the room and rubbed his eye. Despite exhaustion, notions of sleep eluded him.

The door cracked open, and a light rap sounded. Harry set the letters aside and shrugged to a sitting position just as the door creaked open. Snape glanced behind him before slipping inside.

Sounding wry and tired, Snape said, "It was suggested that I check on you."

Harry forced down a smile. "Yeah," he said, putting on an attitude for no really good reason. "So, now you have."

Meeting Harry's attitude with his own, Snape returned, "You're trying, but Slytherin does not fit you, truly. Your heart is not really in it."

"What does my heart have to do with it?" Harry smoothly asked.

Snape did not reply to this right away. He examined the wall and, putting his hand on the door handle, said to the ceiling, "Perhaps it is time to pass this whole thing on to someone better suited to it." In contrast to his words, he sounded disdainful.

"Oh, it is definitely time." Harry made as if he was bedding down to sleep and ignoring his visitor, but inside he worried what his Snape was going to think. If he found out. But he always seemed to find out.

The door clicked closed and Harry reached an arm out to crank down the wick on his bedside lamp.

Harry was woken by Candide peeking in the door and calling in a sing-song. "Harry, there are guests for breakfast, and we have been waiting on you. Winky will undoubtedly serve them another round of pomegranate Knut buns shortly, but they are hoping to see you."

Harry blinked painfully into the grey light from the window and scrubbed his eyes. Really, he must have just shut them and he wondered that his friends weren't all still abed themselves. "Be right there," he said, immediately thinking of all the things he needed to do that day, which got his blood moving nicely.

In the dining room he found his cousin, Pamela, accompanied by Lupin, settled in at the breakfast table. Pamela leaped up to greet him.

"Harry! So terrible what the wizards have put you through!"

"It was a misunderstanding," Harry said, returning her quick hug. "Well, not exactly . . . someone wanted it that way. But it will be straight soon enough."

"Soon enough?" Lupin echoed in surprise as Harry pulled out the chair across from him. A wondrous breakfast appeared, wondrous for being exactly what Harry normally had before he had been sent off.

As he sat there, Harry's curse sense bothered him in strange little surges. After the plain walls of his cell, the normal world felt confusing and busy, including the magic

of it. Harry glanced casually around but the feeling came from directly across from him. Harry's eyes fell on Lupin's unnaturally long nails and hairy fingers. Perhaps it was Lupin himself that he sensed with his over-keyed perception.

Candide took a seat beside him and studied her plate and then Harry's. "At least I'm not the one getting overfed this morning. I swear Winky thinks I'm eating for four, not two."

"How are you doing?" Harry thought to ask.

She was concentrating on picking up her fork and knife as she replied, "Ready to be not pregnant anymore."

Across from her Pamela dropped her hands into her lap to adjust her napkin.

Harry was just wondering how to ask what was wrong when Snape slipped silently in, but declined to join them. Flatly, he said to Lupin, "I will be staying here on Monday, if you will see to things at Hogwarts."

"That will be fine," Lupin said, eyes flickering to Harry. "I'm expect you want to spend some time . . . at home."

Snape hesitated before replying, "Yes. Of course," in a tone that conflicted with his words.

Harry gave attention to his plate. Some weaker part of him wanted to feel sorry for the man, but he refused to allow it.

"Joining us?" Candide asked, sounding concerned.

"I think not," Snape replied. "Just fetching the paper." He slipped around to the sideboard.

"Is that a wizard newspaper?" Pamela asked.

Snape untied the distinctly edged scroll of the Daily Prophet, and glanced at the headline, before turning it over with acute interest. "Yes," he replied, distractedly.

"May I see it?" Pamela brightly asked. "Remus didn't think he should bring me a copy, something about avoiding charmed devices in Muggle houses."

Snape's eyes scanned the page back and forth before he held the paper out to her, expression unchanged. With a faint nod at Candide, he slipped out again, as silently as he had arrived.

Pamela held the newspaper up before her. "Look at that. The people are moving. And what silly hats everyone wears in the cold!"

Harry smiled faintly at her reaction and reached to serve himself more sausages. They were the super greasy kind that became solid and pasty once they cooled even a little. Even a French prison chef would not deign to serve such a thing. As he forked a few more, he glanced at the back of the Prophet, at Skeeter's column.

Exclusive Exposé! it read in bold letters. Distinguished & untarnished old moneyed wizard family's sordid past history . . .

A chill passed over Harry. "Can I see that?" he asked his cousin.

"What? Oh yeah." She quickly glanced through the other pages, even as she handed it over.

"You can have it back," Harry reassured her as he laid the paper out beside his plate where the edge soaked up oil from the remains of his forgotten breakfast.

In muted letters after the gigantic title, it read: " . . . to be revealed in a special supplement to the Prophet tomorrow. Unveiled . . . a tawdry tale told through letters obtained by our intrepid reporter, Rita Skeeter. Infidelity! Deception! Do not miss the Sunday Prophet containing Part One of this five-part special investigation into the philandering past of a wizard many currently, and erroneously, believe to be above reproach."

Harry handed the newspaper back, wondering whose life Skeeter was planning on ruining now. While he was in prison, she found herself another topic, apparently. He wouldn't mind ruining it for her, if possible.

Breakfast wound down. Harry sat back and patted his full stomach. Winky would most likely get her way and return him to his normal self in short order. Lupin slipped out, saying he needed to ask Snape a few things about the Seventh-Year syllabus, and Harry saw his chance.

"You should come see my new room," Harry said to his cousin. "Candide did a wonderful job decorating."

Harry waved that Candide should stay put. She misunderstood that he believed her physically challenged. "I can make it, Harry. I'm pregnant, not lame."

Harry wanted to give her the Auror gesture for I want to talk to this person alone, but she would not understand it. He sighed and led the way.

In the bedroom, Kali set off a series of chimes as she climbed around in her cage.

"I like the rug," Pamela said, rocking up and down on her toes. "Squishy and it looks less like a dungeon in here with it."

Harry finished the quick tour, and asked his cousin, "Something wrong?"

"With me?" she blurted in surprise. "No."

Candide drifted toward the door sending an apologetic smile back at Harry. Harry decided he would prefer she stay and gestured for her to return. She hung near the door.

Harry shrugged broadly, falling into a disinterested mode. "I only ask because I thought you looked unhappy at breakfast."

"Oh." A regretful ripple went through her pose and she looked away. "It's not something you should be worrying about, really."

Harry waited. It was what his old man persona would have done. Pamela fidgeted more and spoke anyway. "It's just that . . . " Her voice dropped. "I want to marry Remus and he's having none of it. He pushes away, a lot, at the merest suggestion and . . ." She drifted off, strained. "I don't know."

From the doorway, Candide sighed. "I know how that goes."

Pamela laughed nervously and, after another pause, said to Harry, "I really don't know. I'm ready to give up. You've known Remus longer, but I don't get the sense you've really been close, or anything. So I hadn't bothered asking what you thought, even though I've been dying to ask someone." After another gap she added more harshly. "Maybe no one has."

Harry turned to Candide for help. Candide visibly took a deep breath and came back to them. "I admit that I don't know Remus all that well. And I don't want to seem insulting by guessing, so maybe we should have you over for a long dinner . . . ah, some night after Severus has returned to school, I wouldn't mind his input, but I've sensed a new animosity with him aimed at Remus . . ."

"Next Saturday would be good," Harry interjected. "I'll talk to Severus about behaving himself," he promised.

Candide sounded unconvinced. "You really think . . ."

"Yes."

Pamela snorted lightly. "You really don't have to get involved. It's not really your problem."

"Nonsense," Candide said, sounding chummy. "Things are quiet here and we could use a challenge."

Harry, stunned by her assertion of household peace, watched them depart. Before they could get out of earshot, Harry shook himself and said, "I'm going out."

Candide, arm now around Pamela's shoulder, turned outside the doorway. "Given how things have been going, I feel I should ask where you are going."

Harry bristled inwardly, but calmly said, "Just to say hi to some friends. I won't be long."

Alone in his room, Harry gathered up his nice cloak, which hung comfortably light on his shoulders. He also grabbed up his other cloak, the one from his father. Harry needed to check on his guardian, but before he knocked himself silly with the bone grinding and chilling transition between the Planes, he wanted to check on a few other things first. And since he was in a hurry, he was not going to be polite about it.

Under his invisibility cloak, Harry slipped in and out of the Dark Plane, directly into Belinda's flat. She had lied to the Auror's office about his visit the night of the murder and he wanted to discuss that with her, if not snoop around more.

Belinda was not home, but the flat was occupied. Two wizards sat before the television, sharing a bag of crisps. Their hair and features had the flat generic look of Durumulna. With food-flecked mouths, they laughed at the man talking on the screen, even though the scene was not amusing. A pile of plates and empty crisp wrappers littered the area around the base of the television stand. Harry listened to the incomprehensible commentary one offered the other about the program, while he decided how to proceed.

Tip toeing, Harry moved into place, noting where each of the men's wands were. Under the cloak he reached out and grabbed up one wand out of a back pocket. The man twisted and reached back in question, the cue for Harry to knock the other one into chain binding, and take up his wand from the floor where it fell. He used another chain binding charm on the first man and with one broad pull tugged the cloak off to reveal himself.

Confused motion turned to startled stillness as the pair recognized him. One of them expressed what must be a profanity as his eyes tracked Harry moving in closer to search them both. There was not much on them. Some pounds, and little note cards Harry could not read.

"Speak English?" Harry asked the nearest one. When there was no reply, he put his wand point just below his throat, where the bones formed a notch, and asked again.

"Yes," came the eager reply.

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"Using this flat as a safehouse, are you?" Harry guessed. When he got a nod in reply, Harry narrowed his gaze. "You better not be bothering Belinda," Harry said, mind leaping to worst case scenarios.

The man rapidly shook his head. "No, no, no. She is not to be touched. We are clear on that."

"Who made you clear on that?" Harry asked. There was no reply, and Harry could see in his gaze only a murky figure bleeding through damaged memories.

Harry swore lightly himself and wondered what he should do with them. He did not want to turn them in, just yet, nor did he want them to tell anyone he had been there, talking to them.

Harry smiled faintly as he thought of a plan. Pressing his wand into the man's solar plexus, which made him shrink away, Harry said, "So, you've been shaking down the shopkeepers on Diagon Alley, eh?"

The man glanced at his cohort before saying, "Mostly Knockturn Alley."

"How much have you collected?" Harry demanded. "I want to know how profitable this venture is."

"Profitable?" came the dull echo.

"I want to know if it's worth my cutting in," Harry impatiently explained.

The man's tone did not come back into focus. "You want in? Harry Potter wants in?"

"What else you think I'm goin' to do? They sent me to prison, the Ministry did. I didn't like that so much," he added, thinking he should probably try to sound less like a film villain.

"Oh. Yeah." The man agreed.

Harry made the point of his wand clear again. "I want a cut of what you're getting."

"A cut? You want part of our share?" the other man exploded. "You think we get to keep much ourselves?"

"I don't care," Harry snapped. "I'm getting in on this, or I haul you both into the Ministry."

The man shut his mouth which had remained hanging open. Harry spoke more calmly. "Or you can do something more for me. You can introduce me to someone who can get me in where the money is a little better. I expect I'm worth it."

The two men stared at each other. "What'll it be?" Harry asked. "Ministry? Money? Or an introduction to your contact?"

"Yer, yer, going to have to prove yourself, you know," the man said, suddenly exhibiting a stutter. His face had turned red and bloated from lying on the floor in a tight binding, reminding Harry of Neville.

"I don't have any problem with that," Harry said pleasantly. "None at all." He aimed his wand back and forth at each of them while toying with their wands in his other hand. "I'll come back on . . . Wednesday, noon. I expect an introduction to be set up by then. If not, your trip to the Ministry dungeon will be long and roundabout and you will be very grateful when you finally arrive. Got it?" He stared hard at each of them. Not surprisingly, neither had decided quite what to do. "Got it?" Harry nearly shouted, thinking a little unbalanced craziness would play in his favor, and frankly, he needed the chance to vent.

They both nodded rapidly. Harry stepped back and said, "You owe me now," and released their bindings. He tossed their wands behind him near the bedroom door, pulled the cloak over his head and slipped into the Dark Plane, leaving them to concoct their own explanations about how he had departed.

Feeling good about how that turned out, Harry Apparated and slipped back into the real world on a narrow lane, beneath a decoratively written, crossed sign designating Heatherlick Lane and Battle Bridge Approach. At the end of the canyon-like lane with its crooked gas lamps, Muggle traffic hummed past, unaware.

Still invisible, Harry fell into step behind a witch pushing a pram, hoping she turned in at Number 55, a soot stained brick structure with heavy rusty bars on the ground floor windows. In contrast to the rundown building, the doors were thick glass protected by swirl-patterned brass, polished to a glitter. The first pair of doors parted for the woman and Harry followed, mincing to keep from getting pinched by the doors closing behind him.

The squeaky wheels of the pram were quickly drowned out by the noise of the front offices of the Daily Prophet. Clacking and humming filled the air as visitors queued at various windows for placing adverts, ordering bronzed back copies and collecting post from their Which Match Secret Admirer boxes. Beneath the chattering noise of the hall an incessant thrum came up through the floor. The glass walls around the wickets allowed Harry to see everything, but he did not see a way into the rest of the building. He wanted to check his suspicions about Skeeter's article and, given his skills, this should be easy, but while patrol had brought him around the outside of the building many times, he had never been inside.

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Beneath his cloak, Harry frowned, frustrated. He would have to try something else. He followed a dallying young couple to the doors. They leaned heavily on each other, even resting their heads together. A glance showed they had wandered over from the Announcements: Births, Deaths, Weddings, Elf Ownership window. They were so dreamy, Harry himself had to give them a light shove to get the second set of doors to trigger open. Rolling his eyes inside his cloaked world, Harry took off to pace around the building, intending to finding a way inside.

As he strolled, passing one painted-over window after another, something flickered from the second floor, like a curtain fluttering out an open window. Smiling to himself, Harry slipped away to his room intending to collect his broomstick, but he forgot which room was his, and he silently inverted into the baby's room. The pale greens and grey-checkered matching ruffles on the basinet and curtains brought Harry to a halt, feet rocking on the edge of the thickly corded spiral of the muted green rug.

Harry took a deep breath, starkly reminded that all was not well at home and that he needed to get his Snape back again. Torn between his desire to get even with Skeeter and his desire to check on his guardian, Harry hung there on the rug edge for half a minute. If he waited, his guardian's influence might make him forgo using all his powers to snoop around without warrant. Harry bit his lip. He would give it just one quick try, then he would be off. In any event, arriving with the sun higher would be better for his recovery on the other side, if he could not think of a safe hearth to land at.

Feeling better about that excuse than the other, Harry presently returned to the alley beside the Prophet building. He rode his broom up to the second floor and found the source of the thrumming. Occupying the entire rear half of the building was a massive, complicated, steam-belching, printing press. The familiar newspaper parchments were shuttled, flipped, and sent flying around the space before settling down and arranging themselves in a neat column that drifted down into the dark depths of the basement.

A figure in a sweat-stained, white shirt hunched over the controls of a great lever arm shuttling at a blinding pace over a broad roller. His hovering chair drifted dangerously close to the cranking metal. The man wiped his brow with an ink stained rag and tweaked a control.

Not spying any Apparation landing spots inside, Harry maneuvered into position to raise the window far enough to slip through, but it would not budge. From under his cloak he pulled out his wand and rather than risk setting off a spell alarm on the window, sent a heating charm at the man. The man appeared to heave a great groan,

inaudible over the din, and sopped his forehead again. He hooked a stretched rubber band over the largest control knob, and pushed his chair to fly over to the window. There was a metallic clack as he unbarred it, then with Harry's invisible help, the window shot up, fully open.

Harry had to grab his broom with a jerking motion and veer away as the man leaned out to catch the cool winter air in fish-like gasps. Inside, the rhythm of the machine changed ominously, a teeth rattling vibration threatened, and the man heaved up and pushed away, leaving the opening clear.

Harry sailed inside, skillfully weaving through the streams of parchment shooting in all directions, to come to rest on a high landing beside a lift. He stopped at each floor, hoping no one noticed the empty lift moving about, sometimes cramming himself back into the cage's corner and sucking in his breath to stay out of the way. He found Skeeter's office on the second-to-the-top floor. The walls everywhere were glass, but the blinds on her office were drawn firmly closed on the inside, and based on the dim light, the office was most likely empty. The massive gaudy gold door lock that must have needed a key only Hagrid could pocket, did not yield to the first spell Harry tried and merely attempting it set off his curse sense, so he minced off to the next office area and waited to be certain he had not set off any alarms. When nothing happened, Harry slid back along the corridor, peeking around the edges of the slats. He could just make out a narrow office with crowded, bowing bookshelves stuffed with leaning stacks of papers and a small desk, equally buried.

When he had a good enough vision of the office, Harry slipped inside using the Dark Plane, and stood perfectly still, nerves keyed up in case of attack from a protective spell. Just below the ceiling, all around, hung a long row of stoic, stone masks that set Harry's teeth on edge. The eyeholes of the faces stood empty, revealing the shadowed wall behind, but they did not feel empty.

Keeping his cloak close around him, Harry carefully circled the desk. Skeeter's familiar, narrow, ringed notebooks littered the area, stacked meticulously front to back. Heart beating in time with the thrumming in the floor, Harry tediously searched with just his eyes. On a low shelf beside the desk, he finally spotted a draft proof of the article from that morning's paper. It lay curled on something smaller underneath. Using the cloak, he tugged that aside, letting it drift to the floor. Under it lay a bundle of letters, secured with a great golden clip sporting a jewel-winged dragonfly. Harry again, through the cloak, picked up the bundle and his curse sense went wild, making him duck instinctively, which was limited by his closely held broomstick. A mad buzzing filled the air, the bundle tried to take flight from his hand and Harry

slipped through the floor and away, tugging the bundle through with him only by gripping it with all his strength.

In the grey stillness of the underworld, Harry examined the bundle, torn clean in half where the charmed clip had kept hold. It was a collection of love letters, written in a stunningly fine hand, and addressed and signed in pet names. They were dated more than thirty years ago, and postmarked from various places around England, but mostly the village near where Lord Freelander had his estate.

Harry held his broom tight and slipped back home, directly into the main hall. He tossed off his invisibility cloak, set his broom against the couch and paced once, thinking rapidly about what he should do. Skeeter's article was probably running on the presses right that instant. Should he go back and break the works to delay publication? He really did not have time to deal with this; he yearned to see to his guardian.

"I have yet to get used to your method of ingress and egress," a distressingly familiar voice intoned from the door to the library.

Harry stopped pacing and waited while Snape approached, gracing him with intent scrutiny before seeming disinterested, that was, until he saw what Harry held in his hand.

"Where did you get those?" Snape asked, sounding vaguely stunned.

Harry waved the broken packet. "Skeeter's office. I feared I knew whose life she was trying to ruin and I think I was right."

There was an odd pause. "And why would you care?"

"Lord Freelander is my benefactor. He's offered me help in the past."

"Ah." Snape said, clasping his hands before him, which brought his broad sleeves to a deep point. "The letters are fake. I planted them on Ms. Skeeter to damage her standing in the wizard community and with her employer."

Harry stared down at the letters. "But Freelander was having an affair . . ."

"Well, not with this witch . . . who never actually existed."

"You think Skeeter'd fall for that?"

Snape's sounded smug. "I believe she already has."

Harry huffed. "I should have grabbed hold of a copy of tomorrow's paper while I was there. The presses were running and I didn't even think of it."

"That is most likely the evening edition, in any event," Snape said, holding out his hand for the letters.

Harry stared at Snape's elegant, open hand, which conflicted so strongly with the scruffy rest of him. Harry held the ragged bundle in reach and let go of it. "I didn't mean to ruin your plans," he said, feeling torn about the situation.

Snape thumbed through the letter halves. "Oh, you have not. This is a far better outcome that I did not think could be arranged. Her office is considered impenetrable, protected by artifacts she reputedly purchased from an illegal dealer in Tazmanian talismanic objects." He put the letters in his pocket. Sounding almost pleasant, he added, "Now she has no evidence, which makes her position all the more precarious."

Harry said, "I'm all for Skeeter getting her due. But I don't like you messing with the lives of people I care about. You have an annoying habit that way."

"I did not realize. I thought him a safe target. My former colleagues knew the blackmail possibilities on every significantly rich or powerful witch and wizard, and I believed him blameless and able to take the scrutiny. But you tell me he cannot."

"Aaron's his son, in fact."

"Really?" Snape said, sounding amused by this gossip.

Harry said, "I just hope Skeeter isn't onto the real truth."

"He can withstand it if she is," Snape drawled, sounding bored.

"You could have told me what you were doing."

"I was getting even as part of a personal battle, well out of your purview, or so I believed. In any event, including this in a letter would have been problematic . . . you and I do not share any code I could utilize. "

"We share all kinds of codes, you just don't trust that we do," Harry snipped. "And on that topic, I'm going to check on my adoptive father. Cover for me if you would." Harry started to turn away to fetch a sweet snack, which he hoped would make it easer to recover from the cold on arrival. But he stepped back to ask, "Where's Candide?"

"Napping," Snape replied smoothly.

"Behave yourself," Harry said, tempted to reinforce the point.

"Please," Snape breathed, insulted sounding.

Chapter 35

"And get ready to leave, because you're going back soon."

At that, Snape lost his annoyance and a haunted something drifted into his gaze.

"You don't look ready," Harry said, trying not to feel anything.

"There is little hope in that place, you must admit."

"It's better than when you left, for what it's worth. You're living at Grimmauld Place now."

Snape crossed his arms and smirked. "With Potter and his Merry Band I suppose."

"Yes. It's safer than before, for you. Don't complain." Harry pointed rudely in Snape's face. "Pretend you deserve the assistance, because if you want a place like this one, you have to earn it."

Snape pushed Harry's hand away, but gently. Voice low, he said, "If you don't think I've been sacrificing for longer than you've been alive, you are badly mistaken."

Harry stepped back, remembered he could use a wand, and Accioed the treat jar from the kitchen. He took a handful out before leaving the jar on the nearest end table. "Your journey's not over yet," Harry said, then feeling a stab of regret, added, "That's just the way it is. I'm sorry."

Mouth full of biscuit, Harry Apparated to his room to fetch his notes, which he found in the bottom of his trunk where he had left them, folded into the back of his first Potions text book. With these firmly secured in his breast pocket, he finished the last of his snack and slipped away for greyer surroundings.

Harry checked the age spell on his hands, and brushed his beard out as he stood before the door at Grimmauld Place. Cold to the bone and with his joints as stiff as if they were full of treacle, he leaned on the railing, like an old man would. The transition between the Planes had been the worst yet. Something odd had caught his attention just as the crushing of the In Between reached its peak, and that distraction drew him back, lengthening the agony. Shaking off uncertain impressions of dark human figures, Harry breathed in the welcome reality of the quiet square boxed in by smoggy air. It was more than smoggy, the breeze smelled scorched, like hot concrete and burned plastic. But the square appeared the same, albeit more decrepit in the hazy light.

Harry sensed the usual handful of Death Eaters hiding nearby, ever watchful. The door cranked open before Harry could decide if he had the strength for some mischief in the Death Eaters' direction. Hermione stood in the doorway, brushing the hair out of her face. She smiled at him in welcome, just like normal. "Hey, it's you. Come on in."

Harry bowed, and found it difficult to re-straighten his painful back. At least he need not worry about forgetting to act his part. Hermione led the way inside to the dining room, where the scent of bread overwhelmed the mildewed drapes. Hermione bit her lip once, as if in anticipation, but that made little sense.

"Mr. Snape, someone to see you."

Snape stood by the sideboard, explaining something to Neville while drawing on a well-used parchment. He turned and caught Harry's gaze and his expression fell away into blank relief. Neville moved aside and Snape met Harry halfway along the table. "You made it," he said, sounding as emotional as Harry had ever heard him. Snape's eyes took in his bent posture. "Have a seat, you must . . . have traveled a long way."

Harry gratefully lowered his sore body into the offered chair. Snape did not release his shoulder as he sat beside him.

"What happened?" Snape sharply asked.

The others in the room gathered closer. Harry managed a small smile for his guardian and decided it was safe to say, "Sorry I'm late. I ended up in L'île de Cachot Méfait." His voice sounded hoarser than he intended.

"You ended up where?" Snape said, hand gripping harder.

"Where's that?" Ron asked, and Hermione whispered, "It's the French magical prison."

Snape did not wait for a response. "Dare I ask how that came to pass?"

Harry read the double meaning to the question and nodded. "I was framed for murder, but some friends arranged for my removal with some, shall we say, dubious counteractions of their own."

Snape said, "So, we have some straightening up to do."

"Just a bit," Harry said, so pleased to be there speaking with his guardian, he imagined everything would be set to right soon enough.

Hermione approached. "Would you like a bite of something, or tea? We haven't cleaned up from lunch yet."

Harry held up his hand. What he really wanted was a scorching hot bath, but asking for that felt awkward. "I'm fine, young lady. Really. They treated me rather well in prison, all things considered. Twelve course dinners with the warden and such."

Ginny, still leaning against the wall nibbling on the remains of the heels left on the bread tray, made a painful noise and said, "Can we get arrested by the French?"

Harry turned back to Snape. "I just came to check on you. To make sure you were all right."

Snape finally released him and knitted his fingers together. "I am quite all right. The situation with the Muggle rebellion groups has grown worse of late, but we are still quite safe here. And how are things where you came from? Are they holding up despite your not being there to look after them, having fallen into disreputation the way you did."

It had been a while since Harry had been teased. He smiled faintly and voice weaker than he would like, said, "Things are holding up fine. But, I should get back."

"You are leaving again already?" Snape blurted. A few of the others also expressed surprise.

"I have things I have to do, Severus," Harry said.

"Not in your condition you do not."

Harry stretched his neck. "It's true that the journey here was . . . more difficult than expected. But I didn't intend to be gone long. I didn't leave things set for that. I'll return tomorrow or the next day, I promise."

Snape insisted on remaining in charge. "You should simply remain until then. Rest yourself."

Harry had not considered that. He had been in too much of a rush to check on his guardian and bring the notes. "I have things to attend to. No one is expecting my absence."

"What did you tell others before departing?"

"Er, I said I had things to think over, given recent events."

Sounding unusually fraught, Snape leaned closer and said, "Then you can easily claim you simply took more time to do your thinking. Stay, Ha-Aaron."

The way Snape botched his name, it came out "Heron" like the bird.

Harry put aside the issue of his staying or not. He felt for the spell notes in his pocket and hesitated speaking.

Snape, ever perceptive, said, "Something you would like to discuss in private?"

Harry nodded and assumed the two of them would depart, but everyone else quickly took the hint and left them alone. When the door clicked closed, Harry observed, "You are getting along here, Severus."

"Things have improved," Snape admitted. "Desperation leaves them little choice." Then more quietly added, "And me as well."

Harry pulled out the bundle of notes and smoothed them on the table between them. "I copied everything out of the book that seemed relevant to executing the spell. If it isn't everything, I can try bringing the book itself, but I didn't want to risk losing it."

Snape read the notes, flipping each page behind the others.

Harry remembered being marked on his essays, and hoped this one passed more than any before. He said, "I expect I can help, since I do this all the time."

Snape nodded distractedly and read through the pages again. "There are only two sections that are not clear to me. I assume you transcribed this exactly?" He pointed at a diagram, where a dome of spell energy rose out of the Device. Harry had been forced to verbatim copy out ink-faded symbols he did not recognize, some kind of modified zodiac signs.

Harry nodded. Snape found a pen. "Could it have been this instead?" Snape wrote out something in the margin.

"It could. It wasn't clear."

"That's an alchemial symbol. This whole string is. It may be the spell incantation. I cannot think what else it may be." Beneath each one, Snape wrote out phonetics, then held the parchment out to examine it. He shrugged lightly, a surprisingly easy-going response to the situation. He glanced sideways at Harry. "We may be relying on you a bit."

"I'll manage," Harry said, determined.

Snape put the parchments away and set the quill on the edge of a stray plate, even though the table was already stained and burned. "Stay, Aaron. You will need your strength for the spell."

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"Afraid I won't come back?" Harry tried to tease, but he was too worn down, so it just came out hopeless.

"I spent the last weeks trying to imagine arranging a life here. I do not wish to do so. I am too soft for this place, too tired of the fight, not to mention too involved elsewhere."

Harry bent over his hands. "And there are new problems too. I'm in trouble with people who don't play nice."

"My duty is to be there helping you. I think I've earned that right." Snape stood and offered Harry a hand up. "I am not going to allow you to depart, so why don't you rest and recover while I research a few things from your notes in the rather interesting book collection Ms. Granger has been slowly pilfering from the London Wizard Library."

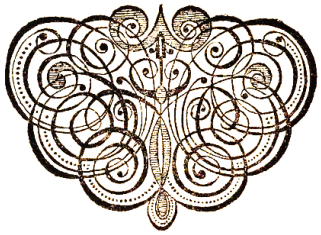
Harry accepted the offered hand and winced as his knees complained, chasing away his last stubborn thoughts of leaving. "All right."

"Thank you for coming back," Snape said, deeply sincere.

Harry snorted lightly. "Like I could stay away."

> Author's Notes: Yup, huge break. Life just got to be too much and this had to give. Back on track again.

Chapter 36.



Substitute Heroes

Upstairs in Grimmauld Place, in the room Snape shared with Lupin, Harry sat on the end of the bed, hunched in the enveloping folds of his charm-warmed cloak. The cold spiking his marrow was slow to ease, and it perniciously drained his strength.

"No ill effects from prison?" Snape asked. He moved about the room pulling potion bottles from the shelves and mixing in a cold cauldron. "You truly were treated well?"

Harry shrugged and nodded reassuringly. Voice still rough, he said, "They were perfectly polite – well, one guard was a bit of an arse . . ." He shrugged again to dismiss this complaint. He had lots of things he wanted to say, but they were undoubtedly being watched if not listened in on. He waited and took his cue from Snape for what to discuss.

Snape used a match to light the burner under a cauldron. Harry blinked at that. "Want to borrow my wand?"

Snape shook his stringy hair. "It's all right. I've learned to live without."

Harry laughed in a bark. "Ha! Have you now? No more mocking me for my Muggle ways, Severus."

Snape's warm gaze slid over to him, nearly obscured by his unkempt hair.

More soberly, Harry said, "You look like a Potions Master again."

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing," Snape drawled.

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Harry hunched over and better wrapped his cloak around himself, wondering if he should renew the charm. Perhaps the room itself was cold.

"The hearth's not lit," Harry commented.

Snape drew out the stirring stick several times, testing the viscosity. He said, "We have to ration wood."

"Why?"

"There is a shortage of just about everything. Partly it is the chaos outside, partly poor organization inside exacerbated by a shifting of roles. Procurement of supplies is gradually improving, but this is a rather large house, with many hearths to feed. The logs there on the grate are for the early morning. Someone usually comes in and warm the walls and floor with a spell after breakfast. That helps."

"They need to get Kreacher on their side," Harry observed. He pulled out his wand and warmed the walls himself, thinking it wise to skip the wall covered in potion-laden shelves. He then sat, hunched more, waiting for the brewing to complete on what he hoped was a Bone-Toasting Draught, if there was such a thing.

Snape's hand endlessly circled, alternately stirring and testing the potion. Harry closed his eyes and, like he had done so many times in prison, reached out in his inward world and . . . stopped cold, stunned silly.

The forest of Harry's mind hummed with Death Eaters, hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand or more. In his inner vision he huddled, small, amidst this dark star-scape, fixed in place by his own amazement. The few dozen servants that bolstered him in prison were a club team in comparison. Wanting to better know, to better feel, he stretched out to touch the shadows, and was over-swept by a headlong surge of potential strength. As his mind latched onto a few shadows here, it slipped away from others there, only to slip free again and rush in another direction, wave tossed, unable to find anchor, at the same time taunted and overwhelmed by the aura of obscene power. Harry had no defenses against the rush and retreat of this extra-sensory onslaught. He lost track of his physical self and slumped to the floor, inert.

Harry was dimly aware of Snape lifting him up and resting him on the bed, of hurried motion and quiet, adamant words. A hand brushing his hair back gave him the sensory harbor he needed to let go of that other world.

Snapped back to his senses, Harry opened his eyes. "It's all right," he insisted. Snape had taken up Harry's wand and currently sat with it aimed at Harry's heart. "I'm all right."

With a sudden motion, Snape stood and went about the room, picking up seemingly random objects: a crystal ball, a conch shell, a figurine of a girl with dog. With these bundled in the crook of his arm, he opened the door and stopped short because Hermione stood there.

Hermione saw what he held and put her hands out. "I was just coming for . . ."

Snape rolled the things into her arms. She smiled sheepishly and headed downstairs. Snape closed the door with a satisfying snap and ran a series of anti-snooping spells before returning to Harry's side. His manic energy waned and he deliberately placed Harry's wand under his pillow, sticking out an inch for easy reach.

Sounding wry, Snape said, "Given their theories about us, I would hope they would not eavesdrop, but I wished to be certain." He felt Harry's forehead. "It is a good thing you did not try to return immediately; who knows what would have happened to you."

Harry closed his eyes, staying within himself this time, and tried not to laugh aloud. He rested that way, wishing the cold would finish easing, and wondering what it would feel like to connect thoroughly to such a legion of servants. It seemed too much really. How would one keep track of them all?

The bed rocked straight as Snape stood to tend the potion, which bubbled noisily. Harry opened his eyes and peered around the room, vigorously resisting reaching out to test the closest shadows. Snape returned with a cup of watery violet liquid that glowed faintly and gave off a metallic odor. "Try to drink that as hot as you are able," Snape said.

Harry had to switch hands quickly on the hot cup to hold it by the handle. All he could manage was one searing sip at a time, but his limbs warmed nicely.

Snape watched him drink before saying, "I'm going to fetch some books from Ms. Granger."

Minutes later, Hermione followed Snape back into the room, accompanied by a hovered stack of odorous leather-bound, monstrous volumes. Hermione was saying, "I don't think you'll find much on advanced diagramming in those. I can go search the collection for others, if you like." She gave disguised Harry an embarrassed smile when she saw him reclining there on the bed. Harry immediately put his feet down on the floor and sat up.

Snape said, "The library is open?"

"I have a key," Hermione said. "Technically, the library is only open two hours a week now and the time always changes. My library card shows the time for each

week Sunday at midnight." She put her hands in her pockets and rocked up on her toes. "If you told me a bit more, I could probably help . . ."

Snape opened and bent over the top book, hair obscuring his face. Harry said, "I can go along to the library."

"Feeling up to it?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, and stroked his beard, constantly worried it might have faded away. "You look through those and I'll accompany Her- Ms. Granger." Harry stood creakily, and fetched his wand from under the pillow in a quick motion. This also embarrassed Hermione, who stepped to the door.

"I'll be downstairs when you're ready to go."

"I'm ready now," Harry said, reminding himself to make his voice hoarser. Hermione shrugged and departed the room. To his guardian, Harry said, "I'll be back."

"Do be careful."

Harry hesitated, thinking that very good advice, but not at all in the way he suspected Snape intended it.

"I'll try."

The London Wizard Library stood like an oversized Victorian shanty in an apparently large open courtyard of a boring glass office block. Hermione stopped in the dimness of the portal leading in and examined the area, wand twitching in her fingertips. The low clouds rendered the scene mute and of indeterminate time of day. Harry's curse sense buzzed in the back of his rib cage. He focused on that, rather than the shadows dancing around him. He closed his eyes for just an instant, just long enough to swallow a charged flutter of breath-sucking reach and power. None flitted too near to them so he had no good excuse to remain in their tantalizing presence. Really, he could not risk getting overwhelmed again. If his disguise should fade when he could not renew it or use a memory charm on Hermione, things would get quite complicated.

Harry must have made a strange noise when he reached inward because Hermione patted his arm and said, "You going to make it?"

At Harry's nod, she turned back to waiting for an employee towing a dust bin to finish rumbling it off through the opposite portal, where it echoed louder momentarily before fading.

"Clear?" Harry asked. He wanted to say that he thought it was clear, but deferred to her familiarity with this errand.

Hermione nodded, causing her hair to bob in the usual manner. She marched across the grey courtyard that was dotted with concrete benches and concrete planters. But instead of heading for the carved double doors of the entrance, she paced around to the back, fishing in her pocket as she went. With practiced ease she pulled out the oversized key and let them both in a large battered door with smaller owl doors mounted in the face of it.

Harry was glad her practiced movements continued and the lamps came up quickly, because his curse sense was setting his back painfully straight. They stood in an over filled storage room. Thousands of books teetered in piles growing out of crates. Crates had been tipped sideways to form makeshift shelves beside real metal shelves. Owl cages hung crooked and empty from the wall over the door, cobwebs between them.

Hermione bent to the crate placed beside the door. "These are the ones I'm supposed to take next," she said.

"Take?" Harry said, feet glued to the spot by his instinctive alarm.

"I'm a member of Friends Of Obscure Libraries. That's why I have a key. With things getting bad, the libraries have been trying to disperse the collections to save them from destruction. So, the next lot to be taken to a safe place are put in this crate." She tapped her hand on the splintery wood.

Harry peered into the crate. "Several of these are cursed," he said, preferring if she did not take those.

Hermione stood on tiptoe to better see inside. "They are?"

Harry glanced around the room, making his feet move in what had to be a dangerous direction. "Lots of these are. This whole shelf is," he added, peering along a line of especially rugged bindings that nonetheless had taken a long-term beating.

Hermione, coming up beside him, gasped and grabbed Harry's sleeve in her fingertips. "What are these doing here?" she whispered. One of the books shuffled on the shelf and fell still. More quietly, she said, "These are supposed to be in the vault. Actually, in the special vault in the vault." Her hair swung as she glanced around. "It's not safe like that."

Harry gave the shelf a good eying, like he would the creatures in the Dark Plane, insisting they behave.

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"It's a trap," Hermione murmured, tugging Harry backwards by the small corner of robe she still pinched.

"It's all right, stand over there," Harry commanded. "Keep your wand up." He scavenged around the room until he found an unused metal shelf. This he mounted across the front of the dangerous row of books. While the hot metal from his welding spell pinged and the glow faded, Harry blew across his wand and gave Hermione a satisfied grin, which, since she did not know him, made her dubious rather than amused.

Harry said, "You are correct that it isn't safe here. I would guess the scheme of your Library Friends has been compromised."

"Fools," she said.

"That's a little harsh," Harry said. "Things are tough."

"No, I mean F.O.O.L.s. That's our acronym."

"Ah," Harry said, not having anything to add. He shook himself. "I still want to look for the books we need. If you want to go, that would be fine," Harry added, thinking he could more easily slip out alone than with her.

Rattled, but as brave as expected, she said, "No, I'll help you look." She started in on the crate by the door, gingerly pulling out a book and opening it. "Just warn me if anything cursed is going to try to take my face off."

"It won't while I'm here," Harry said, trying to reassure her.

She studied him, too closely, such that a flicker of strange recognition crossed the lines around her eyes. "That's interesting. Why is that?"

"Just an effect I have on them," Harry assured her, quickly bending over a book away from her.

Two hours later, Hermione stretched her neck and blew her fringe clear of her eyes. "I don't have a key into the main library, but we could probably get in. Most of the good books have been dispersed already or are in here waiting to be." She gave the dangerous shelf a worried glance.

Harry stepped over a makeshift pile that formed a wall in the middle of the room. "We found three; that's more than I thought we would." Worried about his disguise holding out, he said, "We should go. Given that your Friends have been found out, we are pushing our luck staying this long." He faced her, putting his hands on her

arms. "Don't come back here again. This is a trap." He gestured at the trunks. "Take what you must, now and don't return."

Cobwebs clung to the hair she pushed back out of her eyes. "That would be all of them."

Harry smirked. "Try to be more choosy than that."

The two of them ferried books to the attic of Grimmauld Place for three quarters of an hour, until upon returning to the office block after one overburdened run, Harry's sense of shadows advancing made him grab Hermione before she could step out into the courtyard. He pulled her backwards into an alcove of the concrete portal and waved a spell to obscure their hiding place.

"What-?"

"Shh," Harry said, arm tight around Hermione's smaller frame. Her back moved against him as she breathed, rapidly. Footsteps approached, the kind made by hard leather soles of business shoes. A Muggle.

Harry did not like the turn this was taking. He waved a darkening charm, which sucked the daylight out of the open entryway to the expansive courtyard. He then transfigured the dead leaves collected in the corners into hand-sized spiders and sent them scurrying out to the pavement.

"Gah!" came the expression of horror followed by running feet.

Harry hoped the man slipped away before what must be a dragnet closed around them. So many shadows approached, Harry worried that a broad Apparition barrier may already be in place.

In a very quiet voice, Hermione asked, "What are we waiting for?"

"I suspect we cannot Apparate away, and-" He stopped as she made a delicate series of movements in the cramped space. The resulting spell gave off a puff of smoke that swirled in a tetrahedron. She shook her head. Harry held her more firmly, and said to her, "Whatever happens, do not let go of me."

She nodded and sucked in a breath that may have been a sniffle. Harry bent to her ear. "I am curious what they are doing. I can't imagine all this trouble just for us."

"All what trouble?" But before Hermione's whisper faded, she jerked back against Harry in surprise. Out of thin air, Portkeying into the courtyard, appeared legions of Death Eaters. Harry's gasp of dizzy mental surprise was fortunately completely excusable.

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The hooded figures, long cloaks flowing around them and snapping when they moved, paid no attention to the alcove behind them. Harry quickly added a series of masking spells to their hiding place, easy to add because he could bridge them across the concrete edges boxing them in.

Without any coordination the figures threw spells at the library, causing it to glow at the edges of every board and window pane. The spells hiding it from Muggle eyes failed in a burst that shattered the windows on the library and some on the office block. Glass rained like hail. The spells changed and the glow tightened, narrowed, until, with an ear-splitting creak and crash the building imploded.

The crowd of Death Eaters expressed only one or two notes of victory. A smaller group formed near the rubble and set fire to it. The dry wood caught easily and soon the grey evening sky fell darker in comparison to the rising inferno. The Death Eaters backed away. Some departed. More windows on the office building shattered.

Muggle sirens trickled out of the distance and the Death Eaters began leaving en masse. Harry waited until the fire personnel pushed their way through the crowd gawking from the relative safety of the portal's overhang, their hosepipes keeping a path clear behind them. He cancelled the spells keeping the two of them boxed in, and they slipped away in the crowded confusion and dazzling firelight.

"You were gone quite a while," Snape said when they finally returned to the Grimmauld Place dining room, empty handed for that round.

"We pushed our luck too far," Harry amiably said, trying not to feel anything. He could not afford to care about this place. It would overwhelm him.

Hermione remained quiet upon their return. She went to the tea service and with calm hands made herself a cup and sat down to cradle it, not drinking. Neville tracked her doing this and said, "What happened?"

This drew everyone else's attention.

Hermione cleared her throat. "They destroyed the library."

Lupin turned from helping Lavender put a spell on her mittens. "They did? Guess it was just a matter of time."

Hermione raised her worn gaze to futilely seek hope in every other face in the room, one at a time. Unconsoled, she returned to studying her teacup.

Harry tipped his head subtly toward the door, indicating he wanted to talk to Snape alone. Snape followed him up to the room, where Harry dropped tiredly onto the bed.

"Things really are a mess here," he said. "I saw more Death Eaters this afternoon in one place than I believed existed before."

Snape turned to peer out the window, not replying. "What are you thinking?" Harry asked. When he received no reply, he added, "I want to get . . . can we talk safely?"

Without turning around, Snape replied, "I removed all the spying devices. Go ahead."

"I want to get you out of here," Harry said. "It's going to be difficult waiting until Monday when Candide won't be around to notice."

Snape nodded, but did not turn. From below, scents of dinner wafted up, making Harry's insides churn needfully. He stroked his beard and found it felt thinner. "Can you check my disguise?"

Snape approached, thoughts clearly far away. But he renewed Harry's wrinkles and his beard. Harry took his wand back and redid his own hands. He said, "You aren't having second thoughts . . . ?"

Snape shook his head. "I am trying to find hope, any assurance that the odds of success are better than zero . . . I have not yet managed it. This place well exceeds my inadequate aptitude for finding a bright spot."

Harry put his hands in his pockets to protect them against the chill and gave Snape a wry smile. "Mine too, I'm afraid."

Snape peered across the nightly feast filling the dinner table at his "wife". Her normally conversational demeanor had taken a holiday, making Snape wonder if she was beginning to suspect something was amiss. An newly emerging spoiled part of him wished her to know the truth, but his agreement with Harry kept that idea firmly in check. The young man would not be pleased, and Snape had little desire to cross him so blatantly. He did not fear Harry, exactly – only true cruelty was worth fearing, and Harry was not that. But his quick temper, previously impotent at being expressed in any significant manner, had found a dangerous conduit in this place.

Snape contemplated an appropriate comment for many minutes before saying. "May I ask what is troubling you?"

"What? Oh. I'm just worried about Harry."

Snape hoped that was the extent of it. Perhaps it was the majority of it. Reassuringly, he said, "He told me he needed to think things through. I am certain this is merely his quandary over whether to continue on at the Ministry." He made a point of returning to eating, trying hard not to feel jealous of this moment ahead of time. Such meals would become extremely rare very shortly, and the memories of them painful.

"Why can't he think here?" Candide asked, piqued.

Snape put the quick emotion down to hormones and replied, "Perhaps he grew accustomed to being alone." He gestured at the hall behind her. "You saw how many of his friends were here and how many continue to stop by."

"Including Tonks, who should know where he is," Candide insisted.

Snape shrugged dramatically, truly wanting her to let it drop so he could better have her attention. "Possibly he is rethinking that too," he insinuated. "Harry is fine. I am certain. He is more than capable of taking care of himself."

"True. The way he flits in and out of places, without even bothering to Apparate," she murmured, arguing with herself it sounded like.

"That and other things," Snape agreed.

She finally picked up her knife and started in on the main dish. "I wish someone in our office had Curse Nose. Especially around the time Ministry Revenue sends out the crows with the audit notices."

Candide remained quietly introspective through dinner. Snape wished otherwise, but knew of no means to draw her out. He did wonder why the boy wonder delayed so long in returning.

Candide arranged the pillows just so and settled back on the couch to relax with an empty sigh. Snape thought of and discarded many possible things to say before settling on, "Is there something you would like to do?"

Candide sat up enough to peer at the clock. "Oh, well at eight the Flying Gorgeouso Brothers comes on the wireless."

Snape wanted to utter the what? but held back on the assumption that he should already know. "Nothing else you might prefer?"

"They are re-enacting the magical version of Hamlet tonight. Not interested?"

"I think not."

She pulled a small book from her robe pocket. "I feel like listening to a story. You could read to me." Snape fetched the book from her outstretched hand and returned

to the opposing couch as she tipped her head back and said, "I like listening to your voice."

The book cover showed a rider hauling hard to turn the head of his black horse. His white sleeves leaked out of his ill-fitting rough brown robes. The horse's head filled the foreground with flared nostrils and defiant protruding eyes, banded neck muscles arcing away, countering the tug of the bit. "The Fiery Friar," Snape read. "You truly intend to read this?"

Without opening her eyes, she said, "I'm halfway through. You can start at the bookmark."

Snape parted the book at the diminutive strip of yellow ribbon and backed up a page to the start of the previous paragraph. "Forks of lightening cracked the seething sky and torrents of rainwater consumed the surface of the already poor road. Behind him, the monastery's stalwart walls stood firm against the onslaught, tiny windows shining beacons against the night. Somewhere ahead on the fast-dissolving road, obscured by the foggy mist sent up by the battering rain, was the Green Rooster Inn, where the Duke undoubtedly harbored from the storm on his trip to the port. It would be harder to guard his daughter in such a place should she finally be driven into mutiny by his stubborn insistence that she be sent off, exiled really, to the colonies."

Snape stopped. "Why?" he asked.

"Why is she being sent off? To be married, because the Duke fears-"

"I meant why any of it? Why are you reading this?"

She laughed, reminding Snape again how easily she let criticism wash around her, unlike Lily. "It's just easy entertainment. I like the books that way. I don't want to think at all when I'm relaxing."

Snape flipped ahead a few pages. "No risk of that. I'll agree."

"Don't you sometimes ever like to imagine a different place, where different rules apply?"

Snape hesitated replying. "I find such thoughts to be unproductive, or . . . counter-productive even."

"Well, unlike you I don't want to get home from work and curl up with the latest Potions research newsletter." She peered over at him discriminatingly. "Well, you'd probably break if you tried to curl up, but you get the idea. Couches are for relaxing, Severus, in case you missed the memo on that."

Snape sat straighter in response. He held the delicate book up higher, moved his thumb out of the way of the words, and read, "Scarletta slipped from the horse's quivering haunches and landed lightly on her dainty boots. The rain had eased into a gentle caress with the touch of dawn upon the land. She tossed her blonde tresses out of her eyes and held them back with one milk-white hand. 'But, you cannot go,' she insisted, troubled eyes reinforcing her unsteady tone. 'I don't even know these people or this place."'

Candide interrupted, "He's leaving her? What page are you on?"

"Fifty two," Snape assured her. "Which would be . . ." he flipped ahead. "Precisely the middle." He paged back. "I did skip over some," he said, tempted painfully again to tell her the truth. He shut the book, forgetting the bookmark and having to find the page again to rectify that. "I'm sure he is going to tell her he has larger responsibilities . . . promises he cannot break," he said, thinking the author would have an entire run-on flowery sentence about how much effort he put into saying that with no inflection.

With a surge of selfishness, he pushed to his feet and went over to her and changed himself for one of her many pillows, so that she lay across his lap. He felt defiant given how little time he had remaining. Harry's mysterious absence notwithstanding, he harbored no hope that the unpredictable young man would not hold up his promise to send him home, on schedule. Executing the obscure spell of a long dead insane wizard had been Snape's last best chance, borne of homeless desperation. But fate had pushed back and now he had been drained of all desire to tempt it again.

While he considered his fate, Candide's breathing fell slow and steady and he assumed she slept. Her unremarkable face was canted away from him, so he could not be certain. His hand hovered over her shoulder, tempted to touch, but not willing to disturb her if she did sleep.

Snape took a deep breath and remained still, considering his situation. Even if he could not escape fate, escape retribution, it seemed more avenues were open if he would only escape himself and seek them. Candide presumably had a counterpart in his world. And his illicit understanding of her would work greatly to his advantage in approaching her. He may not have a future, but he certainly had a present and he intended to work out how to optimize the quality of it. There was literally nothing to lose, except the dusty past.

Harry had no hope of sleeping that night. Snape's reassuring presence helped, but the room's underlying haze of stale potions and the foot-powdery scent of his borrowed pyjamas distracted him from relaxing. That and every time he closed his eyes, the shadows loomed into view, teasing him with hard-to-define promises.

Harry would have tossed and turned, had there been space to do it in. As it was, he bumped Snape with his elbow and expected that if the other were not awake before that he would be now. Indeed, Snape shifted and asked, "Difficulty sleeping?"

Harry did not feel this was the best time to explain about his latest penchant for gathering a personal psychic army. "Yeah," he said, intending to leave it at that. But he could not, the wraiths teased at him, and the closest shadows bothered him the most. Harry pulled his wand out from under his pillow and sat up in the grey light.

As he sat there thinking, Snape shifted again. "What is it?"

Harry slipped out of the heavy covers and down to the cold floor. "I have to take care of something." With his toes, he found his shoes and grabbed up his cloak off the hook by the door. He could just make out Snape's outline, sitting up in bed.

"I'll be right back," Harry said, and slipped away.

He reinverted on the far side of the square in the center of Grimmauld Place. Relaxing his mind for just an instant, he detected that there was one Death Eater off to his left, near the corner of the fence, and another three huddled directly across from the house. Without even bothering to tie his shoes, Harry marched along the trampled grass beside the curb, preparing a spell in his head and rolling his wand in his fingers in anticipation.

The Death Eater guard was so inept, he caused a rustle of dead leaves as Harry approached, but Harry had a Silencing Charm applied just before the man let out a bird call. Harry jumped the short metal fence meant to preserve the grass from walkers cutting off the corner and sliced out with one of the few invisible spells at his disposal, a Choking Curse. It took two tries, but his quarry fell through the shrubbery at his feet in a futile effort to escape the spell. Harry disarmed the hooded figure and added a heavy chain binding before releasing the man to breathe again. Harry yanked the hood free to reveal Montague, a Slytherin Harry knew from Hogwarts. The surprised look he got in return made Harry realize that he was operating without a disguise.

Harry hesitated only a second before tugging Montegue's hood back down and slipping off across the grass, angling away from his next targets a bit to come in directly from behind.

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Harry had two of them bound up before the third even thought to turn. The figure's mask was in place, but his voice sounded like Jugson's when it said, "Potter?" and looked him up and down. Harry assumed he made quite a picture, standing in the night air in his pyjamas and cloak, shivering faintly despite the lovely adrenalin warming his blood in its course.

"I want you to leave me alone," Harry said. "I want you to go away."

"Go away?" Jugson echoed, as dull as ever. The mask made Jugson's breathing louder. He huffed and raised his wand. Harry easily waved out the counter to the Blasting Curse that came his way.

"What is this?" Harry mocked. "Aren't you listening? Take your friends and go!"

Another curse. Harry blocked that one too. "What does it take?" He sent a Spinning Hex at Jugson, toying with him. It spun his robes up tight and when it released him he continued spinning until he fell in the cold mud. "Go!" Harry commanded again, reaching inward this time to reinforce his will.

Harry could not see well, but thought that Jugson convulsed once in a great heave before shakily rising. Shoulders rising and falling, he peered at Harry, eyes glittering through the holes in his crooked mask. He raised his wand threateningly, but then lowered it and Disapparated.

Harry stepped over, grabbed each of his companions by whatever he could and took them away as well, to the first place he thought of that was harmlessly out of the way: the Quidditch pitch overlooking the port at Falmouth. He dropped his packages on the center line, also muddy, and went back for the last of the four.

Montague he took to the field outside of London where he had battled with Merton's associates. He dropped him backwards onto the windbroken straw and stared around them. The night made the fields stretch away to an impossible distance. There were no cars, no lights except the hazy glow that must be London central to the northeast. The closest houses were dark, roofs ragged, uninhabited looking.

"Happy with this?" Harry demanded of his confused captive. Part of him felt terror at this world, at what his own could have become if he had not succeeded. It all felt so fragile and slippery and Harry hated that feeling; he was strong enough that he should never feel that helpless, ever.

Harry brought his breathing under control. He longed to lash out, somehow, take any action against the impossible. A great spring threatened to uncoil inside him and if he did not let it loose, it would shred him from the inside. He tossed a Lumos out of his wand and held it low, glaring at Montague.

"You didn't have to become this," Harry said.

Montague cleared his throat, but still croaked as he said, "I did, really. There's nothing else."

"There's death," Harry said pleasantly. "That's always an option."

Montague's face stretched in dismay at that thought and he uselessly shuffled the thick links of the chain binding before falling still again, wary.

His old classmate lay like a black carpet before him, leaching poison into Harry . . . sweet poison. Harry licked his lips and in one sudden and violent movement crouched low, jerked Montague's arm free of the chain and pressed his hand over the Dark Mark. Desperately, fighting his own base instinct to do the opposite, Harry pressed the curse away. He pressed it away from himself, away from Montague's clammy flesh.

Montague screamed and Harry had to hold his knobbly wrist with all his strength to keep him from pulling free. Ash gritted under Harry's hand as he let go. With a small smirk he brushed the ash away to reveal a clean arm and said, "Explain that to your master."

Harry stood, unsteady in the dark field that provided little discernable reference for upright. He brushed his forehead, then had to rub it clean of the ash from his hand. Dismissively, he waved the chain binding off and Disapparated away so he could slip into the Dark Plane unseen, and from there return to Snape's room.

The field outside had not seemed bright, but the room was even darker. Harry's eyes finally landed on a figure standing in the window, when it turned.

"There you are," Snape said in relief.

"Yep, I'm here," Harry said, trying to act normal. He kicked off his shoes, shed his cloak to the floor on top of them, and slipped gratefully back into bed.

Snape joined him a minute later. Sitting on the other edge for a time, thinking, apparently. "We will discuss later what you were doing."

Harry's brows raised, unseen. "Right," he said amiably. "I just needed to stretch out a bit so I could sleep."

"Not wise doing that here."

Harry rolled away and curled up against the cold so far that his knees hung off the side of the bed. "Yeah, I know."

Snape gave him and settled in beside him. "Don't do it again."

Harry, enjoying the lonely near-field of his mind, and sucked down by exhaustion, could not reply.

He dreamed he stared into a mirror. He and his reflection considered one another, blinking and twitching. Harry reached up to touch the silvered glass and found that his reflection did not follow this movement, nor was there any glass.

Harry snapped awake, gasping. Again, he was glad to have Snape's nearly painful grasp on his arm as an anchor to bring him out of the forest. The square outside, and thus Harry's inner vision, hummed with scores of Death Eaters.

"Guess that didn't work," Harry mumbled.

"What?"

Harry rubbed his gritty eyes and explained, "I chased away the handful of guards out in the square earlier and now there are about fifty." With a heart surging start of worry for the counterparts of his friends, Harry asked, "They can't get in here, can they?"

Snape released Harry's arm and reached for his cloak. "If an all out assault could be effective, I expect they would have done it long ago."

Harry calmed his heart. "Good point."

The air in the room bit at Harry's nose and fingers and a gauzy greyness crept around the objects in the room. "Can I light the hearth? What time is it?"

"You may light it if you wish. Heating the walls is almost as effective."

Harry did both and scooted forward on the bed to better enjoy the firelight. Snape still peered out the window, moving slowly side to side, sometimes leaning close. "You really don't think they can get in?" Harry asked again.

Snape shook his head. Harry tapped his wand on his blanket covered knee. "I should renew my spells," he said. "Return to Dumbledore mode."

After a pause, Snape said, "You are nearly as frustrating as Dumbledore, so you do have that going for you."

"Thanks."

It was a good thing Harry had put on his disguise as early as possible. Just as dawn came on in earnest, Hermione knocked faintly on the door.

"Just thought I'd come and warn you to be extra careful coming and going. Looks like we have an invading force down in the square." She minced over to the window

and leaned on the brewing shelf to peer out. "Look at them all. They aren't even hiding." She sounded rattled and worried.

Harry felt a bit guilty and then thought he should reserve his energy for keeping inside his own head.

At the door, Hermione stopped and said, "I have some books spread out on the table downstairs, if you want to come down before we have to move things aside for breakfast . . ."

Snape nodded. Hermione glanced stressfully at the window again before pulling the door closed behind her and leaving them alone.

Harry could not read Snape's expression. He said, "I don't need a lecture."

"I was not intending to give you one." He shook his stringy hair. "I have given up understanding the cause and effect of this place. A sign, I suppose, that I am more than ready to abandon it." He raised a finger in Harry's direction. "Back home, however . . ." and he left it at that.

Downstairs, a loud discussion could be heard even through the door to the room. Neville 's voice and Lavender's came through the clearest. They were debating how best to counter the force outside. Ron made proclamations like he had been pushed by frustration into a daylight counter-assault.

Harry closed his eyes and carefully, most carefully, reached not for the shadows, exactly, but for the heart of where they connected to him. He pushed discordant energy into that, making their Marks burn. Seconds later the sound of mass Disapparation could be heard clearly, like a bundle of marbles thrown at a wall in the distance.

"Did you do that?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded and stood up. "They'll think they were summoned."

"That should be interesting for them to sort out," Snape said.

"I didn't want Ron doing anything stupid for my mistake," Harry explained. "Come on, let's go do some reading so we can get out of here."

Chapter 37.

Fateful Escape, Part I

The entire household had crammed into the entry hall of the house, arguing and whispering. "I think they've gone," Ron said, squinting through the wavy glass set high in the door.

Unusually forceful, Neville demanded, "That many . . . just disappear?"

"I heard them go, I think," Susan said. "Sounded like a whole load of them."

"Why would they just go?" Harry asked.

"Who knows?" Hermione said, exacerbated, "Why did they come in the first place?"

Ron took the door handle in hand. "Maybe I'll go check."

Disguised Harry, standing several steps up on the stairs, cast his voice over the lot of them. "The Death Eaters have departed."

After a pause, someone asked, "They have?" Ron dropped his hand off the door handle, shoulders falling in relief.

Before they could demand more information, Harry picked Hermione out with his eyes. "You said there were some books?"

Another pause, and then Hermione pushed her way free to lead the way into the dining room. Whispering closed in behind them and a few gathered in the doorway to watch what they did.

Hermione had an array of books open on the large table. "I found a few that might interest you. They're on that side." Hermione's voice modulated as she turned from her friends to her books and back again, gesturing that they should leave them be.

Harry and Snape followed along the row, stopping at one diagram that struck Harry as eerily familiar. Snape lifted the heavy vellum to read the next few pages of the book from where it had been left open. There was no publication date in the front of the book, but the cloud of fine dust, and deep groan of the leather spoke of great age. Quietly, Snape said, "I did not think our mysterious author could have invented everything he wrote."

"This is a much clearer version."

"Than your notes, certainly," Snape teased as he angled his nose down to better peruse the broad pages.

Hermione closed the door to the dining room after a quick argument with Ron. She stood with her back to it a second before pushing away and joining them. "Anything useful?"

Snape moved on to the next book in a mode of browsing, apparently not wanting to give too much away. "They are interesting enough. We'll take them upstairs if we may."

Harry quickly marked the open pages on each and stacked them together for easy hovering. Hermione stepped over to glance into the quiet kitchen before intercepting Harry on his way out. "My friends insist that I ask if you did something to the DE outside." She bit her lip momentarily. "I mean, if you wanted to say, you would and if not, I didn't think I should bother you by asking, but they insist."

Harry was reminded again of how very intimidating he must seem. No wonder Dumbledore put on such kindly airs at every opportunity. He said, "I tricked them. I don't know how long it will last."

"How did you do that?"

Harry turned back to the stack of lead-backed books, far too heavy to carry without a charm. "I'd rather not say. It's not something even you'd be able to replicate."

"Oh," she said, shoulders falling. She appeared drained by his response.

Harry frowned faintly and glanced at his guardian, who moved to join him in leaving. Hermione stopped them both by saying, "Can I ask you about something, Profes- Mr. Snape?"

When they did not reply, she hurried down to a book on the end and rapidly turned the pages. Snape slid down beside her, but she put her hand down on the text, covering it. "Can I assume you will not tell anyone this?" she asked, eyes jumping between the two of them. She frowned wryly. "Mr. Totten, can I speak to Mr. Snape alone?"

Harry shrugged and went to the door, startling the group crowded around the other side of it. Harry used several anti snooping spells on the outside of the door, gave each of those lingering near challenging glances and walked away, nearly running headlong into his counterpart at the base of the stairs. Native Harry stood with his arms crossed, defiant. Disguised Harry explained, "Ms. Granger wished to speak to Severus alone."

Native Harry stepped aside to let him pass, saying nothing.

Hermione kept her hand over the book, visibly struggling with what she wanted to say. "This may seem a big mad, but I'm trying to piece something together and I hope you can help. What do you know about Professor Dumbledore's wand?"

"Just that the Malfoys are not above grave robbing, which upon deeper reflection is no great surprise."

"No, I mean where he got it." She pursed her lips. "Unless you knew that and you're being difficult." She huffed and turned to the book. Scanning back and forth, she found what she wanted. "Read starting from here."

Snape followed her finger and obliged. "Hm," was his only reaction. "And?"

Hermione brushed her hair back and leaned over the book. "Gregorovitch is a famous Bulgarian wand maker. Have you heard of him?" At Snape's nod, she went on, "Earlier in the century, he claimed to possess an undefeatable wand and that he would sell a copy of it to the highest bidder. This is according to an advert in an old magazine I found in the attic here. But according to this wand historian, Gregorovitch never produced the wand for the auction and later claimed the original was stolen before he could work out how to copy it. This author assumes Gregorovitch was lying about having such a wand in the first place." She slid down to the next book and flipped it open, raising a cloud of dust. "But this author, Antecedent Tummifus, claims that stories of such a wand – she calls it the Wand of Destiny – are too consistent to be entirely myth. And she says she's collected the tales together and in fact there is a plausible lineage for the wand's legacy, one wizard winning it off the previous one.."

Snape stared at her. "How does one win away an undefeatable wand?"

Hermione shrugged. "Through carelessness, as far as I can suss out." She put one book away and pawed quickly through another, stopping only to glance at the clock. "This is the thing . . . it's possible that Gregorovitch really had the Wand of Destiny and that it was stolen by someone who put it to rather infamous use." She had pulled a book closer, but did not open it, just rubbed the pattern hammered into the leather and fingered the cracked half gem decorating the corner. "So, my question for you . . . Professor . . . is quite simple. Do you know if Albus Dumbledore was using Gellert Grindelwald's wand?"

Snape considered the question, both in this world and his own, pawing back through his memories for clues. She looked away and he caught a glimpse that she did not entirely trust him, and disliked being trapped into asking the very man who had ended Dumbledore's life. Annoyed with his position, Snape said, "It's a bit insulting of the old wizard's memory, isn't it, to imply he needed that much help?"

"I didn't intend that implication," Hermione snapped lightly. "You know I didn't." She fingered the book before her. "Maybe I'm trying too hard," she said, sounding strung out once the excitement of solving a puzzle left her voice. "If it is the wand. Then you got it from Draco, and Harry took it from you, so he now has it and should be its master. He hasn't been using it . . . I think it bothers him a little to think of Dumbledore that much. I mean, sometimes I think Harry feels a little abandoned . . ." She moved quickly to put the books away, triggered by some internal clock. "I just thought if you knew for certain, then I could convince Harry to try using it more. We could use any help. Although I sort of don't want Harry to know; he acts recklessly enough as it is."

Snape stacked two of the books before putting his hands in his pockets and letting her shelve with her wand. "Are you suggesting that I had this Wand of Destiny in my possession and did not know it?"

"I, uh, yeah, I suppose I'm saying that." She stopped what she was doing and turned to face him. "Sorry," she said with a shrug. "I know how you feel. I'd hate to know I had that much power and lost it given how things are." She finished up and moved to open the door, saying, "I'm holding up breakfast."

Snape caught her arm as she went by, still lost in memories. He said, "Dumbledore's original wand had a Phoenix Feather in it. If that wand does not, then it may very well be Grindelwald's old one."

Hermione's bright gaze bored into his. "How did Dumbledore defeat him? No one has ever said."

Snape released her arm. "He never explained that to me. He never explained much of anything."

She ducked her head. "And now we get to sort it all out without him."

Hermione moved to exit and bumped her nose on the door when she tried, but she smoothly backed up and cancelled all the spells and charged through it. Snape followed her out, and the breakfast cooking crew glared at them before hurrying inside. Snape continued following Hermione, drawn to this mystery by clinging tendrils of the unresolved past. Hermione went up to the door of Harry and Ginny's room. It stood ajar and Harry glared at Snape behind Hermione as she said, "Harry, can I see that wand we got from Draco?"

Harry kept his wary gaze on Snape as he fetched the wand out of a hollowed out book and handed it over. "You're not getting it back," Harry said.

"Oh, I realize that," Snape stated dryly.

Hermione examined the wand for a long time before turning the handle to slip out the delicate mount for the core. "What is that?"

She turned to Snape, who leaned over it for a closer look. All four of them did, bumping heads. "Notice the scales at the root. Thestral hair," Snape proclaimed.

"Odd core," Ginny said. "Ollivander never sold any with that core, did he?"

Hermione gingerly turned the handle in and handed it back to Harry for a test. The curtains obediently opened fully. When he tried to put it away again, Hermione said, "I think you should use that one instead of your other."

Harry stood with the book open, ready to drop the wand in. "Why?"

"Well . . ." Hermione struggled.

Snape said, "Your usual wand locks spells with Voldemort's, does it not? If you wish to defeat him you will need one with a non-matching core. That one appears to work at least as well for you . . ."

Ginny dismissively said, "Just carry both. That way if you lose one, you have the other. No one expects that anymore because wands are getting so rare."

Harry shrugged and put the new wand away in his back pocket with his other.

Disguised Harry came up behind Snape with a look of question. Snape gestured with his head that they should return to their room. Once there, Snape said, "We are discovering some things Dumbledore did not explain."

"Such as?"

"His wand appears to have a rather storied history, including formerly belonging to Grindelwald."

"Huh," Harry said, finding that a bit disturbing but not important. "And?"

"Potter now has it. Malfoy took it from Albus' grave, it seems, and it made its way to Potter, of course," he added, sounding annoyed. "The implications of this are not yet clear. And on top of it, Granger does not want Potter to understand the power he may now possess."

Harry replayed in his mind Snape's comments to Hermione about understanding too well. He pursed his lips and said, "And do you think he can handle knowing?"

Snape raised his chin and replied, "Yes. If he remains careful . . . ongoing."

Tonks coughed and brushed the soot from her clothes. "You tightened the Apparition block," she said to Snape, who sat at the table, a cup of tea under his nose.

Candide said, "Arthur suggested it."

"Ah," Tonks said. "I've been looking for Harry rather than reading my memos." She dropped into a chair. "You really don't know where he's gone?" She gave each of them a pleading look. "I'm starting to think he's headed off to one of those other parallel places."

Snape started faintly. "He told you about that?"

Tonks nodded. "I figure that's really the only way for him to get away from everything to think."

Snape tapped his teacup with his long index finger. "Perhaps."

A knock came on the door and moments later Winky led Aaron and Ginny in. "Any news? Well, besides this news . . . " Aaron said, indicating the newspaper out flat on the table beside the tea service.

Ginny gave Snape a meaningful glance, which he ignored, so she took on a more casual attitude. Candide reached for the paper and said, "You mean Skeeter's article, I assume."

Chapter 37

Aaron accepted the chair Candide gestured at and settled in, hands clasped in his lap. "Where'd she get this stuff? Lord Freelander says it's entirely made up. He's had his solicitor subpoena for her notes and evidence . . . these letters she refers to."

Ginny sat straighter, swallowed hard and tried for a proper tone. "And he sent them an . . . injunction . . . right?"

"That too, of course," Aaron said. He tossed the paper into the fire. "Better to be a pauper with a life kept private."

Placatingly, Ginny said, "You aren't even mentioned."

"I expect I will be. Even though her dates are all wrong. How could she be so right and so wrong at the same time?" he demanded of the room.

Snape and Ginny shared a passing glance.

"Your father should just buy the paper and fire her," Ginny suggested.

"Excellent idea," Candide agreed, toasting Ginny with her teacup.

Aaron shook himself. "But this is all silly stuff. What is going on with Harry?" He turned from his former Head of House to stare at Tonks, who helplessly shook her head.

Candide asked Snape as if just thinking of it, "Did you owl Finland? That shaman he stayed with?"

Snape shook his head. "Would it help? If he is there he will return in his own time."

Aaron leaned toward his former teacher and asked, "Do you think he's coming back to the program? I don't know what we'll do without him." He sounded unexpectedly sad.

Snape, biting with his words, said, "Perhaps they should have been nicer to him if they wanted him to stay."

Speaking quietly, despite believing they were no longer overheard here in their borrowed room, Snape said, "You will have to bridge some hazy sections of the spell instructions with your implicit knowledge." He rolled their edited diagrams up and pocketed them.

Fateful Escape, Part I

"The Device is still there, Severus. I don't think we'll have a problem."

"The physical diagram is. A Device exists in magical dimensions as well. The chalk lines are a reference to focus the magic. And this particular Device bridges dimensions of possibility as well." He did not sound terribly optimistic of their success. "We will have most of the day tomorrow to work out the execution."

"Poor choice of words," Harry said. He tapped his fingers on the book open on the brewing counter, impatient with sitting still. "I could have gone home and returned before morning," Harry complained for the second time.

"I expect this task will require you to be better rested than that. And on that note, you would do best to remain in tonight."

Harry pushed back the stool and stood to pace. "Grounding me?" he taunted lightly. A quick check of his inner mind indicated there was only one Death Eater outside on the square. Harry leaned toward the frosted window and used his fingertips to melt away a spot to look through. A surprising number of figures sat on the four benches on the square. Non Death Eaters, perhaps. Harry expected he could ignore the lone true servant assigned if that's all there would be through the night. He wondered idly and with amusement what Voldemort thought of his army being summoned by someone other than himself.

Harry pondered the thousand servants Voldemort had and said, "How is this place going to fare?" His question fogged over the round clear spot, quickly turning back to crystal ice.

"It isn't our problem," Snape said.

Harry watched him put the inkwells away and wipe the pen nibs clean with a heavily stained rag. "You really feel that way?" Harry asked.

"I'm trying to," came the reply. Snape gently lined up the quills in a writing box and latching it. It had the Black family crest on the lid.

"I could just kill him like last time," Harry said, tracing five-pointed diagrams in the window frost. One particular one felt active, so he huffed on it quickly to wipe it out.

"Be careful there. You've created Devices in glass before when you were out of sorts."

Harry sat straight, tucking his hands safely away. "I forgot about that."

"If any of the Horcruces are intact Voldemort's departure will only be temporary."

"But they can keep looking for them with him gone. Wouldn't that be easier?"

Snape nodded. "If they don't lose interest in the task."

Harry said, "You think they could lose interest . . . after all that's happened here?"

Snape shrugged and went to the potions shelves. "I do not know what will happen. Destiny is a difficult thing to interfere with."

Harry spun on the stool to track him. "You don't want me to kill him."

Snape straightened a few bottles before replying, "I think you will pay a price for your actions and I intend to protect you from that if I can. You are my responsibility."

"What about the Harry downstairs?"

"You are my responsibility. My counterpart can fulfill his own promises."

Harry half wished he could feel as straightforward as that. This house was full of the same friends he had at home. They would hurt just as badly when things went wrong.

"Maybe you should leave him a note," Harry said, half joking.

Snape's brow rose and after a pause he retrieved the writing box and systematically removed things from it. He took up the Potion notebook and flipped it upside down and over, before starting in with the quill on this reverse page one. He scratched out words, pausing frequently with his long fingered hand poised over the next blank spot. Harry leaned over Snape's shoulder to read and said, "Those are brewing instructions."

"I am writing a code of sorts. I used this method to take all kinds of notes through the years. So far it has not been broken, although it has earned me mockery for the mud it will brew if followed."

With the sound of the scratching quill to lull him, Harry lay down for a nap. He was woken some time later by a soft knock on the door. Snape opened it to reveal Hermione, who glanced behind her once before slipping inside.

"Can I show you something?"

Snape used the excuse of clearing a space for the book she carried to close up the notes he had been working on. She glanced with concern at Harry sitting there in his old wizard disguise. Snape said, "It is safe to speak in his presence."

Hermione opened the book to her mark. The page margins were crowded with drawings and the parchment exceptionally brown and crinkly.

"The Wand of Destiny had some companions," she said, then pointed where Snape should start reading.

Harry remained where he was, assuming Snape would fill him in later. He used the opportunity to study Hermione in detail and imagine letting go of the people in this place. It did not work out well, but the exercise did push the shadows into the distance.

Snape raised his head. "You will have to find the ring."

Hermione's voice was pitched higher as she whispered, "So you think the cloak . . . ?"

Snape nodded. "There are more than few odd things about that particular cloak that could be explained by this. You need to find the ring and you will know for certain."

Hermione closed the book and clutched it to her chest. Soberly, swallowing hard, she said, "You think we should?"

"I don't think you have a choice."

"But . . . you don't worry that . . . you know . . . Harry? You don't think he might-"

"That is always a concern," Snape said, cutting her off.

Hermione's gaze was bright. "You know what I mean, right?"

Voice low, Snape replied, "Better than you can know."

"I wish we could ask someone who would know for certain about the ring."

Snape's gaze had the glint of Legilimency, even though he probably did not need it. "You refer to the former headmaster, I assume."

Hermione nodded, clutching the book to her front. Snape fell silent and held up his hand when Hermione turned to go. "What became of Dumbledore's painting, do you know?"

Harry sat straighter. Hermione searched Snape's face and said, "Lucius Malfoy is reported to have tried to be rid of it."

"He cannot have removed it from the school. Not with any ease," Snape said.

Hermione nodded again. "Right. We heard he had another painting done, and tried to trick Dumbledore's image into getting trapped in it so it could be removed instead. But it didn't work." Hermione ducked her head. "We tried to steal it once, but we

lost both we sent and several students who helped us were punished severely as an example before they too disappeared."

Snape turned to Harry. There was an edge to his gaze that Harry read as determination, and Harry was glad to see it. Despite his insistence otherwise, Snape could not leave here without trying to help as much as possible. "Care to fetch it for them?"

Hermione stepped in Harry's direction just as he pushed off the bed, too energetically for his persona. "I don't want anyone to get hurt-"

Snape held up his hand. "Not to worry." Then to Harry, "Do not be long."

Harry Disapparated, glad to have something to do to make the day go by faster. Since he could slip away from anywhere else, untraced, he simply Apparated into a London alleyway and away again.

It was the Sunday before school resumed, and the sweeping castle grounds sat with a fresh blush of untrampled snow. Harry had slipped in under the Whomping Willow and stood staring up at the sheer stone wall. He felt better, more himself. The fresh air and concern for his friends' counterparts pushed the shadows away, and he wanted to stay that way for a while so he did not reach inward, but remained acutely aware of his physical senses, and they hummed with the brisk fresh air. His breath fogged the air in front of him and his fingers grew cold so he buried them in his pockets. The tower windows above him showed dark, so he decided that he might as well start his search in the headmaster's office.

As Harry silently arrived on the thick overlapping rugs, a painting snorted. Most of the headmasters hung in their expected places, but some had been rearranged. A clock ticked and chimed the quarter hour. The room smelled of rare wood and the overly sweet aftershave of the current occupant. Dumbledore was not among those on the wall, even the covered ones near the floor, which Harry had to peek under one at a time, not wanting to waken them. Harry moved about, looking over the documents on the desk. A few eyes watched him do this, curious. Harry moved to open a drawer, but pulled back out of a sense of curse – a reminder that he had to remember what he came for and not dally.

To the paintings, he said, "Anyone know where Dumbledore was taken?"

The awake paintings shook their heads or scratched something, a chin or their scalp. A voice from the second level of the office said, "Who in Merlin's cursed realm wishes to know?"

Harry turned to face Lucius Malfoy, who had his wand aimed down at him.

Casting his voice rougher, Harry said, "No one you would know."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he held out his other hand for the railing to slowly approach down the metal stairs. Harry watched him do this, wand at his side.

"How did you get in here?"

Harry took on an attitude of amusement, propped his hand on the desk and leaned on it. "You believe you know every secret of this place? You always were obnoxiously conceited."

Malfoy's wand twitched and his lips moved but he held back on the curse. His eyes took in the room and the paintings. "Why do you want Dumbledore's painting?"

"Who wouldn't want it?" Harry tossed out with a silly flair. "I haven't had a good conversation with anyone since the old buzzard kicked off."

As expected this knocked Malfoy back a bit. Finally recovering, he asked, "Who are you?" trying to overcome confusion with menace.

Harry remembered being alarmed by this man. Now Harry felt deliciously ecstatic at how foolish Malfoy was. "Harry Potter . . . who do I look like?"

The wand homed in on Harry's nose, too far away to grab, but close enough that a normal counter would be difficult to cast, even if Harry had his wand up. "I can make you tell me," Malfoy threatened, sounding utterly confident.

Harry crossed his arms, and grinned. "Oh, I'd be amused to see you try."

The curse came, a Crucio. Malfoy fell. His wand tumbled to the base of the desk. Gasping, he thrashed his cloak-tangled legs and finally managed to claw himself up on one elbow to stare at Harry in surprise.

"You lack all subtlety," Harry said. "You couldn't work your way up from, say, a Spasm Hex?"

Panic seeped into Malfoy's gaze. Harry stepped over and picked up his wand and pocketed it. Malfoy pulled another out of his pocket and aimed it up at Harry, but not steadily.

"How many graves did you rob?" Harry blurted, indicating the second wand.

"Too many!" came a particularly exasperated and elderly former headmaster.

Harry finally took out his own wand and before he could aim it, Malfoy tried again. This time the blowback from the blocked Blasting Curse tossed Malfoy flat on his

back and his wand sailed away to clatter off the bookshelves. Harry Accioed it to himself and took the three others from Malfoy's pocket. He used a Mummy Hex on him and stood over him, thinking.

"Getting in my way was a mistake," Harry tiredly said, which ratcheted up the alarm in Malfoy's eyes. "I want to know where Dumbledore's painting went."

Malfoy sneered but Harry got the strangest image of the Mirror of Erised from his icy eyes, so he smiled faintly back and said, "There are far too many of you – so many that eliminating even half of you would do little good. I think we'd be better off letting you drag things down for a while. Yes," Harry said, thinking upon it more. "I think your pride will keep you from revealing what's happened to you."

Harry struck out with the well-practiced Memory Charm they used on duty, then once that settled in and Malfoy's face relaxed, he used a Charm he had only read of before, in one of the books Snape disposed of to clear out the upstairs rooms. The book had labeled it a Serpent Memory Charm and promised that it would do random selective damage to what someone knew, leaving them functional but inept.

The air seethed and coiled around Harry's wand as he worked the motion. The spell lacked an incantation, which was what attracted Harry to studying the diagrams. As the air flowed around his hand and arm, tendrils reached up from the Dark Plane, seeking his wand. The spell was nearly finished, the coils solidifying and falling off the point of this wand to sniff out their victim. But the Dark Plane refused to close beneath him, despite Harry's best efforts. It was like trying to close a door while standing in the way of it. It grew apparent that as the spell reached completion, the tendrils would reach him, connecting like an electric circuit, to who knew what result.

With a shout of dismay, Harry tossed his hand to the side, cutting the spell off. The tendrils sank away. Harry growled to himself. He should be able to do this spell. It was the perfect spell for what he wanted to accomplish. Perhaps the trouble was less the idea than the execution. The spell clearly unleashed something to do the damage and that was what made it dark. Harry knew how to adjust a standard Memory Charm for depth rather than breadth of interference. He would simply have to use twenty or so narrow, deep spells to get the same result.

After a dozen spells at the helpless, dazed man lying before him, Harry stopped and breathed in and out, feeling badly, but then he remembered everything that had happened here and he added on another ten, even narrower ones. He wanted Malfoy to make mistakes, major ones. Killing him would simply lead to him being replaced. This was better, even as mechanically cold as he felt hitting him with one spell after another, making his head rock from side to side with the impact.

Fateful Escape, Part I

Satisfied that he had struck the right balance between mercy and crippling, Harry released the Mummy Hex, gave the paintings a shushing gesture, in response to which several winked, and slipped away to the school attic.

Harry wandered the entire L-shaped length of one attic and had moved to the other when he stopped, hearing something. The noise faded, and Harry stood, breath held, listening, while he raised his wand and tried a Sentient Locator Spell. The spell fizzled, something Harry had never before had happen.

"Who's there?" Harry asked, certain someone was, but if they were hiding, perhaps they were not foes, so he did not want to try anything more violent than that.

A long ear peaked out, and then a large-eyed head. "Dobby?" Harry whispered.

The elf fully emerged. "Please, Master, Dobby is not harming anything. Dobby is being careful is all Dobby is being. Not knowing your wizardness, Dobby isn't."

More elves peeked out before ducking into hiding again behind Dobby.

"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked.

Dobby rolled his hands over one another. "Dobby is helping his friends. Dobby is not bound to Hogwarts but his friends are. Dobby can just manage to convince them to stay up here, rather than be hurt by their cruel masters, Master."

"Ah," Harry said. "Do you want help freeing them? Do you want me to bring them clothes?" When the other elves squeaked and backed into the furniture-walled hiding place, Harry gave up on that idea. "Do you know where Dumbledore's portrait is?"

Dobby took a little leap forward, making his ears swing. "Dobby can be helping with this, Master." He led Harry by the hand a few paces and pointed at a small window at the end.

Harry gestured him away and thanked him, which made Dobby tug on his ears, embarrassed. At the end of the gabled space, bathed in the dust-riding light leaching in the window, sat the Mirror of Erised and facing it, on a chair missing a leg, sat the painting Harry sought, it's figure snoring lightly.

"Professor?" Harry prodded to wake it.

The painting started, and blinked tired eyes. "What? Oh?" The painting's gaze was taken in by the mirror and grew misty-eyed.

Harry stepped around behind the chair and looked in the mirror, half expecting to see what Dumbledore saw. Instead he saw himself, bright-eyed and smiling. "What do you see?" Harry asked.

"Ah . . . nothing I wish to share, I'm afraid."

"But it works for you?" Harry went on.

"Apparently," Dumbledore said with a sigh. "I can no longer visit the other paintings in the school. I had the elves move me here, so that I might have someone to look at." Only because you asked it of me, will I do the same. "What do you see?"

Harry considered his reflection. "I see someone freed of someone else's instinct for evil deeds. Someone able, finally, to move on without being dragged back into the past."

Dumbledore pondered that and said, "I changed my mind. That is my answer as well, and there is no reason not to tell you that since it was yours."

"We have to go," Harry said, aware of fleeting time.

"I cannot leave," Dumbledore said. "The school holds me in. But I am quite astoundingly bored and very much desire to know where it is you would like to go, just so I can imagine it."

"To where you can do some good."

The spells for the castle's paintings were in Ravenclaw's book, near the front, so Harry had read them too many times over. He cast the spell to link Dumbledore's painting to the rest in the school, thinking that would be useful later. Dumbledore skipped back from the frame as the curling sparkles from the magic sank into the gilded wood. "Ah, thank you. It took Mr. Malfoy months to remove that spell. He thought to lure me into a single other picture where the paint had been tainted with Widow's Ink and then destroy the original. A transparent ploy. Really, he believes himself to be far more clever than he actually is," Dumbledore added, right eye glittering even in the low light.

"Well, it's good he didn't succeed," Harry said picking up the painting to examine the frame with its cloth portrait nailed up against the back of it. In Ravenclaw's book the portrait canvas and frame were a enchanted as a unit so he did not want to simply pull out the painting and leave the frame. Despite wanting to hurry, Harry took his time to think a bit. Ravenclaw had included how to bind a headmaster's portraits to the castle, with a kind of widespread Boomerang Charm that returned the painting to the headmaster's tower by whatever means necessary as soon as it exited a door, window, or tunnel. The book did not contain a cancellation for the spell, so Harry hoped that his means of egress would not engage the spell. If that failed, he would think of something else.

Harry took up a drop cloth from a nearby chair and wrapped the painting in it. "We're going to give it a try. But I don't want you to see how we travel," he explained. Holding tight, Harry inverted himself into the netherworld. The painting gave a shudder and resisted, yanking his arms hard at his shoulder sockets, but as his feet settled to the grey earth, the frame fell still in his hands. Fearing he might have left the painting's subject behind, Harry peaked under the cloth and found Dumbledore smoothing his comically frazzled beard. "That was rather strange. Where are we?"

"You don't want to know." Harry said, unceremoniously tightening the wrap again before slipping back into the normal world, right to the doorstep of Grimmauld Place so as to leave no Apparition trace. He again almost lost his grip on the painting, making him think the resistance was merely the drag of any large object being pulled through the interstice, rather than a vestige of the binding spell.

Upstairs, he found Hermione, Ginny and this world's Harry waiting with Snape. Snape said, "I did not think that would require so much time."

Harry checked his beard with one hand and propped the painting up on the brewing shelf, still wrapped tight. "It had been removed to storage. I had to find it."

Snape stepped in a half circle around the shrouded painting. "They must have broken some of the spells on it, in that case." He turned to this world's Harry. "If I may have a word with the portrait alone?"

"No," this place's Harry said. "I don't trust you." He stepped up and with determined movements, quickly unwrapped the painting, slowing to reverent as Dumbledore's visage appeared to blink in the light. "Professor Dumbledore," he said, carefully propping the painting back up. With visible effort, he stepped back and invited Snape to step forward with a gesture. "Whatever you want to say, say it." Harry, believing himself a fair judge of his counterpart imagined the other was stalling to gather his emotions. Snape sighed faintly and stepped before the painting.

"Ah, Severus," the painting said, showing real joy. "I had overheard that you were found out and worried what had become of you."

Snape waved this topic off and turned the painting a bit when it started to say hello to everyone else. "You must listen to me, Albus. Things are rather dire and you cannot hold anything back any longer." Dumbledore gave Snape a dissuading expression. "No," Snape said. "There is no longer anything to lose."

"I am aware of what is happening, Severus," the painting stated, sounding unusually patient.

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Snape turned the painting back to the room and Dumbledore addressed the native Harry. "You've grown a bit, young man."

"Professor," Harry said, half looking at the floor.

"I suppose I deserve such a greeting."

Harry shrugged. "We need help."

Dumbledore nodded, stroking his beard. "And Ms. Granger, good to see you. Ah, and my rescuer. I don't think we've had the pleasure."

Hermione's head snapped over, her whole body going on alert. "You . . . said you were an old friend of Professor Dumbledore," she said to Harry.

Beside him, Snape half uncrossed his arms and held them hovered around each other, ready to move. Harry said, "A headmaster's portrait does not include every memory, or even a fraction of them. Just what he leaves behind in the pensieve." This world's Harry had pulled his wand, but held it hidden in his sleeve and watched him with acute suspicion.

Harry let the rough mask on his voice fade. "I've known Albus from when I was very young. I think he just doesn't remember."

Hermione stuttered and asked the painting, "You . . . you don't know Aaron Totten?"

Harry directly faced the painting, moving with more confidence than he felt. He adjusted his hat just briefly when the eyes in the room turned to wait for Dumbledore's reaction to this question, revealing his scar.

Dumbledore's reaction was swift and sharp. He actually leaned forward in the frame as if to escape it. "Wait a moment. I . . . do remember you. But, I . . . am quite surprised to see you . . . here. I never would have expected you . . . to take such an enormous risk. What has brought you . . . back?"

Harry realized Dumbledore misunderstood, believing him to be his future self. "I take less of a risk than you realize," Harry said. "Much less. But even so, the situation here calls for drastic action. As Severus insists, you cannot afford to hold anything back."

Dumbledore's eyes remained wide with shock as he stared at Harry. "I need to speak with . . . Aaron alone, if you all would leave us."

"And Severus," Harry added. "We're here together . . . at the moment."

Dumbledore's face went wanky at this revelation. "You are? I don't believe I understand."

"I know you don't," Harry replied.

The room's legitimate Harry stepped into their circle. "I'm tired of secrets. Hermione has questions for you, Professor. Anything else can wait."

Hermione shuffled over and said, "We need to know where the ring is."

"Do you?" Dumbledore returned, clearly a challenge.

"Yes, sir," Hermione humbly replied, dropping her gaze.

"You do know what you are asking for?" Dumbledore queried, like an examination question.

Hermione nodded, shaking her hair which had fallen before her face. "We have the other two things."

Dumbledore straightened at this news. "Interesting." He looked her over before turning to disguised Harry. "And you agree with this?" When Harry replied in the affirmative, Dumbledore asked the same of Snape, who nodded.

"I see that I have failed utterly." Dumbledore took off his hat to brush his hair back, before replacing it again. "Harry," he said, "step a little closer so I can see you properly. You know what Ms. Granger is referring to, correct?"

Harry shook his head. "She keeps me as much in the dark as you used to."

Dumbledore's head pulled back from the frame and he had to straighten his hat. "Well, good to know someone is looking out for you."

"I don't particularly see it that way," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore sighed loudly. "If even half of what I've overheard is true, things are quite dire indeed." After pausing for a sniffle, he contemplated Harry, eyes oozing affection to the point where the paint composing him appeared fresh again. "I'm sorry for this, Harry. Everything I've ever done, I did to protect you because I loved you. But this one will not be that way. If I tell Ms. Granger what she wants to know, and yes, I know where the ring is . . ." Hermione stood straight, eager to hear.

Dumbledore sniffled again. "If I tell her, I fear I will be sacrificing you to this cause more thoroughly than I ever thought possible."

Harry's scarred brow wrinkled. "Haven't I already been?" he asked.

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"Not like this," Dumbledore said quietly. "Not at all like this." He sighed the loudest yet, making the picture frame vibrate on the shelf. He tapped his finger on his crossed arms and said, "In a way I would rather see you . . . well, I suppose that is not fair to the rest of the wizarding world."

"Rather see me what?" Harry asked.

"Dead," Snape bluntly provided from his perch on the shelf a few feet beyond the painting.

Harry glanced between Snape and the painting. "You can't really mean that," he snapped.

Dumbledore said, "I do indeed. Harry, you have to promise me something. When this is war is over. When you have won-"

"What makes you think that's going to happen?" Harry came back.

"Oh, you will. Your friends are asking me to help you become invincible."

Harry gave Hermione a doubtful glance.

Dumbledore went on, "Remember Binn's lessons of how Grindelwald roared across Europe, unstoppable? He only had one of the Hallows and you will have all three. Ah!" he said, cutting off Harry's leap into a question. "Before I say another word, I must have your promise that you will heed me when this war has ended."

Harry stared at the painting. "Invincible?"

"Yes." The painting's voice reverberated now, growing in strength. "Restrained only by your conscience, your love for your friends, and absolutely nothing else. Imagine it well, and then promise me you will do whatever I say, no matter how much you wish to do otherwise."

"You're saying I can just destroy Voldemort and his followers and free us all from the war?"

"Not necessarily in that order. And it will require care, Harry. And some patience to avoid extending the carnage. I would like to guide you in that as well, but that is less a requirement than your final loyalty."

Hermione stepped in, grasping Harry by the arm. "Harry, I don't like the sound of this. He wishes you dead rather than this; you don't know what he's going to ask of you."

Snape too, had stood away from the shelf as if to approach and offer a warning.

Harry pushed her hand away. "It's all right. We don't have any choice. I promise I'll do whatever you say," he pledged to Dumbledore.

"I am going to have you make that promise to your mother as well, if you don't mind."

Harry blinked at him. "How's that?"

Disguised Harry shared an alarmed and curious glance with Snape.

Dumbledore's painting settled back in its seat. "You will see."

The Order spent the day holed up in the dining room, plotting, leaving displaced Harry and Snape in their room to complete their own planning. Harry kept his thoughts away from Death Eaters, even the two assigned out on the square that flickered constantly at the edge of his senses. He would be leaving here soon, and they did not matter.

A knock finally interrupted their scheming. Hermione informed them that lunch was almost ready and that Dumbledore's painting demanded to speak with Aaron, alone. "He's up in the attic," Hermione informed him. "He said he preferred it there."

Harry climbed up to the attic, brushing cobwebs out of his hair and sneezing.

"Bless you," the painting said.

Harry closed the door and cast as many spells as he could to assure they were alone before sitting on a trunk facing the painting, which had been propped in the opened drawer of a battered dresser. "You wanted to see me," Harry said.

"I want to make certain you are leaving immediately, before you destroy everything."

"I am. As soon as I can arrange it."

"And you stated that Severus was with you . . .? He is badly needed here."

"He is. I'm taking him with me, but he'll be here," Harry said, delighting in confusing even the portrait of his old mentor.

The painting hesitated. "I am not certain I understand."

"Just as well," Harry said. "About time I got the chance to leave you with only opaque hints to work with." Harry stood. "I am not risking anything in this place. Not really." He started to leave and said, "Severus will need help, since he will not know what has happened here for the last few weeks. Do give him your assistance if you will . . ."

The painting pondered this, finally settling on: "I will assist Severus with whatever he needs."

"We left him notes in the back of the Potions notebook. Tell him that, in case he doesn't find them."

The painting spent even more time considering this. "Certainly." Then: "You are leaving when?"

"Tomorrow. But tell this to no one."

Dumbledore's visage nodded. "Interesting making your acquaintance; it lets me know far too much about what you may survive, I'll confess."

Harry leaned close all of a sudden. "It tells you nothing of the sort. I'm nineteen." Harry stood, ignoring the painting's confounded expression. "Good day, Professor."

That night, Harry lay fitfully, afraid to sink completely into sleep. The two shadows hovering close on the square needled him. He could not remain neutral about them and their more distant, but plentiful peers – both servants and enemies – could not be denied. Each time he closed his eyes to relax, they vacillated between these two roles, taunting him to defeat them or take control.

Despite this inner battle Harry tried hard to seem outwardly at peace. He lay half curled as much as possible in the small space on the shared bed, head buried against his bent arm, as if he could block out the psychic impressions.

Harry remained cautiously still, despite the turmoil within. Perhaps he lay too still because Snape raised his head and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. His resonating voice came out of the grey murk, saying, "You are rather agitated. And I am uncertain why." When Harry did not respond after many seconds he went on, "Do stay, Harry. There is nothing for you to do here."

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry said through his robe sleeve. But it was almost a lie. His entire being hummed, keyed up to take some kind of action, be it offensive or defensive. He longed to be alone, home away from the shadows, as badly as he feared losing them.

Snape's hand brushed the hair over Harry's ear before re-gripping his shoulder. "If you were any more tense, you could serve as a tuning fork. What is wrong?"

Harry shook his head.

Snape sighed faintly and dropped back on his own pillow. "When we get home, we will discuss it."

Some purer core of Harry flinched at what it feared would be a long and tedious lecture. "If we must," Harry said, feeling suddenly better despite his grim response. He held onto that old, familiar loathing of detention. It felt nostalgic and wholly alien to the corrupting power teasing just within reach. With it he found a balance, and shallow rest.

The early grey-blue light had barely given form to the objects in the room when Snape shook Harry awake. Stiffly, Harry roused with a yawn and lit the hearth, intending to warm himself before sliding out into the cold air.

"We should go," Snape said, prompting Harry to groan and brave the chill.

As he tugged himself into his robes, Harry quietly said, "Do you feel all right about going?"

Snape halted in pouring out the dregs from a cold teapot left from the night before. He set the pot down, stared into the cup and said, "Dumbledore has things well in hand. And he seemed most eager for you to depart."

"That's because he doesn't understand . . ." Harry dropped his voice lower still. " . . . that I'm not from the future."

"He's a painting. There are limits to what it can grasp."

Harry dropped his arms and made ready to Disapparate. They had used the house travel map the night before and had already plotted out a misdirection route. "That's just it. How much help can he be?"

"All he has to do is help them complete this triumvirate of objects and I believe the odds will be about even."

"Lots for them to do, even if they win," Harry said, feeling reluctant to leave, and worried about the source.

"That is always true. It is true for us as well."

"Not like this."

"Nevertheless."

Shrewsthorpe stood with the same willful stillness as Grimmauld Place. The fat, sagging candles and chalk lines of the Device had collected a light coating of dust but

otherwise remained as before. Harry rubbed his neck and stood before it, sensing its dormant connections to the netherworld and beyond, chilled and heartened by it at the same time. Snape came beside him and unrolled the notes where they could both see them.

Harry had been optimistic about the spell, but faced with so many complicated execution diagrams, one after another, he felt daunted by what they needed to do. "Good thing we're getting started early."

Snape's eyes slid over to him before he shook his head and paced around the pentagram's broad borders. "I am hopeful that because it was used before it will reopen more easily than an original construction."

"We have to make certain it's closed utterly this time," Harry said. "If what you say is true, it will reopen even easier after this." Harry sighed and rubbed his itching scar. Snape observed his, but continued without comment. Harry, realizing he was being watched too closely, said, "What's the first step?"

"Clean up the lines, straighten the candles – the Black family was gracious enough to loan us a few-"

"They aren't in a position to notice," Harry pointed out.

"Or more accurately: too dead to notice. Then we create the power arcs between the nodes-"

"You're getting punchy," Harry criticized.

Snape stood with his arms hanging loose. "I admit, I am less than hopeful. Perhaps I have been in this place too long."

"I'm going to get you home, Severus. Let's get to work." Harry bent and used the corner of his robe to clean up the smudges around the nearest vertex.

When it came time to work the first spell, the pair stared at each other until Harry said, "You should do this part."

Snape held the notes out to Harry. "I was wondering if you should. Then the magic all through would be yours when it comes time to work through the gaps in what we have."

Harry pushed the notes back. "But the spell is already yours. Or essentially," he added quietly.

Snape pulled the notes back and held them out, angled to the sparse light. "True, I'll admit. And the has the hallmarks of dark magic. At this point, perhaps I have more leeway . . ."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked.

Snape shook his head, lowered the paper and began to point at each vertex while reciting the complicated spell from memory, then repeating, like a mantra, until Harry had it memorized too.

Harry's bored and over-keyed mind was certain an hour had passed. The sky impinged earnestly now through the cracks in the boards over the windows. Finally, glowing arcs connected each of the vertices to each of the others. At the end of one round, Snape simply stopped and rubbed his arm. The arcs continued to hum, flowing and oscillating as if attracted and repelled by each other.

"Now it must be inverted into the netherworld," Snape said. Squinting at the notes, he tried a spell several times, but the arcs merely deformed before bouncing back.

Harry said, "I can open the gateway wider."

Snape stepped back. "Be careful not to impose your will upon the Device. My counterpart formed a gate without your skills and I am loath to venture too far from his methodology." He sighed. "That stated . . . go ahead. I'll give you a count."

Snape counted to five and Harry cracked open the Plane. The arcs contorted and sizzled against the floor before disappearing. Harry released the opening and reasserted the barrier. "I think I may have been holding it closed on you. It's just a habit."

"A good one to possess." Without further comment he began the same spell again, recreating the arcs on their side.

It required just as long again. Harry paced, feeling uneasy and keeping his wand in hand. He felt watched despite their alarm spells remaining silent. He roamed farther this time, around the room's edge, to find Tidgy's ghost hovering in the dining room doorway. The elf's oversized eyes watched him pass, blinking without disturbing the air.

The second set of arcs finished, Snape paged ahead, studying his amended notes before moving on to building a dome on the arcs. Harry came aside and read along, needing to do something.

Snape, lecturing, said, "During this step, the arcs are stretched upward until they connect back to themselves, linking the Planes." He pointed at the instruction list, which ended in an infinity symbol. "Done correctly, the arcs will straighten perfectly upward and thin infinitely."

"What? You mean they will stretch the entire length of the universe? Seems doubtful."

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Snape raised his wand. "As long as they stretch far enough for the spell, I'll put aside the astronomical implications."

It took several attempts. Fortunately the arcs proved resilient upon failure and always jumped back, bright as ever. But Snape finally mastered the motion to wave them ever upward, until they stretched so thin they disappeared and the device fell dark again, but to Harry, it hummed strangely, making the hair on his arms tingle.

"What now?" Harry asked.

"That was going to be my question," an unexpected voice said.

Harry spun on his heel, bringing his wand up to aim at Draco Malfoy, standing just inside the back door.

Malfoy shifted his shoulders and keeping his wand trained back on disguised Harry, circled closer to study the device. "Took me a while to get through all the alarms on this place." He stopped near the front corner of the hall. "What are you doing? What is this spell?"

Harry cast his voice into old and wavering and said. "Nothing of interest to you. You would best be served by getting out of the way." Harry felt for the young man's Mark, intending to bring him down with that rather than cast a spell that may disturb the Device.

"I want my wand back."

"I don't have your wand."

Pointing with his chin at Snape, Draco snarled as if to an idiot, "HE took it."

Snape said, "It wasn't yours to begin with. Are wands so difficult to obtain that you resorted to taking Dumbledore's from his dead hands?"

Draco cringed, as if at a memory. "My father took it."

"Why?" Snape demanded, full force Head of House.

Draco withered under the assault. "Because the Dark Lord wanted it. My father took it and forced Ollivander to make a duplicate of it to trick him with."

"But why give it to you?" Snape demanded again.

Draco raised his chin. "Father wanted to keep me safe, that's why. He figured if the Dark Lord wanted the wand so badly that it must be special."

"How did you find us?" Harry asked.

"I followed Potter," Draco said. "I have access to Transportation's records if I need them. He was easy to follow, he jumped around so much in a short span of time."

"Too bad for you," came another new voice from the other corner of the hall. An invisibility cloak slipped aside and this world's Harry stepped into the fray, wand out.

"That's my wand," Draco snapped. "I want it back."

"It's mine now," Harry proclaimed and spells rang out, tangled, and Draco turned a limb-splayed somersault before landing in a heap.

"I like this wand," Harry quipped happily, stepping over to lightly kick Draco's inert form with his toe. Draco's hand shot out and tried to trip him. Harry jumped lightly back and used a Jelly Limbs Curse to get his ankle freed up.

Disguised Harry stepped closer to the Device, trying to sense if it had been damaged. It felt untouched, and he slouched in relief, more than even his persona required.

Draco pushed himself up with his hands, only to fall on his face again. "I want my wand!" he whined plaintively.

"You'll be lucky if I don't take this one too," Harry said, picking Draco's wand up off the floor where his limp hand had dropped it. "Disgusting of you taking Dumbledore's wand. Now, what to do with you." He aimed his wand between Draco's eyes and cast a Memory Charm, and a sense of Cursedness made disguised Harry shout a warning, but too late.

A golden pendant dangling around Draco's neck flashed yellow-hot and bounced the Charm back. A counter flashed out of Harry's wand at the same instant, swallowing the curse. He stepped back, staring at the wand in surprise.

Draco pushed to his feet and Disapparated while Harry mused, distracted. Harry pocketed Draco's other wand and said, "Good riddance to that," and turned to the others.

"You should not be here either," Snape stated.

"I wanted to know what you were concocting. You left traces on the route planning map, which records every touch, compliments of Hermione," Harry said, glancing at the now quiet Device while his counterpart considered their options. "What are you working on?"

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Draco landed outside Malfoy Manor in the cold gravel, tossed there by the spells protecting the porch, which already that morning must have been reinforced for the day. Hands stinging, he crunched to his feet and strode inside. The Carrows stood in the hall with heads bent toward each other, whispering, as Draco plowed by, intent upon his destination. His father had gradually pulled away from wholeheartedly supporting their master, satisfied with running his fiefdom at Hogwarts, putting Draco in an increasingly untenuous position. Draco did not know what he would be satisfied with in the long run, but in the short run, a little revenge and bolstering of his own position would be fulfilling enough.

With Bellatrix in hospital, MacNair and Mulciber were given the task of keeping guard over Voldemort's appropriated suite. Draco attempted to simply walk between them, to knock on the door, but he was bodily lifted and set aside rather than allowed to reach his goal.

Draco, bit his lip and brushed himself off. The nasty look that would have withered his classmates, drew smirks here.

"I have to speak with the Dark Lord," Draco pronounced. "I have news."

"Yeah? What for? You have somethin' to tell 'im . . . we'll pass it on for you," Mulciber drawled. His mask had been slid up onto his head, under his hood, which made him appear to be wearing a funny cap. It did not make him look any more friendly.

Draco had no intention of losing the influence his news would lend him. "As if I would tell you something only our Lord should hear," Draco snarled as derisive as possible.

The pair shifted from their spots beside the door and approached. Draco backed up. He had lost his wand, both his wands, and could not physically best them. A full retreat to rethink seemed the best option until the door sucked open with a smoky whoosh and revealed Voldemort standing in the center of the room.

"Let the boy in. I wish to speak with him as well."

The guards stood aside and bowed him forward. Draco swallowed hard, now faced with what he had wanted: access to the murky room that formerly served as his mother's brightly lit dressing room. Draco found the ego to stride inside, but he jumped faintly when the door rushed closed behind him.

Voldemort paced to the fire, the light from which failed to make it into the room except to further confuse the eye about what was real and what was shadow. The Dark Lord held something in his bony fingers, the wand, the fake wand, so carefully

aged by a terrified Ollivander that it and the original could barely be distinguished. Draco took the opportunity to collect his rampant thoughts, to have a chance of hiding them.

Voldemort's terrible voice sounded even worse when it took on an air of casual calm. But he did not look up as he asked, "Tell me again what happened on the tower, young Malfoy."

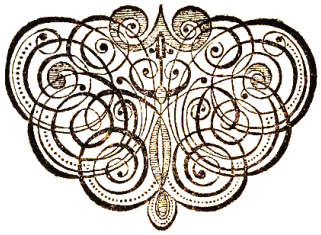
In that instant, Draco was painfully grateful he no longer had the wand. To be revealed to have it here and now would mean an incomprehensibly miserable end. He stuttered through the beginnings of his carefully modified tale, and Voldemort raised his hand, which shoved him back into an armchair that slid over to meet his back. "I have no patience for your nerves, Malfoy. What did Severus Snape do, exactly?" Now his eyes bored into Draco's and the scene in the tower, of Dumbledore begging and Snape finally giving him release, played out.

Draco closed his eyes, cutting it all off. He covered his loss of control by saying petulantly, "He used a killing curse which threw the headmaster off the tower. What else is there to tell?" Ollivander had pulled Draco aside and strongly suggested, with the disingenuous air of a truly caring uncle, that Draco not tell anyone he had disarmed Dumbledore. Draco never understood why not, but sitting there now, pinned to a chair by magic far beyond him even with a wand, he pledged to bring the old wizard a feast and a stack of blankets to improve his poor prison in gratitude.

Draco risked opening his eyes. Voldemort stared down at the wand in his fingers, studying its intricate carving in the firelight. He did this for over a minute before saying, "You insisted to my guards that you must see me. What for?" in a voice that could not be denied, perhaps even in death.

Author's Notes: Happy New Year to everyone (those using the Gregorian Calendar, that is ;-)

Chapter 38.



Fateful Escape, Part II

"How long have you been here watching?" Snape asked the figure exploring the edges of the room.

This world's Harry crossed his arms, wand dangling at his side with confident ease. "Long enough to wonder what you're doing." When they did not reply to this, he added, "I doubt I could repeat the spell, if that's your concern. Without knowing what it does, I probably wouldn't try."

Harry thought his counterpart to be lying, but there was nothing for it. To Snape he said, "What's next?"

Snape gestured for him to come closer, then whispered, "We are almost finished. The candles must be lit, simultaneously, and the Device anchored. That is it." He reached as if to pull out the notes, but did not open them again. "The procedure is unclear from here. The anchoring instructions are repeated, and I am not certain why. But I expect either the Device will activate, or not. If it does not, we shall repeat as necessary." Snape turned his body and leaned closer to better hide his voice. "What do you propose we do with your counterpart?"

Harry shrugged. "What can we do? Who am I to insist someone not visit other worlds? If we remove the anchor from our own, he will most likely not make it to ours."

"Odds are, he won't, but I am still uneasy."

"I'd hate to damage his memory with a spell. He's got enough to worry about."

Snape sighed. "I agree with that. That said, the anchoring in the instructions is vague on another point. How do you choose where you wish to go?"

"I just think about the key features of the place and people and I get taken there."

"And you can return to that place again, with some reliability," Snape added, half a question.

"Well, yes. I think."

"Then we shall leave that step to you." Shielded by his body, he held out the notes.

Harry said, "If we are leaving it to me, I don't need the notes."

Without turning to look, he gave a snapping wave of his wand arm that lit the candles, adding, "It is yours then. Perhaps you can keep the incantations quiet enough to not be heard." Snape backed off, sober face limned by warm candlelight.

Harry glanced at the notes and, while imagining himself poised to travel home, began the last stage of the spell. The Device crackled, the candles popped. Harry glanced back at his guardian and began again, only to have the same result, worse yet, he had a sense of the interstice warping in some stomach lurching way he had never felt before.

Snape joined him again, whispering, "You are enforcing your will upon the Device, I believe. What are you visualizing?"

"I'm imaging Candide at home, waiting."

"But she is not."

"But she will be if we don't make it."

"Perhaps Candide does not make a good anchor, since we do not actually know for certain what she imagines about what is happening." Snape held his hands out for the notes. "Perhaps I should continue the spell."

"What are you going to visualize?"

"I will think of something," Snape said, turning to face the Device. "Perhaps you should attempt to convince our visitant to depart or, failing that, at least distract him, "

Harry slowly moved away while Snape intoned the spell just under his breath. His eyes closed, face intent as the dead language flowed out. The candle flames rose and fell rather than sputtering, breathing with a life of their own. The flames stretched

longer, reaching for some distant satellite, tracked its course over the house, then returned to straining straight up. Harry wished he knew whether to view this as a positive sign or not.

With a quick check of his beard, Harry retreated from the candles' warmth and sidled over to his counterpart, whose mesmerized gaze remained fixed on Snape and the Device.

Harry said, "You really should go."

The other bit his lip momentarily before turning to Harry. "Tell me what you are doing, first if you want me to go."

"It is a spell that allows me to go home."

"You're leaving?" the young man asked, sharply. "You're letting some old portrait tell you what to do?"

"Aren't you?" Harry prodded with a gentleness that made him cringe with his own memories of where else he had heard it.

His counterpart smirked as he returned to observing the incantation. "I guess you did know Dumbledore."

"He is correct that it is my time to go. He is mistaken about the reason, but he is only a portrait, and cannot understand."

They both observed the spell execution. Harry sensed movement under his feet, like sand sifting out with a receding wave. He dearly wanted this over with. He considered what argument might convince himself to leave under such circumstances, finally settling on: "Harry, this does not involve you. It involves something I must do to make right the unexpected consequences of my own lack of magical control. Your being here puts that at risk. I will send Severus back to you just as soon as we are finished here."

Reaching for snide and setting his shoulders more confidently, the other Harry said, "You don't want to keep him?"

"Severus is my family. And the answer is too complicated to explain right now. I'll say that I do expect you to protect him."

The other Harry turned to lock gazes again. Reflected glowing pentagrams shimmered in his eyes. "Do I answer to you if I fail at that?"

"Fair enough question," Harry said, thinking hard, knowing his answer mattered greatly to the impostor, for whom it would actually apply. "I realize your task is

overwhelmingly important, but you will need Severus to guide you after it is all over. That I know. Your friends are not strong enough for this task. For your own good, you need to protect him. But I realize that may prove impossible, so I will certainly not exact revenge if you fail to do so." Harry's voice wavered, struck weak by bad possibility.

His counterpart appeared to notice, because he quickly looked away again.

Harry went on. "You will need Severus close by to avoid becoming a hazard to your friends and wizarddom. I know that seems impossible now, but it isn't."

The other Harry dropped his gaze, which had the effect of making his eyes dim, no longer reflecting the Device. In the darkness their piercing green failed to make up the difference.

After a space, jaw tight, the young man said, "It won't matter for long. I think Dumbledore is going to insist I kill myself at the end of this." When he received no response, he went on, jaw tight, "Don't you think so?"

Harry had difficulty contemplating that, had difficulty pulling in a full breath. "I don't know what he will ask of you. I certainly hope it isn't that." Harry meant it, and it came through clearly in his voice. He raised a hand and brushed his counterpart's arm, and the other young man moved casually to get out of reach.

Harry withdrew his hand, but immediately raised it to his forehead, which felt needled. His counterpart gasped at the same time and ducked, pressing his fist against his scar.

"Severus, hide!" Harry shouted across the hall, and dragged his counterpart toward the closest doorway, that to the library.

His counterpart, with a tight-lipped moan, tossed his invisibility cloak over both of them, just as the candles fluttered and a dark, swirling form landed in the center of the hall. Harry gripped the sleeves of his counterpart to hold him up, and held stock still, leaning around the door frame to observe from under the cloak's protection.

Voldemort prowled the room, his muted face turning this way and that as he stalked around the Device. Harry held his wand at ready, prepared to distract him should he make a move toward the drawing room where Snape must have hidden. But Voldemort strode to the center of the hall and called out, "I know you are here, Potter. Save us both a lot of pain and come out and face your short future."

With a swish, the white skinned face turned one way, then the other, as if sniffing out two possible enemies. Harry pushed fully into the library and whispered, "I'll keep him distracted while you get away."

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This world's Harry stared at him, flinching again with the pain in his scar. Harry said, "I can distract him long enough for you to get at Nagini. Go on. Take the cloak and go." Harry tossed the cloak off and untangled himself from the hem of it.

The other gathered the cloak around his shoulders, head floating disembodied. He grabbed Harry's robes and whispered, "You can't stay."

Out in the hall, a stalking Voldemort, called out, "I don't know what kind of childish magic you are attempting here, but it will not work. You cannot leave this place except through me."

Harry, fearing for the Device, quickly canceled his disguise, and with a wave of Ravenclaw's spells, opened a broken arched doorway in the outer stone wall. "GO!" he commanded in as harsh a whisper as he dared.

His counterpart gaped at him, eyes roving his face. "He . . . he won't be fooled by that."

"GO," Harry tried again and gave a forceful shove on his counterpart's arm.

The other stumbled and tossed his cloak over his head, but raised it up like an anti-cave to warn: "He'll know you're not me!"

Harry turned and marched out the library door to find Voldemort standing before the Device. Harry said, "You're looking for me?"

The figure turned, wand extended toward Harry, pinched with queer delicacy between alabaster fingers. "Ah, Potter. So, you are here. My servants often fail me, but not this time, it seems."

"You didn't bring any of those friends?" Harry asked, stalling, hoping his counterpart had departed, but fearing he had not.

Smug now, in the terrifying way only he could be, Voldemort said, "I can bring them at any time."

Harry dropped his shoulders and shifted his feet, pretending boredom in the face of what felt like a churning dark hole in the fabric of his inner mind.

Voldemort said, "It is past time for you to die, but only after I learn what game you are playing at here."

Harry shrugged, dragging things out as long as possible. He had to assume his counterpart was taking advantage as he advised. Voldemort swept his arms wide and stepped to the side to glance back at the Device. Harry wondered if he felt it instinctively the same way he did.

Fateful Escape, Part II

"A First-Year's silly project, it looks like," Voldemort sneered, and Harry hoped he honestly believed that. Perhaps he was unaware of grey worlds overlaying this one, even as he caused such a violent wrinkle in them. Harry pushed those musings away, lest they be snagged from him in a moment of weakness.

Voldemort aimed his wand directly at Harry's head. His cloak fluttered oddly around him, at once weightless and infinitely heavy. "What is this, Potter?"

"What does it look like?" Harry mocked back.

"Dark Magic. Which your former mentor would be most saddened to hear you are attempting." His wand lowered, aiming at Harry's knees now. "Perhaps you can be turned. Does the power of this thing call to you?"

Reluctant to reply, but eager to stall, Harry nodded.

Voldemort laughed with a chuffing sound. "Yes, I can see it making your eyes glow, even from here." Voldemort considered him as the candles fluttered in a draft before stilling again. "Why don't you join me, Potter? It would be so much easier. I'll make certain your little friends are safe. Isn't that what you want?"

Voldemort tried for reassuring, but the treacly flow of his voice made Harry's skin creep up his arms. Harry rubbed his scar, half without thinking. Voldemort's voice dropped, "If you accept me, that will hurt less." He gestured at the Device behind him. "Forget these infantile attempts at schoolbook Dark Magic. I can show you things you never imagined."

Yeah, right, Harry thought. "Like what?" he asked, unable to not sound derisive.

"You doubt me?" Voldemort asked. His chest and shoulders inflated, making him appear to swell and float above the floor. His wand arm struck out, but Harry was right with him, throwing up a counter to the Snake Conjuration Curse. The spells exploded between them, sending pink and yellow streamers swimming through the hall, hissing.

Voldemort hesitated, surprised. Harry took one breath and came back with the most forceful Chain Binding he could. His most practiced spell worked for half a second before the links melted. A Blasting Curse came back. Harry threw a Rubber Shield over it, but it still shifted the stones in the walls around them as it dissipated.

Intense instinct pumped through Harry's limbs. He half spun, light footed and ecstatically alive, to literally throw a Cutting Curse across the hall. Voldemort managed a block, but he needed two steps to keep his feet. Harry did not let him recover, he

followed up with a Whip Charm, aimed at Voldemort's ankles. But Voldemort had a better Counter than Harry knew existed, and Harry's wand tried to jerk out of his hand, and he hung on, getting tugged halfway across the room and dropped hard on the floor.

Harry struggled to draw a breath into flattened lungs. Voldemort strode closer. Harry sucked in a small fractional breath and worried that Snape may intervene. Between gasps, Harry squelched, mostly, the oncoming Crucio. Voldemort cried out faintly and staggered. Harry pushed himself to sit up, limbs singing with pain, gripping his wet and gritty wand. Voldemort's wand flashed with another Blasting Curse and Harry squelched this one right on time. Voldemort went airborne, met the wall beside the library door, and slid down it, stunned.

Harry stood up and brushed himself off. "I see you have a new wand," he said, indicating the elder wood wand Voldemort held.

Voldemort blinked, still returning to his senses. He held his wand up to examine it dazedly. Harry used a Expelliarmus to knock the wand away and it clattered along the wall where came to rest, glowing out of the shadows. As much as his distorted face would allow, Voldemort's expression grew sly and Harry felt a shifting in his inner vision, a flutter like birds changing direction in flight. In that instant, Harry sensed them, all the servant shadows, all at once. Breathless again, he teetered on his feet. He knew how to send a disturbance into that connection to irritate their Marks, but he had not known how to Summon. Summoning was not dissonance, it was more like song, tuned strings vibrating in the presence of a matching tone of music, rising and falling, calling all of them.

Harry cut it off. He threw his mental weight against the siren vibrato coursing through his inner mind, deadening it utterly. The room remained still.

Voldemort, growing wary, began to stand by clawing his way backwards up the wall. He tugged another more familiar wand out of his robes and aimed it at Harry.

"Sure you want to use that one?" Harry asked. "The one Dumbledore wanted you to have?" Harry bit his lip and gestured at himself with his fingers. "Come on. Want to show me what you can do with that one?"

Voldemort glanced at Harry's wand. Harry with vicious helpfulness said, "I can change to that one, if you'd like," indicating the fallen one across the room.

Voldemort's eyes flickered to the other wand and blinked, giving away that realization struck, and it was not a pleasant realization. His eyes were caught then by something

else across the room that made his lip curl. Harry assumed he had spotted Snape, but did not risk turning to check.

Harry set his shoulders and drew his attention back at himself. "I'm tired of this. I'm tired of you killing my friends of you tormenting Muggles and wizards you don't approve of. I'm tired of this war."

Voldemort spelled a Curse, something that threatened to balloon to fill the entire hall. Harry did not even take the time to resister what it was beyond that, squashed down, the backlash was sufficient to knock Voldemort down again and force him to scrabble for his second wand. His hand shook before he got it aimed again, shoulder wedged against the wall to hold himself upright with his feet trying to find purchase.

Harry aimed his wand between Voldemort's scarlet eyes, yearning to finish this. His breath came in heaves as he fought the instinct not to just crush the darkness slithering before him, but to slip into its place and Summon his followers, to breath in not air, but unfathomable power and reach. Harry bit his lip hard, hunched over with the effort of resisting. So easy to just climb into the center of the web shimmering smokily right before him.

Weak with tormented effort and suddenly damp and cold in his clothes, Harry managed to hoarsely mock, "I've decided to take your advice and I'm not playing around any more, Tom. This is the beginning of the end for everything you've wanted."

This was not his place, Harry adamantly reminded himself. Snape waited. Candide waited. His friends would suffer. He could not risk killing this Voldemort. This world's Harry would have to fulfill his role. He himself could only escape this place, at best.

Voldemort lowered his wand, and Harry's jerked, triggered by the movement to ready a Counter. A ruffle shook Harry's robes and, with a burst of inky smoke, the other wizard vanished.

Harry turned to check the room and found Snape in the doorway to the drawing room, wand drawn. For a second he seemed to consider keeping it up against Harry, but he lowered it.

Harry was still catching his breath when Snape joined him, simple air no longer felt sufficient.

Snape considered their project for several breaths, mind elsewhere based on his expression. He finally said, "I was going to have you check the anchoring on the Device, but I think it is sufficient, given your state."

Harry stumbled up beside him. "No, I'll see if I can check."

Ignoring Snape's hand of assistance, Harry stood unsteadily before the Device, calmed by the glow of its ever breathing tapers. Snape took Harry's shoulders and tugged him aside. "Why don't you rest a moment?"

"I don't know how much time we have," Harry argued, desperate to go, to escape his rampant instincts to reach out and grab what should not be his. With a great swallow and forced calm, Harry asked, "How long do you think he'll be gone?"

Snape shook his head, hands still clasped on Harry's arms as if fearing he may slip free. "I have never seen him run like that, so I do not know." He patted Harry's sleeve and turned him more away from the Device. "Better yet, why don't you talk to me a bit."

Harry could not possibly describe what he felt. A dreamy sense of skirting above everything, untouchable warred with feeling bound into intimate contact with an entire army, if he just would let it be true. "We should go, Severus."

Snape gazed at him narrowly before saying, "Whatever you are going through . . . will it end when we leave this place?"

Through a haze of willful deceit, Harry managed to faintly shake his head.

Snape's fingers now hurt where they gripped. "Will it improve, at least?"

"Yes." Harry repeated. "Yes."

Snape turned him to the Device and held him there by the arms as they both gazed into it. Harry moved his toe to avoid bumping the closest candle, Snape forcefully stepped him back, like a puppet. Harry did not think he needed so much help. "I'm fine," he said, raising his arms to shake free of help.

"If you are certain," Snape said, remaining close, but letting go.

"I didn't kill him," Harry argued his case. "I wanted to."

"I noted that," Snape said. "But you do not seem quite yourself."

Harry brushed his hair back. "I'm the same self I always am," he muttered sadly, and felt better for admitting that. They stood side by side in silence, woven into their own thoughts until Harry said, "Let's get you home."

Snape took his arm again, grip hard as ever. "You will follow?"

Harry, who had not contemplated otherwise, blinked back at him in surprise. "Of course."

This calmed Snape considerably. “All right.” Harry restrained him from entering the device, saying “Let me check it first.”

Snape allowed himself to be pushed back out of the candles’ immediate light. Harry drew in a deep well of air and relaxed his mind, pushing aside the cloying web of power that tried to smother him as he did so. The Device sat like an immovable island in a universe of chaos, and within it, Harry read peace, or at least relative peace: a place unstalked by Voldemort, where a few struggled to straighten out the Ministry of Magic after many battles, both for power and otherwise. Harry sensed himself, struggling with things beyond his maturity and innate coping skills, wishing for guidance from someone too far away to provide it. The candle flames veered and righted as he returned to the here and now. Smiling wryly, Harry stepped back and gestured like an invitation to Snape. “Feels okay. Better than here, for certain.”

Snape uncrossed his arms and after handing Harry the instructions, held up his robes to step safely into the star-shaped void. “You are right that we must hurry. But that said, do be mindful of what you are doing.”

With care to avoid igniting his robes or his hair, Snape crouched and uncurled himself, reaching out to align each limb along an arm of the pentagram before resting his head back on the unyielding floor. Harry dropped his eyes away from the sacrificial vision before him to squint at the phonetic notations beneath the original obscure alchemal codes. On the next sheet, the anchoring process was indeed repeated. Harry puzzled over this, wondering if he should try to execute that part. Haste weighed on him, and he began reading, figuring he could do that section if the spell failed without it.

Harry’s voice sounded stilted and meaningless as he read, but the Device hummed to life, gathering a halo more substantial than the candles could account for. The last words of the incantation fell from his lips and he lifted his wand to copy the complex tracing in the air, trying very hard not to shape what was happening with his innate skill, but it was near impossible to hold back. He could feel the gateway contorting as it yawned wide, could sense possibilities stacking to infinity, making his knees weak. He wanted that peaceful place where the only enemy was his own weakness and his largest need for help from the one who, through atonement, had allowed him to find himself. In such a place he could imagine successfully overcoming what remained of Voldemort’s legacy, and he ached with hope to get there.

The Device latched firmly and dilated open, making Harry hold his breath, steering without trying, but fearing to hold back. A rush of wind threatened the candle flames, sending them seeking outward from the Device in all directions. Visions shot along the flat edges of the pentagram then the wind rushed inward. Then silence.

Chapter 38

Harry blinked at the still candles. Snape was gone. For an instant Harry stood there on his toes, startled by the sudden cessation of shifting Planes, but then alarm took over: Snape's counterpart had not arrived in his stead.

Having been mangled and shunted through an impossibly narrow and acid-cold gap in reality, Severus Snape found breathable air and a hard floor to be an almost insultingly mundane conclusion to his experience. The inconceivable faded and the paralyzing cold took over. His limbs barely obeyed his will, shaking violently when he tried to pull out his wand. His fingers refused to work properly, and he had to wedge the wand against a knot in the floorboards to hold it steady while spelling a Heating Charm into the wood beside him. Gradually, the blessed heat spread under him and eventually, the tremors eased enough that he could breathe normally and sit up.

Snape was in his house, but not. Dust carpeted the floor, disturbed by his struggles. Joints protesting, he stood and out of paranoid habit wiped clean the evidence of his arrival by returning the dust to a smooth sheen. He added another spell to his feet to continue masking his presence.

The house stood empty, but unlike the one he just exited, it remained undamaged, and smelled of nothing but old wood and mold, long unoccupied. Where was he? he wondered, flinching at a random pain when he turned to study the un-boarded upper windows. Someone had seen fit to only protect the house from casual marauders.

Snape sat down cross-legged beside the invisible Device to wait for Harry. His charge would be hurrying to straighten things out, in that Snape had faith. How long it would take him to work things out remained a looming question, but Snape would not make things more difficult by straying away.

A cloud moved across the sun, muting twin four-squares of light beaming down from the upper windows. Despite being intact, the house was not warm. At risk of chills, Snape stood to warm himself by moving about. He circled the hall, glancing into each room, finding fleeting familiarity with how the house had been when he had bought it. Perhaps it was not actually his, just an unsold property. At least he could be assured by its state that no one would be arriving home from work. If their steering of the spell was of any reliability, Voldemort should not be a threat either. Only Harry was of any concern, back in that other dark world, working frantically to rectify things.

Fateful Escape, Part II

Snape circled around to the library and found his best books stacked with apparent haste on the lower shelves and floor. The dust around them had been disturbed recently. Snape backed out of the room and crossed to the hearth, where he could evaluate the hall floor with the advantage of the backlight of the upper windows. Old footprints wandered everywhere, dust filled, so of no immediate concern, but still mysterious.

Snape puzzled this before giving up and returning to occupying himself in a book entitled Transient Concoctions, a primer on brewing short-lived potions. The house had no chairs, so Snape sat on a stack of the largest books, precariously resting the one he was reading on a narrower tower. He was passing into the second chapter when the sound of Apparition brought his wand to hand without thought.

Snape peered around the doorframe into the hall and stopped in surprise. A figure resembling Harry stood with his back to the library, hand on the decorative metalwork supporting the stairway banister. Snape stepped fully into the doorway, subconsciously thinking to call out, but his better instincts prevailed and he remained there, motionless.

The figure dropped his arm and moved to the mirror under the stairs. He trailed a finger over the Celtic knots weaving around the frame of it, looked up, and stood unmoving, fixed on Snape's reflection in the doorway opposite. In slow motion, his hand came off the mirror and he took a half step back, but did not turn. He hung there, his pure green eyes apparent even at a distance. His hand reached for the frame again, running his hand along the side of it, as if expecting it to trigger something.

Snape crossed his arms, and this caused the other to spin, his expression revealing that he believed the reflection to have no real counterpart. Seeing no way to back out gracefully now that he had missed that chance, Snape stepped forward.

"Pr . . . Professor?" Harry stammered, growing more stunned, not less. He swallowed hard and teetered between stepping closer and falling back against the mirror.

Snape dryly stated the obvious as the best opening. "I take it you weren't expecting me."

Harry's mouth tried to smile but uncertainty overcame it. "I'd say," he said, and swallowed hard. Ever finding some inner well under pressure, he said more solidly, "I realize it's your house, but still."

From behind Harry's eyes, Snape gained a fuzzy impression of fatal violence involving himself, but it was pushed aside too quickly to perceive in detail.

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"To what do I owe the visit?" Snape asked.

"What? Oh." Harry reached back to touch the banister again, explaining, "I come here to think. The spells on this place are really good, and no one, not even an owl, can find me. It's nearly impossible, otherwise, to get a break from things," he explained, sounding tired. He began to pace, falling into his complaint, but alarm reasserted itself and he spun to face Snape again. "You don't look like a ghost." He indicated the floor. "You aren't leaving any footprints, but . . ." He came closer, raising a hand, but withdrawing it before it got halfway to Snape's sleeve.

"What are you?" Harry asked.

"Not a ghost, fortunately."

"That's good," Harry said, clearly relieved.

"More an echo," Snape explained.

"An echo?" Harry pondered.

Snape shrugged and paced away, towards the Device, worrying now that his Harry might choose that moment to come through.

Laughing nervously, which made him look much younger, Harry said, "It's true I didn't expect to find you here."

"I imagine not," Snape nebulously replied.

Harry paced him at a distance, like an eager student, saying, "I didn't expect it, but I've wanted to talk to you."

The obvious underlying pain in that statement made Snape stop and return his full attention to the immediate. "Have you? I can't imagine," he said, falling easily into his old self, the one he estimated was expected.

"I did what you said," Harry obliquely stated.

Snape tried to catch the young man's thoughts but they were running roughshod over each other, and it was impossible beyond the bizarre sense of welcoming the enveloping green of a Killing Curse.

Harry went on, "I'm sorry I didn't understand."

Snape now wished he did. There may be something to learn here for his Harry.

"I saw all the memories you left and I did what you said," Harry repeated earnestly, clearly needing to unburden himself of these words. Again, his thoughts were chaotic:

Lily as a child, Dumbledore, the green light again. While Snape pondered the inexplicableness, Harry plowed on, gathering strength from confessing. "And I feel bad that we didn't try harder save you," he helplessly admitted, arms falling loose at his sides.

Snape got a crystal clear picture that time, of Nagini's evil coils, of his own death.

Harry swallowed hard, clearly saddened, but then his eyes narrowed, ever slow on the uptake but guaranteed to get there. "Your neck . . ." He leaned in and down to better see before straightening. Suspicion bled into his movements.

Snape tipped his head back and forward, bluffing. "Your point? I'm not a ghost, as we have already established."

"You're an echo," Harry stated. "Whatever that is."

Snape shrugged. "I am dead, but I am here. Call it what you will."

Harry crossed his arms, and tapped one foot. "Tell me something only you would know."

Snape longed to steer Harry back to the previous conversation. He made a tiresome, in character noise. "Such as?"

Harry bit his lip and gathering determination said, "Tell me what memory of yours I saw that made you quit giving me Occlumency lessons."

Snape topped Harry's standoffish pose with a raised chin. "Oh, the indignity of death and now the indignity of your father's miserable treatment of me. Thank you."

Harry deflated. "Sorry."

Snape gave him now time. "Apologizing for your father now?"

Harry gave a useless arm movement. "I suppose. Yes. Now that I understand better. It's the best I can do. I didn't expect to get the chance, really." He turned to pace alone now. "All I can ever manage is to do my best. It's not always enough, I realize. But I am sorry . . . for everything."

Again, there was too much pain. Snape came back like a whip. "Potter, stop apologizing."

Harry froze and stared at him, derailed from his circling thoughts. Snape did not give him a chance to recover. "You defeated Voldemort, correct?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed with that cloying earnestness Snape had gratefully forgotten about. "I did as you said. It wasn't easy, but I did."

Since Harry's thoughts were singular this time, they came through clearer. Snape demanded, "You stood still for a Killing Curse and believe you have anything to apologize for?"

Harry's mouth moved but he gave up and fell silent.

Snape stepped closer. "May I give you some advice? Give up on the self pity, it gets you nowhere." He waved to indicate the house surrounding them, growing more forceful. "Give up on the past, you owe it nothing."

Harry gaped at him now. "But . . ."

"No buts, Potter," Snape chastised him.

In mild wonderment, Harry said, "No one talks to me like this."

Snape put up a finger to accent his point. "That may be your problem."

"Maybe. Well . . . they all smile and nod, but getting them to actually change things at the Ministry is bloody well impossible."

Snape sighed. "You're nineteen, Potter. Leadership takes time to learn, and to earn."

"So, I'm realizing."

"You cannot singlehandedly fix things," Snape pointed out, guessing at the trouble. "And leading your little friends about is sorry preparation for long entrenched political powers."

"I know that," Harry replied, defensive now. "But what else can I do? Things still aren't back to how they were before, even as sloppy as that used to be. Wizarddom can still self-destruct if the Ministry doesn't get back to normal soon."

Snape suggested, "Perhaps a Muggle course in management?"

Harry laughed. "Are you being facetious?"

"Do I sound facetious?"

Harry fell sober. "I can't tell. I don't understand you, really. Didn't," he corrected, falling sad and introspective.

"Potter, move on," Snape insisted. "It is all well and good to take responsibility for things, but clearly you are letting the past hold you back."

Harry stared at him, eyes unveiled, drinking that in.

"And learn some Occlumency," Snape added. "You are a political liability as open as your thoughts are."

Harry turned away, chagrined. "It's been suggested, but I didn't want to. I remembered how badly it went-"

"Potter!"

"Yes, yes, let go of the past," Harry chanted, pacing a short way. He slowed to examine the room with what may be new eyes. His face went through some expressive transitions before he said, "I found this place in the records at the Ministry. I got curious about you. I wanted to understand." He touched the railing again as he passed. "The other place seemed to be where you were living, rather than here. It was like you were saving this place for a better time." He turned his gaze to the ceiling. "Like you had hopes, plans, for the future."

Snape swallowed, having nothing to add to that.

Earnest again, and almost shy, Harry asked, "Have you seen them, her, my mum, beyond the veil?"

Snape shrugged. Oddly enough, he had. "Yes, of course."

"Oh, well, that's good." Whatever he had been leading up to, Harry let it drop, and stuck his hands in his back pockets and hunched over like a teenager.

Snape jerked his nose at a familiar scent, a whiff of the dry rotted earth that accompanied Harry's gateways to the underworld. Nonchalant, Snape turned to where the Device had dropped him off. The dust was disturbed again, in the pattern of a pentagram. And now Snape felt a tug, akin to a Portkey, drawing him that way.

His Harry was not going to come through himself. He was reversing the spell. Snape wandered that way, retaining his posture despite a rush of absolute relief.

His silence let Harry build up to another confession. "I AM sorry for what happened."

Dredging up some semblance of his stricter self, Snape snapped, "Stop apologizing."

Harry glared at him. "NO."

Snape tried to estimate where he stood without glancing down and drawing attention to the floor. He tipped his head from side to side. "That's better."

His praise derailed Harry again. Harry regrouped and said softly, cathartically, "I needed to tell you. I didn't imagine I'd get to."

Snape feared he would be unceremoniously sucked away at any moment. He ignored his bones wincing at the thought and urging him to jump clear. He said, "Well, you have. And I have to go, now."

Chapter 38

Harry pulled his head back. "What? Go where?"

Snape let out a pent up breath and glanced up to where, in his world, Candide had hung a small abstract weaving. "To a place like this, but full of light, and color, and a family."

"Is there such a place?"

"I hope so," Snape replied. A rush of something circled his feet, tracing the lines of the Device without leaving a mark. When Harry took a step forward, Snape raised his hand and commanded, "Stay back."

Harry circled sideways and away, giving the spell more space. "I am sorry," Harry insisted over the faint sizzle of the spell, sounding more stubborn and less pained.

Snape crossed his arms. "I heard you the first time." And then the world collapsed around him.

Snape came to in the glare of candlelight, with Harry shaking him lightly, saying, "Sorry."

"Ach," Snape uttered in exasperation.

Harry jerked aside, patting down his smoldering trouser leg and the scent of burned cloth drifted in the air. He crouched more carefully and adjusted the warmed cloak over Snape, explaining, "I figured out what the second anchoring is for; it's to lock the spell to a person, rather than just a place."

Snape could barely think let alone move. "Ah," he managed.

"I can execute it again, but I think you need time to recover."

Snape nodded weakly. "As much as I'd like to hurry . . . perhaps . . ."

Harry lifted the cloak off, reheated it and settled it over Snape again, then rested his hand on Snape's chest. "Let me know when you're ready."

"In a minute. Or ten."

Harry smiled painfully. "Where did you go?"

Snape shook his head rather than reply.

"You're all right, though?"

"Yes."

Harry's sigh of relief joined the collective hiss of the candles. He patted Snape and stood, wand out, on guard.

Fateful Escape, Part II

Snape signaled that he was ready, and Harry, worried, asked him twice if he was certain.

Snape lifted his head with obvious effort. "We don't have much time here, nor at home."

"Right," Harry agreed and raised the wand to repeat the spell properly.

This time, the candles drew inward, almost to the center of the Device and their flames appeared to fish up a nearly identical form before fluttering back to normal. Harry let the fitful energy ease out of his shoulders and stepped forward with a warmed cloak.

The other Snape, an impostor no longer, lay senseless, and Harry was loath to leave him alone and unprotected. He tucked the cloak up around Snape's neck to better warm his blood and began to count to sixty. His own Snape lay unaided at home and he could not wait beyond that.

Before the count ran out, Snape stirred and raised an arm. "Don't ignite your sleeve," Harry warned, tugging his hand to safety and helping him sit up.

"Wonderful. Home," he drawled.

"Go to Grimmauld Place. They'll take care of you there."

"Bloody likely," Snape slurred with a shiver.

"I wouldn't lie to you. My adoptive father has been laying the groundwork for you to help the Order, and you are badly needed. Dumbledore's portrait somewhat understands the situation and will help you."

Snape stared at him. "Dumbledore," he uttered. "I am safe from no one."

Harry stepped back. "I have to go. Get yourself to safety," he said, nearly pleading. "Voldemort was just here."

Hand buried in his hair, Snape took that in. "Where is he now?"

"I scared him off."

Snape let his arm fall, breathing, "Of course you did."

"Good luck," Harry said. Snape gave a half wave full of derision, and Harry slipped away through the floor.

Chapter 38

Harry wasted no time imagining home and falling away into it. Again a clinging shadow seemed to follow him, but this time he expected it, and willfully ignored it.

On the shiny clean floor of their own main hall, Harry struggled to his half-numb feet, which refused to move exactly how he commanded them to. He staggered across to where Snape lay, spread out as he had been in the corresponding hall in the other Plane. Harry dropped to his knees beside him, willing his own body to function despite every fiber of him resisting.

Harry breathed deeply several times as though preparing to dive into deep water. This at least cleared his head, even if it did not give him any strength. With clumsy hands, he grabbed hold under Snape's arms and hauled him up.

"Candide will be home soon," Harry said, as a kind of apology for the manhandling.

Snape's head lolled, and Harry believed him unconscious until Harry muttered, "I should just hover you . . ." And received a firm, "NO."

Harry laughed, and they staggered together to the stairs. "Come on then. We have to get you to bed; pretend you have the flu or something."

Halfway up, with Harry needing one hand to keep them from falling forward onto the stairs, Snape said, "I have raised you with a properly devious mind. That makes it all worthwhile."

Harry shook his head and led him to his bedroom. Movement seemed to be helping more than warm blankets. Snape almost stood on his own when they arrived.

Harry applied heating charms to the bed and the extra duvet from the trunk in the corner. Snape tugged off his shoes with difficulty while Harry worked at warming everything nearby.

"I can get those for you," Harry said, but Snape shook his head. His second shoe thudded to the floor and he fell back.

Moving quickly, Harry covered him firmly. "You'll be all right in a few minutes," he assured him. "I usually am."

"You are much younger than I," Snape pointed out peevishly.

"And I don't usually do three in a row. Sorry about that."

Snape raised a long index finger into the air. "Please don't . . ." he began, but the Floo roared downstairs.

Harry stood, glancing quickly about the room to make sure everything was as it should be. Downstairs he slowed to what he hoped was a normal pace. Candide

stood at the table, sorting her post. She jumped upon seeing him there, as if, in Harry's overtired imagination, he did not belong.

"Harry, you're home," she said with great emotion and a hug. "Were you able to figure things out for yourself?"

Harry shrugged. He had not had time to figure anything out, at all, and felt daunted by the creeping concerns of his own reality.

Harry took a silent, much needed breath and easily let slip, "Severus has a touch of the flu, I think."

"He does?" Candide asked, alarm clear. "Where is he?"

"In bed."

Candide slid by him to the door. "Did a Healer look in on him?"

Harry shook his head, safe with the lie: "He doesn't want one." She grumbled and started up the stairs with purpose. On her heels, Harry quietly said, "I told him that if he wasn't feeling better by midnight, we'd contact one, no matter what he wanted."

"Good," she said, businesslike.

Harry hung in the doorway while she entered and directly went to sit on the bed. She brushed Snape's hair back even though it was not in his face. Harry thought he probably needed that more than the warmed duvet.

"Sure you don't want a Healer?" she asked.

Snape replied, "Don't be preposterous. Of course I don't."

Continuing to brush his hair back, despite how difficult the impostor had been recently, she said, "You'd insist on calling one for Harry in an eye-blink."

"That's different."

"My mum insists on taking me shopping this evening and I'm sure she will insist on a visit home, but I can stay."

"Do not do so. It is unnecessary."

Harry could see her frown even from where he was. "You do feel slightly feverish," she said, which reduced Harry's concern that Snape might not be warming up. "If I leave right after dinner, I expect I'll be back by eleven."

Snape grabbed hold of her hand as she moved to stand. "If you do not return by midnight, I will send Harry to apprehend you."

She laughed lightly. “My mum couldn’t argue with him; that’s for certain.” She sent Harry a glowing grin. This time Snape let her stand. She said, “We’ll let you rest.”

The two of them had a quiet dinner. Candide finished quickly and departed in the Floo after checking in on Snape. Harry pretended to be arranging his books and notes before him on the table, but as soon as her feet spun out of view, he went upstairs.

Snape appeared to be sleeping when Harry approached the bed. With the bedside lamp tweaked up, Snape’s face appeared deeply lined by stress. Harry sat on the bed, wanting to speak to Snape, but not willing to wake him.

Winky appeared with a bowl surrounded by the overpowering aroma of chicken broth. Harry set the tray on the side table for later, but Snape roused from the steamy scent. He gingerly rubbed his eyes and forehead and sat up partway. Harry quickly shifted his pillows for him, which startled Snape slightly.

“Winky brought soup,” Harry said solicitously.

“Yes, I noticed.” He leaned his prominent nose in the direction of the tray and Harry carefully handed it over.

Snape ate ravenously once he started, making Harry ache. “Do you want something more substantial?”

Snape shook his head between bites. “Winky is spot on, as usual.”

Finished, he handed the service back to Harry, who set it on the floor. He looked Snape over, wanting to do something more. He said, “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Not as glad as I am.”

“No, I think so,” Harry countered, pained.

Snape shifted forward to lie flat again. He stared beyond the ceiling in silence before saying, “You said something to me once, quite wisely, regarding my faith being your home. I did not realize how true the reverse of that was at the time.”

Harry patted his arm through the duvet. “You must really be exhausted, talking like that.”

Snape shook his head in amusement and doggedly went on, “I have learned a great deal from you, Harry. Having to force myself to behave as I used to I now fully appreciate just how much. ” He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose before continuing. “One must give oneself up to truly discover oneself. You have to give yourself away, totally. It requires enormous faith in those around you to manage it. I

know now it was fear that prevented my doing it before; fear borne on lack of trust. You have been wise enough all this time to know what it has taken me this long to learn."

Harry dropped his gaze. "You really will regret this later," he insisted, in a light sing-song.

Snape punched him lightly on the arm and slowly went on, "I didn't know who I was before. And I was so terribly certain of it at the time. How very delusional of me." He paused again before saying, "I owe you quite a lot."

Harry smiled teasingly. "You still haven't learned, really," he criticized. "If you think there is accounting in this."

Snape's hand clumsily found Harry's sleeve. "We have some things to discuss, I think. But later."

"After you've seen a Healer, you mean?" Harry prodded.

"I'll be fine in the morning," Snape insisted, eyes falling closed. "We can talk after your training tomorrow."

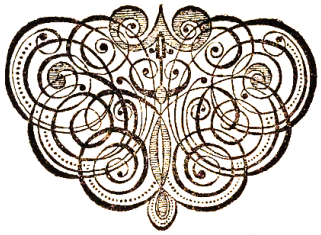
"I'm not going," Harry said, finding that statement very easy.

Snape cracked an eye open. "We will definitely be talking in the morning, then." He studied Harry with slitted eyes before saying, "Feeling better?"

"Yes," he said. He had not tried reach out to the shadows here, and did not know how tempting it would be to grab hold if he tried. He wanted Snape to rest and not worry. "Much better."

Snape, as usual, seemed unconvinced. "Tomorrow," he insisted, patting Harry on the arm.

Chapter 39.



Precipitous Plots

Harry sat at the dining room table, penning a letter to Tonks, one pet on his shoulder and the other watching and winking from the chair-back opposite. Harry held the letter out for Hedwig and took down the canister of Floo powder. She nipped at him, but accepted the journey, leaving behind a tail feather that quickly burned up in the fire when it returned to yellow.

Tonks appeared minutes later, and stood awkwardly beside the table.

"Did you bring Hedwig back?" Harry asked, wanting to send more letters.

"She wanted out of my window, so I let her. Probably off collecting your post."

Harry gestured that she should sit. He wished that nothing hovered between them, but could not shove the issues completely aside. He took her hand and sat down, holding it. "Want to stay?" he asked, missing her acutely from his time in prison.

"You aren't angry with me?" she asked. "About everything."

Harry thought she seemed angry with herself. A breath escaped him and he shook his head. Kali crawled once around his collar before settling in again.

"Coming into the Ministry tomorrow?" she asked.

Harry shook his head again. Partly, he was thinking he could better find Moody's killer if he had more time to do it. Partly, he wanted to punish the Ministry.

She pulled free of his hand and sat back, elbows out. Winky sparkled in and poured her a cup of hot mead, which she concentrated on while sipping it. She did not meet his eyes as she whispered, "We need to find who really killed Moody."

"That's what I was thinking," Harry said. "And I have an idea how to go about it."

Her tired eyes grew interested. "How's that?"

Harry was not ready yet to explain his plan to infiltrate Durumulna. "Let me try this week to see if it will work, then I'll let you in on it."

"Just be careful, Harry. Promise?"

A little recklessness would be required, but these people were nowhere near Voldemort's level, which Harry had just faced down yet again. He shrugged vaguely.

She pulled out her little chalkboard and scratched something out on it. Harry said, "Are you on duty?"

She avoided his eyes. "I've been taking extra shifts . . . just for something to do. I'm taking myself off for a few hours." She held the board up. "Kingsley says no problem." As she slipped the board back into her pocket, she said, "Arthur will want to talk to you."

"Fine," Harry said flatly.

It was not terribly late, but Harry had not rested well in days. He stood to lead the way to his room. In the main hall, Tonks said, "You never opened your Christmas presents."

Harry glanced over at the pile that Winky must be keeping neat and dusted. "Want me to open them now?"

Tonks headed that way, and sorted through the pile. "You have a lot of friends, Harry," she observed.

Harry took up the present from Candide and tore off the paper. Inside was a new quill set, gold tipped in six colors of feather. "I could have used that in prison," he said, remembering having to beg a quill from the warden.

"Posh," Tonks said. "Can I have the bright pink one?"

"Yeah, help yourself to it," Harry adamantly said, reaching for the next gift.

Tonks happily pocketed the quill and said quietly, "I caught Arthur in the file room the other day . . ." She stopped until Harry put down a small box that held what appeared to be a snow globe with the Hogwarts castle inside. But shaking it did not make any snow appear. "He was adding pages to Percy's file."

Harry fixed his gaze on the castle. "What was on them?"

"You assume I sneaked back to read them?" she said with false insult, raising herself up on her toes.

Harry waited, prodding the boxed globe to no avail. Voice low, she said, "He's opened an internal investigation. Just our department. He isn't telling anyone about it, even the Minister. Kingsley's assigned to it. I told him what I'd learned following Percy around at your request." She sighed. "The department would probably not be pleased to know I'm telling you this."

Harry nodded and held back a smile. It was a better present than any on the table.

Tonks helped dispose of wrappings while Harry stacked opened gifts. Halfway through the pile, she asked, "Where did you go?"

Harry turned the box he held one way, then another, trying to read all the small print. Set a Spell it read. Better than a Rememspeller! Harry opened the box, to find a small black pyramid inside. "It's hard to explain," he said.

Tonks took up the pyramid. "My dad has one of these. You can have someone record a spell you can't do yourself on each corner, and then replay it when you need it."

"Does it work?" Harry said, thinking that a bit dangerous if used the right way.

Tonks shrugged. "Only for weak spells and some charms. His refuses to record hexes or curses." She dropped it back in Harry's hand. "His mending spells are bollox, so he uses it for that to avoid asking Mum." After a beat, she said, "What's hard to explain?"

Harry thought of that other place and how tangled things had become with his guardian misplaced. He huffed and laughed lightly. "Everything."

Sadly, she said, "You won't say. I thought maybe you'd gone off to one of those other places."

"I needed to work some things out," Harry insisted vaguely, not wanting to lie outright. He dropped the next wrapped box he had held and took her by the arm. "Come on, let's finish this later."

The next morning, Harry woke late, and alone – Tonks had slipped out while he slept, to return to duty. Harry found Snape in the drawing room, still in his dressing gown, well enough rested that his eyes were clear and keen.

"Feeling better?" Harry asked.

"Well enough. Candide wished to remain home from work for my sake, but I convinced her to go. I feel recovered but I do wonder if it is possible to ever feel truly warm again." He sipped his steaming tea with unusual reverence.

The door knocker sounded, and Harry went to open it, finding Ginny and Fred on the stoop. Ginny said, "Aaron owled this morning to say you were back, but not at training."

Harry nodded and invited them inside. Fred gave him a hard slap, "Welcome back to the Red Haired Anti-Ministry League, my man. Good to have you back on the safe side."

Harry said, "You only say that because I've seen too much of what you're doing. And my hair's not red."

Fred made himself comfortable on the couch. "That can be fixed. Permanently, even."

Ginny scuffed to a stop upon spying Snape in the drawing room. "Oh, you're still home, sir. Sorry, Harry, I need to talk to Professor Snape, alone, if you don't mind." She slipped into the drawing room with too much familiarity, and closed the door.

"What's with that?" Harry asked the room, which only contained Fred, who replied with a shrug.

Harry worried acutely about Snape also not knowing. "Maybe I'll crash this meeting. I'll be right back." He waved Fred to sit back down and after a quick rap, slipped inside.

Snape was standing behind his desk, wearing that thoughtful look on his face that implied he was trying to catch a hint beyond someone's eyes. Ginny stopped speaking upon Harry's entry, trailing off from, " . . . I don't feel comfortable . . ."

"It's all right, go on," Harry urged.

Ginny frowned, and with a half glance at Snape informed him, "I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

Snape gave a small sideways nod that Harry interpreted to mean he was grateful for the help. Harry wished he had some idea what this was about in order to help.

Snape cued Ginny for Harry's sake, "You were saying something about Lord Freelander, if I'm not mistaken."

Ginny glowered. "Oh, so now I can say something."

Snape's expression did not obviously change, but clearly he disliked this immensely.

Harry took a guess and asked, "You're not happy about the letters?"

"You know about that?" Ginny asked, sounding relieved.

"Yes," Harry assured her.

Ginny's shoulders fell. "I feel terribly about the trouble." She paused to give Snape a deserved glare before turning back to Harry. "I don't like having this kind of secret from Aaron, and I worry I should tell him before the letters come to light and can be traced to my handling them. I've seen my brothers at work; I know that can be done."

"Severus has the letters again," Harry said, finding amusement in Snape's attempts to appear that he followed this conversation. Harry turned to Snape. "I'm sure he's hidden them safely away."

Snape gave a mechanical nod. Fortunately, his usual annoyed detachment worked as cover.

Harry tried to console her. "Look, when this all blows over for the better, Aaron will be happy Skeeter got what she deserved."

Ginny argued, "If we got at her any other way, I'd believe that. But this is too close to the truth. I would never hang Aaron's personal life out there like this. Not if I'd known." She gave Snape another glance and stood up. "Never mind. I promised I wouldn't shirk." Her voice fell softer and she addressed Snape with, "I just feel like I sacrificed myself, even though you said that wasn't part of the plan."

Ginny departed, closing the door behind her. After a moment, Snape said, "Clearly, I returned home just in time. Hopefully." He pulled out the center drawer on his desk. "I suppose I should locate these letters, as good at hiding things from myself as I seem to be . . ." He closed that drawer and opened another. "What do they look like?"

"They are torn in half." Harry said helpfully. "Should be easy to spot."

Snape sat down to rummage in a lower drawer. "And that happened, how?"

"They had some kind of magical alarm clip on them, and when I slipped into the Dark Plane it refused to go along."

Snape shook his head. "I don't see them."

"Did you run all the eavesdropping spells?" Harry asked, pulling his wand to check now that he remembered.

"Of course," Snape said, still looking around. He found some other papers that were of momentary interest. "And these letters were to what purpose?"

"Revenge on Rita Skeeter."

"Did it work?"

"Yes."

Snape dropped the papers back into the drawer and closed it. "Long overdue."

Harry explained, "Well, she was tricked by it. What will come of it, is yet to be seen."

Snape stood and surveyed the room. "Is it possible I would have simply burned them?" he asked.

"That would have been the best thing."

They both stared into the hearth, where lean, blackened logs fluttered with orange tongues. "I'll look some more here and at Hogwarts, but if they do not turn up, I may assume I simply did that. But I do wonder if more action is required on my part."

Harry laughed. "You want to finish what your counterpart started?"

Snape gazed thoughtfully back at him. "You always do." He resumed his chair and gestured at the door. "Why don't you see your friends out and come back for our talk."

Harry felt a flutter of reluctance at getting a lecture, but did as requested. Ginny sent her brother on ahead and took Harry's sleeves. "Will you help me with Aaron if I tell him?"

"Yes, of course. You didn't mean any harm to him, right?"

"I didn't even know he would get involved. I didn't ask any questions; I just followed instructions. After your letter, I told Professor Snape I wanted to help you, and delivering those love letters was what he told me to do."

"You were a mule," Harry said, then explained. "What the criminal gangs call someone who does the legwork but knows nothing about what they are carrying."

"Wonderful. I've joined the Gang of Slytherin."

Trying to cheer her up, he quipped, "You'll enjoy it. They get away with everything you never dared try."

"Didn't stop my brothers."

"Your brothers always got caught, as I recall."

"Not as often as you think," she said. Then feel more serious. "I haven't asked you again about that crazy letter you sent me. Did you mean it?"

"I meant it, but I don't know if it matters," Harry said. "That's a bad answer to be going on with, I know. Keep up with your studies and don't trust me. I could be an evil wizard in disguise, you know."

She gave him a shove on the arm, "Harry, not trusting you would include not trusting the letter you sent."

A more wily instinct inside of him said, "And maybe you shouldn't."

"Uhhhn," she groaned in playful annoyance. "I don't want a prophecy. But I'll admit just the threat of one makes it easier to pick up my books when I'd rather do something else."

Harry considered delaying her longer, to delay getting the talk, but she said, "I have to get back to the shop. Aaron is coming to take me out to lunch." She gave him a peck on the cheek and said, "Glad you're home, Harry."

"So am I," He said, happy to gain some distance from the shadows calling to him. It gave him room to think about broader things.

"If you think of sending a letter again, come and find me instead!" Ginny said, before borrowing a handful of Floo powder.

Harry waited for the last of the loosened ash to settle on the grate in her wake before returning to the drawing room. Snape sat with his fingers on his forehead, reading his pre-opened post.

"Anything else I've been doing that I should be made aware of?" he asked, flipping each letter over to scan the next.

Harry took the seat before the desk and tossed his hands. "I wasn't here either, remember?"

Snape's focus drifted off. "The next few weeks should be excessively interesting, in that case."

"We're doing better than they are. Back there," Harry said, silently wishing them well.

"I've been thinking over those events. You appeared to win the Wand of Destiny off Voldemort, tipping your counterpart's hand, so to speak. Except that you already signaled your superiority before that. That may work in that Order's favor, by driving Voldemort into a defensive posture."

"That would be better?"

"It will give the Order some time to get better organized. . . Potter to get a sufficient graps of his powers. . ."

Silence ruled, until Harry said, "Do you think they'll manage?"

"I still gauge the odds at fifty-fifty." He put his letters aside and put his eyes squarely on Harry. "Thinking of going back to assist?"

Harry faintly shook his head. "I shouldn't go back there."

Snape's mannerisms lightened, indicating this was his preferred answer. "One of several things we need to discuss."

Harry frowned and took a deep breath. Snape closed his dressing gown tighter around his chest and settled back in his chair, hands in his pockets.

"Still cold?" Harry asked.

"No matter. Let's back up to the critical issues I missed. You were arrested for what?" he asked, in the mode of one making a list.

"Killing Alastor Moody."

Snape breathed in slowly. "I did not realize that."

"I didn't want to risk telling you in front of everyone."

"Valid concern. Who did kill him?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "Had to be someone who knew he was alive. Oh, that's another thing . . ." Harry, hemmed, "Tonks told me you arranged for someone to confess to my crime, to get me out of prison."

"I did that," Snape stated, half questioning.

"Yup."

"Remind me in the future not to be replaced by an impostor."

"What?" Harry countered, half teasing. "You'd have left me there in the lock up?"

"I would have thought of something."

Harry let that go, otherwise he may need to explain what precisely had motivated the other Snape to take such drastic action. Harry appreciated, with a tremor in his raw nerves at imagining otherwise, having a guardian who was not also a shadow and

therefore a tempting tool. He felt badly now remembering how he had treated the other. He had not been able to help himself, and that bothered him the most.

Snape resumed a businesslike attitude. "So, you were framed for Moody's murder, how?"

Harry pulled out his wand and held it out before him. "Well, I went to talk to Belinda, that evening, and she gave me the brush off about needing help, which she previously told me she needed, but later said I was not there at her place that night. I made the mistake of using the Dark Plane to get there – I know, I know, I should not be using it at all – and so there were no records in the Department of Transportation to back me up." He held the wand up higher. "That and Moody's murder was on my wand," he added, feeling faintly nauseated at that thought.

Snape sat forward, thoughtful for many seconds. "They reversed the spells in front of you?"

Harry nodded, holding the wand out so Snape could take it. "deBenedictus was there and he told me not to let them do it. But I didn't see the risk."

Snape looked the wand over and handed it back. "And it is your wand."

"Yes." Harry sighed, turning it between his fingers, finding nothing odd about it.

"Give me the timeline in detail. When did they reverse the spells?"

Harry held the wand in hands clasped between his knees. "Two days after the murder, when I first came into the Ministry for training."

"And you recognized the spells preceding . . . actually sequentially after . . . the curse in question?"

Harry shrugged. "Other than drills, they weren't anything special."

"And the spells right before the curse?"

Harry paused. "They didn't go back any farther than that."

"They should have. Who performed the reversal?"

Harry's mind was speeding up, remembering. "Rodgers ran the reversal. But Mr. Weasley was in charge."

"I'm disappointed in them, then. I would expect them to be more thorough."

Harry shook his head. "They may not have wanted to prove me innocent. Tonks told me later they wanted temporarily to do what Durumulna intended, to keep me safe."

"And your wand was in your possession the entire time when the murder is reputed to have been committed?"

Harry wondered fleetingly how dinner with both his guardian and his solicitor would go. Tediously, most likely. "Yes."

"You are certain?" Snape stated with clear enunciation.

"Well, the day before my arrest, Percy knocked it out of my hand and fetched it up. Dangled it before me."

"Did he now?"

"Well, but he just knocked it under the bench in the changing room."

"But you lost sight of it in that moment?"

"Yes. But, what could he have done with it in that second and a half?" Harry asked, letting his frustration get out.

"He does not have to do anything but switch it," Snape pointed out, also rising in agitation.

"Severus," Harry insisted, not liking the implied chastisement. "I had my wand before that. I would know if I had lost my wand. It's kind of a rare one, you know."

"Harry," Snape said, backing off on his Head of House voice and moderating into something more gentle, "it isn't so very rare. You had another, before."

A tingle, like ice crystals forming, migrated up Harry's back. He thought frantically backward in time. "I . . . I was having trouble getting my wand out of my pocket. Like it would fall in too far." He slid this one into his front wand pocket and out again, feeling colder still. "Someone switched my wand for my old one. Severus, I had Winky extend all my wand pockets, and several times, I couldn't get at my wand." Harry thought back, trying to remember when that had started, exactly. "I don't remember the first time that happened . . ."

"Think back instead to another time your wand was out of your sight."

Harry did so, unable to remember, so he gestured helplessly.

Snape, unrelenting, said, "It could have been while you slept . . . it could have been while you ate lunch, it could have been a pickpocket."

Harry thought back, but shook his head again.

"Think, Potter. Did you ever loan it out?" When Harry indicated not, Snape went on, "Were you out on a busy street in the days preceding?"

"In the days preceding, I came to see if you were all right, in that other place. Surely no one there switched the wands."

"I would think not. Other than that?"

"I went down to Diagon Alley, to buy a small animal to try taking In Between." Harry felt another chill, remembering the desiccated creature.

"And did anyone bump into you, physically?"

"Belinda," Harry replied.

"Could she have switched your wand?"

Harry remembered that day. He remembered Belinda taking his lapels and waltzing him around the animal cages. He had not been watching her, but instead the suspected Durumulna walking by. "Yes." He scratched his chin with his knuckles. "She had been so eager to talk, to go out for tea or something, and after that, she gave me the brush off. Told me she'd taken care of things."

"She probably had," Snape stated knowingly.

"They told her to take my wand," Harry said.

Snape accepted the fresh tea Winky brought in and poured out two cups. "She was probably not the only one assigned that task, if they were at all competent about it." He gestured for Harry to come fetch the other cup from the tray, and blowing over his own, said, "They left the plan tight for Percy to change the wands back. They had to know he could reasonably get that close to you."

"It was a surprise inspection." Harry warmed his hands on his cup. "You think that's what happened?" he sadly asked, regretting the discovery that Belinda had grown so involved. "You think that's how the spell got on my wand?"

"Not for certain. But lacking more evidence, we will operate on the assumption that it is correct. It is critical to recognize your enemies, especially the ones closest to you. In this case, we already know she lied, so the rest is safer to assume."

Harry turned his cup and drank off the end of it. "So, Percy probably knows who really killed Moody."

"Or did it himself," Snape stated, raising Harry's eyes in surprise. "You do not think him capable? Possibly. In such plots, the fewer involved the more likely the success, and since they succeeded, until foiled at a later time, I would assume there is only one other involved, at most."

"You could lecture our apprentices on criminal plotting, Severus."

"Our apprentices?" Snape prodded.

Harry dropped his gaze to his cup, which was empty. "I might go back. I haven't decided."

"I would prefer it." At Harry's curious glance, Snape went on, "You are still at an age where structure is important. And you have a great deal to learn."

"Yeah, plus you'd prefer I at least pretend I'm on the good side." He eyed Snape knowingly at the tail of this.

"Pretending to be on the bad side does gain one some personal leeway, but I don't recommend it, in general. In any event, you will most likely receive some concession for returning. Perhaps that will assuage your ego regarding it." His voice fell off and he regarded Harry in silence

Harry hoped that Snape would be finished with their talk for now, that he would leave some things for later, but this was not to be.

"On another topic. You were having peculiar difficulties in that other place. What exactly was the problem?"

Harry met Snape's eyes, and only upon finding them shuttered realized he had tried to get a hint of what Snape suspected. "I didn't like having so many shadows around. That's all. They bothered me."

Snape sat with his chin resting on his closed fist. "Bothered you, how?"

Harry shrugged, reluctant to give away everything. Those other instincts to plot had grown less alien and now felt like a reasonable advisor.

Snape asked, "Why did Voldemort fail to Summon his followers?"

Harry shrugged again; it was by far the easiest answer.

Snape did not speak for several breaths. "I consider it crucial to remain in your good graces, Harry. So, I do not wish to appear to betray you by entrapping you with my questions. Are you certain that's your answer?" Snape asked. Too level.

Harry swallowed. In a rush, he said, "I don't like what is happening to me. But I can't stop it."

Snape knitted his fingers before him and said, "Now we are getting somewhere. My counterpart left me a most interesting letter, one I find hard to believe."

Chapter 39

"You were tricking me," Harry complained.

"I was simply asking you for information. Then when you resisted, I was merely assessing you. Both differ from trickery. I am now treating you as an equal by informing you of what he wrote, so you are aware of what I know. Or would you prefer I not?"

Harry dropped his eyes, fluttery inside again, he said, "He set me off. I couldn't stop myself. I was angry with him invading this house."

"Understandable. But despite that, I think you crossed a line. One that I am personally familiar with, so please do not think it a mere lecture when I warn you that it is difficult to remain behind this line after breaching it."

"I do feel better," Harry insisted without thinking. "Here. At home."

"I fear, merely a reprieve," Snape said. Adding upon Harry's change of expression, "I am never delusional, no matter how much I wish a situation to be otherwise. I would think you knew that by now."

The door knocker sounded. Moments later, Winky interrupted with immense shyness to announce Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley pushed the door open a tad more than Winky had to stick her nose inside. "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

Snape stood. "No, do come in. I assume you wish to speak with Harry."

Mr. Weasley slipped his hat off and folded it into his pocket. Scratching his head, he said, "If I could have a moment alone with you first, Severus, I'd prefer that."

Harry stood and, glad for the interruption, went out to the main hall where, with distracted attention, he opened the rest of his Christmas gifts. He stacked a pair of sparkling socks from Dobby on top of a box of Telescope Vision Sweets from the twins. For the first time he understood how his cousin could care so little for each gift. They felt terribly meaningless to Harry at that moment.

In the drawing room, Mr. Weasley tugged the chair so it better centered on the desk. He still had his cloak on and he stood halfway to flip this back over his shoulders before sitting again. "I just wanted to know where you stand before I approach Harry. We do want him back and I want to go about convincing him to do so the best way possible."

Snape sat back and stared at Mr. Weasley over the tips of his steepled fingers.

Mr. Weasley looked away and went on, "Ehem, I wanted to know where you stood on his continuing his apprenticeship before I-"

"I am for it," Snape interrupted.

"Ah. Good. Fine then." Mr. Weasley sat forward in his chair. "How best do you think that can be accomplished?"

"Give him time. Let him make up for his incarceration by enjoying some extra freedom. I honestly think, given enough time, he will grow bored."

Mr. Weasley straightened his hair and better tucked his hat away. "Can I count on you to convince him?"

"I will do no such thing." At Mr. Weasley's surprise, Snape added, "This is his decision, alone. I have expressed my preference to him, but I will not attempt to coerce or even nag him. He is perfectly capable of deciding for himself."

Mr. Weasley's shoulders fell forward. "I was hoping for more help than that. Minister Bones insisted in no uncertain terms that Harry must return. Perhaps she can convince him."

"May I say," Snape said, "that I understand Harry's low estimation of loyalty from your organization."

"The threat to him was not to be underestimated, Severus."

"There has always been a threat to him," Snape pointed out.

"We have leaks-" Mr. Weasley stopped when Snape abruptly held up his hand, took up his wand and reran the spells to block eavesdropping and to force Animagi to unmorph, then he set it back on the desk.

"Do go on."

Mr. Weasley huffed. "Same problem we have. We have a traitor, or perhaps two or three, in our midst at the Ministry. We feared – we being myself, Reggie and Kingsley, that the goal behind framing Harry was not to have him prosecuted for the crime, but merely to have him held in the Ministry dungeon awaiting a hearing, where he would be an easy mark indeed." His face fell. "We cannot fail to detain someone once we have that much evidence. Doesn't matter if it's the Minister herself." He threw up his hands, which then landed on his thighs. "We brought in the very best to advise him, but dear Harry, with his overflowing faith in his own innocence, did not abide by his advice. Placing him with the French was our only workable fall back plan. Fortunately the new Azkaban will not be finished for another half a year; otherwise, we'd have had to come up with a rather singular excuse to not send him there."

The two sat in silence, until Mr. Weasley said, "Really, Severus, we are merely doing our best to protect him. He doesn't make that terribly easy, you know. But he's more than worth the trouble he attracts. I hope he knows that."

"He will if you tell him." Snape fluidly rose to his feet. "I'll fetch him, unless there is something else . . . ?"

Frowning, Mr. Weasley shook his head.

Harry looked up when Snape opened the drawing room door. He was playing with the Set a Spell, trying to trick it into recording a simple Hedgehog Hex. As Harry passed Snape in the doorway, and Snape turned to leave, Mr. Weasley said, "Do you want to sit in?"

Snape shook his head and closed the door. Harry's opened presents sat in a disarrayed pile on the table, the top packages off kilter and threatening to tumble. He took a seat on the couch, hands clasped, appearing more pained as he became more thoughtful.

Mr. Weasley pulled another chair away from the far wall – one in need of upholstery repair. He set it facing Harry and leaned forward anxiously.

"Harry. I'm glad you didn't spend too much time away. We were quite worried, given that not even your family knew where you had gone off to."

Harry rubbed his nose and waited for something easier to address.

Mr. Weasley spread his hand placatingly. "You are well aware of what the limits are of our office. The rules we have to work within. They are part of what keep us from falling into treachery, from the Ministry becoming part of the problem." He sat back and muttered to himself, "Perhaps that's the wrong way to go about this."

Given the terrible situation he had just escaped, Harry had more understanding than Mr. Weasley probably suspected. "I understand, Mr. Weasley, but I'm not ready to come back."

"Ah, but you do intend to."

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "I don't know what I want."

Mr. Weasley gave him a pained frown that might be sympathetic. "Don't take too long to decide or you may fall too far behind. Not that we wouldn't make some accommodation," he added quickly. "We didn't believe you did it, Harry. But we have to do things a certain way, you understand."

An owl scratched at the window. One of the small grey and silver fast ones the twins owned. Harry went and let it in, taking the letter that had his name scrawled on it in a small and furtive, but familiar, hand. Harry opened the letter as he returned to his seat. It was short and from Ginny. She said that Skeeter was snooping around the shop in disguise and wondered if Harry had any ideas what they best do.

Harry tossed the letter on the fire on the way back to his chair.

"That looked like my one of my sons' owls," Mr. Weasley said, in a manner that expected further information.

Harry shrugged. "You were saying?"

"Ehem, yes, I was saying that you are always welcome back. Amel- Minister Bones told me that she is willing to go to rather great lengths to make things up to you."

Harry's brow furrowed. "By doing what?"

Mr. Weasley grew remote. "Er, I think it was something like declaring a Harry Potter Winter Fun Day or some such, but . . . that's not the point, Harry. The point is she's willing to smooth things over, whatever it takes."

Part of Harry thrilled faintly at the notion of being owed a favor he could save for later, but most of him did not want anything. "I'll think about it."

Mr. Weasley leaned closer. "She's willing to place you elsewhere in the Ministry, if that's what you'd prefer. I'd rather not tell you that, because we'd rather you stay with us. And I told Minister Bones that I doubted you would want to be anywhere else . . ." He faded out, eyes searching out Harry's.

Harry stood. "I'll think about it," he said again.

Mr. Weasley patted Harry on the arm, looked as if he wished to say more, but made it to the door before saying, "If you need anything, Harry. Let me know."

"A bit of leeway," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley asked, "With what?"

Harry shrugged again and saw him out. Snape stood in the hall when Harry returned, face unreadable.

Harry slipped his warmest cloak over his shoulders.

"You are going where?" Snape asked evenly.

Harry paused to look at him. He could make a battle out of that. He ignored that instinct and replied, "Diagon Alley. Skeeter is snooping around Ginny."

"Do you want help?"

Harry shook his cloak to drape it forward over his shoulders and memories of what they had just gone through cleared his head. He laughed lightly. "We are unfortunately both equally ignorant about things. I don't even know how Ginny got involved in this. I'm hoping to get her to explain. At least I'm supposed to not know."

Chapter 39

"Her cryptic remark about being sacrificed also begs for illumination."

Harry paused in fishing out his gloves. "Right."

"You will be back to guard Candide when she returns home from work?" Snape asked. "If not I will remain."

Harry felt a warmth rush through him at that expression of trust. "I'll be back. You need to get back to Hogwarts, don't you?"

Snape nodded, studied Harry's eyes a moment longer than necessary, then turned to retreat to the drawing room.

The bells on the shop door cheerfully chimed out a dirge as Harry slipped inside Weasley Wizard Wheezes. His stroll along the alley had attracted a level of attention unmatched in a long time. A few congratulated him on proving his innocence, but most just stopped and stared in confusion.

Harry walked slowly and peered around the shop, thinking Skeeter may be hiding among the piles of colorful boxes. She would have come in disguise in order to ask questions, which she could not do as a bug. Undoubtedly, she hoped to get the letters back, and would not give up until she had.

"Harry," Ginny said in surprise, causing the pair of customers in the corner to look over. Fred, who was assisting them astutely led them to the farthest corner of the shop. As Harry approached the counter, Ginny said quietly, "You still haven't gone into the Ministry today. . ."

Out of the corner of his eyes Harry saw movement on the top edge of a framed Wizarding Yen note on the wall above the counter. Something insect-like with long antenna was crawling along the top of the glittering, gem-inlaid frame. Fixing his eyes on Ginny so as not to give away that he had spotted Skeeter, Harry stated clearly, "No, I'm not planning on going back at all."

Ginny's lips pursed. "Oh."

"I don't want you to give up trying," Harry added quickly. "Just because I have. You wanting to be an Auror shouldn't have anything to do with me."

She came around the counter and leaned on the front of it, peering up at him. This was better for Harry, as his eyes kept wanting to dance up to stare at Skeeter. Ginny said, "Dad's treated you really badly."

Harry gave the faintest shrug. He wanted certain things to make it into the evening edition, but others could be left unprinted. He thought about how he would like an article to read. "The department had to do what they had to do. But so do I. I'm doing what I want now."

"If you say so, Harry," she said, sounding dubious, but not so much as to tip off Skeeter. She sighed, and said in real sadness, "It just would have been nice to train with you . . . if I do get in. It'd be like old times." She glanced along the front windows before leaning closer. "As to the other thing. Are you certain that . . ."

Harry could see in her gaze what she was about to say. With Skeeter hanging over his shoulder, his options were quite limited. He bent down and kissed her to shut her up. It was a quick kiss, but she stood rail straight and stunned when he released her. Before she could speak, Harry grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the door. "I want to show you something."

Fred appeared beside him, seemingly out of nowhere, a perturbed expression on his face. "What's this then?"

Harry gave him a glance that he hoped conveyed he had bigger things to worry about. But the twin followed behind, head cocked amusingly. Ginny's feet caught up, and she said, "Fred, I'll be back in a bit."

Fred slowed down, giving Harry time to pull out his wand and whisper an Imperturbable Charm at the door while pushing it closed with his wand hand. Fred ran into the door and shook the handle. He gave Harry a raised eyebrow and a shaken finger and disappeared back inside the shop.

Harry tugged Ginny down to Eyelops, which had a construction fence around it, made up of half burned boards from the old shop. Based on the sound, work was going apace. Harry shook off Ginny's hand, ignored her sharp gaze, and waved an Animagus revealing spell around them. Nothing happened.

"I wasn't certain we'd beat her to the door. Let's go somewhere we can talk."

Ginny relaxed and let him take her arm. Harry Disapparated them to Weaver's End. Ginny crossed her arms against the cold wind whipping along the road and said, "Where are we?"

"Someplace easy to protect from eavesdropping. Come on." Harry led the way into Snape's old house after layering on a few spells to the outside of the ramshackle structure.

Harry warmed the walls and floor and Ginny waved a repair spell on the couch that caused the sparse remaining stuffing to collect on the seats, almost comfortable.

"This is a nasty place Harry." She glanced around at the bookshelves and the ajar shelf that led to the passage up. "Old Order safehouse?"

"Something like that." Harry adjusted his posture to half face her. "Sorry about what happened at the shop. I didn't want you to say anything with Skeeter there."

Rising quickly in frustration, Ginny countered, "I assumed Skeeter wasn't there because you were talking so freely." She rolled her eyes and sat back, faintly licking her lips, but remaining stubborn in expression. "What's she going to print about that?"

"She didn't have her photographer. And I'm okay right now with a reputation as someone willing to be reckless."

"You are?" She shook herself and brushed her hair back. "What's Aaron going to say?"

"Talk to him. I'll talk to him, too, if needed. Don't worry about it."

She gaped at him the way people in those other worlds often did, so Harry moved on. "I need you to tell me how you got involved with the letters."

"Reheat things, if you will," she said, rubbing her arms and shivering. "Unless you want the highly abridged version." While Harry complied, she said, "I told Professor Snape that I wanted to help you and that's what he gave me to do. He gave me those letters and had me bring them back to him, telling him I needed someone to hide them for a friend. They were love letters he'd forged, it turns out. Fakes to trap Skeeter, who he must have known was spying on him." She grabbed up Harry's sleeve. "I didn't know Aaron's family would end up involved. I really didn't." Heaving a helpless sigh, she sat back and stared at the ceiling.

"What was that comment about being sacrificed?" Harry asked.

A ripple went through her as she composed a reply. "Professor Snape is a scary bloke, Harry. Maybe you know that already well enough. I mean, we all used to think that, but somewhere along the line, we forgot. After I volunteered to help he grew, I don't know how to say it, aggressive. No, that's not quite right. Over-determined, maybe. Said I couldn't shirk . . . " She closed her eyes. "Don't tell him I told you this, okay?"

"I won't," Harry assured her. "Now that I'm back, it's all right again."

"I had the sense he had some plot idea he wanted to use me for. Something right awful. He warned me he would sacrifice anyone to get you out, and I said, even me? And he said 'bright girl'." She shook herself and behaved cold again. "I have to tell you, Harry. He scares me again."

Harry reran the warming spells and then the eavesdropping ones. "I stole the letters back from Skeeter. Partly because I didn't know what was going on. I would not have let Severus involve Freelander if I had been around to stop it."

Ginny laughed. "It's like Professor Snape knew we'd been trying to convince Lord Freelander to buy the Prophet and fire Skeeter."

"What?" Harry blurted. "You were?"

Ginny laughed harder, partly as a release from stress, and punched Harry on the arm. "That's what's happening now. He's trying to convince his wife to run it. Says he's tired of her running off far away to work on her charity stuff and this would keep her at home."

"Does Skeeter know the paper's being bought out?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "I doubt it. Freelander hasn't made an official offer yet." Ginny clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh Merlin, I almost said something to you in the shop! Thank goodness you stopped me." She blushed faintly before grabbing her hair and pulling it back from her face and holding it there. "Oh, what is Aaron going to say. Do you think she'll print that?"

Harry thought he would not mind a good fight, was in the mood for one. He found himself anticipating Aaron's anger with a kind of happy warmth. "Probably."

"Maybe I can head him off. Catch him as he leaves the Ministry. Tell him it was part of some plot you have going." She turned to him. "It is, isn't it?"

"It is now."

Chapter 40.

Bad Press

Harry's evening started out quiet, a welcome relief, just Candide and himself resting after dinner. The quiet was broken by Hermione arriving for an unannounced visit. She eyed the pile of opened presents on the table while loosening her gloves then smiled and gave Harry a hug.

"How are you, Harry?" she asked, not a meaningless greeting, but a serious question.

"I don't know," Harry replied, unable to be less than honest with his old friend.

This reply brought Candide's attention up from the letter she was writing. Harry stared at Hermione's feet, considering suggesting they move out of earshot.

Hermione patted him on the arms and moved to take a seat. "Professor Snape suggested I make a visit." She shrugged apologetically. "He even assigned one of his Seventh-Year Slytherins to do the marking I was working on when I hesitated." Grinning a bit, she added, "He assured me she would mark the essays even more brutally than I do." She looked Harry over. "So, you are not going back to the Ministry?"

Harry ran his best Animagus-detection spell before approaching to sit across from his friend. Hermione reached into her pocketbook for a copy of the Prophet. At Harry's noise of curiosity, she asked, "You didn't see this?"

Candide leaned over to look as Harry opened it, explaining to Hermione, "I added a Hate-Owl blocking Charm on the windows. It sometimes means we don't get a paper."

Bad Press

Harry could not be more pleased with the article that made the evening edition. Potter and Ministry in Splitsville the tall headline read. He hoped whomever he met with in Durumulna tomorrow had a subscription to the paper as well. He suspected he or she would have. Rodgers always asserted that half of what a gang did was aimed at getting to read about it later.

Skeeter had written exactly what Harry had said at the shop, then chased down various Ministry officials for comment. The inset photograph was of Bones waving the camera away like an insect. The caption stated she would not comment until she had met with Harry herself. There was nothing in the article about the kiss.

Harry, hiding a grin, held the paper out for Candide when she reached for it. Hermione gazed wistfully at Harry. "I thought being an Auror was what you wanted." The comment made Harry wonder if they now knew each other about as poorly as he and the alternative Hermione did.

When Harry did not respond, Candide, nose buried in the paper, asked, "What are you hoping to get from them?"

Hermione replied for him. "Harry doesn't want anything. Do you Harry?"

Candide stated philosophically, "Everyone has a price."

"You only say that because you're an accountant," Harry pointed out, surprised to hear her being so cynical.

"It doesn't have to be money." Candide raised her head, handing the paper back. "Rita Skeeter is looking for validation. That's her currency of trade: notoriety for knowing things others don't. She can be bought off with that currency . . . for a while at least."

"You still think I should grant her an interview," Harry lightly accused.

"It's her price for being nice."

"For a little while," Hermione muttered. "Also works to simply get the better of her."

"Right. For a little while," Harry echoed, and the two of them shared a knowing look about the past.

Winky arrived with mulled wine. Hermione took a glass and sat back with a sigh. "This is nice . . . having an evening off."

"Sounds like you work too hard," Candide said, reading the back page.

"Look who's talking," Harry said.

Candide rubbed her mounded belly before resting her hand atop it. "That will end soon. Boss was reluctant to let me go to half time, but I think I will, starting next week. Already can barely tolerate the Floo." She held the paper out and changed the topic. "So, who's the new flame, Harry?"

"What?"

Candide tapped the back page of the paper in Harry's hands, open before him, but unread. "That."

Harry read Skeeter's gossip column and found that his arresting Ginny's speech had not gone unprinted.

Potter has not only moved on from duties at the Ministry, he has also (just in time!) moved on from dating one of the Ministry Aurors. Rumors too hot to ignore reached the ears of your intrepid reporter and I am merely dutifully passing them on to you, my loyal reader.

Candide read the blurb aloud and added, "Did you break up with Tonks without my noticing?" she asked, stunned.

"No. Skeeter's mistaken."

Hermione said, "Harry, you better find Tonks then and explain."

Harry sat back, thinking that seeking Tonks out would put him at a disadvantage, somehow. "She'll come to me."

"Harry! What is wrong with you. Go find her."

Just the tone of her voice made Harry sit up. He could not deny her argument, really. "Right." Brushing his hair back, he said, "You'll stay here?"

"I don't need a guard," Candide argued. "If that's what you're thinking."

"Yes, you do," both Harry and Hermione said in unison.

Harry tried Tonks' flat, but found it quiet and empty. Her copy of the newspaper lay on the ledge outside, rotting with a few older editions. Perhaps she had not even seen it. But anyone else who had would not neglect to mention it.

Worried he may no longer be authorized to enter the Ministry after hours and not willing to submit to the night guard's scrutiny, Harry used the Dark Plane to slip inside the Ministry, into the stairwell just outside the door to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Rogan and Rodgers were on evening duty and they both stared when Harry put his head inside the office.

"Potter," Rodgers said. "To what do we owe the visit?"

"I was looking for Tonks."

Rogan, wide-eyed, averted his gaze back to his reports. Rodgers appeared amused. "She's not here. Said she was going out for a nip, isn't that what she said, Tristan?"

Rogan appeared uncomfortable with having to answer. He muttered, "Something."

"Did she see the paper?" Harry asked.

Rodgers leaned on his desk and nodded, evaluating Harry more than conversing.

"Why didn't she just come see me? How long ago did she leave?"

"Few hours," Rodgers said, seeming to enjoy stringing Harry along, which shifted Harry into a different mood.

Rogan, burrowing farther into his report work, muttered, "She needed a night off anyway . . . needed to unwind a bit."

When Harry started to duck out of the doorway, Rodgers asked, "How are you doing, Potter?" His posture remained aloof and his voice calculating.

"Good to be home, sir," Harry said, clearly sounding artificially pleasant.

Harry Apparated away to search the wizard pubs. He found Tonks in Grimsby at a pub wedged into an alley between two small shops. It was so old the magic to make it larger on the inside than the out no longer could be made to work. Harry squeezed his way through the smoky brown murk to where Tonks sat, arguing with someone whose bright golden curls made prickles crawl on Harry's arms.

Harry stopped just within earshot and listened in. In the gloom, with her attention elsewhere, Tonks did not notice Harry's approach.

"Look, why don't you go bother someone else?" Tonks was saying. Her face showed red strain, even in the poor light. Harry thought it unfortunate that she did not just haul out her wand and use one of a hundred repelling spells Harry knew she could perform without thought.

Ingratiatingly, Skeeter said, "My dear, don't you want to get it all off your chest? You will feel sooo much better for it . . ." She leaned closer, making her bejeweled handbag sway off her shoulder. She smoothly hitched it up again. "It always goes without saying for the famous . . . they think they are above the usual polite rules."

"Like someone else we could mention," Harry offered loudly.

Chapter 40

Skeeter spun on Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter. This is delicious." She gestured at someone farther along the long, narrow pub. Harry subtly waved a Freezing Curse at the photographer who tried to stand up from his table.

Skeeter's eyes flashed with anger. "What's the meaning of that. Ministry rules prohibit employees to interfer-"

"I'm not with the Ministry," Harry smartly pointed out. "Why don't you move along? Make something up, like you usually do."

"Oh ho, I didn't make this one up, and you know it. I saw you locking sweet red ones with the youngest Weasley." She pounded her fist into her other hand, adding to herself, "If only I'd had my photographer with me."

"You were sneaking around in Animagus form, a strict violation of Ministry regulations."

"Ah ha," Skeeter said, shining red lips stretched wide. "So, you admit it's true?"

Tonks' gaze took on a new distance and she pulled her mug close.

Voice low, Harry said to Skeeter, "Go away."

Skeeter glanced at her photographer, still frozen, half standing from his table below a crooked hanging of a dragon circling over a tower. "Are you threatening me, Mr. Potter?"

Her supercilious mockery made Harry reach for the shadows, but he was like a man grabbing a robe hanging just out of reach. He teetered and closed his eyes to recover. When he opened them again he found the room much dimmer.

Tonks drunkenly pushed her chair back. "Harry . . ." her concerned voice came from the right side of Harry's tunnel vision.

Skeeter had moved to her photographer and was repeatedly waving an Unencumber Charm at him. Harry took Tonks' hand, clammy from her mug, and Apparated them away.

In the hall in Shrewsthorpe, Tonks shook off his hand and stared at her feet, hiding her face from the room. She gave a faint wave to Hermione when the other greeted her warmly.

Harry took Tonks' shoulders and said, "Let me explain, please. We've been setting Skeeter up for a fall. Ginny didn't know Skeeter was spying on us at the shop and was about to let slip that Freelander is about to buy the Prophet."

Tonks shook her shaggy brown mane, having trouble catching up with that after so much alcohol. "What's this?"

Candide interjected, "Freelander is making a secret offer to buy the paper expressly to fire Skeeter."

Tonks' red-rimmed eyes brightened. "Oh."

Harry said, "If Skeeter finds out, she will make a stink and the deal will be much harder." He released Tonks to shrug helplessly. "I didn't know how else to quiet Ginny without letting Skeeter know I knew she was there."

Tonks sniffed and wavered on her feet.

"Tonks, why can't you trust me?" he began, shaking her lightly, but she was limp. "Never mind. Let me mix you up some of the house remedy. Have a seat."

Harry placed Tonks beside Hermione and went off. When he returned with the potion, the room fell awkwardly silent. Harry tried very hard to avoid taking offense or growing suspicious, either of which would make him lose control.

Tonks accepted the glass, complaining, "But I was trying to get flat-on-my-face pissed."

"Would you like a shot of something instead?" Candide offered innocently.

Tonks gingerly rubbed her eyes. "No," she said, and drank down the glass.

Hermione sat forward. "I should get back."

"Why?" Harry asked. "You said everything was being taken care of. Why don't you stay?" Behind her, Harry spied the piles of opened presents. "I got a few games for Christmas, let's play one. We could all use an evening off. Especially Tonks, who has lost her senses."

Tonks stared sadly into her glass and did not argue.

They settled around a deep box and proceeded to unpack a complicated game board that unfolded with a charm into various combinations of terrain with a long, winding dirt path on it. Hermione read the instructions, "Gambling Castles is a game of resource strategy. You build houses and villages with the eventual goal of installing castles or casinos, depending upon whether you adopt a strategy of defending the gold you have or attracting more of it." She reached into the box. "I want to be the unicorn."

Tonks reached in and took out a pig. Peering closely at it, she said, "Funny, he's wearing a waistcoat with a little pocket watch on a chain."

Candide took it from her. "I'll be that one. That's about how I feel."

"I'll be the juggler then, and Harry can be the last." She took out a little figure of a bent over wizard leaning on a tall knobbly staff. She withdrew it momentarily to glance at the bottom before plonking it down before Harry. "The Wandering Sage."

"I don't feel much like a wandering sage," Harry said, adjusting his piece to his starting arrow. The figure saluted him with his staff and shuffled his feet.

Hermione rubbed her hands together gleefully. "This is great. I haven't had a chance to beat everyone at a game in months."

Candide, leaning sideways to reach all the way across the board said, "You think you're going to win that easily? First you have to know who else is playing."

Harry arrived in Belinda's flat promptly at noon. He slipped silently in under his cloak and tossed it off.

"See?" one of the underlings Harry had dealt with before said to the bulky masked figure standing between them. The two Harry knew stood round-shouldered, letting the larger man dominate even more than he would have otherwise.

"You really are Potter," came a raspy voice from the masked figure. The accent sounded West Country, making Harry believe he was not foreign. He fiddled with something in his wand hand, something glittery. Harry suspected it was a Portkey for a quick escape.

"It is. The same." Harry stated, sounding as bored as possible.

The figure nodded to the side. "They said you wanted to cut in, or something mad like that."

Harry tried for disdain. "I do, but not at their level."

Fingers flipped the shiny thing faster. "I don't buy it. Prove it."

Harry trusted that Snape was correct about Moody's killer acting with few accomplices. "I really killed Moody. I had a mate frame your man to get out again."

The flipping coin froze. Harry continued, "Come on. Word going around your organization must be that he didn't do it."

The figure's jaw moved behind the mask, folds of skin filled and shrank beneath it. The coin resumed turning, slowly. "All right then. I have something for you to do. Prove yourself and I'll take you to someone else."

"I want to meet your contact, now," Harry said. "No games."

"Not until you do something for me."

The two of them stared at each other. The underlings barely moved, waiting. Harry contemplated putting the man on the floor and threatening him. It would feel good to do that – lack of drills left him itching for some serious casting. He resisted the instinct. He may need an ally or two later, and he was not certain how many layers there were.

"I want to hear what it is first," Harry said. "If it's not worth my time, I don't want to bother."

A snort came from behind the mask. "Yeah, you would be the snooty type."

"Look at it this way: you need something done you don't have anyone to do, and I can skip a level or two when I succeed. I'm an impatient man."

"Yeah, all right. Wait here, then." He Disapparated and Harry was left to bide the time with the two others.

One of them studied his fingernails then said, "Must be nice."

The other said, "How do you do that trick? Apparating without a sound?"

Harry lied, not wanting them to suspect the depth of his skills, "It's easy. I send a Silencing Charm ahead of me."

The two thought that over. "Huh. Must be one hell of a charm."

Eventually the masked man returned with a loud pop. "I have a job for you. There're some things we want from a house in Harrogate."

Harry exhaled, glad it was not something he could not undo later, if needed. "What?"

"A tea set and a pillow."

Harry scratched his bristly upper lip. He wondered if he was being toyed with or insulted and how best to respond. Asking "why" was not going to be acceptable. Soldiers in gangs did not have the luxury of getting answers or understanding the larger picture.

Harry said, "There must be a catch. Otherwise someone else would already have done it."

"The catch is that the place has Aurors stopping by on patrol twenty four-seven. Here's the address and a description of the items. Bring them Sunday, same time." He waited while Harry perused the little slip of torn newspaper edge used for the note. The scrawled lines vanished as he read them. The man went on, now insulting for certain, "Unless His Highness needs more time."

"No. I'll bring them then."

Harry found his curiosity nearly too much to bear. He had been out of the office too long to know what was happening in Harrogate. He needed to go home and look at the atlas before casing the house. Mind leaping ahead with plans to avoid asking questions, he said, "Then I expect to meet with someone with some real power."

The man shrugged. "I can bring you to my contact. That's what I can do – I don't know anyone else."

"So you must be new to be so low in the organization. Is it worthwhile?"

The man shifted his shoulders back. "Good people always move up. And I get respect now when I'm out on the street."

"Not in that mask, you wouldn't."

The man snorted again. "I don't need the mask all the time. Power shows even without it."

"Right," Harry said.

"You have loads of power already. Why do you want in?"

Harry crumpled up the bit of blank paper and tossed it on the floor. "I want a different kind. The unlimited kind." As he said this, what was to be meaningless words to someone he needed to fool, a rush resonated up through his core. Distracted by this, he moved to toss his cloak over his head, but at the last moment saw the man's wand moving and stopped. He bundled up the cloak under his arm and exited through the door instead, shutting it quietly.

Greeted by the empty house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry found himself grateful for any task to occupy himself. In the library he pulled out the atlas and eventually located Harrogate – after shooing the drawing of a snoring dragon off it. He would have to take a broom from Kirkby Overblow, the closest place he knew from field work.

Thinking about field work gave him a pang of loss. He had psyched himself through his time in prison by dreaming of returning to previous activities, and it sent him more adrift to lack them. As tedious as patrol often was, he did miss it.

Well, Harry thought, he would have to reconsider things when Durumulna was straightened out. He closed the large atlas with a thud and Accioed his broom down from his room.

The weather alternated between bitter and pleasant depending upon the clouds. From high above the hills, the patches of sun glowed golden as they crept across the rippled earth. His strange task still felt insulting, but that made it simply a test he must pass, rather than anything to think about.

Harry located the town that matched the map and tilted the broom handle to plummet. He landed upon the unbroken roofline of the houses two streets away and scanned the area, keeping the broom hovering beside him. With the Obsfucation spell renewed because his invisibility cloak blew off his legs in the wind, Harry took his time observing. He fished a Telescoping Vision sweet out of his pocket and chewed it thoughtfully.

It was a good thing he kept a tight hold on his broomstick. As soon as the sweet took hold, filling his vision with the surging view of the brickwork of a distant house, he lost his balance and would have toppled backward off the roof otherwise. Grasping the broomstick in both hands, Harry carefully found his footing on the tiled roof peak and let his eyes wander wildly over the distant surfaces that threatened to bump his nose. He should have only eaten half a sweet, a nibble, or even just a lick.

Growing dizzy, he closed his eyes, but dared not leave them that way in such a vulnerable locaiton. He carefully traced the roofline opposite, down to the spotty soot stains left there by the rain. He squinted into the windows beyond, checking each in turn. The only one with open curtains revealed a stairway with a white banister and a pale blue runner. He estimated by the window count that it should be the correct house. His vision began to recover. Blinking rapidly, he spied a wavering like an invisibility cloak in the air above the next roof over, then lost it as his eyes returned to entirely to normal.

The world seemed ridiculously small now and he could not locate the disturbance. It was most likely someone watching the house. But from whose side, he did not know.

Harry slipped away to stash his broom back in his bedroom. Now that he knew the area, he could return without it. Cloaked, he slipped directly onto the stairs of the house in Harrogate and stood, listening. Voices droned somewhere, rooms away. Harry sneaked slowly up the thick runner, uneasy about even a muted squeak. In the master suite he found a distinctively lacy pillow propped neatly in a place of honor before an army of other pillows. It matched the description well enough, so wrestling

a bit, he rolled it up and stuffed it in his sack. Then he had to spend time tugging the bedspread back to pristine.

Downstairs, in the back of the house, he found the kitchens. That put him closer to the voices, and he could hear Kerry Ann talking, intermittent with an older, complaining voice.

"Look, Ms. Auror, or Aurorette or whatever you call yourself . . . honestly, I can't believe they'd allow someone so young anything like the kind of responsibility you've clearly been handed . . ."

Harry sighed and began searching the bastion of stainless steel for a blue and white teapot. The idea that he might actually find the things he had been sent for brought his curiosity back full force. He slowed his search to listen more.

" . . . but I don't have even a lamb's lick of faith in the Ministry let alone a little girl, even one as tall as you. What happened to that quiet black man who was here last time?"

"He's out searching for your husband, madam-"

"And that other man, the red-headed one who's balding . . . they have potions for that you know. Merlin knows why any sensible wizard would not avail themselves of the magic available . . ."

Harry resumed searching more expediently, carefully opening the top part of a tall cupboard and standing on tip toe to look inside. Something bumped his leg and he jerked back, wand extended, heart thumping. But it was only a small grey cat. Undisturbed, it bumped its bony spine against his half-cloaked leg again, purring fiercely.

"I've a mind to write Minister Bones again. What do we have leadership for except to lead?"

The voice was starting to make Harry's nerves itch. He ducked low to search under the long metal counter, but that was full of mixing bowls.

"Drat it all! Where is that calendar of mine? Godfried has been missing for almost three weeks, Ms. Auror."

"You can call me Kerry Ann, really."

The cat batted at the cloak, catching it in arced claws.

"Hey!" Harry whispered. Not wanting to tug and risk damaging the precious thing, he had to unpluck the cat's paw one transparent, hooked claw at a time. "Shoo!"

Standing from freeing himself, Harry spotted a blue and white flowered tea set on a silver cart by the door.

"It wasn't like this in my day, I'll have you know. . ."

It was a tall teapot, chipped along the spout. Harry lifted the cloak to grab up a neat stack of delicate little cups and slip them into his deepest robe pocket. The creamer was fortunately empty, and this filled his other pocket by itself. The cat jumped up on a nearby counter and curiously cocked its head at him before washing a paw. Harry hefted the heavy teapot and, grabbing his cloak with his free hand, slipped away into the Dark Plane.

As he feet ground into the grey dirt, Harry put his hand on top of the pot and found the lid missing. He imagined it left behind, hovering just an instant, before falling to shatter on the floor. He stood there for just a breath before setting the pot down and slipping back into kitchen. The lid lay scattered in a thousand pieces, except for the rooster-figure handle. That survived whole. The grating voice had ceased and footsteps approached. Harry waved a Reparo and with a telltale rattle of his pockets, scooped up the lid, and slipped away again.

Harry tossed off the cloak and huffed at the crazing in the glaze from his sub-par repair. He pocketed the lid, shook out the half lobster-, half salamander-like creatures that had crawled into the teapot to investigate, and slipped away for home.

He placed the pillow and tea set on the floor just beside the door to his room. Unlike, say, a diamond necklace or something meaningful for a real thief, Harry felt no need to hide his haul. He studied the cracked lid again before returning it to his pocket.

The quiet house nearly did Harry in over the course of the afternoon. Given the copious opportunity his mind had to wander, he repeatedly reverted to imagining fighting Voldemort in that other place, and had to remind himself that was not the case here. Well, not exactly the case.

When an owl scratched at the window, Harry jumped up, eager to fetch any letter. This one, written on a torn paper bag corner, was from Ginny.

Monday the deal is done. We're celebrating at the Three Broomsticks tonight.

Harry smiled, savoring the thought that Skeeter would shortly be out of a job.

Humming to himself, he returned to shelving his Auror books in the library, alphabetically in a manner that implied he did not intend to touch them for a while. On the top shelf above that sat an interesting row dark magic books, antique ones in

excellent condition that Snape had not been able to part with when he cleaned out upstairs. Harry hesitated, fingers gripping the spine of one titled Odyous Okkult. It stood out from the others by the black suede cover, tooled in silver.

Harry hesitated, remembering how he had been forced to cancel the Serpent Memory Charm against Malfoy. He worried that learning more spells he not dare use would only lead to more frustration. Curiosity won out and he pulled the book down. As usual for the era, the bookbinder was more skilled at binding than spelling or typesetting. As he entered the main hall to make himself comfortable while he read, Franklin dropped a letter on the side table with his name on it before taking off again. For a second, Harry imagined his taking the book down had triggered a letter from Snape. Shaking this notion off, Harry set the book aside and opened the letter.

Stop by my office for a visit this evening, if you would was all it said. Harry pocketed it and contemplated the book, not opening it, but running his finger in the curly, silver grooves. It was not clear what he wanted. He wanted to get even with a few people, that much he knew. But beyond that his plans were vague. For the first time his life lacked all structure and he did not know what to replace it with.

Harry opened the book to a random page in the middle and began paging forward.

Candide arrived home and Harry informed her of the visit to Hogwarts just as she settled on the couch with a heavy groan.

"You're implying I'm supposed to go along?"

"I can't leave you alone here." Harry said.

She raised an eyebrow. "What about that little knitting woman who wrestles dragons?"

"She was assigned by the Ministry because I was busy doing stuff for them."

Candide rubbed her rounded robe front. "I'm not taking the Floo again today. Maybe not again until after the birth."

Harry imagined that to be reasonable.

"I can stay here," she offered.

Harry shook his head. "You have your orders and I have mine."

"How do you know I have orders."

"Severus always gives you some," Harry said.

She sighed again. Harry said, "I can take you so you don't need the Floo. My friends are going to be in Hogsmeade tonight. Wouldn't you like to get out?"

She waved an ottoman over and propped her feet on it. Hands emerged out of it and untied her shoes and began a massage. She moved her feet around, making faces. "Going out wasn't high on my list, I'll confess. Watching people drink . . ." She stared into space a moment. "I could just about kill for a beer."

Harry broke out into a laugh and put his book away on the side table.

She sobered quickly, saying, "I wouldn't mind talking to Severus too. He's been out of sorts. I assume it's the impending third party, but I don't really know. He seemed to be overcompensating yesterday morning."

"Severus isn't always easy to figure out."

"At least he is always intriguing in his own strange way." She sat up and the cloth hands sank away. "Well, shall we go for dinner?"

"Brilliant plan." Harry felt the lid in his pocket. "Oh, before I forget, can you repair this better than I did?"

She puzzled over the lid, but shrugged and waved a repair spell at it. The pieces flew apart, hovered a moment above her hand, then with a tiny clatter, reformed without any sign of cracks.

"Thanks," Harry said, moving to take it back upstairs. "Put on something warm," he called over his shoulder.

"We're not going by broomstick, I hope," she called up as he went along the balcony.

"No, of course not," Harry replied, amused by her subsequent expression of relief.

When he came back down, he said, "We'll take my bike."

Harry's friends had not arrived at the pub yet, but Hagrid occupied the largest table in the corner, sitting with Hornisham.

"'Ello, 'Arry!" Hagrid roared. "Was that Sirius' bike I saw go by out there? Ah, he'd be pleased to know yer on 'er." He immediately grew soft as his eyes fell on Candide.

"And how is the little fella?" he asked, giving Candide a kind of pat, perhaps more an envelopment, on the belly.

"After that ride, ready to order his own drinks," Candide said, accepting the offered chair. "He'll have to settle for a hot cocoa, or three."

Chapter 40

Harry shook hands with Hornisham, who had to bundle her knitting against her to free a hand. The silvery limbs of her project spilled onto the floor at her feet.

Hagrid returned to roar level. "We were jus' discussing the finer points of tusk care. 'ave a seat, Harry."

After dinner, Harry left his friends to head to the castle. He walked carefully over the treacherous frozen ruts that made up the road, but stopped suddenly before Honeydukes to stare at the boarded over windows. Around the boards, large splinters stood out of the frames in all directions, prickly looking. The scent of burnt chocolate drifted on the crisp air.

Harry stopped the next person walking along the other way. "What happened to Honeydukes?"

The witch pulled her stringy hair back and stopped to consider the shop in question. "Someone attacked it. Broad daylight. Cheeky bastards, they were." She sniffed loudly. "Eh." With that succinct assessment, she moved on.

Harry did not like this. His purpose in infiltrating Durumulna was to get proof that Percy was involved with them as well as a party to Moody's death. He also hoped to relieve Belinda of their machinations, believing her a victim. But the damaged shop solidified for him that more was at stake. The crooked shop sign reminded him of bright-eyed, school-day trips for sweets, and for once those other, darker, instincts had no opinion. Harry sensed them biding their time, though, and walked on.

The students milling in the Entrance Hall after dinner greeted Harry warmly and welcomed him home – he assumed out of prison, not so much back to Hogwarts, but either was fine.

A dash of flowing white and green joined him on the stairs. "Harry!" Suze Zepher said breathlessly. Harry slowed so she could catch her breath.

"Good thing they caught the real killer. I thought you might be stuck there for good and we'd have to break you out."

"Really, I'd have broken myself out before it came to that," he said, drawing a laugh from many listening in as they passed.

She followed him to the door to Snape's office. "What are you going to do now? You aren't an Auror."

"I'll find something."

"Coming to the next match then? We're playing Ravenclaw. They have a new Seeker this year – a visiting student from Morocco who is quite good."

"I do have lots more time now," Harry admitted.

She smiled awkwardly and clasped her hands behind her. "Well, if you can. I could use the support. He's going to be tough. He has this non-reg Algerian broom that the headmistress is letting him use anyway." She nodded at the door. "And despite that Professor Snape, you know, always expects a win."

"A challenge is good for you," Harry pronounced.

Her face wrinkled up. "You sound like an adult."

"Well," Harry waved his arm in apology. "I'm getting there, they tell me."

"Sad," she said, shifting her impossibly long white hair as she shook her head. She brightened nervously again. "Don't forget: Ravenclaw match."

"I won't."

Harry watched her walk away. That inconvenient instinct was assessing her potential loyalties with cold calculation. Harry knocked on the door to have something else to think about.

Snape sat with a student, whom he told to finish serving detention with Lupin. The student left with no little expression of relief. When the door clicked closed, Snape said, "I arranged rather a large number of detentions, it seems. Sit down, Harry."

Harry took the vacated desk. The seat was still warm.

Snape paced to the window, then back to his desk. "Still feeling better?" he asked.

"Me? I suppose," Harry said.

Snape's gaze came around before his head. "Not much of an answer."

Harry gestured at his seating. "I'm back in a desk. You're a teacher. What can I say?"

This drew a faint smile and the strategic instinct inside Harry smiled too. Snape said, "It's been interesting adjusting back. I had forgotten how much we've gained."

"On that note, you're being too nice at home," Harry said, further diverging from the topic.

"Truly a first."

"Really. You need to ease back into you again. Try for old you for a little while."

Snape sighed and stared at the ceiling briefly. "Candide doesn't suspect, does she?"

Harry shook his head. "You've been excused for it due to the kid's near arrival."

"A fine excuse," Snape stated. He leaned back against the desk. "And yours?"

"Do I need one?"

Snape stared him down. "Are you going to remain behind the line you crossed?"

"I'm trying." Harry considered that Snape would most definitely like to hear about his meeting with Durumulna. But he found no desire to mention it.

Snape continued studying him, saying, "I suppose until an opportunity to cross it presents itself, it will be difficult to determine, for certain, how successful you will be." He reached behind himself and handed over a folded parchment. Harry breathed in deeply and unfolded it halfway, stalling. Snape said, "I find it interesting the contrast between your treatment of him and your treatment of me."

"You aren't one of them," Harry said, holding his gaze on the letter, noticing it had no salutation, just a date. Harry reckoned that addressing it to Other Self might have felt too awkward.

"Is that the only difference?" Snape softly asked.

Harry did not look up, but he also did not read the letter. The closest lamp was on the desk, so all Harry had to do was tip the letter slightly to make it too dim to read. "There are lots of differences."

"Of the ones that matter."

"Lots of them matter," Harry said, not understanding this line of questioning and wanting to be difficult.

"I'm curious what they are." When Harry shrugged, Snape went on. "It matters greatly if it means the difference between your treating me as a guardian or an underling." After a pause: "It is not like you to cause others pain. Even those you do not like."

Harry remembered making the other Snape's Mark burn. At the time, he had not cared about the pain beyond its use as a tool. That other part of him had ruled over their interactions so he could not recall any real reasoning he may have had.

Snape asked, "If I had a Mark again, would our relationship revert to the one in that letter? That is the essence of my question."

Harry did not have an answer, so Snape went on. "I seem to recall that during the incident with the cane, when you convinced me against all better judgment to return

to twenty years of age, that I did set you off, not dissimilar to the events described there."

Harry folded the letter up without reading it and held it in his hands. "It did," he agreed, remembering that with a similar distorted mix of regret and satisfaction.

"What is happening to you, Harry?" Snape asked. Level, calm – a tone that made it far easier to answer.

Harry closed his eyes and held them that way, seeing the shadows in the distance, a mirage, almost. "He left a vacancy behind."

"Voldemort did?"

"Yes." In a surge, Harry found the explanation bottled up again. By talking, he was giving away power, and doing that felt wildly unwise. But one glance at Snape looking down at him with level interest and perhaps affection let him keep talking. "I can feel his followers like I used to, but now I can also manipulate them. Easily. So easily, it's hard to avoid it."

"You, yourself, pushed Voldemort out of place," Snape stated. "You created this vacancy."

"I did," Harry agreed, feeling unseemly pleasure in remembering that moment when he carved Lockhart magically into pieces, removing the threat of him, the rivalry of him, it now felt like. Harry licked his lips.

Snape had to call his name twice to draw his attention to the present. "Would you rather be free of this influence?"

Harry glanced down at his hands. "I know I should want to."

"That wasn't the question."

Harry felt woozy. "I don't know." Then he felt fearful, worried that he had created an enemy out of Snape by revealing too much. The cords on the backs of his hands popped out. The letter crinkled.

"Harry," Snape said after a pause. "I do know what you are going through. Truly I do." When Harry's face expressed doubt, Snape went on, "Shall I prove it? You are thinking now that I may be untrustworthy because I know too much. That is correct, is it not?"

Harry looked up, beating down the wings of alarm trying to take flight in his chest.

"This is important, Harry. I want you to always remember that I am on your side, no matter what. I do not want you to ever doubt that. Do you understand me?"

Harry chewed on his lips, trying to reach equilibrium between his riled instincts.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

"You've said that before," Harry said. "But you must have some limit."

"No," Snape said. "I never have if need be." He shifted to sit back on the desk after setting one of the lamps aside. "All I ask in return is that you trust me. Which should not be much to ask, really."

Before he could change his mind or find new resistance, Harry said, "I've decided to infiltrate Durumulna."

Snape considered that before replying, "You are uniquely well positioned to do so right now."

"That's what I thought," Harry said, feeling relieved to have confessed.

"Dangerous occupation, however."

"More so than before?" Harry asked with light sarcasm.

"The danger will perhaps not increase for you, true. But for others close to you, it will."

Harry dropped his gaze, considering that. He had acted on the opportunity, listening to that voice that assured him it would be so easy. "I'll know what they're up to. That will help."

Snape lightly shook his head. "People like this will not hesitate to use family as leverage, or as a target for retribution."

Harry bit his lip, feeling vaguely unwell. "I didn't intend to put anyone else at risk. I didn't think about it that way."

"Your power makes you too confident, I believe." Snape did not sound angry, surprisingly, just thoughtful. "If I strongly suggest that you do otherwise, what would be your response?"

"It's too late?"

Snape blinked and reached his long neck out forward. "You managed to get in over your head in a day?"

Flinching faintly, Harry said, "I'm good at that?"

Snape shook his stringy hair. "We will have to take even more precautions than we already are. Perhaps invite Minerva to help respell the house."

"You aren't angry?" Harry asked.

"I don't believe you are thinking quite clearly, Harry. Through no real fault of your own."

"You're going easy on me all of a sudden," Harry criticized, to take the sting out of being treated as if he were helpless.

Snape stepped forward and leaned on Harry's desk, bringing their noses to within inches. "Much larger things are at stake," he stated clearly.

Harry blinked at him, for a wild second imagining he had the wrong guardian yet again. This close, Harry could see the distinction between Snape's black irises and his pupils, the texture of his skin, as well as the sprinkling of grey in his brows.

Snape went on, continuing to speak slowly like one insisting upon being understood, "I am quite familiar with what you are becoming. And I am doing what is necessary to retain your trust in me. I am even telling you all this so as to encourage you to trust me additionally."

Harry had pressed back in his seat, and relaxed only when Snape pushed straight again, rocking the desk. He turned away and went to the window, where the grey sky no longer competed successfully with the lamp flames reflecting off the glass.

Undone, Harry asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to not lose yourself. This thing you harbor previously clashed with your mindset, causing you pain. An adult mind and greater power has allowed it to make a better home."

"Being trapped there in prison with all his followers didn't help," Harry said, remembering how good it felt to reach out for even that small cadre. Just as well he could not reach them now in quite that intimate a way.

"Your battle with Voldemort in that other place involved fighting for his followers, I now suspect. That is why they did not come to his aid, and he instead fled." It wasn't quite a question.

Snape did not turn as he spoke, so Harry had to do more than nod and that drew out another confession. "Yes. You wouldn't believe what that kind of powerful reach feels like."

Snape fell silent a while, his reflection in the window backlit by the lamps. "Back in that other place my counterpart is coping with a Harry just now arming with unimaginable power."

"So you have the same problem as him," Harry tried to quip, but it fell flat.

"No." Snape finally turned. "He has it worse. You are quite manageable as long as I have your trust."

Harry huffed. "We're talking about me as if I'm not here."

"That's because we are talking about the part of you that does not belong."

"I've had this other part a long time. It sorta is a part of me."

"I am hoping that is true only if you yield to it."

Harry swallowed and rubbed his hands along the well-worn edges of the desk. "And if not? Then what? We ask Dumbledore's painting what it suggests?" Despite his level voice, Harry's heart rate leap up as he asked this.

"Never that." With only the lamplight now, Snape's face fell in shadow. "We will think of something else," he stated with certainty. With a sigh, his tone shifted to the practical. "Tell Candide what you are doing with Durumulna. I do not want her in the dark about the dangers. And make sure she is always guarded as you are already doing. Take her to the Burrow if there is any question, it is nearly as safe as Hogwarts as long as Percy is not there."

Harry stared at his hands, feeling sorrowful. "I didn't mean to make trouble for your family, Severus."

"You are my family, Harry. Do not forget that."

"Still," Harry said, sliding out of the desk at what sounded like a parting tone from Snape. "I'm still sorry."

Snape returned to casually leaning back against his desk, exuding confidence of all things. "You may hold that thought. It is most likely a safe one for you."

Harry half grinned, half frowned. Snape did understand. "Still," he said again.

"Harry," Snape began, losing his level tone in exchange for a reassuring one. "I have always assumed that my past would come back to haunt any kind of life I attempted to establish."

"This isn't your past, it's mine."

"How so?" Snape returned sharply. "As I recall, the events leading up to your obtaining this rather inconvenient piece of Voldemort were not without my participation."

"True," Harry said, scrubbing his head. He felt even more confused and undone at remembering that.

"Do keep me informed, as well as Candide as necessary for her to be on alert for trouble. Not too much detail, however, as that puts her at yet more risk."

Harry cut him off. "You sound so casual about it."

Snape crossed his arms and rose up a bit. "I have seen you in action and am confident that you can protect her as long as you are aware what is happening. I will be home soon enough on leave as well."

"That will be nice," Harry said, imagining them all home together, which made him feel utterly himself.

"Be careful, Harry. That is paramount." Snape said, as Harry went to the door.

"I thought not losing myself was paramount," Harry said, teasing a bit.

"Same thing."

Back at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry was pulled out of his circling thoughts by Aaron, greeting him roughly just as he stepped inside. He pushed Harry back through the door out into the road.

"I want a word a second," Aaron insisted.

Harry was still gathering his bearings and nearly tripped on the uneven hard mud.

Ginny came out behind Aaron. "What are you doing?"

With false pleasantness, Aaron said, "Just having a chat with Harry. We'll be right there."

Harry glanced around the road, which was filling with interested bystanders. He found his balance and stepped closer so his friends would perhaps not talk so loudly. Ginny was demanding of Aaron, "I told you there was nothing to it. What are you doing?"

"This is between me and him," Aaron insisted.

Harry put up a hand to encourage Ginny to calm down. "It's all right. I'll talk to him."

Ginny said, "It's not just between the two of you. How does that work again?"

Harry saw Skeeter's photographer approaching, stealthily low but still on tip toe, so he walked rather oddly which made him immediately obvious. Harry closed his eyes to work up the right attitude. He grabbed up the front of Aaron's robes and tugged him off balance. Despite Aaron starting the physical battle, this caught him off guard and he swung an arm in a futile attempt to break Harry's grip.

"What do you think you're doing?" Harry demanded loudly. Close to Aaron's face he muttered quietly but affectionately. "There is nothing going on and now we both look like fools."

The photographer's flash went off and Harry let go. He smoothed Aaron's robes for him, even though Aaron batted his hand away, confusion in his movements.

Ginny covered her face in dismay, but recovered to pull her wand on the photographer, who squeaked and slipped back into the crowd. Trying not to grin, Harry patted Aaron's shoulder. "Let's settle this like civilized men: with a drinking contest."

Aaron straightened his collar with a rough tug. "You're on."

"Ugh," Ginny sighed, following them inside.

The crowd chuckled and muttered as it dispersed. Harry, happily envisioning yet more effective press for the next day, ordered a round for the table.

Snape returned home earlier than usual on Friday evening. He wished to assess Harry yet again, an instinctive need that would most likely not diminish any time soon. The house creaked faintly in the wind as he sorted his post.

"You're home," Harry's voice came from the doorway.

Snape turned, glad he had let his correspondence distract him from immediately seeking out his charge. It allowed events to fall into a normal, healthy pattern.

"Yes," Snape said, returning to the envelopes long enough to pull out the ones requiring attention that day. "Hogwarts, specifically Slytherin House, is quiet for a change."

"Maybe all those detentions . . ." Harry suggested.

"Something I'll have to remember," Snape distractedly returned. He tucked the letters at his side and gave Harry his full attention. "I couldn't help but notice you

were in the papers today, tussling with an Auror Apprentice of all things. Anything I need worry about?"

Harry shook his head.

"You are certain?"

"Just more posing for my undercover operation."

This stopped Snape, who had not expected that answer. "You are doing well in that case. You have been converted from pristine hero to bad boy in record time."

Harry slipped his hands into his back pockets and shifted to a jaunty stance. "I'm sorta liking it. It's much less effort to maintain." He resembled his father standing that way.

Snape said, "And your next contact with them is?"

"Sunday."

"Do be careful. Perhaps I should remain here until you return."

Cheekily, Harry said, "Candide would like that, so certainly."

"Hm," Snape said, passing Harry on the way to the drawing room. "I knew you two would gang up on me eventually."

Harry followed. "Remember, not too nice."

Snape waved him off, still having difficulty hearing such an unlikely thing.

Harry waited in the doorway of the drawing room while Snape set out his writing set. Harry said, "Since you're home early, I'm going to meet up with Tonks early. I have some make up time to spend with her."

Snape began opening his mail. "Don't be late," he said automatically.

Disbelievingly, Harry retorted, "And that would be what time?"

Snape shook himself. "I'll expect you at breakfast."

"That I can work with."

Snape worked on correspondence until Candide returned from work. She leaned on the doorframe Harry had vacated earlier and said breathlessly, "That's definitely my last trip in the Floo . . ."

Snape forgot his letter and put the pen down on the blotter. "Do you need anything? A Healer, the Witchwife?"

She waved him off and set her well-worn bag of files down inside the door. "No, no. But I will if I try one more time."

Snape stood and took her things from her. "Ask Harry to take you. He has no trouble Apparating that distance if you do not mind Siding Along."

She rubbed her back while making a face. "I'll do that."

"Or I can simply insist he do so. Whichever."

She shook him off and headed for the seating area.

"Where is Harry this evening?" Candide asked as she draped herself across the couch in a position that was presumably more comfortable than it looked.

"Out," Snape replied. He pondered her there, considered making room beside her, but remembered Harry's words about behaving more coldly, and sat on the opposite couch. He took up the latest issue of Potion Portions Quarterly, even though he had no interest in anything except in getting reacquainted with his much missed home life. It pained him, but he managed a disinterested air for nearly ten minutes.

"When you are done with that, why don't you finish reading to me where you left off?"

Snape lowered the journal. He had no idea what she was referring to and clearly he should. "If you wish," he said to cover. As he pretended to finish that article, he glanced around at possible reading material. Certainly she did not mean one of the Witch Weekly or Enchanted Life magazines stacked under the side table.

Eventually, he had no choice but to try a bluff. He set the journal down and made a point of glancing around.

"It's just there, by the vase."

Snape had disregarded the little book sitting there right before him. He picked it up, grateful it had a bookmark, at least. He tried to stare properly at the action-packed cover but he should presumably be familiar with it already. Continuing the bluff, he said, "Ah the Fiery Friar," in a pleasant tone that betrayed none of the horror he felt at the prospect of reading such a questionable volume, even silently.

Snape stared at the words and felt a cold chill. This was a test. It had to be. She suspected the switch and was using this ruse of his counterpart reading aloud from this . . . this . . . novel . . . to snare him.

"We left off where the man is arranging to send a carriage to pick up the woman and her niece who is disguised as a maid," Candide prompted helpfully. She was clearly a better actor than he gave her credit for.

"Must we read this . . . particular . . . enchiridion?" he asked, using the only middle ground that did not give him away.

"You seemed to be enjoying it last time."

Snape stared at her. "You must have been mistaken."

She chuckled. "I'm pretty certain you read it. I'm willing to believe I mistook your lack of annoyance for enjoyment."

Snape turned to the book again. Perhaps this wasn't a trap, after all. Or, if it were, it was of a far more complicated variety. That his coarser counterpart fell for it too was small consolation.

Pulling the small book closer so he would not have to squint, Snape began, "The mule's breath clouded the still air around him as he pulled tight the last loop of the harness. The animal stood, stalwart, throughout, only flicking an ear occasionally to follow the sound of the rooks gathering in the hedgerows, lost in the dawn mist, all sound and no fury. . . ."

Author's Notes: I had three huge work deadlines in the last two months and as an independent contractor that basically means I've been living, sleeping, eating and breathing work. The last of those project deadlines was yesterday, so I finally got a chance to give the chapter some much needed attention. The betas were champs this round, given what a wreck the chapter was when I sent it to them. Special thanks to them!

Chapter 41.

An Offer You Cant Refuse

"What would you like to do?" Harry asked brightly when Tonks came out of her bedroom. He was relishing his freedom this evening and wanted Tonks to join in.

"You seem very chipper," she complained. When Harry shrugged, she added, "I expected you to still be angry about getting stuck in prison."

Harry had lost track of that anger while working to recover his guardian from a much worse place. The touch of absolute power he had experienced through Voldemorts' army of followers there had dwarfed what he had felt in prison, rendering that experience smaller yet.

Just for something to say, Harry half-jokingly said, "They've learned not to take me for granted since I quit."

She came around to where he sat and placed her hands on his shoulders. "The recriminations keep flying about that."

The tips of her fingers hurt him where they pressed against unyielding muscle. He tried to relax into her ministrations. but failed and shook loose by standing up.

"Come on, let's go out. I don't care where." Indeed, in this world, everywhere was safe, the whole place a playground.

Glumly, she insisted, "Somewhere Skeeter won't be."

Harry put an arm around her narrow waist, gathering her thick winter robes under his hand. Whatever scent she had put on was overwhelming so close. “Nah, let’s go find her.”

“Are you mad?”

Harry grinned. “One last setup . . . come on.”

She shook her head. “You’re really certain about her getting made redu-” Tonks glanced around.

Harry replied, “I am.”

Tonks took up her small silver-blue handbag on a silver chain. “How about, we don’t go looking for her, but if she shows up, I get to tell her to bugger off?”

“All right,” he agreed.

Tonks hesitated departing. Finally she asked, “You couldn’t shut Ginny up any other way?” She sounded doubtful, but fortunately not like she did when questioning a suspect. “It really didn’t mean anything?”

“I couldn’t think of anything else on the spot. And it didn’t mean anything more than that I didn’t expect she’d resist.”

Tonks glared at him full on. “Did she?”

Harry shrugged yet again. “No. Not really.”

“Wonderful.”

Harry had considered finding his friends that evening, and instead said, “Where do your friends usually go?”

Tonks took them to a place where a vast space danced with colored lights but everyone sat on high stools around the shadowed fringe. Harry followed along the perimeter, flinching at the noise pummeling his head and making his heart vibrate but glad for the anonymity of the lighting.

Tonks leaned attractively over the bar to shout their order to the barman. Harry scanned the crowd and checked that his wand remained easy to reach. Tonks handed him a glowing red drink and clinked their plastic glasses together.

The drink tasted sickeningly of artificial cherries, and Harry pretended to sip it, not in the mood to mute his concentration, at least not by drinking this particular substance. Tonks insisted on dancing, but while they did so, Harry remained steadfastly off

the floor where they would be the center of attention. The lights and the brain-penetrating noise blissfully let him forget where he was and what he needed to do. He must have relaxed his grip on Tonks as they danced because she suddenly slipped closer and they fitted together much better, turning there in the waves of sound and color.

Tonks ordered a second drink after finishing Harry's. When he suggested she slow down, she couldn't hear him even with him shouting directly in her ear. Once she had her drink, Harry tugged her away from the blasting curtain of sound and back into the recesses of the nightclub.

"What?" Tonks asked when they entered an area of cheaply black-painted walls and random thin curtains.

Harry tugged her drink away to take a sip of it – at least this one was clear – and said, "I was trying to suggest you slow down."

"It's my night off," she pointed out, not understanding.

The speed with which she had put down two and headed into a third implied she had taken on a regular habit of more.

Harry took another symbolic sip of her drink and kept it at his side, held by the lip. "I'll help you with this one."

She screwed her face up to complain, but it did not hold. She leaned against him, slipping a shoulder under his arm. Harry led the way further from the thrumming of the dance floor and around a corridor lined with curtained alcoves. Elegant feet with high heels stuck out from under one, shifting slowly. Tonks halted and backed up to pretend to trip over them.

The person let out a yelp and sat up, fighting with the curtain to do so. Other feet appeared, clad in dark men's shoes and pinstripe flared trousers.

Giggling, Tonks yanked Harry away. Her outfit and hair turned jet black, the better to blend in with the surroundings. She shoved Harry through an unlocked door and they stumbled into the stairwell, which held far more lounging bodies than expected.

No one moved. Harry at first assumed this was from surprise, but it was not. The figures sat or reclined on the stairs as if overcome by some kind of lethargy. A robed figure sitting halfway up the flight raised his head and peered at Harry, eyes blinking in wonderment. As though living in a thick soup, Justin Finch-Fletchly's lips moved, forming the word "Harry". Then he raised his arm, ever so slowly, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Laudinasia, looks like," Tonks said, snapping Harry back from an acute sense of unreality.

"What?" Harry asked.

Tonks nudged the closest body with her foot, moving far flung robes off the stained floor. She walked around doing this, finally bending down to pick up a plastic baggy. This she held to the light filtering down from the floor above. "Red crystals," she said. She moved about, lifting heads this time.

"Recognize a few?" she asked Harry.

Harry nodded, noting several former students from Hogwarts.

She came back to Harry, and slipped the bag into her pocket.

"This party's a drag; let's go somewhere else," Tonks announced and led the way out of the stairwell. Harry followed, hurrying to keep up.

"Aren't you going to do anything . . . take them to St. Mungo's or something?"

Tonks did not slow down. "I don't want them getting any cures. I want their headaches splitting their heads open when I go around and interview them tomorrow."

They were off by Apparition to a quieter spot before Harry could ask more. "But what is that stuff?"

"Laudinasia is a crystallized potion making the rounds of the party set. The stuff with red crystals comes in from St. Petersburg, and that's usually made pretty well. The local stuff isn't brewed as well, and can have all sorts of awful side effects." She pulled out the packet and rolled it more carefully. "Looks like first timers since they were only splitting a single satchel of it. We'd like to get a line on the local brewers, since they are causing the most casualties, but the demand is created by the good imported stuff, so it's a problem too."

Harry, worried about his old schoolmates, asked, "Addictive?"

"Psychologically mostly." She clapped Harry on the shoulder. "You've been missing out being gone, Harry."

"Apparently."

"Come on, I'm famished. Let's get some dinner. Somewhere nice."

Tonks provided grooming charms for both of them before she let Harry open the door to the Middle Inn. The waiter led them to a central table and remained just long enough to snap Tonks' napkin into her lap.

Chapter 41

"So, things are getting tougher at the Ministry," Harry said, feeling left out, as well as digging for information.

"We're always understaffed. Are you coming back?"

Concerned who might be overhearing, Harry had no trouble saying, "I don't know."

She frowned, deepening the already noticeable lines of her face. Around them, dining room chatter ebbed and flowed, relaxing the mood. "Rodgers says he's now glad we're together because he thinks he can recruit you back through me."

"I need some time," Harry said, sipping his expensive fizzing water. A vision of Finch-Fletchly mouthing his name dogged at him. "I was surprised to see Justin among those in the stairway at the club."

Tonks shrugged. "Sometimes straights get pulled in. Especially when friends insist you can't get hurt and you don't want to get left out. Bones is about to launch an informational campaign about it." She scratched her ear, thoughtful. "Were any in the stairwell Muggles that you could tell?"

Harry thought back before shaking his head. There had been Muggles in the club, but not there on the stairs.

"Good. We've had reports the stuff is getting sold on the Muggle market too. That we really want to stop. It has magical properties and the Muggle authorities will be asking some serious questions once they get a hold of some."

"Serious questions of the Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked.

"Serious questions about how the stuff works. Bloody inconvenient having to Obliviate entire departments in secure Muggle government bureaus. They tend to ask questions about that too, unlike most Muggles who just shrug and write off everyone forgetting a whole day. Like they'll assume the calendars were all wrong or something. Muggle bureaucrats don't do that. They get more tenacious."

As the meal progressed and conversation fell off, Harry's mind began to fixate on his meeting Sunday. He had no idea how it would go, and expected he would have to give way to that other mode of thinking to best maximize the encounter, or perhaps even to survive it. He was lost in these musings while picking at his ice cream with a fork when a familiar voice jarred his attention away.

"The riffraff even in the nicest places is just unbelievable," Draco Malfoy sniffed.

Harry looked up. This Draco actually looked older than the alternative world Draco, which did not match most of the other schoolmates Harry had seen there.

Harry, taking Draco's put on attitude as just that, put his toe down on Tonks' foot before she could say anything. Before he could come up with a unperturbed rejoiner, his eye was caught by the vision in heavy black robes standing just behind and to the side of Draco. Pansy's belly bulged as much as Candide's did. Unlike Candide, who seemed to glow a bit, even through the discomfort, Pansy appeared hopelessly weighed down. She stood bent forward, hanging on Draco's hand. Make-up failed to mask her puffy eyes, which fixed on Harry with a curious but wary look.

Aware of the diners around them halting and turning, Harry stood up and gave a nod in Pansy's direction. Wanting to do the unexpected, Harry graciously said, "Mr. Malfoy, I think your wife looks quite ready to be home, with her feet up."

Oddly, Draco appeared to make a decision and relaxed into a grim, quieter attitude. "Come, Pansy," he said, leading her away by the hand.

Pansy put her head down and followed. Harry watched them depart, as did most of the restaurant.

Tonks picked up her drink and said between swigs, "Not exactly the happy couple."

Bleary-eyed, Harry returned home for second breakfast, glad when Snape gave him only a cursory looking over that could easily have been attracted by Harry's ruffled personal state.

Harry sniffled, wishing his head did not pound lightly and his ears did not buzz.

"Did you make things up to Tonks?" Candide asked.

Harry grunted noncommittally, taking great care to evenly coat his toast with marmalade. As nice a time as he and Tonks had had, things still felt unresolved. Maybe things just always felt that way.

Candide, working her breakfast with both hands, paused to add, "She's easily upset, it seems. Not self-confident."

"She is with magic," Harry said, not certain if he was defending her or just clarifying.

"I meant with relationships."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I don't know how to reassure her. What should I do?"

"It's not you, I don't think, Harry. But I'm not impartial."

Chapter 41

Snape lowered the paper he was reading to glance between the two of them.

"You were saying?" Candide prompted him.

"I was just thinking that this was the same topic that I must submit to overhearing from my students."

"And you'll get more of it this evening, with Lupin and Harry's cousin coming for dinner."

Snape gave Harry a gaze of dismay that said, yet another thing I must bear, and lifted the paper to ignore them through the rest of breakfast.

Harry, bored just minutes after breakfast concluded, decided to take a run. He had not done so in months and once the idea took hold his limbs refused to remain sedentary.

The brisk air burned Harry's lungs, making him cough, but after stopping to clear them, he powered on, He ran in a single direction, limbs cycling, mind blissfully blank until he passed the gate where he had encountered Moody spying on him one night last autumn. Harry slowed, crunching gravel underfoot as he leaned on a gate post to stretch his legs. He did wish to avenge Moody, even as annoying as the old Auror's paranoia had grown in the end. Moody had been following someone else besides Harry, at the end. He had been watching out for Belinda too, and now there was no one to do that except Harry, who did not understand as much as Moody presumably did at the time. Maybe if the old Auror had trusted anyone, he would have told someone what he knew. Perhaps he had only ever really trusted Dumbledore.

Properly stretched, Harry ran on.

Lagging sooner than he had hoped, Harry pushed himself several times to go on, but he had lost too much capacity for athletic activity between prison and winter's dissuasion from venturing out. Coughing again, Harry stumbled away from the road along a muddy field path bordered on two sides by overgrown stone walls. When the car noise faded and the wind took over, he transformed and took flight for home, flapping slowly and relishing the air on all sides of him, hoping to be mistaken for a kite if his luck did not hold.

Back at home, Harry had at least shed his anxious energy, if not his mental boredom. He wandered to the library, thinking perhaps of pulling down one of his Auror books. Once there, he felt doing so would imply giving in. He instead perused the top shelf of far more interesting bindings, turning his head to read each title in turn, looking for any gems he might have missed the last time. He pulled each down and paged through them, pausing to study the etchings and woodcuts, which frequently

contained something in the background, a little mouse in the corner or a little walled city on a hill.

Harry's attention was so caught by the muddled, arrow-filled diagrams in a book on hex deconstruction, that he did not notice Snape standing in the doorway until the other cleared his throat.

Harry said, "All the good books are gone."

Snape replied, "'Good' being a relative term in this instance."

Harry put that book back and took down the next. Like most of them, it had no index or table of contents, so it had to be perused to understand its scope.

"Looking for something in particular?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm just reading."

Snape dropped his voice. "Increasing temptation as well, I expect."

"Maybe."

Harry read in peace for a page. Snape said, "Do you feel lacking, magically?"

"Do you mean, do I feel like someone who's been living on porridge and dry toast and just discovered a book on desserts?"

"Something of that nature."

"A little," Harry admitted. He shrugged helplessly. "I feel incomplete. I want something, but I don't know what it is."

"I think everyone experiences that at your age, Harry."

Harry looked up from the book, finger on an incantation for cursing someone with a parroting affliction. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"What did you do about it?" Harry asked, hopeful for a decent suggestion.

Snape's gaze drifted off. "I made rather a large number of serious mistakes."

"Oh," Harry said, returning to his book.

Voice harder, Snape said, "That makes me more useful to you, not less; I'll have you know."

Harry grinned. "Figures you'd say that." When Snape continued to ponder him, Harry said, "What?"

"Nothing. Let me know if you require anything of me."

The arrival of their guests broke the monotony of the house. Harry greeted his cousin and led her inside, Lupin trailing, brushing his hair back nervously. "I have to keep it an early evening," he said, sounding strangely false while apologizing.

Harry's curse sense was making his skin itch again, confirming that Lupin himself set him off. He resisted the urge to step backward rather than shake hands.

Candide, with a teasing glance at Snape, said, "Shall we send Severus in your place so you can stay later?"

Speaking softly, Lupin grinned weakly while saying, "No, that's all right."

Lupin said, "Minerva asks after you, Harry, and wanted me to insist that you stop by for a visit now and then." He smiled more as he added, "She doesn't trust Severus to pass on social invitations, I don't think."

"I'll do that, thanks," Harry said, instinctively pondering what useful information she may have that he could appear to innocently weasel out of her. She did sit on the Wizengamot. Harry shook off these thoughts and helped Winky hand out fruit juices all around. Pamela gazed curiously at the glass she had been handed, and suddenly said, "Where's your pet, Harry?"

"Up in her cage." Harry waved an Unlatch Spell in that direction and moments later his Chimrian came flapping over the rail before settling on the edge of an unlit lamp, claws ringing painfully as they scraped on the glass.

Harry plucked her off and put her on his shoulder and took a seat beside his cousin.

"Can I hold her?" Pamela asked.

"She eats strangers, you know," Candide warned her.

Kali gave a warning hiss just then in the direction of Pamela's outstretched hand. She intelligently pulled it back slowly, rather risk a quick movement.

Harry patted his pet on the head and she began cleaning her wing membranes by running the edge along her foot in between nibbling frenetically on them.

"Look at those teeth. She doesn't hurt herself doing that?" Pamela asked, leaning in closer than she really should. "Is that how she got those wounds?"

Harry took his pet off his shoulder and tugged on one wing to pull the black membrane taut. He no longer noticed the ragged scars even as much as they distorted the sheen

of his pet's wings. She had been injured defending Snape from the demons Harry had let loose.

"No, that was something else," Harry replied. "She got in a fight with something nasty," he hedged, not wanting to explain, really, but knowing he had to say something. He found Snape's gauging gaze on him when he looked up.

"Did she win?"

"It was a draw," Harry said, clipping his speech in the hopes that she would drop the questions.

Pamela sat back with her arms crossed. "More mysterious magical stuff that isn't fit for Muggle ears I suppose."

"It isn't that you're a Muggle," Harry said, remembering those painful helpless hours while Snape slipped away from him. "I just don't feel like talking about it." In the end he had taken care of things himself, like he always needed to do. And probably always would, a notion that bolstered him for tomorrow.

Snape stood and fetched Harry's pet from him and held her on one bent arm. He stood beside Candide's chair, holding Kali down by stroking her back. Harry sensed he was watching him through his hair.

"Likes you well enough," Pamela lightly complained.

"You will have to let her drink your blood if you wish to make peace with her." Snape coolly stated.

"Oh," Pamela said, mouth holding an 'O' shape.

"There is no shortage of monsters in the wizarding world," Lupin said between sips of his drink, frowning a bit.

Harry observed Candide glance at each face around her in turn. "Shall we go to the table?" As she scooted forward to more easily lever out of her chair, she said, "If I were being honest, I would say, I don't care about anyone else, I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

Pamela laughed loudest at this and gave her a hand, since Snape's hands were full of Harry's pet, who had decided she did not want to fly off when urged to.

As toast with olive spread appeared on the table, Candide said to their guests, "You two are still very cute together. Any additional plans on that front?"

Harry thought this diving in a tad blunt, so he picked a side, saying, "I'm glad you don't start in on Tonks and me like that."

Snape's stern voice emerged from the shadowy head of the table where the hearth burned high behind him. "She had best not."

After a gap where she studied the slightly rusty wooden-handled knife by her plate, Pamela said, "No. No plans."

Candide shrugged, fully appearing to make this a casual conversation. "You seem well matched is all."

Lupin's grey gaze flicked to her, then to the truly disinterested Snape, before returning to the black smeared bread abandoned on his plate.

Into the silence that followed, Pamela said with pretend brightness, "Remus insists he's not the marrying type."

Harry watched Lupin's hairy, pointy-nailed fingers rotate the toast on his plate, and sensed the man bristling. To fill the gap, Harry said, "Severus insisted that too, but look where he is."

Candide turned that way, bit her lip and said, "He hasn't been entirely happy lately."

Harry rose immediately to defense. "He's adjusting all right." He and Snape shared a glance and Harry frowned lightly. He hoped Candide was being overly forthcoming solely to distract Lupin from what could be construed as a grilling.

"Where's your ladyfriend, Harry?" Pamela asked.

"You mean, why am I spared?" He paused while they chuckled. "Tonks is on duty. As usual." He took another square of toast. "As far as I can tell, married people want to make certain everyone is equally miserable and so try to sell it to everyone else."

"Kindly leave me out of this," Snape intoned, accepting a drink from the tray Winky sparkled in with. He swirled the liquid around in the bulbous glass a few circles and Harry knew he was going to say more from the way the muscles of his face tightened. "I honestly don't care what anyone else does. I don't care if your cousin feels out of sorts for lacking a ring . . ." He have a small gesture in her direction. "Nor that Remus feels unworthy, for reasons entirely outside his control, of giving one over."

Harry, for a second, was certain Lupin was going to stand up and storm out. But instead the air went out of him, and his fingers fidgeted more. In his best self-depreciating manner, he defensively said, "Easy for you to say."

"You think?" Snape said. "Really?"

Harry did not believe this the best tack, but part of him was relieved they would not play the earlier game all through dinner, but would instead get it settled quickly. Leave it to Snape to dispense with niceties.

Lupin stared at Snape before sitting back and tossing his napkin onto the table beside his plate. "I don't know," he breathed.

"If you are looking for pity, you are looking in the wrong place," Snape stated.

"I'm not looking for pity. I'm not looking for anything," Lupin said.

"Why not?" Candide asked.

"What?" Lupin uttered.

"Why not?" Candide began gesturing with her knife, but set it down. "Why aren't you looking for something. Isn't that the state everyone is supposed to be in?"

"I . . . I never thought of it quite like that." Lupin glanced around at them all and returned to hunching over his plate, which had the unfortunate effect of making it clear his spine bent a bit unusually. Pleading a bit, he came back with, "I'm not right for a husband, for anyone. Or fatherhood, or anything of the sort. It surprises me that anyone could think I was." He relaxed then and finally ate his toast.

Pamela leaned forward to partly face him, "If no one else cares, why do you?"

Lupin finally turned to her. "If they don't care, then they don't understand," he stated with finality.

"Well," Pamela said, voice unsteady. "As long as we've established that all of us are hopelessly daft, that's fine."

Lupin rolled his eyes and shook his head. He held his hands up. "Can you imagine these hands holding a child, taking care of a child. What if the child turns out like this?"

"Curses, in general, rarely pass along father to child," Snape stated.

"And how would you know?" Lupin returned.

"Copious reading. Minerva would be a better source of informed opinion on the matter. But again, no real concern of mine, so do as you wish."

The table fell silent aside from small fidgeting movements. Dinner sparkled in, a great crispy roast duck.

"Are house elves hard to get?" Pamela asked.

"It's complicated," Candide replied.

"Involves a creepy spell," Harry added, partly glad to change the topic.

Pamela paused holding a spoonful of potatoes staring across the table at Harry. "Creepy how?"

Harry tried to explain, "It involves . . . uh . . . magical bondage, er, something."

"Yuck," Pamela offered.

In a voice of dismay, Candide said, "Some wizard weddings do the same."

Pamela swallowed hard. "Really? Yours didn't, did it?"

"No," Snape and Candide replied together.

Kali choose that moment to stick her nose out of Snape's pocket and creep over the landscape of his robes toward his plate. Snape plucked her up by her fur and dangled her out to the side. "Your pet, Potter."

"Yeah," Harry said, pushing his chair out. "I'll take her upstairs." He stopped back at his plate for a slice of duck and nearly lost two fingers giving it over to his pet. Her teeth flashed in the firelight, seeming to lengthen before they were embedded in duck breast.

"Quite a pet," Pamela said with a hint of sarcasm.

Lupin said, "That's why wanting to marry something a hundred times as big and ten times as nasty makes no sense." He sounded victorious pulling out that argument.

"You're really that bad?"

Lupin dropped his assertiveness as fast as he had put it on. He returned to hulking over his plate and eating.

"Why don't you let me see for once and judge for myself?" Pamela demanded.

This deflated Lupin more. Harry hesitated in the doorway. He gave his pet a toss toward his room instead of escorting her. She flapped madly to cope with the weight of her meal, but gained altitude in time to make it up to the railing.

"I'd rather not," Lupin said, rather calmly.

Harry only saw it because he had not yet returned to his seat, but Candide tapped Snape on the shin with her toe. Harry settled back in at his place, hoping his pet did not decide to use his pillow as a dinner napkin. Snape put his utensils down and

propped his clasped hands over his plate. "It could be safely arranged," he said in a bored tone.

Harry pretended interest in smearing an unwanted third piece of toast when Lupin's accusatory gaze made it around to him.

"Fine," Lupin mumbled, as if that won the argument.

Harry looked up and asked, "Fine what?"

"Just fine," he said, sounding fatigued.

Pamela contemplated the beaten old wooden handled fork they were using that evening. Despite a brutal shining by Winky, rust spots still showed on the tines. "Should I be serving food with something more like these, or plastic even?"

"There isn't much silver in your silverware," Lupin mumbled.

"But there's probably some. Why didn't you point that out? I tossed out all my silver jewelry, but I didn't think of this."

"It's not important," Lupin insisted. "I've learned to tolerate it. It happens frequently enough."

Pamela scrutinized Lupin beside her, giving a small huff of exasperation, but remaining silent.

Snape said, "It has been my observation that Remus cannot bear anyone making accommodation for him. Even when it is in everyone's best interest."

Softly, but with finality, Lupin said, "I said fine."

"Two weeks, Friday, then. I believe we have a date," Snape stated, in the manner of closing out a meeting. Candide suppressed a small smile.

With the distinctive chiming rustle of fine china, Harry scooped up his stolen goods and Disapparated for Belinda's flat. He had decided that showing off his silent transportation skills too much was an unnecessary risk. Belinda blinked at him from the couch where she sat curled up with a magazine. When she did start to move, she moved rapidly, dropping her reading on the floor and jumping to her feet.

"Harry?"

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Harry placed the china on the table and the pillow on a chair. "Good evening," he casually greeted her.

She put her hands on her hips, challenging him. Behind her, in the window, her owl fluffed itself and pecked at the side of his wing. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a meeting," he informed her.

"A meeting?" she echoed dully.

At that moment, Harry's Durumulna contact arrived, flanked by his two lackeys. He adjusted his mask and peered at Harry, ignoring Belinda. "You have the stuff." It was not a question.

Harry waved an inviting hand at his cache and reached to pick up the teapot.

"Leave it on the table." With a toss of his round shoulder, the man sent a lackey over to run a hex detection spell on each item.

The underling stood aside so his boss could study the pile. "This the stuff they asked for?"

The man nodded. "Pick it up, and let's go."

The lackey had to do as Harry had, and load his pockets with rattling teacups in order to comply. Another gesture from the masked wizard and the other lackey came forward, pulling a black sack from his pocket. He was not intending to help carry, but instead moved to put it over Harry's head.

"Your wand too."

Harry hesitated at that one, but assumed that he could escape from any situation, and so complied. He gave Belinda one last glance before letting himself be blinded. She stood stunned, even when he winked at her.

The hood pulled free of Harry's face and he glanced around a wood paneled room with no doors or windows. They had Apparated twice, then walked for many minutes, and somewhere along the line had lost the two lackeys. Harry studied the room, memorizing it for later, uncertain how they could have walked into it from elsewhere. His escort had already moved to a steep ladder leading to a hatch in the ceiling, the only visible exit. "Boss is this way," he said, sounding threatening.

Harry followed, feeling stiffness in his legs from his run as he climbed. They emerged near the ceiling of a modern industrial building and followed along a catwalk stretching the length of the building. Sunlight came through the skylights, but black cloth had

been hung around the catwalk, obscuring the view. Harry could hear voices echoing, and a shout, a pounding like a hand on a table, and then a sharp hearty laugh.

As they walked, they approached closer to the noise. Harry's ears strained to follow what sounded like a card game. A whiff of pungent cigar odor drifted by.

The catwalk came to an end hanging out into space. The man stopped and waited, tossing a small ivory box in his hand. The goods Harry had collected were not visible, and Harry thought it best to hold off on his questions.

Time passed. Back along their path, from somewhere down on the floor of the building the distinctive sound of shuffling against solid wood drifted up. Suddenly, Harry noticed the catwalk now continued on in three directions. Still the man waited. The catwalk creaked and an elf with wiry hair-covered ears crept up and beckoned from the branch to the right. Harry's escort batted him on the shoulder and gestured for him to lead.

They reached an ordinary, heavy door, which the elf stood on tiptoe to open. With more long fingered beckoning, he led the way into a heavily decorated office lined with plush furniture. The scent of cigar smoke grew pervasive.

A minute passed before the wall at the far end jumped away, doubling the size of the room. Someone sat at a wide desk, feet up on the blotter. A female elf, dressed in a lacy red placemat, lounged on the corner of the desk. Her ears drooped with rows of gold hoops.

"Special delivery?" a voice asked in a light accent Harry could not identify.

"Insisted on an introduction in exchange for the goods," Harry's escort explained.

The feet slipped away and a short man wearing an oversized hat emerged from around the desk. His long pointed chin moved side to side as he talked.

"Well, the infamous Harry Potter pays us a visit." He put his cigar to his mouth and his jaw worked all the more.

Harry gave a deep nod. He did not trust himself to not ask questions if he spoke. The man snapped his fingers and Harry's escort scrambled to take a chair. Before Harry could turn back, the boss shouted in a slightly insane manner, "I said, take a seat!"

Harry did so, startled more than anything. The elf's red painted toes bounced at the end of her crossed legs. She grinned back at him mockingly. Harry looked away from the queer sight of her and studied his surroundings. The room contained a few mildly

cursed things, but there were too many objects in the room to identify the cursed ones from where he sat.

The boss paced his perfectly creased trousers to his desk and picked up an issue of the Prophet. "My people tell me you want in. Give me the stuff, Ursie."

Harry blinked in confusion. But his escort tossed the boss the little ivory box, from which the pillow and each part of the tea set emerged, one at a time. "Take these down to our guest. Mr. Potter and I will have a little chat alone."

Harry's heavyset contact moved like a sprite to comply, gathering up the things on a tea tray and shuffling out, a vision of unlikely maid service.

After the door closed, the boss flipped his cigar around his mouth a full circuit and said, "Give me just one measly excuse not to kill you here on the spot, Potter."

Harry sat straighter and despite resisting, glanced around himself in quickening alarm. The deep maroon curtains and knickknack-filled shelves could harbor all sorts of things.

The boss waved his cigar, leaving smoke like spell trails from his fingers. "There are about a hundred ways to do it where you are there. No sense wondering what they all might be since you can't count them."

Harry sat back and forced himself to relax, just for show. "One reason only? Okay, how about you can't really afford to waste the opportunity?"

The boss snorted. "The opportunity to be hulled, you mean? By an inside job?"

Harry could honestly peer back in confusion about this. He had lost control already and needed to cease playing this as himself. He closed his eyes a second and felt for the shadows, dredged up the hunger that still lingered from losing so very many followers. Immediately, a sense of outrage and derision flowed into him. The room transformed before his eyes from a showpiece into an insultingly superficial trap.

"Look," Harry said, keeping a tight binding on the scornful tone wanting to get out. "I'm here to make an offer of my services. You can accept them or not. I'm still exploring potential opportunities. I have loyalty to no one right now and I may decide to just keep it that way. Your organization is certainly giving the Ministry a good run, so I thought I'd shop my services to you, see what my options may be."

The cigar bounced around again, shaking the ash from the end, which fell and disappeared as it struck the shag rug on the floor, revealing the room to be an illusion. Harry may not even know enough about this place to slip in via the Dark Plane, unless he departed via it, and marked the location.

The boss leaned back against his desk, which barely came up to his armpits. He turned the folded newspaper to better glance over it. "What do you think of one Rita Skeeter?"

Harry saw enormous hazard in this question. He worried that if he informed the man of his bitter feelings, he may be assigned to assassinate her. He instead saw a chance to bolster his dark credentials and replied, "She has an annoying habit of following me around."

"Potter's out of control, says adoptive father." The boss read off, clearly from an old edition. He pulled another over and flipped it around. "This same adoptive father . . . interesting vitae, himself. I wouldn't mind recruiting him . . ." He stared Harry down with intense eyes that gave Harry the sense that the only real thing in his surroundings was that pair of dark blue eyes. "How did he escape getting sent off prison? Every one of his colleagues got the shaft."

Harry felt on better ground arguing for his own corruption based on Snape's. "This time, or the previous time?"

The boss's lips curled momentarily. "Both, if you are so eager to tell me the story." His strange accent, mostly hidden, flared as he spoke this.

"Dumbledore staked his own reputation on Severus Snape's loyalty the first time. He was influential enough to keep him out of prison. The second time around, I've been defending him."

"Staking your reputation . . ." the boss taunted.

"I wasn't putting it to other use," Harry casually tossed out. "It was going to waste."

"So, how did you like prison?" came the next flatly conversational question.

"It was . . . informative," Harry said, making himself forget his distress and depression in projecting a thoroughly different outward memory of events. For a minute he could almost believe the experience had made him stronger. "Too much time to think, though," he complained.

The boss took a long, cloudy puff on his cigar and smashed it violently out on the pristine surface of the mahogany desk, adding the scent of burnt wood to the tobacco odor. The elf leaned over and waved the smoke away, removing the mar from the desk, which must be real, even if the floor was not.

A knock came on the door and Harry's escort entered and groveled his way to the middle of the rug. "I did as you instructed."

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"Is our guest pleased?" the boss asked, sounding something far less than pleased himself.

"Yes, sir."

He gave a toss of his hand, and the man jumped over to gesture rapidly that Harry should get up and follow him. The boss turned away, then back. "Take Potter down to our guest, why don't you. He'll be tickled to meet him."

Harry followed out of the room and walked backward down the catwalk a few steps. The door disappeared just after it closed, leaving the gangway swinging out over empty space. They took a different path back and halted at a ladder down that vanished into a black fog before it reached bottom.

Harry's escort insisted Harry lead. Harry turned around and, with some trepidation because he had to bend down and step blindly over the edge, finally got both hands and feet on the ladder.

They reached the floor and more branching black-cloth corridors, lit by hovering fairylights. Harry could hear the card game clearly now, and a more acrid cigar smoke stung his eyes. They emerged from the tunnel of cloth into a room with no apparent ceiling, but with lots of woodwork and a mirrored bar along one wall where another exotic elf patiently shined glasses. The tea set sat on the bar, clashing brightly with the wood and glass.

A feeble-looking, grey haired man tossed a card down with surprising authority, his partly closed hand pounding the table as he did so. "Ha!" he said. The other three much younger players had the usual generic Durumulna look to them as they scrutinized their full hands of cards.

Harry's escort chose a moment to step forward and interrupt. "Mr. McCurdy, the boss thought you'd like to meet . . ." He did not get a chance to finish.

Mr. McCurdy caught sight of Harry and stumbled out of his chair, still safely holding his fan of cards. "You better not be here to take me back!" the man growled at Harry, one eye popping out, long fingered wagging accusingly at Harry.

"No," Harry denied. "I had no such idea."

Mr. McCurdy went limp with relief. "Ach," he uttered, and showed his age as he slipped creakily back into his seat. "Yangzy get me a refill," he cried out in the direction of the bar. Then as he patted his chest, added, "I need something to recover from that shock."

He dedicated his attention to his cards long moments before turning back to Harry. "Nice to meet you, my boy. Just paying a social call, then? Do me a favor, tell my wife I'm being tortured horribly . . . argh!" he shouted as one of the others collected that trick.

The elf delivered his drink on a tiny silver platter. "Any of those little snacks left? Maybe Mr. Potter would like something?" He said all this without taking his eyes off his cards. When the play came around to him, he tossed off something small. "Pull up a chair, Mr. Potter. We'll deal you in."

Harry's escort shook his head. Harry said, "I don't know this game."

"That's because I invented it. I call it five-deck shooter."

"Four-deck," one of his tablemates corrected.

"It'll be five if we get him to play too," McCurdy pointed out knowingly, then laughed. "Ah, I haven't had such a fine time since . . . nineteen fifty two when my father dragged me out of the club by my ear and forced me down the aisle. "Your lay, Pitface. You're leading toward me, so you might as well just hand them all over now." He laughed heartily again, not a noise one would expect from such a sunken chested man.

Harry's escort rapped him painfully on the arm and nodded back the way they had come in. Harry said, "Nice meeting you all," before retreating with his escort into the smoke-hazy tunnel.

Harry withstood the black hood again, and expected to be back in Belinda's flat when it was tugged free, but instead, they stood in an overgrown lot strewn with abandoned cars sporting tail fins.

"Don't call us," his escort growled, tossing Harry's wand so that it clattered at the base of a flat tire with hazy white walls, the rusty wheel rim protruding viciously from the warped mass. He Disapparated away before Harry could fetch it up.

Harry checked his wand for damage and sighed. The sun wanly crept out from behind the clouds and slipped away again. Harry had no idea where he was, but at least it was warm with the wind so low. He walked a bit along the gravel, thinking. Having no real information, he came to no real conclusions and decided he should get home so Snape could get to Hogwarts.

Based on how much aim he needed at the end of his Apparition, Harry decided that he must have been a very long way from home, farther than London, for certain. He

found Snape in the drawing room and closed the door when instructed to do so with a gesture.

"How did it go?"

"They don't trust me."

"Not a surprise," Snape smugly said, opening a small trunk to wave the contents of his desk into.

"They wouldn't mind recruiting you."

This made Snape pause. He lightly shook his head and snapped the trunk closed.

Harry pleasantly added, "If they end up trusting me, it will be because of you."

"Hm," Snape uttered. "I expect that won't be the only reason." He picked up his trunk and walked by Harry, pausing to say, "I assume you are on hold?"

"Yep. How'd you know?"

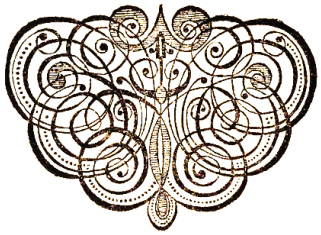
"Really, Potter. I've seen more people initiated into a far more demanding organization than this one probably has in total. Keep in mind most newcomers fail." He turned at the door to add, "Spectacularly, I might add. Although, a few would just slink away and disappear. The lucky ones I suppose."

Harry followed him to the dining room. "You've made your point."

Snape set his trunk on the table and took down the Floo Powder canister. "No, I don't think I have, but it will have to do." With a handful of grit clutched in one hand, he touched Harry fleetingly on the shoulder with his other before hefting the trunk. "Do be careful, and do keep me informed."

"Right," Harry said.

Chapter 42.



Out with the Old

"Thanks Harry," Candide said as she released his arm from Siding Along. The shuffling and tapping sounds of an awakening office drifted into the cold stairwell when she opened the door to the accountancy.

"No trouble, really," Harry assured her. "You're off at noon?"

Candide nodded and put her hand protectively around her coat-covered abdomen to maneuver through the door.

Back down on the Alley, only a handful of shoppers plied the storefronts. Half the shops sat dormant, but activity could be seen through the window of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Harry rapped on the window since the door was locked and the carved sign resting against the display case window read Shuttered please try us again at a more holy hour.

Ginny pressed her nose to the glass of the door before working the locks, both mechanical and magical, to open it. "Are you coming along?" she said, right out.

"Er . . ."

Ginny waved behind her and scooped her cloak over her shoulders, pausing only to free her hair from her collar. "Freelander is buying the Daily Prophet this morning."

"I'd love to," Harry said, happy to have something to occupy his time.

Ginny was off before he could say more, muttering, "Frankly, we may need more security."

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When Harry and Ginny rounded the corner of the Prophet's blocky building, they came upon Freelander and his wife standing outside the gold and glass doors surrounded by a small phalanx of solicitors wearing serious faces along with their tweed.

"Mr. Potter," Freelander greeted Harry warmly, accompanied by a hearty handshake that made Harry have to hide a surprised wince. As soon as he released Harry, Freelander's attention shifted immediately back to the trophy-like doors before them.

"Shall we gentlemen? And ladies . . . of course."

Inside the bright room, they stopped in the center of the well-worn wooden floor and took in the activity at the surrounding array of wickets and counters. Gradually, the office rattle, hooting owls, and voices shouting to those hard of hearing died out and attention turned to the waiting group.

A section of the ceiling cracked open and a lift floated down beyond the glass wall before them. A round man on rapidly moving legs approached as soon as the lift touched down. He shooed the desk clerks aside and opened a door, wicket and all, in the wall.

"Lord Freelander, it is a pleasure . . ." the man gushed in a voice pitched too high for a grown man, making him sound like a performer or a ventriloquist. Freelander introduced him as Pierrepont Walpole, the newspaper's owner. This introduction was followed by that of the Editor in Chief, Barnabas Cuffe, whose long countenance did not imply he was pleased with events. Three harried assistants crowded him, arms full.

"And you brought . . . quite a crew here . . ." Walpole said to Freelander, falling uncertain as his eyes counted the lawyers and then landed on Harry. "Mr. Potter," the man said, reaching into the group to single Harry out for a handshake. His hands were small and clammy and heavily stained with ink.

Walpole adjusted his glasses and waved a writing desk out of the parquet floor. "Shall we dispense with the formalities, then, and retire to my office for tea?" Scrambling suddenly, he pulled out a pocket watch, then checked one of the many wall clocks. "Ah, still time to make a Lazyeye Monday Edition. It will have to do."

One of the less dour solicitors sensed that he should bring forth papers. A stack of exceedingly long parchments were draped over the desk to unroll to the floor and half way to the entrance. Around them, the clerks and staff were gathering at the windows or kneeling on their desks to hear over the glass wall.

With a serial flourish of long quills the contracts were completed. In the meantime, the lift had made two more trips from the ceiling and this time Harry spotted Skeeter's

tight golden curls in the crowd. He waited with rising anticipation as her head bobbed closer, moving back and forth impatiently when the bodies thickened and slowed.

"Well!" Skeeter said, voice as sharp as the snap of her high heels on the floor. "What have we here?"

Skeeter had been barreling straight for Harry, but Freelander turned his bulky self and intercepted her. He tugged a folded paper from his breast pocket and presented it to her with a slight bow, just as Skeeter came to a stop. He did not let go of it, however, as she took hold and tugged.

"We have had a change in management, as you are perhaps aware . . . or perhaps not?" Freelander drawled. Then he raised his voice over the drone of gossip flowing around the hall. "And I'm sure you are all eager to learn what other changes we will be making. As far as redundancies are concerned, please all rest assured that nearly everything and everyone will be remaining the same. We have just one." And with that he released the paper, which moments before Skeeter had been battling for, but now made a distasteful face as she gained full control of it.

Skeeter snapped open the letter and with a glance over it, crushed it down. "On what grounds?"

"Oh, Ms. Skeeter, let's not make this more tedious than is already required. You concocted stories about me, whole cloth, and, most astoundedly of all, expected to be immune to any negative outcome as a result."

Skeeter adjusted her jeweled glasses and leaned closer to Freelander. "I did not make up a single thing I wrote. I had the very letters you sent. I had them verified, in fact."

"And these letters would be, where?" he asked politely. "You refused to produce them for my legal team, as requested." Freelander began putting his things away, clearly dismissing Skeeter. "Until you do so, there is nothing to discuss, I'm afraid." He sounded bored now, which only made Skeeter's face redden.

"I DID have them," she insisted weakly. Harry was glad she did not glance at him, which meant she did not suspect him.

Walpole gestured at someone in the distance, then said to Skeeter, "You'll have to clear out your office."

Skeeter appeared far more prepared to do battle than pack boxes. She glared down domineeringly at the former owner, but he simply shrugged in return. A large figure

rose up in the far corner beyond the windows. It brushed off what appeared to be straw and lumbered toward them. Harry had not imagined a half troll might exist but this character did a good impression of one. He wasn't as large as Hagrid, but he was ten times as ugly and he lightly hefted a massive granite club. Everyone turned to watch him approach.

"Thug, take Ms. Skeeter to her office. She's to pack it up," Walpole said.

The half-Troll gave no indication he understood, but he moved aside to let Skeeter pass. Freelander gestured surreptitiously with his chin in the same direction and Harry stepped forward. "I'll come along."

Skeeter's sideways glances evaluated Harry as they walked in the vibrating wake of the half-troll's footsteps. The crowd parted for them as they approached the lift, scooting backward, gazes wide and curious.

The troll took up most of the lift platform. He stood in the very center, club resting on the marble floor.

Skeeter leaned around the troll's rag-wrapped belly and said, "I can't figure out how you're involved in this, but there must be a connection."

They were almost to the ceiling now. The floor looked much farther down than the ceiling appeared from below. Ginny waved up at Harry, even though Freelander's wife was trying to get her attention.

Harry waited until the channel of the lift surrounded them to ask, "Why would I have anything to do with this?"

"You've got your fingers in everywhere from what I hear," she said, then leaned farther over. "Care to comment?"

Harry laughed. "And you'll print my comment where?"

Skeeter huffed. The troll shifted from foot to foot, making the lift rattle unnervingly in the shaft. Finally the door opened and Skeeter stalked out, rushing, Harry thought, to get inside her office and lock them out. But she left the door open behind her. Harry remained in the corridor, looking in. He did not like the masks any better in full light.

"What are those?" Harry asked.

"The masks? If I had my way, my former colleagues," she quipped without stopping what she was doing.

The troll lumbered off to a cupboard down the corridor and rummaged inside it with giant, deliberate movements.

Harry laughed. "What do you do to your enemies if you treat your fellow journalists like that?"

Skeeter stood straight from stacking things. "My enemies are my most prized and lucrative possessions. My colleagues just get in my way."

"I actually can understand that," Harry said. He leaned on the doorframe and watched her work.

"You're not going to help?" she criticized.

"You don't want me to."

Upon further reflection, she said, "Yeah, you're right about that."

When all the boxes had been heaved out, ten at a time by the troll, and nothing remained but scraps and broken things, Harry stepped inside. The office still felt cursed, despite the masks having been carted off in an iron trunk that had been chained closed for good measure. He wandered slowly around the bare shelves, trying to determine what bothered him so. He stopped and backed up below the clock, which had 27 hands on it, all in different colors. "Leaving that for your colleague?" Harry suggestively asked.

Skeeter used a hand to primp her hair. "Sure. Why?

"It's cursed," Harry said.

"Of course it's cursed. It's a World Time Deadline Clock. I challenge you to find me one that's not cursed." She propped her hands on her narrow hips, thumbs forward. "What's your game, Potter."

"I wanted to make sure you removed everything dangerous."

"That's not what I meant." She sounded hard now, like a teacher.

"Whatever it is, I'd hardly tell you, of all people."

She exhaled, looking him up and down, enticing now. "I'd pay well."

Harry's darker instincts screamed at him to string her along, to leave open the possibility of using her later. "I'll think about it."

Strangely, he sensed that she saw through his answer. She strode to the door and waved an extinguishing hex at the one remaining lamp. She primped her hair and

touched up her lipstick in the reflection of the glass in the office door. "Time for me to make my final hysterical scene before departing."

"You are one to talk about games," Harry commented as they re-entered the lift. The troll must have grown weary because he dragged his club now, and it rumbled deafeningly on the floor, forcing them to shout.

They rode down in silence until just before they touched down when Skeeter said, "As long as you can remain an enemy, dear Harry Potter, we can continue to be friends." With that, she screwed up her shoulders and veritably marched across the floor, taller all of a sudden and well visible to all the flash lamps going off, homing in on her as she closed in on the old and new management still chatting in the middle of the floor.

Someone touched Harry on the arm, making him jump. Ginny said, "Guess what?" Her face glowed with raw intensity as she went on. "Beatrice wants me to be her assistant here at the Prophet!"

"That's great, Ginny!" Harry said, suddenly removed from his well of troubles. "What are your brothers going to say?"

"Hopefully a lot. I've been working for Knuts over there, and do you think they ever say, "good job, Ginny" or "good to have you here, Ginny", no . . ." Her face took on annoyance, but it slid back into a grin as she watched the people milling in the Prophet's service hall. "This is going to be fun. A ton of work, but fun," she said, rubbing her hands together. Skeeter had just giving up her loud arguing and was marching out. "I'd better go," Ginny said, and with a flutter of her short cloak, wove back into the crowd.

Harry watched Freelander and Beatrice introducing themselves to a few of the staff. Beatrice took Ginny aside for a chat involving lots of arm motion. A little man floating a cart full of boxes stopped upon seeing Harry there and stared at him sideways along his crooked nose.

"Hm," he grunted and resumed directing the cart, mumbling as he passed, "Everything's changing, everything's changing."

"It is," Harry echoed to no one in particular.

The staff had thinned out and returned to work, quieter and more diligent than when they had been interrupted that morning. Harry made his goodbyes to Lord Freelander and the others and strode out with purpose, but standing on the pavement outside he realized he had no where in particular he needed to be. Harry could go home and

read. Or he could take himself for a run and a long flight. Neither of these sounded terribly appealing. Few of his friends would be home during the day, just Elizabeth, who should still be home between terms.

Elizabeth answered the door in a yellow dressing gown and fuzzy white slippers. "Harry!" she greeted him. She clasped her dressing gown closed over her pyjamas and said, "I didn't expect you to call. Hang on, let me get something on. Have a seat."

She was off into her bedroom, leaving Harry to ponder calculatingly how very much he was trusted. He was still in that spot when she returned. "Really, sit down," she admonished, pointing at one overstuffed chair while taking the other. "How are you doing? You getting over being locked up? Have you given the Ministry of Magic hell for what happened?"

Harry had opened his mouth at each of these, but only got a chance to speak at the end. "Doing all right," he said, finding himself with little to say. He was happier to see her than he expected to be. Her hair was mussed and down and falling around her oversized pullover.

"The Ministry of Magic strikes me as a frighteningly arcane bureaucracy," she pronounced, sitting back and crossing her arms. Her overly exacting attitude came across differently when it was in Harry's own defense. "I'm glad you're out, now. Any prison sounds awful. I can't imagine a magical one."

"It wasn't that bad," Harry said.

She leaned over the side of her chair to pick up a Witch Weekly.

Harry commented, "I didn't know you read that."

She leaned over to flip through the magazine, treating the pages with more care than most would. "I've been trying to be more like a real witch." She had flipped all the way through and started again from the beginning, letting the pages flap out from under her thumb more slowly this time.

"Is it working?" Harry asked.

She shook her tresses, making them hide her bent face. "Mostly I just laugh at this stuff. Which is funny because as a girl I would have killed to do more of it. Imagine! A Charm to do your hair any way you like and change the color of your dress." She stood and set the magazine in Harry's lap. "They did an article about the prison you were in." Then she loped off to the kitchenette, saying, "I skipped breakie and need

some nosh. And I'll make tea," she added, holding up her wand in a pose of casual victory.

Harry skimmed the article, not really reading it, but taking in the animated diagrams showing the layout of the cell blocks. The Extremely Dangerous Criminal Block was not far from the warden's office. Harry wished a chance had come up to visit Lockhart/Voldemort while he was there, and he wondered if the warden might still be open to that earlier tour offer. Harry also would not mind a chance to stick his tongue out at Lucius Malfoy one more time. He was grinning at this thought when Elizabeth emerged with a tray.

"I'm still bollocks at Heating Charms," she said. "Sorry it took so long. I keep meaning to find a tutor for wand waving, but term is starting in another week so it won't be until after that's over."

"Want me to show you?" Harry asked.

"I think I'd be such a terrible student I would bore you to tears." But she sat forward on her chair, belying her answer.

Harry did not think spending more time with her would bore him at all. And he had nothing else to do.

"Here, get out your wand. If you are going to be a witch there are a few spells you just have to know."

Harry's week dragged by. Evenings he spent hoping Tonks would find time for him, but she managed to slip in only once for a few hours and she was too tired to do anything but nap. Mornings, after Harry dropped Candide at work, he spent tutoring Elizabeth. Somewhere between getting away from her parents and going to school she had lost the harder edge to her critical personality and he rather enjoyed her company. He steadfastly refused to consider returning to training, despite the painful boredom of his afternoons and an ongoing desire to return to normalcy. He heard nothing from Durumulna and considered visiting Belinda's flat a number of times, but he had been specifically instructed to wait for them and he did want to seem the diligent type about following orders, so he held off. He sent Belinda an owl at her office, which generated a terse, plain reply that told him nothing.

Harry began to feel envious of his friends who had regular things to occupy their days. Elizabeth was soon returning to classes. Ginny worked all day and evenings even at

her new job, growing quickly ragged from the long hours but no less enthusiastic. Ron was free evenings, but he mostly talked about his job, which did not improve Harry's outlook. Friday when an owl arrived from Hermione inviting him for a visit, he dropped it on the floor and left it there in his rush to leave.

Harry arrived in a cupboard on Hermione's corridor and listened at the door with cupped hands before opening it a crack to check that the way was clear. She called out immediately in response to the knock on her door.

"You're here already!" Hermione exclaimed, flipping back the hair that had fallen loose from the clip on the back of her head. She pushed back from her desk and came around to greet him. "That's right, you don't have to bother with the Floo . . ." she said, remembering.

Harry touched his finger to his lips, but Hermione rolled her eyes and hugged him.

The sun poured generously into the room at this hour of the day, making it feel less like Hogwarts than Harry remembered. Hermione asked, "How are you adjusting to life outside prison? Everything all right?"

He gestured at her uncharacteristically disarrayed office. "About the same as you're adjusting to life in this prison," he teased.

"Yeah," she huffed, surveying the scene. "Come on, I'll skip lunch and let's go for a walk. I need a change of scenery before I tackle another essay that asserts that hexes are a special class of charms."

"They are if you do them right," Harry jested, garnering another friendly chastisement.

The corridors were crowded with clumps of chattering students, who quieted and turned to greet them or just stared in surprise. Harry had once hoped that by this time in his life, he would be treated more or less normally, but that was not to be.

One of the Creavy brothers broke from a group huddled in a window alcove and kept in pace with them. "Wotcher, Harry!"

"Hello Dennis, studying hard?" When Dennis stretched his face disturbingly. Harry explained secretively, "I have to keep up appearances for Professor Granger here."

"Oh, good. Thought you meant that. Swotting would cut into my training too much. I'm determined to make Seeker next year."

"Speaking of which, what do you think of the Ravenclaw Seeker?" Harry asked, mostly to make conversation as they followed along with the flow down the staircases.

"Tanzir, you mean?" Dennis said. "He looked pretty good in their first game." He shrugged. "But everyone looks good playing Hufflepuff."

Hermione leaned closer as they rounded the landing to say, "If they'd pay as much attention to lectures as they do at the matches .. ."

Dennis stopped suddenly and Harry nearly ran him over. Dennis was used to this and stepped quickly aside, pointing. "He's over there."

Harry turned and found the aforementioned boy hanging onto the banister, rocking back and forth while chatting with another Ravenclaw. He was a wisp of a boy with bowl-cropped black hair. Perhaps sensing the attention, he turned, displaying chiseled features. He pushed himself straight as recognition softened his face.

Harry stepped over and introduced himself. The boy closed his hanging-open mouth, and responded, "My name is Aylal, How are you? Pleased to meet you," like practiced phrases.

Hermione leaned in and said, "His French is better."

Upon which, Harry received a string of French that he halted by holding up his hands. "My only time in France was in prison, and I didn't pick up much there."

The boy's face fell and he laughed nervously. "But you are out, now."

Looking for a better topic, Harry said, "I'm going to come watch your match against Slytherin."

"But no pressure," Hermione quipped.

"I am honored," the boy proclaimed, beaming.

Other students making their way to lunch stopped to listen in. Harry made his goodbyes because they were blocking the staircase.

Dennis slithered in between them when they continued on. "Who're your Galleons on, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped, trying to figure out a reply, but Hermione sent her student off with a sharp wave of her hand. "No gambling on school grounds."

Dennis laughed as he slipped off. "Shouldn't have Quidditch then."

"He has a point," Harry conceded.

Hermione tugged Harry off the landing before he could take the next set of stairs down. "I remember that I wanted you to show me something." She started back upward.

"I thought you wanted a change of scenery."

"The library at lunchtime is a change of scenery . . . no students."

Madame Pince must have already gone to the Great Hall because the library was completely unoccupied. Hermione headed straight for the gate to the restricted section. "Speaking of Ravenclaw, I want you to show me her book."

Harry followed Hermione in, turning to make certain the gate latched properly behind them. The stacks sat in a waiting silence, reminding Harry of another library and another Hermione. He lowered his voice. "I don't know if it will let me open it with you here, you know."

"Give it a try." She stopped beside the podium against the rear wall, hanging on the edge of it with her fingertips.

Harry opened the grate in the wall, and the book lay inside as it always did, sporting a light coating of dust. Hermione narrated while Harry carefully removed it. "Amazing to think all these centuries, that's been sitting there. The actual notes of the Founders . . ."

The book's stone covers rattled and ground together and Hermione fell silent. "If that's all it takes to quiet Professor Granger . . ." Harry teased.

"Hey!" she whispered harshly, "You know how hard it is to fill a double class period sometimes?"

"I remember how hard it was to sit through a double class period . . ."

Harry tried to open the book, but the covers would not budge, the entire thing a single block of stone. "It doesn't like you," Harry said.

Hermione moved in beside Harry, facing the book. "Why not?"

Harry shrugged and gestured for her to move away instead. He took on an attitude of superior calm. The restricted section fell quieter yet; every last rustle and creak ceased. He imagined facing down the nastiest of creatures from the Dark Plane, making it back down and retreat, head bowed.

Harry touched the cover and lifted with his thumb. It released and let him heft it open to reveal the warning letter. Hermione, crouching, slipped closer to peak around at it from behind Harry. The book vibrated, and Harry again forced it to submit and still.

"Wow." Hermione whispered as she read, "Knowledge should never be mistaken for learning, information, or insight. Oh," she said with passion. "This is amazing. .

. . take only pure knowledge away. Yes, yes, I will." she said, sounding childishly excited. "Can you turn the page?"

Harry tried to, but the book rumbled. "Back up," he said, determined, but not wanting Hermione in harm's way. Slowly, he reached up and rested his left hand on the edge of the front cover, not so much to hold it open, which he could not physically do, but to keep track of it. With his other hand, he delicately lifted the corner of the next page. The book shook on the lectern, which resonated and amplified the sound. But Harry, though sheer force of will, compelled the book to remain open. Hermione's hand wrapped around his arm, gripping tighter as the book sang louder in a rumble through the wood of the lectern.

"Harry, maybe you shouldn't," Hermione shouted over the noise.

Harry did not want to lose this battle. He did not want to retreat. He pressed his will harder, and reached for the next page, just to see if he could turn it. The vibration eased but now smoke swept out from between the page edges.

"Harry!" She shook his arm back and forth now. "Don't make it destroy itself. Let it go!"

Harry calmly pulled his hands clear and reluctantly gave in. The book slammed closed, covers flying vertical before tilting neatly and thundering down onto the lectern and falling still as stone once again.

Hermione's pent up breath came out in a wheeze, and she still held Harry's sleeve for support. "You were right. It doesn't want me to see it, I guess."

"It might not be so happy with me any longer, either" Harry said.

"Well, that'd be a shame, Harry. I'm sorry for asking."

Harry shrugged. "I've learned loads of spells from it already." He tossed a shoulder, which pulled against her grip on his robes. "Go out beyond the gate and I'll put it away."

"You're sure you'll be okay left alone with it? McGonagall mentioned what it has done in the past."

"Yeah," he replied, sounding amused, but it was to mask his uncertainty. Her footsteps retreated, the gate squeaked up the scale then down, and finally the latch fell into place again.

Harry stared down at the chiseled cover of the book, at each of the house seals in turn. Part of him suspected that it wasn't Hermione that was entirely the trouble.

But like the letter from the other Snape, he did not want to find out for certain what was inside, so he left it a mystery. Calmly, gathering a certainty of power to compel his actions, he lifted the book and put it away.

Both of them wandering in their own thoughts, he and Hermione walked together down to the Entrance Hall. The dull crowd-roar of lunchtime in the Great Hall washed like a balm around their mood, and Harry opened the castle's front door with extra grace and bowed Hermione out ahead of him.

The lawn lay in a mat of mostly dead tangle. Coarse snow hugged the low spots and cowered under the benches. Harry led the way around to the rose garden and warmed a bench for them to sit on. Hermione breathed into her mittens and surveyed the winter ruin of the plants.

Harry took his mind away from what happened in the library and said, "Has there been any trouble with crystal potions here at all?"

Hermione sat back on her mittened hands. "You mean that mood altering stuff? Haven't seen it yet."

"Keep an eye out."

She crossed her legs and bounced her foot, looking more the student than the professor. "What am I looking for?"

"Students going out of their head."

"Like that doesn't happen normally."

Harry smiled. "This is farther out than normal."

"You've seen it?" When Harry nodded, she asked, "Tried it?"

"No," Harry replied, laughing lightly. "I have a hard enough time with the realities I already have access to."

They sat quietly for long minutes. A mistle thrush worked its way from one bare branch to another, browsing for dried berries.

Hermione patted Harry's leg with her broad mittened hand. "How are you doing, Harry?"

"I've been better," Harry said, and immediately felt a pit open beneath him. His keener senses went on alert against further confessions.

"At least I got an honest answer. Still mad at the Ministry?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't care about the Ministry."

"Oh," she replied. "That's not like you."

Harry sighed. He remembered that other place and wondered what they were all doing there, whether they had succeeded in collecting any more Horcruxes and whether that Harry had obtained the power his friends were going to arrange for him. He wondered how long it would take for him to reach full power, and whether he should risk going back to test himself against himself, just for fun.

"Harry?" Hermione prompted. She was sitting forward to better look at his face.

"Yeah?"

"You're not having nightmares or anything from prison, or anything like that are you?"

"No," he answered in a tone meant to calm her concerns.

After another gap, she asked, "Are you going back to the Auror program?"

"When I feel like it," he said, and liked the sound of that.

She tugged her mittens up one at a time and tucked them into her sleeves. "Aren't you bored?"

"Terribly. But I'm getting ideas."

"Oh, that's not good," she said, snorting faintly.

Inside, he parted ways with himself, half was insulted and angry and half leapt back to the past, to being much better understood. He tilted his head back and stared at the flat grey sky. "I don't know if it is or not."

"Harry, you're really worrying me."

He turned to look at her and watched her studying his eyes, like many of his old friends did, unfamiliar with their pale color, expecting them to always be they way they used to.

Part of him wanted to tell her he wasn't the same and that he was a bit worried about that, but he did not have access to his faculties of speech to say it, so he simply stared at her. He broke their locked gazes by standing up. "You have class, don't you?"

She stood too and took his arms. "Harry?" She sounded far younger, fearful for him.

He needed to take care of that. He took her shoulders in turn. "It's fine. I'm just working through some things." All true.

"I don't know." She glanced up at the school. A bell rang inside just as she did. "Are you going to be home this weekend?" At his nod, she said, "I'll come for a visit, all right? I'm not sure when, but I will. Take care until then, all right?"

She started to go, but waited with a hand on his arm for him to nod before actually doing so. When she turned back before reaching the doors, the rose garden stood empty, the only movement a dead rose branch, set rocking by the thrush landing upon it.

That evening after dinner, Hermione knocked on the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts Office. Footsteps approached before Professor Snape jerked open the door.

"Ms. Granger," he said, in his usual dismissive tone before contrastingly gesturing for her to enter.

Hermione frowned at finding a student sitting by the window, writing diligently by the light from a lamp perched on the sill. She recognized Mthunzi, shaking his hand out between lines, face obscured by hair so tangled it may have been intended as one of those Caribbean hair styles.

"I wanted to talk to you about a student, in private," Hermione said to Snape when she noticed his questioning glance.

Snape diverted over to the window and, without ceremony, slid the parchment out from under his detainee's hands, examined it, and stuffed it back in place, crinkling it. "Two more formulas and you are finished for now."

The boy positively glowed at this news, white teeth well displayed, prompting a dark look from Snape who said, "But if I catch you dueling one more time . . . "

"But, I made sure this time it was someone two years head of me," the rhythmic yet mousey voice came back.

"I don't care if I catch you dueling one of the Seventh-Year Prefects, I will send you home."

Mthunzi frowned expressively and bent back to his task. Snape shook his head. And as the boy handed him his parchment, Snape gave him a searingly stern glare that sent him scurrying out of the office.

Chapter 42

After the door closed, Snape spent a moment checking the parchment. "He'll be school champion by the end of the year," Snape muttered, dropping the lines into the bin beside the desk.

Hermione grinned faintly. "And that's a problem?"

Snape took a seat and said, "Since he isn't in Slytherin, that is most a definitely a problem." He pushed the things directly in front of him aside to make room to steeple his hands. "You were saying something about a student . . . ?"

Hermione began pulling the desk over, only to run into the straight backed chair Snape hovered over from the other wall. She dropped the desk with a clunk, and took the chair, unable to find a place for her hands. "It's about Harry, actually." And with that her stomach flipped strangely.

She waited, but Snape gave no reaction to her statement. "Is he all right?" she asked.

Snape ran a rather complex privacy spell Hermione had never managed to get right, and returned his wand to his pocket. She hoped that meant he was going to say something, but he remained quiet, studying his fingers.

Finally, Snape said, "Harry is not well."

Hermione dropped her head. Even though it felt twice as heavy as usual, she lifted it again. "He didn't seem quite himself. Prison seems to have . . . I don't know . . ."

Snape explained, "It wasn't prison exactly. It was close exposure to Voldemort's servants. Harry's connection to them continues to deepen." His eyes moved as if he read something out of the air. "And I fear . . ." He stopped, breathed deeply. Starting again, he said, "Harry disposed of Voldemort's power in the Dark Plane. And he keeps . . . crossing . . . through that place."

Hermione's chest froze from the inside out. "You think he's picking up more of Voldemort?" The thought made the rest of her mind seize up, helpless.

Snape's gaze was dangerously level. "I'm only informing you of my suspicions because I knew once you suspected something you would not let it drop. That, and, once properly informed, I trust you will tell no one else," he said, sustaining the "S". He added, "I also expect that you can assist with him."

"Doing what?" she blurted, too discombobulated to imagine anything at all useful.

"My research into possible solutions has turned up nothing that does not entail additional extreme risk, to all involved. I would appreciate assistance with said research.

I can give you a list of sources I have not yet checked or that deserve a second reading." Snape rubbed his hair back, appearing exhausted. His voice lowered to almost inaudible. "My main new concern right now is that Harry does not appear to be fighting this other self any longer."

"The Muggles have treatments for that."

"It's not like that." Snape waved his hand dismissively. "Perhaps just as well he is psychologically sound as far as I can discern." Once he had started talking, Snape seemed in need in of fully unburdening himself. He gazed pointedly at Hermione and said, "Just so you understand the situation . . . I am going to inform Harry that we spoke of this. My primary goal right now is to remain steadfastly on his side, at all costs. I hope you will do the same. I will be easier for you, since you always have been."

Hermione gathered her scattered thoughts long enough to say, "But . . . you leave him home alone with Candide?"

Snape pushed to his feet. "Harry isn't dangerous. He just isn't himself. And the self that isn't him isn't one I particularly want to see more of."

"I would say not," Hermione blurted. She glanced around the room, finding it alien. Nothing was in the right place: the papers on the desk, the lamp on the window ledge, the desk abandoned a few feet away.

Snape was speaking. "Whenever you see Harry, try to remind him what he used to be. How he used to think. What he valued. Previously, he was incorruptible. That core of him seems to be smothered of late. It takes a lot with it when it goes."

Hermione sat rigid, watching him speak, observing everything from outside herself. She remembered the rose garden, how distant Harry became without warning and even how differently he moved. "I'll do that." She swallowed hard. "I told him I'd come for a visit. I was going to bring Vishnu along."

Snape nodded. "Good. Do try not to look as panicked as you do now. That won't do," he criticized. "Harry is still Harry." He crossed his arms and huffed. "But we are losing him, I fear. Something will need to be done. I just have no idea right now what in Merlin's Realm it may be."

Hermione's thoughts found a landing spot. "Do you know what spell he used to cut Voldemort's magic out of Gilderoy Lockhart? Did you see it?"

Snape nodded. "Harry begged me, in fact, to let him use that spell on himself when he realized what he was, realized that he was the last vessel for the Dark Lord. I would not allow him to attempt it."

Hermione swallowed hard again, wondering if that was the right decision now.

Snape answered her unvoiced question, saying, "In the first place, I could not imagine it would succeed, given that he would have to execute it on himself, using magic to remove his own magic, while simultaneously needing that magic to complete the spell. In the second place, failure would have been catastrophic, like the spells Riddle used to cut himself up to achieve immortality. The ones that made him as truly evil as he was. The risk was too great, given the powers Harry already had then, let alone the ones he has now."

Snape leaned back against his desk, deflated. "I was not intending to tell you so much all at once. I did not expect you to notice for a while yet. That concerns me too."

Hermione wanted to reassure him."I could have excused it on a lot of things. But he admitted he wasn't doing well when I asked."

Snape rose up at this. "That's reassuring. Do let me know when he begins to deny to you that anything at all is wrong."

"I will. I definitely will." She stood and glanced sadly around the office again, wishing she did not know what she did and knowing it would be tied to this place from now on. "Do you think Harry would be better off back in his apprenticeship, or not?" she asked.

"I think he would be better off," Snape replied, sorting through the paperwork stacked on his desk. "For one thing it would occupy him. He has been using his copious spare time to get into trouble, doing things outside his purview best left to someone else."

"That sounds like Harry," Hermione said.

Ginny held fast to her broomstick when a gust came up, billowing her cloak like a sail and trying to spin her around upside down. Beneath her, a low fog smeared the lights of a town. Chains of twin eyes of white and red snaked along a major roadway. Away from the city lights, the land sank away into distant blackness, scattered with houselights like outposts.

Every night that week had been a late one. Tonight Ginny had been sent off to chase down a missing shipment of wizard ink. She could easily have Apparated to the Burrow, but needed the time alone with nothing to think about after a week of

too much to think about. Even now as she steered down toward the field behind her parents' house, she wished the flight had been longer.

Broom propped on her shoulder, Ginny trudged over the winter-beaten meadow toward the warm lights of the kitchen. She was just passing by the long shadow of the shed when she heard voices near the tree-line, heated but lowered to a stage whisper.

Ginny approached the voices, using the shed as a shield from view. She peeked around and recognized her father by the wispy hair standing up from his head. He spoke forcefully with someone who, at the moment, was looking away and down.

Mr. Weasley was saying, "You will not come here unannounced, henceforth."

"And you think Mum won't notice if I'm missing for Sunday dinner?" the other figure said, giving away that it was Percy. He turned to face Mr. Weasley, which made the spare light catch in his hair, igniting it.

Mr. Weasley poked Percy in the chest. "You may come for Sunday dinners, but that is it. If I catch you here any other time, or hear of you visiting, you will answer for it."

"Right," Percy said, sounding bored. "All proper and everything all of a sudden. When I wanted rules around here, there was no chance of it."

"We aren't discussing the past . . . we are discussing the present," Mr. Weasley said. "Molly wouldn't hear of my banning you from this house outright, but I've a mind to."

In the muddy light, Ginny could not discern Percy's hands clearly. She slipped her wand out of her pocket and held it at ready. Percy's posture spoke of grave anger as he faced off with his father, and it seemed reasonable that he may snap and try something. Ginny half-wished he would.

"This family isn't much to brag about, really," Percy said. "Something about everyone's simpering attitude . . . really drags one back from true success."

"Then restricting your visits should be easy, in that case," Arthur stated crisply. Ginny smirked from her hiding place. She considered tossing something invisible, and well-deserved, at her brother, but decided that playing impromptu guard was far more important. She next wondered that Percy had come alone, then felt a chill despite her heavy robes that maybe he had not. She checked over her shoulder frequently while the argument went on.

"Do you intend to toss me out of the house if I happen to forget and drop in for tea? It'd be amusing to watch the attempt," Percy scoffed.

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"Don't try me, Percy."

"Or you'll toss me out on my ear? Oh, but we can't have any scandal can we? Of course not. This is a proper sort of family, not one to make trouble, or perhaps, horror of horrors, make a bit of money."

Ginny imagined that her father now held a wand in his hand, but it was difficult to tell for certain. She gripped hers tighter.

"You may leave now on your own, or I will send you off. Your choice." Her father sounded more serious than Ginny had ever heard him, but he also sounded regretful, which really took the power out of it.

"Fine," Percy said sounding like his lips were too tight to really speak, and Disapparated.

Ginny's shoulders fell, but then she came to herself and ran the barrier status spells on the lawn, just in case Percy had brought someone with him inside the barriers. The trees sparkling drew Mr. Weasley's aim that way and he glanced around, pose tense.

"It's just me, Dad," Ginny called out as she came out from the shadows.

"Oh, Pumpkin, you startled me."

"Pumpkin?" Ginny sputtered. "You haven't called me that since I was four. Percy didn't hit you with something when I wasn't looking did he?"

Closer in, Mr. Weasley appeared strained. His voice fell low. "Don't tell your mother what you heard, if you would."

"Why not? Doesn't she need to know Percy is a first order git?"

Mr. Weasley put an arm around her shoulders and started toward the house. "She won't ever accept that, so, no. Speaking of accepting things, to what do we owe this visit?"

"I want some more of my things from my room," Ginny said. "If you think I've forgiven you for Harry, you're wrong."

He patted her shoulder and released her. "Won't be the first time."

Ginny kept her voice down as they reached the side door. "You shouldn't confront him alone, you know."

"I didn't expect to confront him at all."

Mrs. Weasley threw open the door from the inside, putting an end to the conversation. Ginny put up with a hug and insisted she just needed to ferry a trunk-full of things away. "And, um, can I borrow a trunk?"

"You may, Dear. I'm sure there's a spare in the attic." Mrs. Weasley lifted her robes to troop up the stairs. "But why don't you stay the night? It's awfully late to be towing anything by broomstick." She started up the next set, her voice echoing down the narrow opening, "The Wireless Foretellcaster said it may rain tonight."

"Doesn't he say that every night?" Ginny called up behind her, but there was no reply.

Ginny played with the flimsy bannister and waited. Mr. Weasley said, "She misses having you children around."

"We were all going to leave sometime. Don't try to make me feel guilty."

Mr. Weasley put up his hands. "I wasn't."

After a gap, Ginny said, "Really, Dad, if you need help with Percy, just send an owl or a silver bird. I'll happily help."

Mr. Weasley crossed his arms and considered her, the strained lines in his face shifting to amused. "I have an entire department of Aurors at my disposal, Pumpkin."

"Don't call me that."

"Your new living arrangements are working, it seems?" Mr. Weasley asked after another space, vaguely uncomfortable.

"I've only been there to sleep this week, and barely that," Ginny complained.

"I'm proud of you getting a better job than looking after your twin brothers' shop."

"So am I," Ginny agreed. "But don't think that doesn't mean I haven't already filled out another Auror Apprenticeship application for this year, Dad."

"I wouldn't dream of assuming that," he said airily.

Disarmed from this line of aggression, Ginny said, "Well, good," rather more lamely than she preferred. She sighed, "Where IS Mum?" and began to stomp up the stairs.

They found Mrs. Weasley beside a half emptied trunk, sitting upon a broken basket full of old Witch Weekly issues, her head bent over a photo album.

"Oh!" she said, upon seeing them there. She started to close the album, then turned back a few crackling pages. "I was just remembering when we still had all of you

home." She flipped back another page, then closed the album and resumed emptying the trunk into a neat stack on the floor with a shuffling movement of her wand. "I do hope everyone can make it on Sunday."

Ginny and her father shared a frown.

> Author's Notes: My dream that I was going to get around to the making the edits to this chapter while visiting family for Easter was only that. Don't know what I was thinking, there.
> Second, "wicket," you may not know that word in this context, but despite beta advice to the contrary I left it in. It is the perfect word, officially defined to describe exactly what I envision here, and I've seen it in use in England in this situation, albeit, mid-1990s.

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On Guard

Late Thursday evening Harry received an owl with detailed instructions. It told him where to go at certain times and what he should do when he arrived there. He read it through twice, wondering at the wisdom of the plan. He carried the letter downstairs where Candide sat flipping through the accumulated journals beside the couch, including the ones about Potions. The wireless eeked out nearly inaudible music, more haunting than entertaining.

"I need to take you to Hogwarts early in the morning," Harry said. "Or somewhere else if you prefer."

She stared at him and said, "Oh that's right, I forgot about tonight. I don't get to join in?"

Harry held up the letter. "Severus specifically says no. But if I take you to Hogwarts you can argue with him yourself."

She rocked to her feet. "Well, I'm partly to blame, so perhaps I'll get an early start to bed and be chipper in the morning. What time?"

"Four. It's a lunar eclipse tonight. Severus thinks that'll be a good opportunity, since Remus won't be completely transformed, or if he is, he won't be completely senseless, especially since he's been taking wolfsbane." He glanced at the letter. "I'm to fetch Pamela to the village of Ashthorn on the Muggle edge of the Forbidden Forest. I need to get her there in time for the full moon."

She stared at him, thoughts off elsewhere. "I guess I don't really need to see this. Remus seems like a very nice man to have to go through this."

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"I thought you agreed it was a good idea?"

"Oh, I do think it needs to happen; he won't relent otherwise. But a smaller audience is probably better for his pride."

Harry read the letter's postscript one more time before tossing it on the fire.

I have discussed your situation with your friend, Ms. Granger. Given her probing nature, this was inevitable. I am surprised that you have not spoken with her yourself.

The village of Godric's Hollow rested in muffled sleep, not even a nightbird's call broke the stillness. Harry made his way toward Pamela's porch light, which hung in space ringed by illuminated mist.

She answered his light rap while he was still knocking and backed up to let him in. She wore an oversized jumper and her hair was casually bundled at her neck.

"Ready?" Harry whispered, finding it hard to talk normally in the hush of night.

"Let me get my scarf and something for my hands. Then I'll be ready . . . at least for the cold." She snorted wryly.

She tugged on a pair of thick mittens and nodded. Harry took her arm and took her away. They arrived on the roadside beside a pub that was shuttered for the night. The mist hung more thickly here, enhancing both distance and claustrophobia at the same time.

"Stay here," Harry said and fetched his bike from the car park behind the pub. Even though there were no houses nearby, he turned the roar! knob all the way down before kicking it to life.

He stopped beside her and handed her a helmet out of the compartment under the seat.

Speaking quietly, she said, "This is more like my usual kind of date." She set the helmet over her head and as she fished out the strap from beside her ear, said, "You know, as dangerous as Remus is supposed to be, being a werewolf and all . . . on top of being a wizard, he is far sweeter than anyone else I know."

"Just hold that thought," Harry said, rocking the bike back to straight up. She swung over behind him with ease and wrapped her arms around his middle. Gravel punched out from under the tires as he gently powered back onto the tarmac.

A few miles along, Harry slowed, watching the play of the headlamp on the brush reaching toward the roadway. Even with the branches bare for winter, it was hard to find what he was looking for. They rolled along another mile and, he was considering turning around, when he spied an overgrown, stone gate post. Beyond that, the second gate hunched in the tangle. The space between them had been filled in with piled brush and discarded tree stumps that resembled angry spiders in the harsh light of the bike's headlamp.

Harry gunned them into the air and over the blockade, eliciting a cry of surprise from Pamela. With a squeak of the springs they came to rest on the other side, on a narrow gravel lane, still level despite long abandonment. Harry, worried about being late, rotated the hand grip and they shot through the trees, headlight bouncing wildly over the spidery branches.

They came out into a clearing where a low farmhouse stood. The looming straw roof overshadowed the modest structure, all green with moss and smelling of nature rather than habitation.

Harry set the bike on the stand and put the helmets away mostly by feel. He tweaked off the headlamp and they both stood listening, bathed in the glow of an unnatural crescent moon. Pamela had held her hand on Harry since they arrived, but she took a firmer grip just above his elbow.

Something large fluttered overhead, black against the midnight sapphire and diamond sky. A figure landed and waved a Lumos out of his wand, lighting his distinct profile.

"Severus," Harry said.

Snape glanced around as he strode over to them, using his broom as a walking stick. He went past to the center of the clearing where he waved deadwood out of the forest into a haphazard pile and ignited it. The warm glow chased away the empty night.

When the fire settled down, Harry walked Pamela over beside Snape, who continued to scan the treeline.

Snape said to Pamela, "You will remain between the two of us at all times. Do you understand?"

She nodded, then answered, "Yes," when Snape did not respond.

She still had hold of Harry's right arm. He switched her around to his left, to better handle his wand.

"What time is it?" Harry asked.

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"Potter, if you cannot tell by the eclipse what time it is, you are beyond help."

Harry glanced up at the moon. "Testy, aren't we?"

Snape huffed. "I will be glad to have this over with."

The hold on Harry's arm tightened.

They waited. The burning logs settled lower. Snape pointed with his wand and said, "There."

Harry needed a moment to discern the dog-like grey figure sitting just this side of the far trees. The dancing light made the figure appear to shift and move, but it remained in place for many minutes. Pamela began pulling down hard on Harry's arm.

Voice wavering in Harry's ear, Pamela asked, "So, he's still a werewolf right now?"

"Looks it. When the moon is fully eclipsed, he may change back . . . temporarily."

Snape said, "His state is less predictable now with the second bite."

"Poor Remus," Pamela said.

The wiry figure shifted for real, disappearing and reappearing against the brush in the hazy blue glow. The werewolf padded on light feet around the fire and stopped, keeping the blaze partly between him and them. He stood, paw raised, still as a statue aside from the firelight reflecting in his eyes.

Snape lowered his wand. "Can you understand me, Lupin?"

The blue light of the moon continued to sink away, leaving the fire to dominate. The werewolf cocked his head, took a step, then became statue-like again.

Harry glanced over at the moon, the last feathery sliver slipped away and the whole moon surged into view, bathed in red light.

Lupin put one paw down, took another step, then seemed to break down, sinking to the ground. Pamela pushed away from Harry toward him, but was grabbed up by both of them.

Snape snarled low, "You will remain here."

Harry felt Pamela tense then slacken. Lupin contorted on the ground in a strange slow motion grind.

"Is he all right?" Pamela demanded.

Snape pushed her toward Harry and took a step in Lupin's direction, skirting the fire. "He is un-transforming." Well clear of the fire and Lupin, Snape crouched and said, "Remus?"

Harry took two careful steps closer, still holding Pamela. Lupin's hairy arm raised up and brushed at his ragged head, more human than werewolf, but just barely.

"Would you like more potion?" Snape asked.

They were close enough that Harry could see Lupin nod. His patchy-haired body lay folded on the ground, back bent away from the fire, so his face fell in shadow. Snape reached into his pocket and took out a bottle. He glanced at Harry. "Cover me?"

Harry nodded and aimed his wand.

"Harry!" Pamela chastised him. Harry had to raise his left arm to shield his wand hand from her grasp.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, prepping something gentle in his mind, like a Mutushorum. But ready also with a Blasting Curse, should Lupin lunge.

Pamela gave a gasp as Snape disappeared. But he had not, fully. A sinewy glisten of silky scales oscillated through the grass. The snake approached Lupin with the bottle clutched in its fangs. A half-paw reached out to take it and as he worked at the stopper with clawed hands, the snake slithered away. Lupin clumsily tipped the contents into his mouth. Glittering drips rained down, hinting at a poorly formed mouth.

Snape reappeared and stood straight, wand out. "What do you think?" he asked no one in particular.

Pamela required a few tries to answer. "I think you are all very cruel."

Snape's voice remained level. "How so?"

"Something more should be done. He shouldn't be left to cope like this."

Lupin tossed the bottle onto the fire and rubbed his hands over his hair.

"It's not his fault," she added.

"We know that," Harry said.

"Quite a bit is done," Snape said, then glanced at the red moon. "But now is not the time to debate that. He will be changing back presently."

"Are you all right, Remus?" Pamela called out.

Lupin moved as if to duck. Harry quietly said, "His hearing's very good right now, I expect."

"Oh."

Harry heard her breathing in and out, sounding distressed. He kept an eye on the moon, waiting for the sliver of white light to appear on the opposing edge from earlier.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" she asked.

Harry replied, "Give him help. Make sure he doesn't infect anyone else. He'd feel terrible if that happened."

"Yes," Snape agreed. "Guilt is popular around here as a self-wounding weapon."

Harry let that go. Dealing with Lupin always made Snape crueler.

In his ear, Pamela asked, "Is Severus capable of any pity?"

"There's a lot of history here you don't know," Harry explained.

The scene began to brighten and Harry stepped back, pushing Pamela along. The humanish black figure against the fire light distorted, growing ears and a snout crowned in the light by spiny hair standing up from his back.

The werewolf climbed to his feet and prowled in a circle, before raising up on two legs and sniffing in their direction. Pamela sighed in distress, but had stopped pushing so hard against Harry's arm.

Lupin lowered himself back to four paws on the ground and cocked his head at them. Then bent low and backed up away from the fire before turning and loping away.

"He's gone," Pamela said wistfully.

"Stand back and I will douse the fire," Snape said.

Harry led Pamela to the bike while billows of hissing steam filled the clearing. She argued with no one in particular, "Just because he has this thing inside him, doesn't change who he is."

"Only if he lets it," Harry said.

They waited for Snape to join them. Harry said, "I'll take Pamela home and come back for the bike."

Snape nodded without ceasing to scan the edge of the clearing. Harry took Pamela's arm and with a burst of trapped air, her sitting room appeared around them.

She stepped away from him and her sigh sounded loud in the confined space. "I wish I didn't know any of these things."

"Including me?" Harry asked.

"What? No, I didn't mean that. Really. I'm exhausted. 'Course I'm glad to know you, Harry."

"This all comes along with it, I'm afraid."

She paced over to the couch but stood studying it rather than sitting. "I'm very glad to know Remus too, I just wish things could be different. I wish he could be more open about it all. He uses it as a shield, a wall, an excuse. I see that now. That's the real trouble. I also wish that I had not seen Severus turn into a snake."

Harry found himself grinning.

She turned to him. "I mean, I've known men I readily would call snakes in the grass, but that was a bit much."

Snape was still there when Harry returned to the bike, waiting with broom in hand.

"Go all right?" Snape asked.

"I think so. She understands that the problem isn't that Remus is a werewolf, but that he uses it to keep his distance."

"I'm not certain that is going to change just because she has seen the monster he becomes, but perhaps it will help," Snape said.

Because he did not need to ferry Candide into the office, Harry slept in late Saturday morning. He scrubbed his face to wake up and stumbled through getting dressed before he tried to fetch his pet out for the day. But Kali would not leave her cage and instead burrowed under her rags. Harry rubbed his eyes and left her there.

Downstairs he found Hermione cradling a cup of tea across from Candide. His friend jumped up to greet him, her usual chipper morning self. Solicitously, she poured Harry a cup and placed it in front of the chair at the head of the table.

"Is Vishnu coming?" Harry asked through a nose full of steam.

"He's coming for brunch if that's all right."

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling a little awkward and wondering what Hermione had told his fellow apprentice, whose moral standards were too high to meet at the best of times.

Harry let the women talk while he read the morning's Daily Prophet. The paper had changed less than expected, aside from the expansion of the gardening section, and the new Missives to the Editor which now filled the back page. At least now Harry could read the whole thing without much concern. For the third day in a row there was absolutely no mention of him.

Vineet arrived in the Floo and brushed soot from his hands before greeting everyone. He bent to Hermione with restrained affection, accepted a seat, and proceeded to arrange the things before him, just so.

"You are very much missed in the department," Vineet said to Harry.

"Do you miss being there?" Hermione added while Harry pondered what to say.

Harry shrugged and found this response keenly observed from all quarters.

Their meals twinkled in. Everyone else had eggs, rashers of bacon and toast, but Vineet's plate had arrived holding UFO-shaped cakes and a red sauce.

Vineet said, "The Minister of Magic has called each one into her office to ask for our thoughts on how to bring you back in."

"You always wanted to be an Auror," Hermione said, but she bit her lip before and after saying it. Harry probed at her eyes just enough to see Snape's hand in her comment.

"I did," Harry acknowledged flatly. "I don't know now." For some reason, he felt like toying with her. "Boring, really."

"Being a dark wizard hunter is boring?" Candide broke in to ask.

Harry pretended his plate was interesting. "Much of it is."

"Hm," Candide breathed. Harry had told her about Durumulna, explaining that he wanted to find Moody's killer. She probably would have said more if they had been alone. She was good at keeping secrets, and Harry increasingly liked that about her.

When Candide excused herself for the second time, Vineet leaned in and said, "I am assuming you are recalling, still, my pledge of my loyalty to you?"

Harry shook his head and refilled his tea cup. Partly to see the reaction, partly because he thought he owed his friend, he said, "I do, but you shouldn't be pledged to me. You won't like yourself for long."

This made Vineet sit straight again. Harry expected him to glance at Hermione for help, but he did not; he held Harry's gaze. Keeping his voice down, Vineet added, "Perhaps you misunderstand me. I understand you." He paused, searching for words, which did involve glancing at Hermione, whose eyes were still wide. "I choose how to execute my loyalty. I reserve this right and I repeat that it is to you."

"All right, then," Harry said.

"Harry . . ." Hermione began, sounding heartfelt, but she ducked back to her plate when Candide reappeared.

"Sorry," Candide said. "It's only supposed to get worse as it goes along, too."

"No worries." Harry glanced around the table at his friends and their barely concealed concern, and felt strange, almost euphoric. He itched to test things. Something. Anything. There were limits all around him, but he did not know where they were. He wanted to test some direction so he could find the limit along the way and remove it.

Harry's friends dawdled with small talk but they eventually departed. Harry combed the shelves in the library, and finding nothing more of interest, told Candide he would return shortly. He slipped away to the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library, and not wanting to search long, found the first book that shrank from his touch and took it home without even reading the title.

By mid-week, Harry was bored to a kind of fitful distraction. He brought Candide into work earlier than usual and Apparated to Tonks' flat to catch her before she could leave for first shift.

"Harry. Sorry I couldn't stop by last night," she said. "Had to break up two separate fights last night and needed a quick fix up at St. Mungo's."

"You should have owled or messaged or something," Harry said, broken cleanly out of his inner thoughts by a surge of worry.

"You have to keep an eye on Candide. It wasn't anything terribly bad."

"Still," Harry said, glancing over her. She looked the same as always. "I'd like to know."

"Yeah," she said, "I know."

Chapter 43

"Can you visit tonight?"

This prompted her to gaze up at the clock. "I'll try, Harry."

Harry let a sigh escape him. "Okay. I assume you need to go now, too, or you'll be late."

"You could come with me," she suggested.

Harry considered that, uncertain whether his pride was in the way or something else. "Maybe another time," he said, and slipped away into the Dark Plane.

Silence hung in the musty air. Harry looked around himself, at the hillocks with their nests of crazed wire, at where the strange land met at the horizon at a stubborn grey sky. He started walking, thinking. Animals scurried on ahead of him and fell still, only to scurry again. An air of leaden expectation overlaid the place, like something waited, just out of sight. He should probably not remain here too long, but he could not think of anywhere he wanted to go.

It was early yet. Elizabeth was off to Oxford and Harry felt annoyed about that, wanting someone to blame for it, but came up with no good targets for his emotion. He was bored. He wanted to stretch his magic a bit and his choices were limited about how to do that. Anything he did, especially if he tried an assault on the one Durumulna hideout he knew, he would have to explain later, and that struck him as tedious, if not self-defeating. Before he could think better of it, Harry applied a disguise he hoped would stick, and fell away, far away, into the back room of the Hog's Head.

Harry shivered violently upon the rusty rings of grit left behind by rotting barrels. A rat scurried away from him, frantic. Barely in control of his limbs, he stumbled out of the room and along the passage to the front of the pub, where in his mind's eye a roaring fire would be keeping the place habitable for customers.

The fire wasn't roaring but the hearth held fragments of pulsing hot coals. Harry collapsed before it, facing it, ignoring the patrons, who shifted their chairs so the legs squeaked in surprise.

Harry clenched his wand in his hand and held it close to his chest. Someone's foot prodded him in the back. "Oy, lookie, someone's 'ad too much before even arrivin'."

The radiation off the coals burned Harry's cheeks where his disguise did not protect them. Fortunately he was warming up quickly. He relaxed into the waves of warmth and felt the shadows hovering nicely, distributed evenly all around, nearby and distant. One hovered quite close. Harry savored the feel of it, the dry metallic taste of its shifting form.

The barkeep stomped over. "Hey, old man, you want to sleep, you pay for a room." He grabbed at Harry's arm, set off those strange sparkles from passing between possibilities, and jerked his hand clear.

Harry sat up and glared at him, back broadside to the fire, which felt like salvation the way it seeped into his core. Voice roughened he said, "Get me a hot mead or something."

"Let's see your coin."

Harry tugged a Sickle out of his pocket and tossed it at him. The bartender's reflexes were better than expected and he caught it out of the air and stomped off.

Warmed, but still weak, Harry pushed to his feet and faced down the curious gazes arrayed in his direction, including the interested glint from a hooded figure slouched in the corner. Harry closed his eyes – not the Death Eater. Too bad, an audience might be fun.

A crooked chair rested against the wall. Harry waved it before the fire and accepted his drink. The rest of the place turned back to their elevenses and accomplices, sending overly casual, but attentive glances his way. Harry gave them nothing more of interest, just sat sipping his mead and examining the world in his head, thinking that he had been a starved man and now, finally, faced a buffet.

Rubbing his beard flat as an excuse to check it, Harry made his way out to the road, drawn toward the nearest shadow he sensed. He slowed before each ramshackle building, nearly passed one, but then decided it must be correct. He backed up and entered Honeydukes accompanied by a poppy Weird Sisters tune from the door chime.

He picked up a chocolate bar and took it to the unattended counter where he pretended to consider buying a package of chocolate frog cards while waiting for the shopkeeper. Off to his right, at a large marble slab, a worker directed a wide charmed paddle to flip and fold a great black mass of chocolate. That man, Harry realized. Mousy, with a long pointed nose accentuated by the kerchief tied around his hair. At Harry's scrutiny, he looked up, twice, before staring back, face shifting gradually from drowsy and bored to alarmed.

The other staff must have been busy in the back. It was still early. Harry continued to stare, considering what he would like to do. The paddle, unattended, began to miss the bulk of the chocolate blob, stretching limbs out of it, which flopped to the side, trying to escape the pristine marble.

Fussing with his uniform, the clerk came out and Harry bought his chocolate without taking his eyes from the Death Eater. The clerk shuffled off again.

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"I know what you are," Harry said, sneering faintly.

The man's mouth moved like it had gone dry. He grabbed the paddle out of the air and held it the way one would to brandish it. Beyond his eyes, his subservient past came tumbling forward, accompanied by cold panic.

Harry smirked and walked out, peeling his sweet to take a large bite. It tasted even better than the Honeydukes he knew.

Licking his fingers and, after contemplating the position of the sun, Harry slipped away to the Burrow, arriving in the brush bordering the old orchard. The sizzle of a spell made him tug out his wand. He came around the brushline and found Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, still in her apron, facing each other on the drive.

"Harder than that, Mum," Ginny complained.

"Repetition of proper form is more important than trying for power every time, dear. I remember that from school, and I think it's good advice."

"I know that, Mum, but if I don't get this block strong enough, Professor Snape can send what's left of me home in a small brewing cauldron when I have my lesson tomorrow." She caught sight of Harry. "Oh!"

With Ginny off her guard, Mrs. Weasley sent the spell she had prepared straight up into the sky, where it flared pink. "You children are too easily distracted."

Ginny met Harry as he strolled out onto the lawn. She shook her cold-reddened wand hand and slipped on her other mitten. "Hello," she said. "Didn't expect to see you again."

Mrs. Weasley greeted him stiffly and adjusted her muffs back over her ears. "I'll fix something hot. Bring our guest inside, dear. Must get Arthur to fix that dratted Weather Vain as soon as he gets home today."

Sticking for the moment with his genteel persona while Mrs. Weasley was in hearing, Harry said, "I wanted to see how you were faring."

Ginny's shoulders fell. "I'm working hard. I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere fast."

They strolled slowly toward the house. "Only a few people who know really believe anything bad is going to happen," Ginny confessed. "That's the hardest of all."

"We can do some drills if you wish. But I don't have much time."

They diverted back to the drive and faced each other. Harry called for a block and sent a mild Blasting Curse at her. She handled it, somewhat. He repeated it and the block wobbled the other way.

On Guard

"Are you practicing enough?" Harry asked.

Ginny lowered her wand. "You have to be kidding. I practice all day."

Mrs. Weasley came out, directing a tray. She hovered this to the battered picnic table and sent a few spells up at the Weather Vain, but it just spun and sputtered. "The hot drinks will have to do, I'm afraid."

As they sipped from their cloudy mugs, Ginny studied Harry closely. She was peering past his disguise, Harry discerned. He also caught that her feelings heightened as she imagined what he really looked like.

"Still have crush on Potter?" Harry asked knowingly.

Ginny's eyes saucered. Mrs. Weasley chuckled. "No, she's long grown out of that. Haven't you dear?"

Harry smirked at Ginny, but then had to find something with which to dab foamy cocoa out of his mustache.

Mrs. Weasley said, "If you are going to be Ginny's spelling partner, I'm going to work on the chores a bit."

More eager now that they were alone, Ginny put down her mug. "Let's get back to it. I have a new block, a Serpolo, that I have to get right. You know that one?"

"Of course," Harry drawled.

"Yes, of course. Silly of me."

They took up their positions again, using the drive as the dueling platform. Harry fell easily into the cycling habit of the limited drill sequence. He would have previously insisted that this was boring, but he did miss it. The reassuring repetition and the feel of magic flowing freely through him kept the siren call of the shadows at bay. He liked having the power to resist them almost as much as he liked having them there, keeping him company.

As soon as Ginny began to put up solid blocks, Harry began modifying his attack spells so her blocks would go wonky again. After each one, she would shake her head and mutter something.

"I thought I was doing better."

"You are," Harry called back.

She lowered her wand, but Harry did not break sequence, so she had to duck under a smaller block to avoid his Freezing Hex. He did not let up, moving right on to the Confusion Charm.

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"Stop, stop," Ginny said, protecting her head with her arm, wand held out blindly.

Harry sent her one more before complying. She managed to block it, but just barely. She stood slowly and combed her hair back with her fingers, and said, "Yes, I know, my enemy would not listen. I get that from Snape, believe me. I need another sip or two of Butterbeer."

Snape, Harry thought, briefly closing his eyes. He was one of those alluring shadows out there. Shaking himself, he joined her back at the table where she stalled returning to drills. Harry did not mind; he was examining the world around him, the way the light leaching through the clouds shifted on the great lawn in front of the Burrow, the way that Ginny's curls caught the light like polished metal, and the way the shadows begged to be hunted or exploited, whichever he choose. He watched Ginny reheat her mug and sip at it, wanting to leave and use his short remaining time here to investigate the shadows instead.

Her light brown eyes came up to his. She laughed oddly and talking quietly said, "So funny to know who you really are. No one would believe it." She laughed lightly again, school-girlish. Without the trials his friends had endured she was still youthful. She was pondering him with far too much interest.

"You do still like him," Harry said.

She blushed, bringing her face more in line with her hair.

Harry laughed. From inside the house, he heard a clock chime. He did not wait to hear the count. "I have to go," he said.

Harry was late picking Candide up from the office, but she still had her head bent over one of those tall scrolls and did not even mention it. When they arrived home, Harry found an unsigned letter in the post. Belinda's flat 3 p.m. it read before it burst into flames and Harry tossed it toward the hearth.

"Howlette?" Candide asked without looking up from a thick letter. "Quiet one if it was."

"Can you visit your parents this afternoon? Or the Weasleys?" Harry asked.

Candide lowered the letter and considered him. "Yup." She did not ask more, making Harry appreciate her all the more.

On Guard

At Belinda's flat, Harry found the masked beefy man from his previous rendezvous and his two underlings. The man shoved one of the underlings in Harry's direction.

"They're yours for the afternoon. You have some business to take care of." When the man looked to be departing, Harry started to ask more. "These two know where you're going," the man gruffly said. "You're just there to make sure no one interferes." Then he was gone.

Harry studied his newly assigned assistants. "I need some names," Harry said. "You know mine."

The gangly one, with a habit of gesturing with hands that were narrower and longer than seemed natural, said, "I'm called Hummer and he's usually called Slowdraw."

"Wonderful," Harry said, trying not to sound too sarcastic.

Hummer stared at Harry expectantly. "And what are we supposed to call you?"

"'Harry' is not appropriate, I suppose?"

Slowdraw said, "He could go as 'Harry Potter'. It certainly sounds like an alias."

"Not if it's his real name, ya pillock."

Harry put out a hand in case their slapping turned into a real fight. "How did you get the name Slowdraw," he asked, half as a distraction.

Hummer laughed, pointing at his partner. "He wanted to be Zipdraw, but somehow no one kept a straight face while calling him that since it never was true. I tried getting everyone to call him Zimmerdraw, but it's a bit long."

Slowdraw's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Never mind," Harry said, "just call me the Old Man."

"Hey . . ." Hummer said, "that's a good one."

Impatient to finish and get away from these two, Harry said, "We're supposed to go do something?"

Their attitudes grew sober. In a low, serious tone, Slowdraw said, "Yeah, we got a shipment coming in."

Harry did not like having to do it, but he let Hummer Apparate him where they needed to go. They arrived on a lonely, dirt coast road pinned between the hills and wave-spattered boulders. The wind roared along the shore, tossing the faded grass and kicking off the tops of the spray from the crashing waves.

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Hummer walked along the road while Harry and Slowdraw waited. He dived into the brush beside the road and after some tossing about of the branches came back with three broomsticks. They mounted these and were off along the coast, full speed. The brooms, despite the mud and leaves caught in the bristles, were top of the range. Harry had to duck his head to get a full breath they were flying so fast into the wind. The underlings flew with their heads permanently ducked down and to the side, glancing forward only occasionally.

Suddenly the two of them veered off, out over the water. Harry followed, muscles thrilling, heart leaping at the instant maneuverability of the broomstick. Back on shore, a car approached, bouncing over the bad surface of the one-lane road.

They remained out over the water, flying straight, the glinting wave tops blurred beneath them. Harry could do this all afternoon, he decided, hoping their destination was far ahead of them.

They flew a long time, long enough that they passed through two rain showers and Harry wished he had used a Repelling Charm on his glasses.

They landed at a half-ruined abbey on a narrow promontory. The weather had cleared but the waves continued to thunder just below them.

They landed in a small clearing in the abbey's rubble in what previously had been the largest room. One arched window remained bolstered by a few blocks, so fragile it was a wonder the wind did not blow it over.

"Not here yet," Hummer said. "Someone needs to patrol."

The underlings stared at each other. Slowdraw said, "He's in charge of security."

Harry said, "I'll do it. What am I looking for?"

"Anything," Slowdraw said, sounding like Harry had gone dim. On top of Slowdraw's already slow demeanor this was sinking pretty low.

"I don't want to spell whomever we're meeting," Harry pointed out tartly.

"Ah, well, you won't do that on accident," Slowdraw assured him.

Harry rolled his eyes and left them there, happy to go back up on the broomstick. Before he hovered it, he looked for a brand name, but there wasn't one. The broom was completely plain, like someone had rubbed every last ounce of polish off it, including the name which would have been engraved in several places. Shrugging, he took flight and circled outward around the jagged tooth of land standing firm against the onslaught of the cold, foaming sea.

On Guard

There was no one around. The only Muggle road was a mile away and the only farms had derelict little buildings with gaping black squares for doors and windows. Harry veered, avoiding taking a predictable path in his patrol. He was just going to sweep out a bit wider when he saw something out over the water, something far too large to be hovering up in the air like that.

Harry continued his patrol, glancing frequently back at the thing growing in size. On his next pass, Slowdraw waved Harry down from the top of a high broken wall. When Harry signaled back, Slowdraw jumped on his broom and flew directly out to sea. Harry noticed that the rubble had all disappeared from the large room. Hummer waited with Harry by the wide doorway, observing the craft approaching.

"Don't you want a mask?" Hummer said, sounding honestly surprised. "You haven't potioned your face off."

Harry raised his wand to give himself a spell-based one, but Hummer waved him off and found one behind a neat stack of fallen blocks.

"Real ones don't fail when you're in a fight," he said.

Harry cleaned the dusty mask with a spell and slipped it on just as their delivery slid onshore with a great rasp and rocked to a rest.

It was a flying barge, suspended from sixteen giant flying carpets tethered like kites. Figures in hoods that made their faces too dark to see even in good daylight, began unloading crates from the barge and hovering them inside. The underlings jumped up to help and soon the ruin's largest room was stacked floor to sky with all manner of boxes, crates and trunks. Harry remained far enough removed to keep everyone in sight at all times, wand at the ready.

The muscle from the craft retired to the deck of it and broke out bottles of something clear and smelling sharp enough, Harry's eyes watered from twenty feet away. Within the ruins a debate started over the manifest and the crates.

With one last careful check of the barge's occupants, Harry slid inside the door, keeping his back to the wall, to listen in.

Hummer was standing over an open trunk filled with sacks, saying, "These are not of the quality we were expecting."

The accent on the visitor flowed thickly. "Dese is the quality available right now. You want better, you have to help me with my supplier. He is getting trouble with his Ministry, you know."

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Hummer went down the line to a rough crate and opened it, pulling out a twig with great care, examining it in the light, before placing it back inside and opening another.

"Those are Estonian. The best. I swear on my great uncle's bunions, dose are the best. And half the price so you can take out the local market and still turn a coin."

Hummer nodded and made a note. They continued down the line, opening next a trunk full of books, some of which Harry recognized from Hogwarts. Hummer opened one before tossing it back inside. "Kids don't know the difference."

The visitor added, "And the bindings do not last, reducing the resale value considerably." He rubbed his hands together. "More sales the next year."

As they completed the entire warehouse and Hummer charmed it all to resemble piles of rubble stacked against the walls, the visitor pulled out an awkwardly tall bottle and glasses from his pocket.

"You got new muscle," he said, tossing his hooded head in Harry's direction. "You want some?" he shouted to Harry, even though Harry stood not so far away.

Harry shook his head.

Slowdraw motioned that he only wanted a little between glances at Harry. He leaned close to the visitor. "It is good there was no trouble today," he said.

"Why, he still green?" The visitor laughed. "To business," he then said, raising his glass.

Harry's new colleagues wanted him to fly back with them to their Apparition spot, but Harry wanted to catch Tonks when she got off shift. He said, "I won't Apparate, so no one can track me," he said. "But I'm going on my own."

"Give over the broom then," Slowdraw said.

Hummer, in a tone of giving advice said, "Difficult people don't make it long with the boss. They don't make it at all, in fact."

Harry held out the broom and Slowdraw bundled it with his own using peevish movements. "Now what're you going to do? Portkey's out too, boss says. Not that we'd ever have one."

Harry transformed into his Animagus form, forcing the two of them back by shock as well as the wind off his wings. He leapt into the air off all four legs and leaned into a turn, caught the wind off the sea and lifted away from the ruins. Below him the underlings were gaping up at him before a crumbling bell-tower wall blocked them from view.

On Guard

Harry flew high since he had not asked for an Obsfucation Spell. When he spied a remote stretch of woodlands he plummeted to soar low to find a landing spot amongst the bare trees. From there he Apparated to Tonk's flat.

She still had her cloak on from just arriving home.

"Harry," she said, surprised.

He was glad to see her. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't you?"

Tonks dropped into a chair, making the metal feet chirp against the floor. She flattened her hair down before fluffing it back up with her inherent magic.

"You are getting me a beer?"

"Yeah," Harry said, closing the fridge door and waving the caps off.

She sighed and propped her head on her hand, bedraggled despite having neatened her appearance. Harry thought she seemed to be aging faster.

"You've been working too much," Harry complained lightly.

Tonks shook her head, not in denial, but in dismay. "We have no leads on this kidnapping. It's been a month and we have nothing." She sighed again and swigged her beer. "I shouldn't be talking about it, but what the heck does it matter after this much time . . . and money the family has forked over, I don't know how much. I think the McCurdys have been lying to us about how much." Once she got rolling, she grew more animated. "And no one wants to go over there to guard the wife anymore, she's intolerable. The apprentices think we are punishing them when we send them instead."

Harry held back on his reaction. "Maybe he's happy to be away," he forced out so it sounded the jest.

"Right," Tonks said, but then laughed thoughtfully. "Maybe."

She drank her beer, sitting glumly. Harry made himself take a deep breath. "No idea where he is, though?"

She snorted and dropped her voice. "The last source we had inside that particular branch of Durumulna . . . we found him dead last week. Hung up by his collar over the fence at the Belgravia police station, charmed invisible so the Muggles couldn't see him, only smell him."

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"Ah," Harry said, and busied himself with re-chilling his sweating beer. "Anything more on Percy?" Ginny had told Harry about her father's banning him from the Burrow, so he assumed Mr. Weasley's investigation was still active.

"Nothing I should tell you," Tonks said.

"But he's in Durumulna, right?"

Tonks shrugged, but it seemed like a 'yes'.

"What is he doing for them?" Harry asked, mostly thinking aloud. Harry had seen no sign of him, but then again, he had only seen a handful of gang members without masks. "I mean what would they want the git for?"

Tonks sounded disappointed in him as she rhetorically asked, "You mean, besides insider information?"

"True. What's HE get out of it? Other than a girlfriend," he added, thinking of the creepy date Percy kept with him.

"Hate to imagine he's sold out over a woman, no matter how good she looks in tight black clothes." Tonks raised her beer to the side and assumed a reasonable approximation of Vespera's usual outfit.

Harry grinned and thought she looked quite good that way. "So, you've met, I see."

"I've seen her meeting Percy in the Atrium a few times. The guard usually won't let her in. I used to think he was just an annoying git, but now I have a soft spot for him."

Harry traced lines with his thumb in the droplets on his beer bottle, trying to think rather than be distracted by her appearance. "So, Percy may only have limited contact with Durumulna."

"Possibly. Having followed him, I'm willing to believe that. Unless he is stellar at Doppelgängers." Her clothes faded back and her gaze narrowed in on Harry. "Why all the questions?"

"I'm just thinking. I'd like to catch him in the act of something is all."

"You AND me. But you aren't even as official as you were before, remember?"

Harry bristled at what sounded like her talking down to him. "I know that," he said stiffly, feeling angry and behind that pressed a flood of something dark and sticky that he did not want loosed. He glanced at his watch. "Candide will be coming back soon from her parents', I need to get home."

On Guard

As he donned his warmest cloak, Harry relished notions of the Hogwarts Quidditch match, the most that he'd had since leaving school. Perhaps it was the tedium his life had been reduced to recently that made it so appealing.

Winter did not slacken for the event. A burst of frigid air tried to take off the door to the Three Broomsticks when Harry opened it to depart. His friends followed him out, ducking into the wind one at a time. Hermione came aside Harry, strolling fast to keep up between the longer legs of him and Vineet. Harry slowed and turned to watch Aaron pinning the door against his foot for Ginny and Fred to exit. Ron slunk out behind them, failing to acknowledge Aaron holding the door for him.

Harry slowed when he spotted figures standing in the lee of the pub, in the alley. They stood with their heads low, gathered around a central figure. Coins dropped into waiting gloves, one at a time to be counted.

Behind Harry, Fred asked Ron, "So, how much did you wager on the match?"

"I didn't, this time," Ron replied. "I couldn't bear to put money on Slytherin and the spread the booky at Gringotts wanted was rubbish."

"Well," Fred said, "in that case you should have some spare coin for a little bet with your brother . . ."

Despite arriving just as the ball crates were being hefted to the center of the pitch, the stands were sparsely occupied.

Hermione slid along the bench to make room, hunched in her heavy cloak. "Sad to see that half of the wizarding world is more intelligent than us."

"You are not appreciating Quidditch?" Vineet asked, when there was a break in the wind. He sat unbothered by the chill.

"It's the weather," she replied.

Vineet reached for his pocket. "Would you like a Warming Charm?"

"I have one already. Thank you," she replied.

Harry leaned closer to the two of them. "What? Something about becoming a teacher, your spells stop working?"

"Harry, you are on really thin ice here."

Harry grinned, leaving off his teasing. "Well, that explains why my bum is so cold."

Hermione stated succinctly, "I repeated the charm too many times on the walk to Hogsmeade, already, that's all."

Vineet leaned in closer. "It is fortunate you are not marked on this assignment."

Hermione's reply was lost in the crowd rising to their feet to cheer the Quaffle toss. Harry eyed each of the players in turn. Some, specifically the Slytherin Beaters, were too large to still be in school at all. The Ravenclaw Chasers looked too frail to be facing them. The little bulk they had came from their wrist guards and padding. Harry recognized Wereporridge, who played with an unwavering crease of concentration on his brow.

Harry leaned over across Ginny and tapped Aaron on the leg. "Who's the other Slytherin Beater besides Wereporridge?"

"Cadre, his name is," Aaron replied as the aforementioned player whacked a Bludger with a sound like a thunderclap. It flew in a clean arc towards a Ravenclaw Chaser dropping toward the center goal in a collapsing pyramid maneuver. Instead, she was knocked off her broom, and only held on by a gloved hand. By the time she swung a leg back over, the play had collapsed and Slytherin was carrying the Quaffle the other way. She flew hunched over, clutching a shoulder.

"Hogwarts needs a size limit on players," Harry said.

"He is big enough for League play," Aaron agreed. "But where would the fun be for Slytherin then? Keeping students back is our main advantage."

"Well, it's not brains," Ginny opined. "They didn't even set up a play on the return run, just blasted straight through."

"It worked though," Aaron pointed out, crossing his arm. "Ten to zero, you will note."

"It lacks a certain beauty and grace when they have the Quaffle."

The beefier Slytherin Chaser tried to force the Ravenclaw Chaser out of the pitch area. The Chaser executed a roll, throwing off his opponent. He underhanded the Quaffle to his still limping team mate, who made an instant recovery, pivoted, and scored on the left hand goal post.

"Faker!" Aaron cupped his hands to shout. When Ginny batted him on the arm, he turned and said, "What?"

On Guard

The Seekers flew high, fluttering specks against the seething clouds. Tanzer and Suze were equally matched, weaving in and out of each other's flight path. One of them would swerve and the other pulled up to match pace and, if in position, block the other's path. This went on and on. Glimpses of Suze's hair were the only clues as to who was who.

Ravenclaw arranged their team for a run at the goal, flying like a diagram on a blackboard. The shot on goal flew wide, shot early so the Chaser could put both hands on his broomstick and execute a spin to dodge a Bludger.

Slytherin again came straight down the pitch, heedless of Beaters and Chasers dodging to cut them off. The goal keeper made a panic save with his broom tail, and the score remained tied.

The Seekers flew lower now, flying just outside the flag poles in a great oval race. Fans stood up to watch them come around behind, flying so fast they passed with a whoosh-whoosh. They circled again, faster, uniforms flapping madly. Suze pulled up and dropped into orbit in the other direction. The whole crowd had stood to watch the Seekers. They looped around, straight at each other, diverting just at the flag pole over the Teachers' Box so that they missed colliding. A few of the teachers ducked unnecessarily.

Tanzer pulled straight up, dodging randomly once, twice, suggesting that he has spotted the Snitch. Back on the pitch the Ravenclaws were running a Spider Web, a keep-away arrangement meant to tire the opposing Beaters.

Suze careened across the pitch toward her opponent, broom kicked so hard into full speed that it flew canted. Tanzer dropped his body, arm extended. Harry caught sight of the Snitch then, glittering off the boy's fingertips. But his broomstick floated upward, leaving the prize buzzing just out of reach. He hung that way, straining while time stretched thin, until Suze blasted through, spinning her opponent around and grasping the Snitch out of the air.

Aaron threw his hands over his head and pumped his fist. "All right!"

Everyone else sat down, and Harry elbowed Ginny, who tossed up her hands. "I can't help that he's a Slytherin."

Harry stood up, watching the players land and the Slytherins piling on top of one another, largest on the bottom. Snape appeared at the base of the staircase to the Teachers' box. He stood watching his players, face neutral.

"I'll meet you at the pub. I want to go talk to someone," Harry said to his friends, then pushed his way to the exit.

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Down on the grass, the players were greeting friends and family. Harry parted the convivial noises, drawing surprised gazes his way, mixed expressions that made his own thoughts mix around dangerously.

Harry arrived just as Suze reverently held out the Snitch to Snape.

"Professor," she said shyly. She glanced over at Harry and her face slipped from shy into a grin.

"Can I talk to Suze for a minute?" Harry asked.

Snape gestured that he could, and Harry led Suze aside over onto the warning track.

"Nice match. You looked to be having fun up there." Harry tried not to feel jealous.

She stroked her broomstick. "It did all right in a straight match up. I didn't think it would. I read all about the builder of his bespoke one and thought I was outmatched. But I beat him to it in the end."

Harry let her bask in memory for a moment before leaning down to quietly ask, "Do you think he threw the match?"

She stared at Harry with her strange eyes. "Why would he do that?"

"That's a separate question," Harry said. "I couldn't see as well from the ground as you could from up there. That's why I'm asking."

Suze's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, but she did not reply. Wereporridge shouted for her to join them in returning to the warmth of the castle. She waved back to him and said quietly to Harry, "It was a little strange, him not pulling down on his broom. He could have. He was hanging upside down and sometimes that confuses people. But if he can't control a broom upside-down, he shouldn't be a Seeker."

Harry patted her on the shoulder. "I don't mean to diminish your win. You looked good up there. Don't say anything, okay?"

She grinned broadly. "Why would I? Come. On."

Harry walked with her. "One can always count on a Slytherin to act in their own self-interest."

Snape, standing waiting in his best cross-armed pose, caught the tail end of this and raised his brows. "Can one?"

Harry let Suze walk on alone. The two of them stood there until the pitch cleared around them. Out of the wind it was far more pleasant.

Snape said, "How was your week?"

Harry glanced around them. The stray breeze catching at the grass was the only thing within hearing. He waved a spell for Animagia just in case. "Interesting and boring at the same time."

"The boring only concerns me in so much as what it might drive you to in the interest of alleviating it. What was interesting?"

"I did a small job for someone. Just guard duty."

Snape centered his cloak and adjusted the snake clasp. "Learn anything?"

"Minor things. I'm starting to wonder if the person I'm looking for is there often enough for me to catch him there."

Snape nodded. "Anything else?"

Harry did not answer right away. He did not want to tell Snape he had again left this Plane.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Snape said. He bent his head while he talked, which masked his voice. "I am hoping you will assure me you did not go back to that place you just rescued me from."

"I didn't go back there," Harry said.

Snape raised his head and stared straight into Harry's eyes. "If I request that you never go back to that place again, what would your response be?"

Harry tossed his hands. "Fine. I don't need to go back there."

Snape held his gaze, making Harry want to look away. "If you did find yourself wanting to go back there, what would be the reason?"

Harry trial-ran the honest answer against his new instincts and found them silent. "To try my power against his." He liked the sound of the words. He liked the way it made his insides go molten.

"You may be surprised what you find. I can send you some reading about that wand of his, if you wish."

Harry cocked a grin. "Then you are suggesting I wait until I feel ready?"

Snape raised his chin and took Harry's elbow to steer him off the pitch. "You are jesting."

"Half jesting," Harry insisted.

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Breach of Faith

Harry arrived at the front door of the Breakstone residence, a low sprawling brick house that tried at Muggle, but failed in little ways. The brick wasn't smooth and straight, and the wrought iron decorations on the corners of the eaves strongly resembled bats.

"Come on in, Harry. I'm not quite ready to go, yet," Candide greeted him at the door, a niece and a nephew pressed against her legs, peering up at him with wide eyes. "Come on, you, give way," she said, herding them clear.

The whole family and some extended relatives had gathered for Sunday dinner and surrounded an awkwardly long table. Candide had requested Harry Apparate her home, but dinner was apparently running late.

"Harry." Candide's father stood up to greet him with a firm handshake. Children raced around their legs as they did so.

Her mother said, "We're just having dessert; why don't you have a seat." She scooted her chair over to make room for him. A sizable glob of lemon curd over shortbread was handed down to him. This cued the youngsters to fight over the best adult laps at the table.

"So, Harry," Candide's father said, "You are still punishing the Ministry, it seems." He sounded amused.

"Not that they don't deserve it," Candide's brother, Fenton, said. He had close-cropped hair, and low, square sideburns framing his chiseled face. Like much of Candide's family, Harry had not seen him since the wedding.

Harry dug into his dessert and relaxed into the conversation, especially when it turned to expressions of pleasure at the changes in the Daily Prophet.

A second serving of madeira left Harry groggy in the humid room. He was just backing his chair out to get some air when someone placed a toddler in his arms – a wiggly toddler who arched her back to head back to mom, or the floor. Candide's mother, beside Harry, told the girl to sit still, a command she honored for around three seconds.

"Candy tells us you can tell if the little ones are magical before it really shows," Ruthie asked. "Is that true?"

Harry lifted the struggling child to stand on his legs. She reached out and snagged his glasses off without warning.

"I think she's got a future as a Seeker," Harry said, rubbing his forehead.

Someone handed him his glasses back.

Candide's sister-in-law, Trillium, said, "Allie must be magical. Remember the incident with the open stove door last month?"

"Might have just got lucky dear," Candide's mother said. "You never know."

There were a lot of magical people in the room, confusing his senses. Harry stood up and carried the girl away from the table. Movement calmed her struggles and she swung her head around, interested in where they may be going. Harry set her down on her feet and held her hands to help her balance. Magic definitely vibrated off her.

"She is," Harry said, releasing one hand that immediately stretched toward mum.

Trillium scooped her up and swung her feet out before hitching her on a hip. "Told you. We are three for three."

"How do you do that?" Candide's brother asked when Harry resumed his seat.

Harry lifted his hands. "Wizards and witches just feel magical."

"And Muggles?"

"They don't," Harry said. "Something's missing."

Candide's mother leaned forward to say, "When I was a girl there was an ancient old hedge witch who was known to be able to detect magical folk. She used to come to the market in Kent selling Charms and herb concoctions."

"She could suss werewolves, right, even outside a full moon?" Ruthie said.

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"What was her name?" Harry asked.

"We called her Good Witch Glister, but her name was, uh, Gliwice, or something.

Pouring herself more madeira, Ruthie said with a grin, "You told us stories when we were little how you were going to sell us to her if we didn't behave."

"Do you remember her name, dear?" Candide's mother asked her husband.

"I just remember she was exceedingly old. She put curses on all boys, or so we were told, so we never went near her."

She patted his arm. "Only on troublesome boys, dear."

"Well . . ."

The evening drew on and fell subdued. Harry found Candide's gaze trying to capture his. She raised her brow questioningly, her face showing wear from the long evening.

Harry stood. "We should get home."

Candide's mother stood up. "We have one more we'd like you to read the magic on."

"We don't want to wake Elred, Aunt Addie. He didn't get a naptime this afternoon."

"I'm sure it will be all right, dear. It would be nice to know."

Candide's cousin's wife slipped away and returned with a sleepy baby in a long midnight blue nightie, who greeted the room with a shaky yawn and vague fussing.

Harry accepted the bundle, finding the boy far heavier than expected. "Yeah, he's a load," the cousin said with a laugh. "Eighteen months of determined eating."

Harry knew the instant the weight rested fully in his arms, but he walked to the open space by the darkened bay window to be certain. There was an absence about the child. He clearly existed, fussing half heartedly, fist rolling against his cheek as though considering cranking up the volume, but not sure it was worth the effort. But his existence ended at the physical, like he existed, but didn't, at the same time.

In the dimmer light away from the table, Elred could open his eyes wider, and he peered at Harry with suspicion between long blinks. Candide stepped up before him, in front of her cousin and his wife.

Harry shook his head.

"No?" Candide said, head tilting back with a jerk.

"No," Harry said.

"Maybe you can't tell with a baby. He's half Allie's age."

"Maybe," Harry said, swinging his arms a little, making the boy fall still. "But I don't think so." Feeling sudden heat on his cheeks and up his middle, he said, "But it doesn't matter."

"No, of course not," various voices agreed, but they sounded like they spoke past disappointment.

Harry handed the child over to his father, who walked away bouncing him lightly while looking him over thoughtfully.

To Candide, Harry said, "Ready to go?"

She nodded, gaze far away.

After making their goodbyes, Harry Apparated her straight home to the main hall.

"Harry," Candide's voice drew him back from heading up to bed. She had not moved from where they had arrived. Gesturing vaguely at her midsection, she asked, "Can you tell if this one is?"

Harry stepped back over to her and shook his head. "It's too muddled up." Then he repeated: "It doesn't matter," and this time felt pain saying it, like some core of him was making a last desperate stand. He spun away to hide the damp that suddenly clung to his eyes.

Candide remained silent, watching, as he walked away and up the stairs.

Harry lay down in bed, but his body refused to relax. Hedwig plucked at her cage door, sending a series of twangs into the darkness of the room. Harry rose to let her out for the night, then opened his other pet's cage door as well. Kali climbed out onto the top of it and luxuriously stretched each wing. Harry wondered if he should get her a cage big enough to let her do that whenever she wanted. She sniffed the air in his direction with her little fox head, then bent to groom her fur with her rows of fine teeth.

Harry sat on his bed, letting the cold air of the room chill his sweat-damp pyjamas. Something about refusing to escape the uncomfortable cold seeping into his bones made him feel more aware of everything. With a deep breath he reached under the bed for one of the books he had borrowed from the Hogwarts library restricted section. The leather surface of the book squirmed under his fingers like tiny muscles flexed beneath the surface. The stamped cover bore no title, just amorphous shapes that could have been leaves and vines or creatures and limbs.

Chapter 44

Harry cast a Silencing Charm on the room in case the book screeched when he opened it. It did not exactly screech, but the binding made a grating rumble like opening a subterranean chamber.

Harry studied the page he had opened to, but he could not understand any of it. It was like the ramblings of a madman interspersed with arcane spell snippets. He flipped ahead, reading each sheet of meticulously scribed text while the wide border decorations writhed and shifted around the words. But it was just more of the same. Harry wondered why Hogwarts kept the book. That curiosity alone made him keep reading for many more pages. Each page only held about thirty words the way it was written out so large. Each section had a little oil painting around the lead letter, with grotesque themes of death and plague, like a tarot deck viewed through a mind altering potion.

Harry shut the book around a Chocolate Frog card of Dumbledore. The figure of the old headmaster walked into the frame and winked, unaware of his odd surroundings. Harry thought he should have some opinion about all of this, but apparently not.

Swinging his head under the bed, Harry set the book back on the closest stack, but it teetered. When he leaned under farther to arrange all the books he had stashed there, he noticed that the light under his door shifted as though someone was standing outside it. Harry, caught up in a strange state of ill ease from the book and a fit of anger at some kind of ill-defined persecution, snapped open the door.

Candide stood there, hand out like she had been knocking.

"Oh," she said, startled about something she found in his face.

"I had a Silencing Charm on the room, since I was making noise," Harry explained.

"Oh." She was rubbing her abdomen in broad circular strokes. "I was feeling a bit off. I'm wondering if I should see the Midwitch."

Harry realized then that she wasn't startled by him, she was just startled in general, eyes wide and worried. She went on, masking fear with pragmatic planning, to Harry's ear. "Do you know how to get to the Midlands Midwitch Mediwizard Hospital? I'd hate to take myself since the Midwitch is the one who insisted I side-along for the last month of pregnancy. Scared me into it with all kinds of horror stories."

"We learned three ways to get to every hospital in Britain as part of our training, so I can take you." Her worry was infectious. Harry felt himself slip clear of the cloying shroud stultifying his emotions. He stepped out onto the balcony and took her arm. "Maybe you should message your mum. Or I could fetch her?"

"It's three in the morning and it's probably just the three servings of lemon curd with marmalade. Really."

"You're certain you don't want me to get your mum. I'm sure she wouldn't care about the time."

"Really, I'm sure."

"Severus?" Harry prompted, thinking ahead to trying to explain this later and foreseeing trouble.

"Harry," she said with structured patience, "in the last month all kind of false alarms are going to happen. I don't want to bother him already with this one."

Harry rushed back into his room, tossed yesterday's robes over his pyjamas and slipped on his shoes without any socks. He came back and took her arm again, and with a bang! they arrived in the arcade that formed the central corridor of the hospital.

A half moon desk arced out of the wall halfway along, basking in the blue glow of a swarm of fairylights. Harry steered Candide that way and waited while she explained her situation. He felt strangely disassociated, abandoned, like his thoughts had too much room to rattle around in.

"I'll be back, Harry," Candide said, sounding like he needed reassurance now more than she did, perhaps because of the grip he had on her arm.

Harry did not want to let her go on alone, but the Midwitch took over his hold. Releasing her arm felt like letting go of a life preserver on a choppy sea. Harry turned to look for a place to wait, feeling far away from the arched metal poles holding up the glass roof just feet away on both sides.

"Aren't you Harry Potter?" the desk clerk asked.

Harry turned. The clerk was a delicate woman with a careworn face and receded jaw. The magic radiating off her was weak, almost overwhelmed by the taint of stale blood radiance leeching off the walls around them. She barely qualified as a witch at all.

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling whole again, or at least blessed with a head crowded with diverse notions.

A row of metal benches bisected the atrium. Harry took a seat and waited. Worried about letting his mind wander, he puzzled over the strange book he had been reading instead. What was the purpose of it? Why would someone write something that

made so little sense? Someone had gone to great trouble to illuminate it and bind it. That was probably the only reason the Hogwarts library had kept it so long.

Candide returned, accompanied by the Midwitch, a black woman with a glowing face who exuded matronly reassurance.

"If you feels any pains tomorrow, come back."

Candide nodded, lips pulled back in a sheepish frown.

"Sorry, Harry," she said. "I shouldn't have woken you. Turns out it probably was nothing."

"No matter," Harry said, meaning it. "Ready for home?"

They were greeted by Winky, who bowed Candide in the direction of the dining room. "Winky is serving for Mistress chutney and banana on biscuits."

"Thank you Winky; I'm famished."

Harry's stomach grumbled as well, despite the menu. "Is there something else to eat?"

They split a pot of tea that sparked in when they finished their respective snacks.

"Are you going to tell Severus?" Harry asked.

"About what?" Then she chuckled. "I was overly careful, is all."

Harry found a deep reservoir of dutiful will on this topic. It tapped a source closer to his core than those new instincts could reach. "You can't be overly careful."

"The Midwitch was nice enough about it. Only mentioned first time mothers three times during the consultation." Wry smile fixed she poured them both more tea. "How goes your new job?"

Harry accepted this as code. "Not learning much so far."

"In general, you don't learn much until someone takes you under their wing."

"I haven't found anyone to do that yet."

"Maybe just as well."

When the amber glow of dawn lit the ivy veining the garden wall beyond the window, Candide yawned. "Maybe I'll sleep and go into work for the afternoon."

Harry swallowed a yawn too. He had things he wanted to do, but they could wait until she was safely at the office.

Harry dropped Candide at her office and, hiding under his invisibility cloak, immediately slipped into the far corner of the Magical Law Enforcement File Room. He crept along the short wall and leaned far over to be certain no one crouched on the other side of the long row of cabinets before moving down to the drawer marked Gjinni-Glock. Inside he found a thin file of disintegrating brown notes. Under his cloak his breath blew them around, so he held his breath while he carefully lifted each sheet, looking for an address. Holehollow was indicated beside her name, along with the date of 1 November, 1938. The remains of the report hinted at some complaint from her neighbors regarding finding iguanas in place of their children in bed that morning. Smirking, Harry flipped each fragment, chipping the edges of them despite handling them as carefully as possible.

The same location repeated on other sheets, but all very old. Harry should have asked at the party, but he had been loath to reveal his interest in front of so many witnesses.

On the atlas at home he found Holehollow and took himself there through a combination of Dark Plane Apparition and flying, laughing to himself at his ability to be untraceable with such ease.

Holehollow turned out to be difficult to find. In his Animagus form, Harry circled a pair of tracks that crossed in an area where the semicircular arrangement of gnarled old trees hinted at intentional planting. But everything else had grown wild, for quite a while, it appeared. Harry landed and found a broken down wooden sign beneath a canopy of dead ivy that confirmed he had found the place.

The sun beat down and without a breeze it almost felt balmy. Harry walked through the stillness, stopping to study the domed hillocks covered in washed out weeds and brush. He walked up to one and poked around until he found a smashed out window, low to the ground. Cupping his hands around his eyes he peered inside and found the remains of a house.

He broke trail to the next one and found the same thing, only this time there were signs of fire inside. Perhaps Muggle campers had used it. Back on the dirt track, Harry surveyed the area enclosed by the broken arcs of giant trees. It slept with a cold ease that spoke of wounds erased by time and the death of memory.

Harry turned sharply, sensing someone watching him. He crossed the road and tried the last hillock house on the other side. The weeds and brush were undisturbed

around it but it felt more alive than the others. He circled around, looking for a door or window, and found a half-sized door on the side away from the road.

Harry knocked and waited, but no sound issued forth from beyond the bare wood. He waited more, feeling he was being tested. He knocked again and stepped back to where he could see around the sides of the house to watch for movement.

The door cracked open, swung back, creaked open farther, repeating this like it were being tugged on by a string. The door fell still, revealing a dark hole in the side of the hill. Harry stepped forward, just to the top a set of steps leading down and called inside.

In response the door tugged open just a little more. Harry stepped sideways down the stairs because they were so narrow and waited for his eyes to adjust. Light filtered in through brush covered windows in the roof. The air smelled of sweet smoke, cabbage, and wet fur. A brown rat scuttled up to Harry's foot and sniffed at his trouser leg. Harry stepped back from it.

"Herman has to approve of all the guests," a raspy and accented voice came out of the corner.

Harry located the voice in the corner, propped near a window on a rocking wooden contraption that resembled a magical concoction of a bed and a set of dining room chairs.

"Are you Gliwice?"

"I used to be. Not much of anything now." The window lit her pure white hair, which flowed in all directions from her head and accented her deeply sunken face. "Don't have a chair to offer you."

"That's all right," Harry assured her. "I won't be long. I was just curious about something-"

"That's the only reason any comes. They used to only come because they wanted to know, again, what happened here."

"What did happen here?" Harry asked.

She snorted breathily. "The war happened here. None ever wanted to move back." She turned to look out the window, her features as softened and sunken as a dried apple.

"I saw one of the houses was burned out," Harry said for conversation. "This is a strange little village."

"Used to be all magical folk here, and herbs grew everywhere around. Even on top of the houses. That's why my parents emigrated here, herbs was their speciality." Her face drew in farther. "Wars is terrible things. Grindelwald was hardest on the ones he thought should be his allies, but refused. That's what happened here."

"Wars are when things change," Harry said, not sure why he said it, or even what it meant. Gliwice remained staring out the window at the dead brush glaring in the sunlight.

Herman's tiny paws walked over Harry's feet, sniffing his laces. Shaking the rat off his foot, Harry said, "I heard you could tell when people are magical."

"You need me to tell you if you are?" she asked.

"No. I can do the same, is all, and I've never known anyone else who could."

She turned from the window, putting her deeply sunken features into shadow. "And you hears the demons too . . . the ones no one else will believe are real?"

"Oh, they're real," Harry said.

"You're awfully young for such visions. I thought that was only a plague on me old brains. Magic got bored or something."

"But sensing magical people, that's not the same thing as the demons, is it?"

"Yes and no." She did not continue right away, but studied Harry standing there. Herman tugged on Harry's shoe lace, and when it came loose, tried to run off with the end of it. Harry shook his foot free again, and stood on the lace ends.

Gliwice spoke more slowly, making her accent more apparent. "Everyone can channel evil. That's what you sense when you can feel someone is magical: that potential."

"It doesn't feel evil, though," Harry mused aloud. "It just feels like magic, or something more than Muggles have."

"Magical folk are connected to more things than non-magical ones are. That's the difference. Things no one can see. And probably wouldn't want to if'n they could." With her permanently spiraled, club hands she adjusted the quilt over her. "You have more than your share, from what I can tell. Not the same as power, though. Don't make that mistake."

Harry fidgeted, resisting her words.

She went on, "But you young people never take advice from the old. You have to make all your own mistakes. Given that odd scar, you've made more than your share already."

Chapter 44

Harry was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake in revealing himself to her at all. It was a gut level worry that when examined in detail, did not hold up. But still, a careful voice urged a Memory Charm, or something.

Harry jumped back, and shook his foot free of Herman, who had bitten his ankle.

"He doesn't like unfriendly visitors," Gliwice stated.

Herman reared up to his full low height, tiny paws upraised, and snapped at Harry.

The air in the room shifted, rushing outward. Gliwice went on, cold and brittle, "Didn't survive this long for no reason, young man."

For a breath Harry wanted nothing more than to match her threat, to stretch his power so that it battered against another's. His better senses, bolstered by the sight of her there, hunched and withered, won out.

Tight lipped he said, "Right. I'll be going then. Leave you to the . . . silence."

"Silence is golden, young man, silence is golden." She turned back to the window.

Harry slipped into the main hall at home and bent to check the wound on his ankle.

Ginny's voice from the doorway to the dining room made him raise his head. "Harry. You sure came in quietly."

Hermione came up behind her. "Hope you don't mind if we let ourselves in."

Harry wondered if perhaps they did not need better spells on the house, in that case. He glanced at the time. "I'm late fetching Candide home. I'll be right back."

Harry returned with Candide and they joined the full table; Aaron and Vineet had also come for dinner.

"My mum says hello, Harry," Aaron said, saluting with his fork from other end of the table. "She also says that next time you insist on picking a fight, please make certain the press takes their pictures from my good side." He pressed his face to the side with his thumb in demonstration.

Ginny said, "If she didn't insist on having the article framed so she could admire it every day, it wouldn't matter so much."

Aaron leaned his long neck out in her direction with his chin propped on his palm. "I happened to notice that someone else carefully cut out the article and is currently using it as a bookmark in her diary."

Ginny had begun to flush, but then snapped, "Were you trying to read my diary?"

Aaron raised his hands up. "You left it under your pillow." With a sigh, he added, "Besides, it was blank, as far as I could tell."

Harry blinked at that and glanced at Hermione, who said, "Watch out for Ginny and blank diaries."

Harry noted the time. He had not decided what he thought about this concerted effort to socialize with him. To Hermione he said, "No marking to catch up on? Assignments to write?"

"Professor Snape gave me his two best Slytherins as regular assistants."

Ginny said, "What is a 'best Slytherin' anyway . . . one whose blood runs a sort of streaky red-green?"

Hermione shrugged. "They'd be in Ravenclaw except for their chronically bad attitude. But they enjoy marking, rather a lot, rather too much, really. But who am I to complain . . . well, except for the nearly blinding, glittering green ink they insist on using."

"Speaking of blood," Ginny said, "Harry, Fred and George wanted me to ask you to come to the shop tomorrow morning. They need a favor of some kind. Wouldn't tell me what it was. There could be some gold in it for you, they told me to mention if you were too busy."

"I'm not busy," Harry said.

The morning sun was just reaching the rough wood around the windows on the upper floors when Harry stepped out onto Diagon Alley. He had his gaze on the triple "W" sign ahead of him, but noticed on the way, that the construction barrier was down around Eeylops and a fresh coat of black stain gleamed tar-like around the windows and exuded the nose-wrinkling scent of turpentine. A spritely sign painter was hunkered down adding gold embelishments to the corners of the glass.

Pleased to see the shop open again Harry stepped inside the propped-open door. Eeylop was unpacking merchandise, directing his employees to hang samples of each type of cage along the ceiling in front of the windows. Harry walked amongst the scattered packing materials and blinked as his eyes adjusted. He picked up the scoop in the Owltreets barrel and filled a paper sack for Hedwig. As he turned to find a

path to the counter to pay, he realized he recognized the crude construction of the crate blocking his way as well as the trunks stacked behind the counter.

Eeylop met him at the counter where he pulled coins from his own pocket to make change because the till was absent.

Harry said, "You were lucky to get restocked so quickly."

Eeylop went from hurried to frozen. He shuffled the coins in his palm, staring at them. His flushed skin became dotted with micro-droplets of sweat. "Yeah, Mr. Potter. It was lucky."

Harry wished he would look up. Eeylop laid too much change on the freshly sanded counter. Harry picked out something close. "More than luck, I think," Harry said, pitched only for the man's ear.

Eeylop worked his lips and scooped up the remaining coins. His attitude stabilized. "The new owners use their own supplier," he announced. "I just run the shop now."

"New owners?" Harry glanced around, seeing nothing that would indicate this. "You sold the shop?"

"In a manner of speaking," Eeylop said, then bustled by Harry to help untangle a bundle of self-lowering cage chains that were faltering across the floor like a marooned metal sea creature.

Lost in thought, Harry opened the door to Weasley Wizard Wheezes.

"'Ello, Harry," one of the twins greeted him. "Come on in. Have a tea. It's on the house."

A pile behind the counter shifted and another twin emerged. Stacks of boxes and paperwork were mixed up all around the back area.

"Fred, where's that order form from House of Hair-Raising." He began digging, restacking things wherever he could find a horizontal surface. "Mornin', Harry," he added, without looking up.

Harry accepted a stained cup and held it out for tea saying, "Looks like Ginny was keeping things organized around here."

"Lies!" George exploded. "Never did a thing around here, that lazy sister of ours."

Harry grinned and accepted the seat indicated, a Smorgas-Sweets barrel with the lid hastily placed back on it.

George sat on the counter itself, and bent far over to talk to Harry at eye level. "This is what we would like, if you can stand the boredom. And we're willing to pay Galleons, mind you, knowing this." He gestured with his long-fingered hands as though holding a large sphere out before him. "We want you to spend some mornings here, on days we need you." He glanced up sharply and eyed the street outside the window. Dropping his voice he said, "As a kind of guard."

"You're having trouble?"

"At first it was sort of fun taking care of it ourselves." George cracked his knuckles. "But it's grown tedious. We have work to do and as much as we'd like a sideline in defensive devices and traps, well, our work for others in that area hasn't gone so well. We were told they'd be coming this morning, 'to issue us an ultimatum we'd be wise to consider'."

Harry stared at his friend before watching the other twin arrange boxes more tightly on a shelf to make room for something new, and tried not to smile in amusement.

"I can do that," Harry said.

Customers came in and most treated Harry with reverence, stopping to talk and commiserate about his situation. As usual, he was disconcerted to find how much near strangers knew about him. Throughout the morning, Harry kept up an attitude of simply visiting his friends there in the shop.

Eventually, the shop bells chimed and two familiar figures slinked inside, checking the alley outside repeatedly before making their way through the maze of goods. Their destination was the counter, but they did not reach it. They spotted Harry sitting there beside it and stopped.

Harry's gaze locked with those of his erstwhile criminal assistants and no one moved. Fred and George stood in defensive positions: one behind the counter, one beside the wall leading to the counter, wand hands hidden by their sleeves.

"Something you want?" Harry politely asked the pair from Durumulna.

Hummer and Slowdraw rocked from one toe to the other, bumping together like they wanted to whisper to each other, but not doing so. Uncertainty tainted their plain faces. Harry relished it; it was one step from fear.

"I didn't hear an answer," Harry pointed out.

The two stepped away and slinked out, glancing back at Harry several times.

Fred exhaled. "That went better than expected." He clapped Harry on the back. "You have the perfect reputation for this job."

Smiling faintly, Harry said, "Yes . . . that I do."

Harry remained at the shop until shortly before lunch when he needed to ferry Candide. Fred plucked a Galleon from the till to pay him for the day. Harry stared down at the coin, imagining for a blink that it flickered into becoming a plain metal slug, but he pocketed it anyway, feeling the pay did not matter anyhow.

Late that afternoon, Ron showed up in the front garden bearing a trunk full of baby things from his mother. He hovered the trunk through the narrow corridor with an ease that surprised Harry, not bumping either wall.

Candide pulled a chair over to look inside, while Ron explained apologetically, "Ginny tried to sort out the truly Weasley stuff, but I think mum slipped much of it back inside. Do what you want with it."

Candide pulled out a pair of knitted booties with long curled toes. "Oh, these are adorable."

Ron stayed for dinner, which put a crimp on Harry's thoughts of trying to track down Hummer and Slowdraw. Harry spent the evening thinking about what he would do the next morning. He must have been too wrapped up in his own thoughts because Ron said, "You're as quiet as a magician's mouse. What's up?"

Unwilling to answer, Harry turned the question back. "How are things at the bank?"

Ron pushed back from the table and rocked up on the back legs of his chair. "Oh, well. The more rigorous identification spells we require of customers have cut down on problems. We still have some trouble, like this customer last week who insisted he withdrew all his money under an Imperio. But that sort of thing has happened forever."

Candide said, "Have there been any large new accounts opened in the last year?"

Ron's chair dropped back to level. "You mean, is Durumulna using Gringotts to hold their money? Officially, no."

"Unofficially?" Harry prodded.

Ron rubbed his chin. "Probably, but using fronts to deposit the money. Once you start wondering if every threadbare wizard bringing in Galleons by the cauldron-full is actually laundering money they all look like they could be doing that." He flipped his napkin around. "No one asks anything about that. The Goblins care about losing money, not about who brings it in."

That night as Harry perused his Hogwarts collection of books, a tiny elf owl pecked at the window. It dropped the rolled up message on the sill and fluttered off. It read:

Independent business is strongly discouraged. We expect monthly delivery of our cut. "Strongly" had three red underlines that began to spread and drip just before the message vanished in a flash of red heat.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his reading about a spell called The Living Skeleton. The author had not made it clear if one started with a live person or a dead one. Harry flipped back to the beginning of the section. Maybe the spell would work either way.

Harry closed that book, unable to think of uses for the spells outside Halloween and returned to the mysterious book with no name. He set Dumbledore's card to the side, but decided instead to press it into the back of the book, out of view. He turned each thick page, stopping at one showing a border of twining ivy sporting blooms of happy faces that shrank into craggy old shrunken heads that dropped off out of the frame. The meaning of the random words shimmered just out of reach.

Harry dropped his hand on the page and quickly flipped back to the Chocolate Frog card. Dumbledore rubbed his ear and clasped his hands together loosely. Harry's lips twitched; he knew how he would spend his free morning.

During the desperate search for his kidnapped friend, Aaron, Harry had tried without success to use a Device to see his own Plane instead of other ones. While doing so, he had glimpsed Dumbledore sitting alone in a tower beside a window. Seeing his old mentor again was something he had intended to do, once he had the time free, and currently he had nothing but free time.

Heart thrumming with anticipation, Harry slipped away to the Dark Plane from the stairwell of the accountancy immediately after seeing Candide to the door.

Knowing little about the place where he would arrive, Harry opted to arrive in a field nearby to the tower, but far enough away to have a chance to look around. The cold ground and weak sunlight made warming up a desperate affair. After he finally managed to heat the ground beneath him, he lay there for a long time, his body ringing with discomfort. Birds darted in serpentine paths overhead. The pale grass prickled and itched through his robes, urging him to move.

Heavy as lead, Harry rose up and ran his eye along the bare trees edging the field. Soft hills rolled to a sharp upsweep of unwelcoming mountains shaded from the sun by

a shroud of clouds. A grey stone tower, topped by a tall conical roof, stood perched atop a nearby hill. No other habitation was in view. Assuming the tower was the one from his vision, Harry skipped his usual disguise and walked toward the structure, which turned out to be farther away than it appeared and on a much higher hill. By the time Harry arrived, his joints had sufficiently recovered from the punishment of the Inbetween to let him feel invulnerable again.

The heavily hinged door to the tower had a cursed aura. Harry circled the base and instead flew up to the first set of windows with no bars. Just in case of human repelling spells, he wiggled inside while retaining his oversized Animagus form. He kinked a wing doing this and when he changed back, had to nurse a stitch in his side while circling the workroom in which he found himself. Enchanted objects and apparatuses littered tables and sat atop stacks of books on the floor. Bookshelves bowed under the weight of rare grimoires. Books were spread out three deep upon one another, a thin dust layer upon them.

In the mode of Auror patrol, Harry made his way up the risers jutting out of the curved wall. He passed more living spaces smelling of long term use but with no current inhabitants.

At the very top of the stairs the door hung ajar. Harry rapped lightly and pushed it open. It swung soundlessly, moving with just a touch. Dumbledore looked up from the desk where he sat, transfixed by Harry's arrival.

Dumbledore moved slowly; he rotated the quill he held and placed it beside his diary.

"Harry."

Mired in guileless memory, Harry lowered his wand and stepped forward. "Professor," Harry said, voice far away.

Dumbledore's water-blue eyes flicked to Harry's wand and back to his face with machine-like precision. Harry smiled sheepishly and put his wand in his pocket.

Sounding as if Harry were breaking several serious school rules, Dumbledore asked, "Harry, what are you doing here?"

Harry fought the tangled spell of memory, resisting chastisement. "I wanted to talk to you."

Dumbledore raised his chin. "Speak quickly, then."

Harry floundered for a starting point in his story. How to explain it all? He was becoming something else, something from the past. What was he to do about that?

He wanted help and the urge to pour forth his worries met with no resistance; his paranoid instincts fell completely still when faced with his old mentor.

Dumbledore's eyes drilled into Harry's. "How did you find me?"

Harry remembered himself and Occluded his thoughts. "That's too long of a story. Though it would be easier to explain everything else if I explain that too." He hesitated, but went on: "I want help getting rid of this last piece of Voldemort I have."

Dumbledore's white brows rose together. "I'm uncertain what you are referring too, Harry. What makes you think there are any pieces at all?"

"I thought you would understand." Harry said, feeling his last best hope shimmer away.

Dumbledore's chest filled as he prepared to speak, but a noise came from the doorway behind Harry and Dumbledore fell into the same kind of wary stillness he displayed when Harry first arrived.

Harry turned. An old wizard glided in, his blonde-white hair flowing wildly behind him. He moved like one much younger than his wrinkled features, which shifted indecisively as he studied Harry. "And who is this, Albus?" the wizard asked, gesturing toward Harry as though to touch him, but pulling back far short with a strange curl to his fingers.

Harry did not like this man, at all. His starkly contrasting beauty and keen, vile eyes reminded him of Lockhart hosting Voldemort.

"Who are you?" Harry demanded.

The wizard threw his fine robe sleeves to the sides as he gestured. Grandly, at full volume, he asked, "Who am I? Oh, dear, do I need to remind the world again who I am?"

Dumbledore's boney fingers closed hard around Harry's arm. Harry shook himself free and stepped out of reach.

Dumbledore, smiling and shaking his grand head, said, "No, no, my dear Gellert, I'm sure they have not forgotten."

Harry glanced between them, trying to remember where he had heard the name Gellert before. Dumbledore restrained Gellert, patting his arm. They were equally matched, both boney limbs enveloped in bulky robes. Dumbledore turned to Harry with a guilty expression.

"It's a just a visitor from Hogwarts. Cleverly managed to track me down is all."

Harry remembered with a snap of his heartbeat where he had heard the name Gellert, and he stepped back again, surprised to find solid ground when everything shifted so violently otherwise. "Grindelwald?" Harry's wand slipped eagerly free of his pocket. Grindelwald pulled his out as well. Dumbledore tried to restrain Grindelwald but the other slipped free.

Harry risked a glance at Dumbledore, trying to understand. "Why are you here with him?"

Dumbledore did not get an opportunity to answer. "We have a cheeky upstart, here. So nice," Grindelwald said, and raised his arm.

Harry beat him to the curse, but just barely, the spells exploded between them, throwing Dumbledore aside. Harry used a Rubber Shield on the next one, trained well to avoid harming others.

Spells flew, taking the curtains and desk and even a heavy shelf with them. Harry threw a Blasting Curse so powerful it shifted the stones of the tower, Grindelwald threw back a Cutting Curse that doubled Harry over behind his best Block.

"Stop! Gellert, Stop!" Dumbledore commanded, reaching for his companion's arm.

"You will be destroyed, little upstart wizard!" Grindelwald mocked Harry in manic glee, but his next curse was pulled wide. "Let go of me, Albus. You said yourself that it would be dangerous for anyone to know we are here. Since you are too weak to destroy him, I will do it." He shoved Dumbledore aside.

His eyes fluttered with delight. "Prepare to die."

Harry countered, "Die? I haven't even started trying yet."

The next curse Harry squelched. Grindelwald held onto his wand, but he stumbled backwards into the crooked curtains, showing his age by the slow way he stood straight. Dumbledore moved as though to help him, but withdrew his hand and held the other up in Harry's direction.

"Harry. Hang on," he pleaded. Taking Grindelwald by the shoulders, he said, "I can handle Harry. Cease this pointless fighting at once!"

Grindelwald shook free and glared at Harry while throwing a Hatchet Curse, which Harry, wand pointedly at his side, squelched again. Grindelwald's wand clattered on the unyielding stone floor. Grindelwald called it back to his hand with an elegant finger gesture, but stopped to calculate what to do next.

"Come on," Harry said, using the same gesture. "Got something more?"

"Harry," Dumbledore criticized.

"You are one to talk . . . here with him, of all people. What did you do, fake your death or something?" Harry snapped back, guessing as best he could to try and hit a sore point.

Grindelwald, with a subtle flick of his wand, tossed out a Blindness Hex, which Harry countered. Without pausing in finishing that spell Grindelwald converted the end of it into a Cruciatus, which Harry suppressed, sending Grindelwald crumpling to the floor. He rolled and raised an arm in Dumbledore's direction. Dumbledore had his wand out, half raised at Harry.

"The wand. Give me the wand!" Grindelwald croaked.

Harry glanced at the wand Dumbledore slowly raised in his direction. Harry's insides twisted and thrashed, half wanting to plead and half joyful at the prospect of being utterly free, just as soon as Dumbledore attacked.

Harry took in the pale, carved wand. "You have the Wand of Destiny," Harry blurted, connecting dots together with other worlds.

Dumbledore threw a binding spell at Harry, which he barely blocked, and mostly slithered out of physically, by rolling away from the bulk of the spell. Before he could push back to his feet, a hex shot out at him from Grindelwald. Harry, close to the floor, managed a low counter that deflected the Spine Splitting Hex up through the roof, causing wood chips and bits of slate to rain down.

"Nothing harmful!" Dumbledore snapped, reaching a hand in Grindelwald's direction without sparing his aim from Harry.

The three of them held fixed in a wavering tableau, breathing heavily. Snape's warning about that particular wand echoed in Harry's adrenalin-soaked brain.

"I came to you for help," Harry snarled at his old mentor, things tearing apart inside him as he said it. Tearing free. Harry stood, staggering once.

Dumbledore's wand wavered and his face contorted, "Harry . . ." he began, clearly pained.

Beneath Grindelwald's feet Harry sensed another Forbidden Curse forming, felt the stench of hungry death. "Try it, I dare you," Harry said, glaring straight at the wizard. "That curse won't kill me. It never has." Turning back to Dumbledore, Harry said, "Lovely company you are keeping here. Hope it's worth it."

Chapter 44

And with that, and one last glimpse of Dumbledore's regretful features, Harry soundlessly slipped away into the floor.

> Author's Notes: Yes, long gap. I've been travelling and last week when I had a good internet connection and was going to post, I caught some awful stomach bug and only got back to an internet cafe now. Really in the boonies now.

Chapter 45.

Deeds and Plots

Harry returned to his own Plane and, as soon as he was capable, began pacing his bedroom. In a way, his new, carefully decorated room felt as foreign as the one he had found Dumbledore in, and it irked him. He raised his wand, considering how he might change things, but Kali chirruped from her cage before he could decide whether to burn away the nicely matching curtains or simply Expunge them into the ether.

Remembering a time when he had no room at all to call his own, he dropped his annoyed disgust and went over to his pet. Kali climbed over the inside her cage, hanging upside down and considered him with a tilted gaze.

"Dumbledore and Grindelwald," Harry said aloud to his uncomprehending pet, trying out the sound of it. He shook his head. He calmed his thoughts and opened the door of the cage. His pet, as she usually did lately, did not fly to him, but crawled onto the top to stretch and groom her fur. Her color had never returned to its original blinding violet.

Harry pulled out his wand again and used a narrow cutting curse on his finger. Maroon blood ballooned into droplets that slipped between the fingers of his cupped hand. He held the swelling little pool out to his pet, who sniffed at it curiously and went back to grooming herself, uninterested. With a flick, Harry healed his wound and rubbed the blood off on a clean rag from the cabinet under the cage, and left his pet to herself.

Chapter 45

Harry fidgeted his way through the remainder of a deathly quiet week. On Friday, he received another owl from his contact in Durumulna informing him of a meeting. Harry was tempted to ignore it.

Candide watched his bouncing feet a minute before saying, "Do you have something you need to be doing?"

Harry considered that he might be able to catch Hummer and Slowdraw alone at Belinda's flat if he went early for the meeting. He wanted to chat with them some, and if they did not want to chat back, then he wanted to interrogate them some. "Yeah. I have some things. You?"

"Molly suggested I visit any time. Owled to say she had missed a few things she wanted to give us." She heaved up and went off without a word, returning shortly. "I'm ready."

They arrived in the drive leading to the Burrow and Harry released Candide's arm. He studied the Weasley house wondering for the first time why anyone with magic at their disposal would choose to live in such ramshackle conditions. Molly waved from the door and Harry watched Candide approach before Disapparating away.

Molly, watching Harry go, remarked to Candide. "Harry is still upset with Arthur, I see. Do remind him I don't agree with everything my husband does and Harry is more than welcome for a visit."

"I'll remind him," Candide assured her.

"On that topic, when is this little one finally going to pay us a visit?" she asked, patting Candide's belly while holding the door for her.

Candide rubbed the back of her neck. "Three more weeks. The Midwitch insists boys are always early. I hope to Merlin's uncle she's right."

"Sons are a challenge and a joy," Molly lectured as she pulled a chair out from the table for Candide.

"You would know."

At Belinda's flat, Harry did not find his criminal assistants, he found Belinda, making herself lunch. She jumped when Harry appeared, aiming the butter knife she held like a wand.

"Oh. Harry."

Harry pulled out a chair at the table without an invitation and took a seat. "How are things?" he asked in a tone that insisted on an answer.

"They've been better," she muttered flatly. Keeping her eyes down, she came to the table and nibbled on a carrot.

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Is it safe to talk here?"

She twitched her head like a nod and picked up another carrot, which she nervously masticated.

"I'm curious about Percy," Harry said. He did not believe her that it was safe to talk, but he decided he could make this work even if they were eavesdropped upon, or especially if they were.

"I don't see him much." The next carrot got guillotined by her teeth. She straightened her sandwich but did not pick it up. More disturbed, she asked, "Why are you involved in this?"

"I don't have anything else going," Harry airily said. He hooked an empty chair with his foot and pulled it closer to put his feet up on it. Belinda's eyes flickered that way, but she said nothing. Harry said, "Someone framed me. I know you helped with that."

He relished her reaction. He couldn't see her face, but the blood left her fingers and she seemed to stop breathing. She looked frail, especially with her hands shaking.

Harry asked, "Why did you help with that? Do you hate me that much or-"

"I don't hate you." She pushed her plate aside. "I didn't have any choice," she snapped.

"There is always a choice," Harry stated, vacillating back to calm and wise.

"Yeah, going to wizard prison is a choice."

Harry sat forward suddenly, badly startling her. "As opposed to my going to wizard prison?"

Her eyes danced around the room. "I didn't know that was going to happen."

Harry opened his mouth to reply to that, then closed it again. He took one of her carrots and munched on it. "I want to know about Percy," he said again. "I'm certain he killed Alastor Moody and made sure I took the fall for it and I intend to get even

with him." When she continued to pick at her plate, Harry said, "You gave my wand to Percy, didn't you? After you stole it."

"You can't prove anything."

"I don't need to." Harry dropped his feet to the floor, startling her. "You are going to help me get even."

Her eyes danced around the room. Harry after a moment, followed suit, but the room sat empty. Harry stood and paced the room, running every eavesdropping block he knew, as well as hovering some cursed objects into the toilet and shutting the door. He resumed his seat.

"How often do you see Percy?"

"Why should I say?"

Harry eyed her, but she did not look up. "Because I can tell the Ministry what you've been doing."

She rose to that with vibrating lips. "And what about what I can tell the Ministry?"

Harry returned levelly, "Go right ahead. I have nothing to lose."

She breathed in and out, "I haven't seen Percy since I did what he wanted. Just as well."

"Vespera?"

Belinda rolled her eyes and tossed a hand in disgust. "He works for her. She works for someone they call Ma Dame." When Harry tilted his head sideways, she added, "She's become a rival to the boss these two work for." She gestured into the room at the television where Harry normally found Slowdraw and Hummer. "They used to be a couple, but now they don't get along so well. Only women allowed in Ma Dame's organization. Except Percy. I guess."

Harry smirked.

Her mouth worked until it glistened with saliva. "Get even with Percy, you say?"

"Yes. I want to bring him low. As low as possible." Harry watched her pull the cheese from her sandwich and tear it into small strips. He went on, "I want to destroy him in front of everyone . . . especially his father." This notion opened a vibrating hollow in Harry's midsection, like he had not eaten in days and someone promised stew.

"What are you going to do?"

"Lure him in with what he wants most in the world. He's weak and not very bright. It'll be easy."

Belinda smirked, underlined with general unhappiness. "I thought what he wanted most was to show off. Get attention. A girl." She shrugged, tossing her hands, which accented her shaking anger. "New wand. New broomstick. His medals."

Harry was drawn out of his strategizing. "Percy has medals?"

She waved one hand dismissively, relaxing into mockery. "Yeah Special Under Duress Service and some other where you can't read it, since it's a secret, but it glitters a lot. Fudge presented both of them to him."

Harry rolled his eyes. "He must hate working in Mysteries. Can't brag nearly as much."

She hovered her abused sandwich bread back to the sink. "Doesn't stop him. Let's him brag and then not have to back it up, since he can claim you aren't allowed to know." She stood and fetched a bottle of sherry. With shaking hands she poured some into a tumbler, lifting the bottle invitingly in Harry's direction. When he waved her off, she put it down and sipped it. "Watched my mum do this when I was a girl. Hated her for it."

Harry pulled his wand and magicked it into non-existence, glassware and all.

She stared at her empty hand and licked her sherry moistened lips. "Why'd you do that?"

"For your own good," he replied. It sounded good, but it was a lie. He just wanted to mess with her.

"Bastard," she muttered, but rather than pop out for more, she sat back and with a long sigh said with relish, "I'd love to watch Percy go down."

"I'll buy you a new bottle of sherry to celebrate when we're through," Harry quipped, sounding obnoxious to his own ears.

She crossed her arms. "I won't need it, then."

Hummer and Slowdraw appeared. They glowered at Harry. Slowdraw grumbled, "You moved in on our territory. That was ours, Diagon was."

Harry reached into his pocket and tossed them a Galleon. Hummer caught it and examined it. "Boss gets 80%."

"That's a 100%."

They now stared at Harry with twisted faces. "That's all you got?"

Harry wanted to stand up to better toss spells at them if needed, but he opted to continue with cocky and dismissive and propped his feet up on the table. "How much should I have got from them?"

"For a month?" Hummer stammered like someone tired of dealing with the hopelessly daft. "At least fifteen. For a shop that successful, thirty."

"I'm getting paid by the day so that's right," Harry insisted, gesturing at the Galleon Hummer held. "What shop can afford that every month?"

The underlings just stared at him, giving no answer. Belinda said, "That's the point."

Harry thought about Eeylops and lightly shook his head.

Slowdraw said, slowly and clearly, "You need to get paid for a month."

Harry mockingly held up his hands. "All right. All right. No one told me."

"Yer just s'possed to know." Clearly they both thought he was an idiot. Harry considered knocking them both to their knees. His eyes slid over to them and he felt for his pocket. But they were apparently highly familiar with this look, because they stiffened, and mid-step backward, Apparated away.

Harry rolled his eyes again.

"Shakedown seems beneath you," Belinda said through a sloppy smile.

"I like to think so. It's not a shakedown; I'm working for pay, providing protection."

She laughed, snorting when she took a breath. "And the difference would be?"

After a gap, Harry admitted with a grin, "Maybe there isn't one." But he could not care about such subtleties when he had bigger things to worry about. He leaned forward. "Percy has my old wand." In case someone was still listening, he added: "and I want it back. But he's not going to give it to me. I want you to tell him that the Boss, Ma Dame's rival, is interested in buying it, price no object."

Belinda gave that some thought. "Why would he want it?"

"It's the wand that killed Voldemort. That would make it a collector's item, no? Just tell Percy that for me, that the Boss wants to buy the wand." Harry stood up, acting like he had somewhere to be.

Belinda said, "How would the Boss know Percy had the wand?"

"Maybe you let it slip . . ."

"I'm not that sloppy," she criticized. "I'm careful with things."

Harry leaned on the back of the chair. "Not careful enough to stay out of trouble, I would say."

Her lips pursed. She looked away and her face grew chiseled. "I can't stand my life now. Some days I just want to walk in and confess it all just to stop fearing everything all the time. I think everyone must know, that they are all suspicious, but then nothing ever happens. I'm just left to do my job. It's torture."

Harry rubbed his chin. He had a thought. "Ma Dame would love to take the Boss down, wouldn't she?"

Strangely, Belinda brightened at this. "Oh, I would say."

"Hm. And Percy would love to be rewarded by Ma Dame for helping with that. He'd do all kinds of stupid things if he thought that he might accomplish that." Harry's mind floated in a pleasant smoky weaving of possibility. It occurred to him that Belinda, lacking Occlumency, would be an open book for Percy. He stepped around the table, wand out.

When he took Belinda by the chin, she said, "What are you doing?"

Soothingly, he replied, "Nothing that will hurt. Hold still." And he struck from her the memory of the wand purchase being his idea and before she could blink back to awareness, he slipped away.

McGonagall shuffled her staff meeting notes, and said, "Anyone else have any issues they wish to bring up before we move on?"

Madame Pince raised her thin fingers. "A rather large number of books have been removed from the Restricted Section and not checked out, far more than the normal number that students find interesting. Given the exceptional nature of a few of the more dangerous ones, I cannot imagine they are being stored undetected by any of our students."

Snape uncrossed his arms. "I have a number of them," he casually said.

Across the table, Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Quite a number of them, it seems," Pince criticized, adjusting her glasses to better peer at Snape as if to reevaluate him. "A few of the volumes are quite rare and fickle

about their use. The Corpus Delicti should be handled with extreme care. I am surprised it let you remove it from the library, let alone the shelf."

Snape shrugged broadly. He did not have that particular book, but he strongly suspected he knew who had taken it. Dismissively, he asked, "Do you require a catalog of what I am using, currently? I can compose one for you."

"As long as you are careful and return them by the end of the school year for the final inventory, I can overlook it, but I would prefer you formally check them out. The other staff are quite good about that, even when they take books after hours."

Snape avoided Hermione's attempts to catch his eye, wishing she would better pretend to be un-affected. After the meeting adjourned, she stalled and sorted her papers until they were the last two in the room.

"All of the books you loaned me had been checked out already with Madame Pince," Hermione said in a leading tone.

"Yes," Snape said, finally pushing to his feet and tossing his robes straight. "And your point?"

"I assume that Ha-"

Snape interrupted, "Of course Harry has them."

Hermione frowned. "But what is he looking for?"

The mid-day light from the single window shifted while Snape considered an answer that was not utterly philosophical. The stone and masonry wall opposite the window went from pale mud to slate grey as the clouds glided overhead.

"He is not looking for anything in particular. I believe he is just bored."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That's worse."

"The weekend could not come soon enough. I resist checking on him too frequently, lest he begin to think of me as overbearing."

"You have other good excuses to go home."

"And I have been using them."

Hermione dropped her voice. "Candide tells me he has been behaving just fine."

Snape rubbed his chin. "He has actually been growing more protective of her, I believe."

"That's something." She finished making a neat stack of her notebooks.

"Perhaps."

She stood staring down at her leather satchel flopped beside the stack. "He behaves so strangely around me. I just want to reach out and shake him."

"I would not recommend that."

Her shoulders fell. "What are we going to do? I have two notebooks full of references but not to any spells I would want to attempt on anyone, let alone Harry."

Snape was relentless. "No matter what he turns into?"

"The ones that don't involve crippling the mind – which is most of them, involve splicing souls one way or another," she said, filling with anger. "That's what started all this with Voldemort, isn't it?" She dropped her hand on the table. "I'm sorry. I've been reading instead of sleeping a few too many nights in a row." She pushed her hair back from her face and held it there. "I thought I'd feel better going to see him more often, you know, remind him of our friendship, how things used to be." With her hands still pressed to the sides of her head, she said, "It didn't work. He's so calculating now, it's unsettling. Calculating is what I used to have to do for him. Now all the time I worry what in the world he's thinking about.

"The way he looks at me sometimes, I get the sense he's wanting to test my loyalty with something he knows I won't want to do. And he knows me terribly well. That's the worst part: how awful the challenge may be. It's hard to act normally, worrying."

She dropped her hands to her sides. "You know all this," she stated.

He nodded faintly. "I am in my element; shall we say."

She snapped, bordering on shrill, "I don't want to hear that." Her eyes blinked rapidly as she buckled her satchel. "I've been reluctant to suggest this, but Winky . . . she also, in a sense, is in her element." Hermione raised her eyes, waiting for a reply.

"I have already dismissed that idea." He leaned on the back of a chair. "She did well enough, for a while, with Barty Crouch Jr. but Winky was bound to him long before she was put in charge of him. Harry is not, nor would he submit to it now, except through trickery that would most likely negate the effects. In any event, past events lead me to believe Harry is stronger than her."

"Care to illuminate?"

"In a fit of anger over breaking up with Penelope, Harry flew off in his Animagus form. When he had been gone too long, I ordered Winky to fetch him back, but she

insisted he was out of her reach and could not elaborate more. He should not have been too distant, since he was still within the country. At the moment of my request, Harry was trying to escape his troubles by flying himself into exhaustion. Winky suffered great difficulty in denying my request, but still did so. I believe now that his will exceeded hers. And if it did then, it certainly does now.

"In any event, his trust is the most important thing I am concerned about right now. Winky has been instructed to keep an eye on things. Only. She insists she can calm Harry without risk when he is at home, and I told her to continue doing so only as long as Harry does not suspect."

"And the books? What if Harry learns something dangerous?"

Snape scoffed with lips twisted upward. "Harry does not need to learn anything. The fact that he believes he needs to is buying us time."

At home on Saturday, the first thing Harry said to Snape after following him to the drawing room was: "You said you could loan me a book about the Wand of Destiny."

"I did." Snape put his small case down on the desk. "It is in the Hogwarts Library. I'm surprised you have not found it." Then after a beat: "Given how very many books you have from there."

"I've been through the entire Restricted Section, twice over," Harry said, wanting to sound diligent.

"It isn't in the Restricted Section."

"Oh."

While Snape scratched out something on a parchment corner, he said, "The most powerful information is generally not hidden or protected. It is in plain sight." He handed the slip with an author and title to Harry, who slipped away for the library and returned not even a minute later.

"And to think, the rest of us must suffer the Floo Network."

Harry opened the jewel-encrusted book to a random page. "I don't know how you tolerate it," he said. "This looks familiar from that other place."

"It should."

Harry closed the book and held it at his side. "I wonder how they're doing?"

"You promised not to return there," Snape said, placing his hands on his case, but not moving to open it.

"I won't return there," Harry said. "Not unless you change your mind for some reason and tell me to go." Indeed, Harry had found a far larger challenge: the two greatest wizards of the century, allied.

"I do not like that distant look," Snape said, studying Harry as he in turn studied the low hearth.

"Then I'll go elsewhere," Harry said distractedly, turning for the library.

Harry's reading was interrupted by Snape saying, "Lupin and your cousins will be here shortly for a late lunch."

Harry sat up on the leather divan and put the book aside. "You have been playing social director," he complained sharply.

Snape shook his head. "Not me. Your friends have." He leaned against the door frame and gestured casually at the closed book. "Learn anything?"

Harry shrugged. "It says Death himself created that wand, but that doesn't seem very likely, does it?"

"Death follows that wand." Snape said. "That much is certain. If Death created it, he has cleverly corralled human nature to his cause with it."

"Grindelwald had that wand, right? Before Dumbledore?"

Carefully pedantic, Snape replied, "That is my understanding."

"So all these great wizards . . . they were actually cheating."

"Perhaps. They were great, if you will, in their ideas. If we wish to be generous." Snape said. His intense gaze contrasted strongly with his easy-going posture and tone.

Harry matched his gaze. "Their ideas were also their downfall. So what does it mean to be great, then?" Harry did not wait for a response and, thinking of Percy, added: "I suppose it means your enemies are no bother." Harry waited a pause to properly fix Snape's expression so as to watch if it changed. "And the cloak?"

Snape's face remained level. "It could very well be the same as the one you have, just as your counterpart's friends assumed in that place. I do not know how one might tell, except to attempt to hide from death directly."

"Didn't work for my dad," Harry said, frowning.

Snape pushed away from the doorframe and stepped closer to touch the book. "In any event, the cloak's power is most likely limited to that which you have already experienced of it. You tell me if it is the one."

"It's a good cloak," Harry said.

"And one of rather exceptional longevity. Few if any last so long."

"Whose side are you on, again?" Harry prodded.

Snape's brow went up. "Yours. Do you doubt that?"

Harry shrugged. The door knocker sounded, prompting him to stand and slip by Snape, pleased at worrying him with that comment, and wanting to hide his grin.

Harry's cousins, including the two little ones, stood in the grey gloom of the garden, having arrived by car with Lupin.

As he helped with the coats, Lupin said to Candide and Snape in a quiet aside, "Don't know how Muggles manage that every day. At least in a train you can get up and walk about."

Harry followed behind Basel as the boy high stepped toward the brighter hall. The boy did not feel magical to Harry, but that did not slow him down at all. He charged into the main hall on his small legs, stopped in the center of the floor, and surveyed the room before heading straight for the tall floor oil lamp, which was lit. Snape waved an Imperturbable Charm at it just before the collision. Basel tumbled, picked himself up and launched himself at the footstool, which fortunately needed no magical protection.

Candide crossed her arms high on her body and said, "I can see that we are going to need some more child-proofing in here."

Patricia scooped Basel up. He kicked all the way as if still running on air. "They've been cooped up in the car. We're staying at a hotel with a glassed-in pool tonight and tomorrow, so they can have some play time. They need it. It's been a miserable winter so far."

Briar tugged on Harry's robes and folded her hand up and down in a wave hello before scampering over to pull off her brother's shoe where it dangled beside her mother's hip. She did not feel magical either, Harry decided.

He looked up and found Candide giving him a questioning look. He shook his head. She returned an overdone frown.

It was not until they were all seated and Harry helped Snape carry in the food from the kitchen that Candide said to his cousins, "Harry doesn't think the little ones are M. A. G. I. C. A. L."

"No?" Pamela said. "That's too bad."

Patricia said, helping her daughter with spooning her own potatoes after she gave a squawk when threatened with being served. "I don't think so, really. I don't know how, what did you call them . . . Mugged parents could possibly manage."

"Muggle," Harry supplied, setting a large serving fork on the plate of roast.

Pamela turned to Lupin, "Well, it's up to us."

Lupin blinked, stunned. "What?"

Harry forced down a grin. Patricia leaned forward and said, "Look at all this. How did you manage it all while we were sitting around having drinks?"

To avoid the children talking about her to their father later, Winky had been instructed to stay out of sight. "It was the help," Harry said.

"The E. L. F." Pamela explained.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. How nice," Patricia added jealously, surveying the feast. "I don't need a wand to wave around, I just want an el- E. L. F." She accepted the roast Candide forked for her.

Lupin, who had been active in the conversation up to that point, fell silent. He was on the far corner from Harry tonight, allowing the sisters to guard and split up the children. Harry felt all kinds of strange instincts about him as he studied his profile in the light of the candelabra, mostly abhorrent ones. Memories of Lupin's early patient help with spells wiped away all but the curse instinct. Pamela patted Lupin's arm and Harry's other instincts came to the fore again. Again he won against them, but he had to keep at it.

Harry looked away, around the table and found Snape studying him. He dropped his gaze to Briar beside him. She piped up, pointing, "Candles!"

"That's what we use around here," he agreed.

She clapped her hands once and gave a grin that made her cheeks puff. "Whose birthday is it?"

Harry grinned. "No one's. We just like candles."

Chapter 45

Dark liquids were being offered and perhaps that's what inspired Patricia to lean forward to look down the table and say, "Are you two going to give us some M. A. G. I. C. children?"

"We're thinking about it," Pamela said.

Lupin skipped stunned this time and went for long suffering.

Pamela turned to Snape. "What are our . . . um, odds, I guess you'd call it?"

"I don't know why you are asking me," Snape said between sips of something that gave off a whiff of smoke when swirled in a glass.

"Because you seem to know everything," Pamela returned.

Dryly, Snape said, "I don't mean to give that impression."

"Really?"

Snape rolled his eyes, sat back and huffed, "About a 65% chance. Maybe a little better. Harry might remember how many generations it tends to jump in your family. He would have seen the files while doing the paperwork for your exemption."

Harry, who had seen the disparate old parchments for each person through the years, tried to remember all the dates, or at least a sense of the gaps between them. "About once a hundred years. Maybe twice."

Patricia asked, "So, it's recessive or what?"

"It's random," Snape stated, pouring himself more from one of the bottles set out under the candelabra.

"So you really don't know," Pamela accused.

"I believe I said that," Snape replied.

Candide patronizingly shook her head and helpfully said, "Pure blood families that have been thus for generations can have what we call Squib children. Muggles with no history of M. A. G. I. C. can have children that are."

Pamela said, "Maybe that's just the rate at which people fool around, you know, showing up there."

Harry found this funny, then had to clear his throat. Beside him, Snape fell distracted, making Harry wonder what he was thinking.

After his relatives headed out for the hotel, sleepy children draped over their shoulders, Harry returned to his reading. Snape appeared in the doorway. "I thought perhaps we could play some chess."

They settled before the board and Harry promptly beat him in eight moves. The knight who had smashed the king stood tapping his sword on his boot, looking smug. The pieces looked up expectantly, watching the two of them.

"Want another?" Harry asked, enjoying himself, enjoying asking that in just the right insinuating way.

Snape was not so easily baited. "If you wish."

Harry sat back and surveyed the pieces lying toppled on the table beside the board. He waved for the pieces to reset for a new game. The queen on Snape's side patted the arm of the king who appeared to be nursing his head. But they all stood to attention, frozen, when the last pawn settled into place.

It required fourteen moves this time for Harry to win, including a wild distraction gambit that sacrificed three of Snape's pieces to even keep it close.

"I must be rusty," Snape said, toppling his own king this time, before the rook could reach it after eliminating the bishop that stood in the way.

"This wasn't a test?" Harry asked.

Snape reset the pieces before replying. His face gave nothing away. "I had not intended it as one, no."

"Getting rusty for sure then," Harry needled him.

Snape raised his gaze, but he looked amused if anything, or perhaps affectionate.

Harry pushed his chair back, feeling pulled in too many directions at once. He wanted to move on trapping Percy and now wondered if the state he had left Belinda in would compel her to contact Percy. "I have an errand to run."

"May I ask where?"

"I'll be back really quickly. So it doesn't matter." With that, he Apparated to Belinda's flat.

"I wish you'd use the door and knock like someone with some sense of decorum."

Harry glanced around, but the room was empty. "No one else who comes here does, do they?"

"Eff off," she breathed.

"Is that an invitation?" Harry asked, wanting the upper hand.

She smirked. "I seem to recall difficulties in that area were on your end."

Harry decided to ignore that rather than see where it may lead. It did not feel to be leading anywhere good. "Have you talked to Percy?"

She grew confused at this. "Why?"

Harry leaned over a chair back to lord over her. "Just say, yes or no. Really, how secret could that answer be? It was a simple question." When she nodded, brow heavily furrowed, Harry said, "Excellent. And his answer?"

"Said he had to think about it," she came back carefully.

"Owl me when he does, will you?" Harry straightened. "Oh, and owling the Boss . . . let me take care of that, if you will. I, er, I want to get on his good side."

Harry Apparated away, back to the drawing room. Snape was bent over his files; he only glanced up briefly.

Harry said, "Tonks is supposed to come by. I'll be in my room."

Harry sorted through the book piles under his bed. After running out of interesting titles, he had begun searching for books by smell instead of topic. The ones that gave off a whiff of old bitter smoke often had mundane beginnings but then rambled into more interesting prose, as if the author had become possessed. One of them had wild visions of things that could be demons. Another swore that trees talked to him, making Harry think the author simply suffered from magical abilities more in line with Shamanism. These authors' progressive distress made Harry feel smug.

He put those away and took out the next, one utterly infused with the odor of a trash fire and bearing page edges stained with fingers of smoke. This one introduced itself on the title page as a personal collection of the worst spells the author could find. Trouble was, the author was so obsessive about recording his findings he continued to write long after the nib ran dry of ink. Harry tilted the page to read what periodically became an engraving in the vellum. After straining his eyes on one particularly interesting page, Harry fetched out a soft pencil and lightly shaded in the missing lines so he could read the pen scratching in relief.

Harry stopped and flipped back a few pages. The described spell appeared to be a Protean Charm for flesh. Harry pulled out his soft pencil and laying it on edge, gently rubbed the words into view.

Harry shut the book when he heard the sound of the Floo downstairs. He changed it for one of his Auror books and then acted surprised at Tonks' arrival. She appeared worn and aged more than he imagined her with his mind's eye. She threw herself down on the bed, arms wide, and said, "There is way too much going on."

After a minute, she asked, "How are you, Harry?" She sat up and faced him, fingers plucking at the bedding. She wanted to ask him something, he could tell, but held back. With a sigh, she crab-crawled over beside him and sat close, legs rubbing.

"What to do anything?" she asked, sounding far away.

Belinda's taunts echoed in Harry's mind. He closed the book on tracking and dropped it off the edge of the bed while reaching for her, intending to make a point of some kind, but to whom, it wasn't clear.

The next morning, while Snape and Candide faced each other across a late substantial breakfast, Harry stood near the window, opening his post. Tonks had departed earlier, unusually declining a good breakfast. She seemed eager to go, despite spending the rest of the night. Harry had other things on his mind, and decided it not worth his while to ponder too long what might be troubling her.

As he stood there, an ordinary barn owl delivered a missive from Belinda, sealed with a fanciful wax disk bearing the note. If opened when not alone, letter will turn to sawdust. The seal looked like the kind of thing the Minister's office would use.

Harry went to the drawing room and shut the door. He stood in the middle of the floor and broke the wax free of the paper.

Percy is interested. Will only discuss terms with the Boss directly, face to face. Is adamant on this point.

A knock sounded on the door and Harry lowered the letter to his side. When the door opened he could feel the paper disintegrate between his fingers and flow away. Snape glanced at this, and moved on only after Harry brushed his hands off, uncaring.

Snape said, "I should return to Hogwarts soon, but I wanted to talk to you first."

Harry failed to react.

"Have a seat, Harry," Snape invited.

With no reason to argue, Harry took one of the visitor's chairs, sitting in it casually, attention on the window more than the desk.

Snape took his time making his way to the chair behind the desk. He considered Harry and his fingertips alternately. "You have plans?" he queried, taking the upper hand.

Harry replied, "I want to get even with Percy."

A pause. "You expect me to object?"

Harry's mouth worked. "I don't know."

"You believe he killed Moody; do you not?"

"I do." Harry could not bear to sit. He stood and paced once, stopping before a shelf that had collected more personal items than Harry realized Snape owned in total. He felt the words come easily, having no one to talk to about his ideas, most days. "I think he's been trying to get at me for a while now. At first because I suspected him of manipulating Transportation's records, then because I was interfering with his dating Belinda, which I think now was less personal and more strategic on his part."

"Dating the Minister of Magic's personal assistant would have distinct advantages." Snape pulled his robes over his lap. "I have no objection to assisting you. If you are willing to let me in on your plan?"

Harry felt the first stab of suspicion. He stared at a tarnished brass bookend in the shape of a sheared off crystal ball. The mate to it was on the shelf above. They were a wedding present from Professor Trelawney. A tasteless choice, he thought.

When Harry turned, Snape said, too casually, "If you do not need my assistance, that is fine as well."

"Percy works for a different branch of Durumulna than I have been. I put word out that my gang boss wants to buy my old wand, the one I know Percy has."

"How many others know Percy has it? How is this boss figure reputed to have found out?"

"Already thought of that. Belinda knew as well, and she could have told him. Her flat's one of his safehouses. I told her to tell him she let it slip."

Snape leaned far back in his chair, in a pose the opposite of his usual professorial one. "Why would Percy risk selling it, when he could deny having it at all very easily? The price would have to be very high indeed."

Harry shook his head. "That's not the plan, actually." He smiled. "Percy said he would only consider negotiating at all if he could meet with the Boss in person for the transaction. That's what I was hoping, but even if he hadn't insisted on that, I would have settled for trapping just him." When Snape's gaze narrowed, Harry went on, "Ma Dame, Percy's gang's boss, wants to get at the other Boss and take over his branch of Durumulna. If she thinks he'll be there, I'm hoping she goes in for an all out assault. I'm going to warn the Ministry to be ready for that possibility."

Snape rubbed his fingers over his chin. "Up to this point this Boss is not actually involved in the transaction. But if you were to tell him that Ma Dame is planning on ambushing him, you may get him to fall into the larger Ministry trap as well."

Harry smiled more. "That's an excellent idea. He may help me lay a more believable trap as well, if he thinks she'll be there."

"It has a chance of working, as long as Percy is trusting enough," Snape said. "Given Percy's skills at Legilimency, Belinda is a large potential hole in your plans."

"I used a few very small memory charms on her," Harry said reassuringly. "She forgot I was involved. Now she only thinks I'm nosing in to make a good impression on the Boss."

Snape raised a brow. "She thinks you're turning into Percy, in other words."

"Please."

Snape sat with his fingers steepled before saying, "You run a huge risk trying to take everyone down at once, I must say. If you miss at all, you miss severely and will have serious enemies to contend with."

"You're saying I shouldn't aim so high?"

"I'm saying, keep the Ministry out of it. Let the rivals reduce each other's numbers by their very nature. Or aim lower. One branch at a time, starting with the rival of your handler. That will win you a rise in that part of the organization."

Harry scratched his head.

"Have you set a date for the transaction?"

"Not yet. I need time to set up a site for the meeting. I'll have to call in some favors for that."

"Do let me know when, so I am forewarned." He bent back to his files and without looking up reached into his pocket. "Speaking of forewarned, you should perhaps see what just arrived."

He held out a copy of the Quibbler.

Harry accepted it, tried to figure out which half of it to read, then found the headline in question, written in hand printed stencil around the outer edge of the cover. Harry turned it anti-clockwise three times to read it all. Exposé by our newest contributing investigative writer, brought over from the Daily Prophet at great loss to them, Rita Skeeter. Necessitating a print run of an extra 500 copies! Harry Potter, Crime Lord!

Harry flipped the magazine open. "How much does she know?"

"Enough."

Snape said, "For what it's worth, I think she found out the old fashioned way, by bribing some low-level sources."

Harry lips twitched. "Maybe I should give her an interview. Got any potions I could slip her?"

Snape paused before replying, "Depends upon what effect you are hoping for."

"Something that takes her out of the picture."

"She's ahead of you in this game," Snape stated in a warning tone. "You cannot remove her now without all suspicion falling upon you."

Teeth clenched, Harry said, "I missed my chance, you are saying."

"You missed the previous chance. There will be others." He stood up and began putting his files away in a small trunk. "I will see if I can find a workable variation on the Holiday Compulsion Concoction. Generally a disreputable brew sold only by owl post for use on one's boss, but it can probably be reformulated. I would not recommend trying, for a while anyway, anything stronger than that. But by all means, grant her an interview and send her off the scent."

Harry assumed Tonks would show up around lunchtime, but he was mistaken. She did not arrive until evening. She stood in the main hall, hands fisted, leaning forward toward him as if into the wind.

"I need to talk to you, Harry," she stated clearly, absolutely nothing but discipline in her tone.

Candide stood up. "I'll be upstairs anyone needs me."

Tonks pulled a ruffled copy of the Quibbler from her pocket. While doing this she eyed Harry the way she eyed random magical citizens while on patrol. "I went around to a few of her sources, after I weaseled their nicknames out of her with threats I really wasn't prepared to back up. They pretty much confirm her story."

Harry imagined his erstwhile assistants under the effects of some nasty curse while saying, "So?"

This disarmed her. "What?"

"I told you I had an idea about how to do things. That's what I'm doing."

She stuffed the magazine back into her pocket. "Harry, you have NO idea what you're doing."

Her condescending tone flipped him completely out of any affection for her. Coldly, he asked, "And how would you know?"

Again, this made her stop to reassess him. She exhaled and rubbed her brown Mohawk gently one way then the other while peering at him sideways. "You're going to get yourself killed, Harry."

"You have that little faith in me? You don't know anything about me, just for the record."

She rubbed her hair. "Merlin, Harry . . ." She gestured upstairs. "And a baby on the way. Harry these people play for keeps."

"So do I. So did the Dark Lord." He paced away from her and peered up at the ceiling where the new wood still glowed where the balcony had been repaired. "I was going to ask for your help."

"I couldn't help you in good conscience with this anyway. I want you to stop."

He spun on her. "So, if I tell you I'm going to hand you an entire branch of Durumulna, you'll not take it?"

Tonks closed her eyes. "If you tell me what you're arranging. I might."

"I'll think about it," Harry said.

She frowned and glanced, pained, around the room. "You aren't leaving me a lot of options here, Harry."

"What?" Harry let his anger drive him into a disconnected state where everything spread before him like a chess board. "Are you going to arrest me again? I know you helped Severus frame someone for Moody's murder. You don't have any options."

"I want a meeting with the Boss", Harry demanded of his contact, Ursie.

It was the middle of the week and they were alone in Belinda's flat. Hummer and Slowdraw were off somewhere, which was unfortunate, since Harry wanted to talk to them and could not seem to catch them there. Harry was feeling irked. He had spent hours over the previous few days searching out a proper spot for the transaction, and he had found one, an old stone building on the outskirts of Birmingham. Spelled properly, it would hold well against even magical escape from the inside. He was

going to force the two of them to help with that in exchange for not pummeling them for talking to Skeeter.

The man snorted. "Why would I set that up?"

Harry kept his burgeoning anger in check. "Why wouldn't you set that up?"

The large man crossed his arms and said through his mask. "Because you haven't done enough for me to deserve it. You've made more trouble than you're worth. You even got the press involved. That's breakin' rule one."

Harry's fingers grew damp against his wand, which he held pointed at the floor. He could simply level the man and force him to do what he wanted. An Imperio certainly would work. The spell leapt to mind like he had done it a hundred times.

Ursie uncrossed his arms, posture wary. Harry gathered his anger into a struggling bundle and said, "I have a business offer for the Boss and only I can convey it."

The man scoffed, "Do another job for me and I'll consider it."

"I don't want to wait that long." The sickly energy of the Imperio made his fingers burn where they touched his wand.

"I don't operate on your time, Potter," the man sneered, and Apparated away before Harry could finish raising his wand. He rubbed his tingling fingers together and peered at them. They were unmarred. The hungry feel of the spell still filled his limbs. He should have put an Apparition block on the flat before the meeting. A mistake he would not make again.

Annoyed and stymied, Harry slipped away to the Dark Plane. He walked a while, paced at a distance by a few curious creatures. One approached, sniffing the ground. It raised its bulbous, brain-exposed head and scampered off, dashing between the hillocks for cover.

Harry fell sideways to somewhere he had free rein to do as he pleased.